

Biblical Literacy in the UPCI: An Interim, Ad Hoc Report

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The United Pentecostal Church, International, perhaps the leading denomination within the Oneness/Apostolic Pentecostal movement worldwide, prides itself on its unswerving commitment to the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and as the final arbiter for all matters of doctrine and practice. In fact, such a claim forms the preamble to our statement of Fundamental Doctrine: “The Bible is the only God-given authority which man possesses; therefore, all doctrine, faith, hope, and all instruction for the church must be based upon, and harmonize with, the Bible. It is to be read and studied by all men everywhere, and can only be clearly understood by those who are anointed by the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:27).” With such a statement, the UPCI clearly positions itself broadly within the Protestant tradition of Christianity, especially with regard to its commitment to *sola Scriptura*.¹

For Apostolic Pentecostals, this commitment to Scripture’s unique authority is grounded in a prior commitment to Scripture’s unique origin as God’s “inspired” Word (see 2 Timothy 3:16). Paul’s term *theopneustos* is unique and is most literally translated “God-breathed.” It is more image than concept, according to Bernard, describing God “breathing out words from His mouth (Matthew 4:4), creating Scripture similar to the way He created the universe.” As such, “inspiration” in this verse is more than a “general creative impulse” because it is related

¹ This paper does not seek to describe in detail the history and theological impact of this methodological commitment nor the unique Apostolic approach to it. For further discussion, see Alister McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First*, (New York: HarperOne, 2007), pp. 199ff.

specifically “to the writing process...rather than to the authors.”² As a result of this unique formation process, the Bible has a unique “self-vindicating authority” proven by “its claims, character, historical and scientific verification, and impact upon human society,” as well as our own personal experience of its “dynamic power.”³

Again, the concern of the present paper is not to investigate or probe the Apostolic Pentecostal description of the nature and/or source of biblical authority but rather to address itself to the issue of biblical literacy, which forms the second “half” of our Preamble: “It [the Bible as inspired, authoritative Word of God] is to be read and studied by all men everywhere.” It might not be too much to say that, if we are to follow the logic of the structure of our own Articles of Faith, the promotion of biblical literacy precedes, and forms the only sure basis for, our commitment to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20, ESV): “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...[and] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” In fact, effective presentation of the Gospel *presumes* a measure of prior biblical literacy if the message is to be properly understood and fully obeyed.⁴

The following is an “interim, ad hoc report” of an ongoing survey conducted by the author of incoming students at Urshan University related to the most basic matter of biblical literacy, whether (or not) they have read the entire Bible. The first part of the paper will present a brief explanation of the survey and its early findings, followed by descriptions of larger issues that need to be considered when understanding the import of this data. The goal of this work is

² David. K. Bernard, *Understanding God's Word: An Apostolic Approach to Interpreting the Bible*, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 2005), pp. 15-16.

³ Bernard, pp. 14-15.

⁴ See as an example, the story of the resurrected Christ's encounter with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35, especially v. 27).

simply to “raise the issue” of biblical literacy, suggesting that we have a current (and growing) crisis of biblical *illiteracy* that may be a significant threat to the longevity of the Apostolic Pentecostal movement. As the great American theologian Ray Bradbury once wisely said: “You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture. You just have to get people to stop reading them.” The hope is to open a serious discussion that will perhaps provide an impetus toward a coordinate, national effort to address the crisis.

The Survey

For many years now, the author has conducted an informal survey of all students enrolled in the Old Testament Literature course at what is now Urshan University.⁵ This course is the first required Bible course in Urshan’s “Apostolic Identity” core, a series of 6 courses that all Urshan University students are required to complete as part of any degree program. The course is offered currently five times a year: each fall and spring (on-campus and online) and every summer (online only). For most incoming students, “OT Lit” (as it is known) is the first course of their first semester as a student at Urshan University. As such, it provides a unique opportunity to assess incoming students’ prior biblical knowledge.

The questionnaire for the survey, with some slight variations, consists of the following four key questions: 1) What is your favorite Old Testament book (and why)? 2) What is your favorite Old Testament character (and why)? 3) Have you read the entire Bible through in a year? And 4) Peanut butter: crunchy or smooth?

⁵ Unfortunately, due to its “informal” origins, data collection for many of those early years was sparse if not altogether non-existent. Data has been archived for

Caveats

Obviously, the question of primary concern in this report is that third question (though some interesting data can be gleaned from the first two). Furthermore, since this survey began its life as an “icebreaker,” the precision of the questions was not a primary consideration. This leads to the following important caveats related to all reported data.

First, it is recognized that “Bible reading” does not equal “biblical literacy”; however, a *lack* of Bible reading is surely a core indicator of impaired biblical literacy. Of course, it is entirely possible to misunderstand something you have read, but it is entirely *impossible* to understand something you have *never* read.

Secondly, the question favors explicitly an *annual* Bible reading program and, more implicitly, a *canonical* approach (e.g., “Genesis to Revelation”). Obviously, there is nothing inherently “better” about reading the *entire* Bible within a calendar year. In fact, there may be much to recommend reading the Bible at a significantly slower pace to aid better understanding. And while there is a strong theological argument to made that a *canonical* reading of the Bible should be preferred,⁶⁶ it is by no means absolutely necessary when considering this piece of basic biblical literacy. The question itself excludes those students who have a) read the entire Bible in *more than* a year and b) read the entire Bible but not in any sort of canonical sequence. It is almost certain that if the question were reframed: “Over your time as an Apostolic Pentecostal, have you read the entirety of the Bible?” the affirmative answers would likely be higher (though perhaps not as much as might be hoped).

⁶⁶ Especially to the ever-popular “chronological” Bible reading plans.

Finally, one important contributing factor not accounted for in the current questionnaire is the distinction between students who were raised in the Apostolic Pentecostal tradition and those who converted into the movement. The importance of this distinction should be obvious: a student who was born into an Apostolic home has had significantly greater opportunity to imbibe Apostolic teaching on the authority and centrality of the Bible⁷ as well as more opportunities to complete a year-long Bible reading than a recent convert with only one or two years attending an Apostolic church.

The Data

In brief, the early data show the following:

HAVE YOU READ THE ENTIRE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR?	YES	NO
FALL 2022 (105 STUDENTS)	37 (35%)	68 (65%)
SPRING 2023 (31 STUDENTS)	15 (48%)	16 (52%)
FALL 2023 (100 STUDENTS)	22 (22%)	78 (78%)
SPRING 2024 (32 STUDENTS)	11 (34%)	22 (66%)

Overall, of the 268 students who responded, only 85 (31%) students affirmed that they had read the entire Bible in a year; that is less just slightly less than one-in-three. The highest percentage of a class that had read the Bible was 48% (not quite half); the lowest percentage was 22% (lower than one quarter). However, in terms of “real numbers,” the disparagement is even

⁷ Which should, at least hypothetically, enhance personal motivation to read the Bible.

greater; the class the registered the highest percentage was only 31 students while the class with the lowest percentage average was 100 students, over 3 times as large.

At this point, not enough data has been collected to spot significant “year-over-year” trends to determine if Bible reading is declining amongst incoming Urshan University students. However, the data itself in this small sample is frightening enough without considering trending: nearly 7 out of 10 incoming first-year students at Urshan University have never even read the entire Bible one time.

Questions

It is important to keep in mind the distinction between “data” and “information.” Numbers alone (e.g., raw “data”) are not typically “self-explanatory”; they require the application of one or more interpretive grids before they can be transformed into useful “information.” Furthermore, the primary use of such “information” is not so much about providing “answers” but more about providing a means to ask better “questions.”

Looking at the data provided above, it is certain numerous follow-up questions will occur to the reader, including, perhaps some of the following: 1) What is the gender breakdown? Are college-age young women or men more likely/less likely to have read through the entire Bible in a year? 2) How does the discipline of Bible reading contribute to other aspects of academic discipline? Over time, do students who have read the entire Bible in a year before entering Urshan fare better academically than students who have not? 3) Since Urshan University is a Christian liberal arts college offering non-ministry-related degree programs, are these percentages lower/higher/about the same when compared to similar statistics at other UPCI-endorsed Bible colleges that are focused on training for vocational ministries? 4) If a student has

not completely read through the Bible in a year by the time they have entered college, what is the likelihood that that student will *ever* read through the entire Bible? Is it possible to identify an age (or narrow age-range) in which the discipline of regular Bible reading must be established in order to be retained as a life-long spiritual habit?

These questions point to the need for refining the questionnaire to consider other relevant factors as well as expanding the data-gathering process beyond a single university. Furthermore, if we are going to assess true biblical *literacy*⁸ rather than simply the prevalence of disciplined Bible *reading*, we will have to consider developing tools to collect and track this additional data.

Deeper Issues

The data collected thus far should be nothing short of alarming. For a denomination that declares its unflagging commitment to the “*Bible* standard of full salvation,” the Bible reading habits of our college-age constituents might call into question their actual understanding of just what that standard might be.

More “Of” the World than “In” It

However, what might alarm us more is that this apparent lack of “biblical literacy” mirrors a growing trend in American society. Stephen Prothero points out that Evangelical pollsters have “lamented for some time the disparity between Americans’ veneration of the Bible and their understanding of it, painting a picture of a nation that believes God has spoken in scripture but

⁸ Importantly, the author would include basic *theological* literacy (i.e., familiarity with the distinctives of Apostolic Pentecostal theological teachings such as the Oneness and New Birth doctrines) as a subset of “biblical literacy.”

can't be bothered to listen to what God has to say."⁹ It was George Gallup who coined the term, "a nation of biblical illiterates."¹⁰ In fact, research conducted by the Gallup organization shows that Bible reading has steadily declined since the 1980s, bringing basic Bible knowledge to an "all-time low," in spite of the fact "“virtually every American home has at least one Bible, publishers sell about twenty million Bibles annually, and Gideons International gives away a new Bible every second of every day.”¹¹

For Prothero, the telling sign of the decline of biblical literacy is that, in the early days of his professorial career, a "humorous list of bloopers, supposedly drawn from actual student papers and exams" circulated with some regularity via the Internet and e-mail chains. For example, one student purportedly claimed: "The Egyptians were all drowned in the desert. Afterwards, Moses went up to Mount Cyanide to get the Ten Commandments." Another lamented that "Moses died before he ever reached Canada. Then Joshua led the Hebrews in the battle of Geritol." Still another turned his attention to the New Testament's Apostle Paul: "St. Paul cavorted to Christianity. He preached holy acrimony, which is another name for marriage."¹²

Prothero's concern is that "these bloopers don't pop up as often as they used to," leading him to wonder if such lists have grown scarce because "to get the humor you have to know something about Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible."¹³ Prothero's concern for biblical (and, more broadly, religious) literacy is rooted not in some evangelical passion for biblical truth

⁹ Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't*, (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2007), 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 30.

¹² Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 32.

¹³ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 32.

but in a concern for the civic health of the United States. Seeing religious literacy as a subset of E.D. Hirsch's concept of "cultural literacy" and the "gradual disintegration of cultural memory" which caused a "decline in our ability to communicate." Again, pointing to his personal experience, Prothero writes of his early teaching days: "I told students that I didn't care about facts. I cared about having challenging conversations." However, he "soon found...that the challenging conversations I coveted were not possible without some common knowledge...before we could discuss in any detail the great religious traditions of the world, we would need to have some shared vocabulary in each, some basic religious literacy."¹⁴

While Prothero's concerns are civic and embrace literacy in *all* world religions, his comments and observations raise for Apostolics an entirely different concern. The biblical literacy he describes as commonplace in the world of non-believers is growing more common place within the Apostolic Pentecostal church. In other words, in terms of biblical literacy, the Apostolic Pentecostal movement may be more *like* "the world" than differentiated *from* it. What might this mean for the future of, say, the Oneness view of God over against a Trinitarian understanding? Or the essentiality of water baptism by immersion in the name of Jesus rather than in the titles "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost"?

"Thy Word is a Sound Bite on My App"

Another area of concern related to the decline of regular Bible reading/growth of biblical illiteracy is demonstrated in an interesting trend in the ancillary data on students' favorite Old Testament book gathered in the above surveys. Beginning in Fall 2022, the book of Proverbs has

¹⁴ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 3-4.

consistently appeared in the “top three” of students’ favorite Old Testament books, twice coming in as the favorite book in that timeframe. Several of the students who selected that book shared that they had chosen that book because they were Bible quizzers and had come to appreciate the book through the UPCI’s Bible quizzing program. However, the preference for Proverbs continues to persist long after students who covered Proverbs through Bible quizzing have graduated.

In a personal conversation the other day, a student¹⁵ suggested another, darker reason for this growing preference for Proverbs—the prevalence of short, pithy sayings that do not require the same sustained attentiveness as do “long-form” narratives such as, say, the book of Genesis or the books of Samuel. In other words, in a world saturated with short-form social media content (i.e., Facebook reels and TikTok videos), the cultural attention span has degraded to a point that the majority of biblical content is virtually inaccessible, let alone understandable.

In the face of this targeted distraction,¹⁶ Maryanne Wolf and Mirit Barzillai coined the term “deep reading” to describe “the array of sophisticated processes that propel comprehension and that include inferential and deductive reasoning, analogical skills, critical analysis, and insight.”¹⁷ This is part of the reason why a canonical, “Genesis-to-Revelation” discipline of Bible reading is so critical; forcing oneself to read through (instead of skip around) the difficult parts of the biblical metanarrative is a critical discipline of the reader’s spiritual (and intellectual) attention. Difficult passages force deep(er) readings and thereby increase our

¹⁵ My teaching aide, Colton Schipper.

¹⁶ “The harmful effects and manipulative nature of our distracting technologies is well documented even by their creators.” Rachel B. Griffis, Julie Ooms, and Rachel M. De Smith Roberts, *Deep Reading: Practices to Subvert the Vices of our Distracted, Hostile, and Consumeristic Age*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 9.

¹⁷ Ibid. See, for example, Maryanne Wolf’s *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, (New York: Harper, 2018).

capacity to handle *even more* difficult passages with ascending levels of ease and spiritual profit. Perhaps here there is even a case to be made for a “faster” (e.g., annual) plan for reading the entire Bible; reading at such a steady pace aids the reader in maintaining a grasp of the entire scriptural metanarrative.

More importantly, the activity of deep reading is effectively a practice of “temperance,” one of the fruit of the Spirit and a classic Christian virtue. As Griffis, Ooms, and Roberts say: “Reading is a relational act—the very opposite of the kind of disembodied, distracted content consumption our technologies shape us to practice.”¹⁸ Regular rereading of the entire Bible should prevent us from “sound-biting” the text, treating it as an object to be disassembled and/or reassembled in ever-new configurations driven by our own perceived needs rather than by any specific underlying/overarching message. It forestalls the temptation of making the Bible “fit into” our world before we have taken appropriate measures to fit ourselves into its world. The Bible is not just a “Book of Answers”; it is a Story that reveals to us the one Answer for which we would never have thought to look.

Conclusion

It is difficult to call the present document a “paper,” which implies that some sort of helpful conclusion is reached. Instead, this was written to serve strictly as an “introduction,” raising an issue that calls for further research and ongoing discussion. What was never in doubt was the Apostolic Pentecostal commitment to the primacy and supremacy of the Word of God as the rule of all faith and practice. However, in light of that commitment, what must *always* be up for

¹⁸ Griffis, Ooms, & Roberts, *Deep Reading*, 40-41.

scrutiny is how our Scripture-related practices align with those core commitments. It is my prayer that the Apostolic Pentecostal movement in general—and the Urshan University and Graduate School of Theology in particular—could never be accused of *saying* that the Bible was central and foundational while all the while *living* as if it really didn't matter. May our deeds, our habits, and our practices always match our love for God's Holy Word!

Bibliography

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