



WOODROW KROLL MINISTRIES

“Just How Illiterate are We?”

Dr. Woodrow Kroll, Founder

In 760 B.C., the Jewish prophet Amos predicted, “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord God, that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). Much more accurate than Nostradamus or other so-called seers, the predictions of the Jewish prophets had to be correct 100 percent of the time or they were beheaded and branded a false prophet. Amos was dead on in his prediction, but it wasn’t until our day that we watched his prophecy unfold before our eyes.

Let’s face it. The Bible is unique in innumerable ways. There is no book like it. Brides still carry it down the aisle on the most important day of their life. Presidents in the United States place their hands on it as they take the oath of office, even if they don’t ever seem to consult it thereafter. The Gideons hand out millions upon millions of copies each year to people around the world. Persecuted Christians who are locked away for years when their only crime was being a Christian cling to every shred of memory they have of their favorite Bible verses.

The impact of the Bible over the course of history is unquestionable. A Gallup Poll says that nine Americans in 10 have never doubted the existence of God. Still, just 12% think the Bible is the actual Word of God. It’s that lack of de facto trust in the authority of the Bible that has led to Bible illiteracy in America, Canada, Europe and almost every Christianized country in the world. So, let’s ask the question.

How Bible illiterate Are We?

We’ll look at both anecdotal evidence and statistical evidence for just how illiterate people are when it comes to knowing the Bible. Here are seven examples.

#1 The Battle of the Brains

In 1975 a quiz show in central Virginia aired on a local television station called “The Battle of the Brains.” The show still exists on local TV stations in the area. Long before reality TV made TV unreal, game shows like this one dominated Saturday morning television. The show assembled teams of the brightest high school students from around the area and let them battle other high school teams in wide-ranging questions like: “Name the element whose symbol is W?” Students would ring in and the fastest would answer “Tungsten.” Equally challenging questions would be asked in other fields of study and life. But when it came to answering simple Bible questions such as, “Who is called the doubter in the Bible?” (Thomas), the silence from these brilliant students was deafening. Even years ago bright high school students proved we were on the road to Bible illiteracy.

#2 Jay leno’s Tonight Show

When Jay Leno was consistently besting David Letterman for late night TV ratings, Leno did a segment called “Jay Walking.” The premise of the piece was that Jay would go out on the streets of Burbank, California with a microphone, ask questions, and let the passersby demonstrate their ignorance with regard to just about everything. Leno would ask questions like: “Can you name the Beatles?” and the answer instantly would be shot back, “John, Paul, George, and Ringo.” It was a very comical segment

until Leno asked simple Bible questions. *"Name one of the 10 Commandments."* Answer: *"God helps those who help themselves"* [which is not in the Bible, by the way]. *"Name one of the apostles."* No answer! *"Who was swallowed by a great fish?"* to which the confident answer came back, *"Pinocchio."*

Of course, it was Southern California and it was just passersby on the Street. You know the producers of the Tonight Show edited out all the good answers, only featuring those that made people look stupid. And these answers came from people who presumably had no Christian faith or background understanding in the Bible. But what if you asked Bible questions of Christians, people who go to church every Sunday, people who have more than three Bibles in their house, surely they would fare much better, don't you think? Well, no, as the next example points out.

#3 The Gallup Biblical Knowledge Quiz

Decades ago the Gallup Organization developed "The Gallup Biblical Knowledge Quiz" to test the Bible knowledge of Americans. It has been administered each year for decades. The Gallup Biblical Knowledge Quiz would ask questions like: *"What is first book of Bible?"* *"Name one of the prophets in the Old Testament?"* Or *"Who delivered the Sermon on Mount?"* I think we would have to admit that these are fairly easy questions, the kind you would expect a child in Sunday school to be able to answer. But Americans either didn't go to Sunday school or they forget almost everything they ever learned. That's the conclusion reached when you take note of the percentages of those who could answer these simple questions. *"What is the first book of the Bible?"* Only 49 percent could answer. That means 51 percent, more than half the American population, could not answer the question correctly. *"Name one of the prophets in the Old Testament."* Only 21 percent could answer. And *"Who delivered the Sermon on the Mount?"* A pathetic 34% could answer. Bible illiteracy is taking root in American society.

#4 The Bible Challenge

I have been battling Bible illiteracy since 1980 and that's a long time. When I became the President and Senior Bible Teacher of Back to the Bible in 1990, I devised something for our ministry website called *"The Bible Challenge."* The idea was we would give people, predominantly Christians, the opportunity to take a challenge online to see how much they knew about the Bible. There were multiple questions on three different levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) in five different categories. When we averaged the scores for the participants in each category this is what we found. The average score in the category of "Characters," which featured questions about people in the Bible, was 74 percent. The average score for the "Chronology" section testing their ability to place people and events in chronological order was only 69%. For the category of Christian "Doctrines" the average was 75 percent; for Bible "Geography" it was 70 percent and for "References" [matching a Bible reference with a popular verse] the average was 71%. While these averages may not seem all that bad, when you consider the audience taking the Bible Challenge, you may think twice.

" Biblical illiteracy is like spam: it's awful, it's everywhere, and it's almost impossible to stop."

– Rabbi Yisrael Rutman

#5 George Barna Research

In 1984 George Barna founded The Barna Group, a market research firm specializing in studying the religious beliefs and behavior of Americans, and the intersection of faith and culture. Barna quickly became the “go-to” guy for any research on what Americans believe, how they practice their faith or their attitudes towards a plethora of contemporary social issues. Barna Research identified some alarming facts about the average American’s understanding of and belief in the Bible. For example, the research indicates that 10 percent of Americans believe *“the Bible is an ancient book of fables and legends.”*

Beyond this, two adults in three (64%) did know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and three adults in four (75%) knew Easter celebrates Christ’s resurrection. But anyone who has watched television Christmas or Easter specials would know that. It’s the fact that Americans of all religious stripes and now even Evangelical Americans place so little faith in the authority of the Bible that has led to widespread but subtle Bible illiteracy in America. The evidence is too strong to deny.

#6 Christian Education

It might be possible to argue that Jay Leno’s responders or Americans in general who participated in Gallop or Barna polls are Bible illiterate because they are not religious people, not Christians, not born-again with a faith in the power of Jesus Christ to save. We may be able to excuse their ignorance of the Bible on these grounds. But what if the responders were all Christians? What if research was done within the Christian community and the results were much the same? Would that surprise you? It shouldn’t.

Dr. Gary Burge is professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, a bastion of Christian, conservative education. Presumably all or nearly all of Wheaton’s students are believers and have faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. But when Dr. Burge asked his Wheaton students to place biblical events in sequential order, one-third of Wheaton’s freshmen class could not put in order: Abraham, the OT prophets, death of Christ, Pentecost. Half of these students could not sequence: Moses in Egypt, Isaac’s birth, Saul’s death, Judah’s exile. One-third could not identify Matthew as an apostle from a list of biblical names. One-third could not find Paul’s travels in the Book of Acts. And one-half did not know the Christmas story could be found in Matthew. These are not children of the culture; these are children of the church who are biblically illiterate.

“While America's evangelical Christians are rightly concerned about the secular worldview's rejection of biblical Christianity, we ought to give some urgent attention to a problem much closer to home--biblical illiteracy in the church. This scandalous problem is our own, and it's up to us to fix it”

– Albert Mohler

#7 Personal Experience at Liberty University

I joined the faculty of Liberty University (then Liberty Baptist College) in 1975. The school was only founded in 1971 so these were the formative years of the university. Within a short time I was asked to serve as the chairman of the Division of Religion at Liberty, the largest division of the university. One of my tasks as chairman was to administer a “Standardized Bible Comprehensive Exam” to incoming freshmen.

In the final year I served this institution, 1,100 incoming freshmen were given the test. The test was not available to the public and still isn't. It was devised by the Association of Biblical Higher Education, but I received their permission to grade the test myself [with the help of staff] because we only wanted to use it for student placement in sections of Bible 101. We wanted to pair students together in the multiple sections of Bible 101 based on their level of Bible understanding so there would be parity in each section. We decided to grade on the pass/fail system. To pass the student needed to get half of the 150 questions correct. Now, these students came from the finest Christian homes, many were homeschooled or had a Christian school education, and most of them grew up in church and Sunday school. They had every advantage they could have to be biblically literate, and yet only 45 students out of 1,100 were able to pass the Bible exam. You read correctly. Only 45 of these Christian students correctly answered half or more of these basic Bible questions. Forty-five out of eleven hundred.

Please understand that these last two examples do not reflect negatively on Wheaton College or Liberty University. In both cases, the exam was given to incoming freshmen, who had never yet taken a class at their respective schools. It does reflect rather poorly, however, on Christian parents, schools and even the church. It indicates that we aren't as good at instilling knowledge of the Bible in our children and teens as we think we are.

These anecdotes and statistics should convince every thinking Christian of one thing: maybe it's time we took the growing plague of Bible illiteracy more seriously within the Christian community. Maybe it's time we didn't back-burner it as a need on our church. Maybe it's time we did something about Bible illiteracy.