

# Biblically challenged: Overcoming scriptural illiteracy

by [Kristin M. Swenson](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue

Comedian Jay Leno has gotten lots of mileage out of exposing general ignorance, including biblical ignorance. He'll ask passersby a question such as "On the first day of creation, God said, 'Let there be \_\_\_\_'" and people will respond: "Um, peace!" Or he'll ask, "Who were Cain and Abel?" and get the answer: "Friends of Jesus?"

The Bible is the all-time best-selling book—according to a 2002 Gallup poll, nearly every American (93 percent) owns at least one—yet it seems people know little about it. A Kelton Research survey in 2007 indicated that people know more about what goes into a Big Mac than they know about the Bible and can name members of the Brady Bunch far better than they can name the Ten Commandments. A 1997 Barna survey showed that 12 percent of adults think that Noah's wife was Joan of Ark, and about half don't know that the book of Isaiah is in the Old Testament. Yet another poll (by Gallup in 2004) revealed that nearly one in ten teens thinks that Moses was one of the 12 apostles.

Americans are not alone in their ignorance. Earlier this summer, St. John's University in Durham, England, released its biblical literacy report for the U.K. While 76 percent of respondents said that they owned a Bible, 79 percent couldn't identify a single accurate fact about Abraham, and 60 percent had no idea what the parable of the Good Samaritan is about.

The situation may have comic possibilities for Leno, but for preachers working to craft a biblically based sermon, the situation is confounding. If parishioners can't follow references to significant people, places or things in the Bible, they may miss or misunderstand the whole message. Tony Campolo, founder of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education and author most recently of *Red Letter Christians: A Citizens Guide to Faith and Politics*, recalls referring in class to the book of Proverbs and hearing a student ask, "Do we have that in our library?" Wallace Adams-Riley, rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, says biblical

illiteracy is such a big problem that a lot of ministers “don’t even know where to start.”

As with most things biblical, the answers aren’t necessarily obvious or straightforward. But a silver lining may glimmer round the edges of what some consider a crisis.

There is no single reason for the general lack of knowledge about the Bible. Commentators often point to public schools anxious about overstepping the First Amendment, perceptions of the Bible as out of date or limited to Sunday worship, and decreasing reading rates in general. Campolo identifies the proliferation of translations as yet another factor. Without a common text that everyone can recognize, he believes, it’s difficult for people to learn with confidence what’s in the Bible. Consequently, in thinking about ways to rectify the situation, Campolo advocates bringing back the simple practice of memorization. He identifies the King James Version, with its familiar biblical-sounding language, as the best candidate for such an exercise.

Others, too, maintain that just as an effective weight-loss diet finally boils down to eating less and exercising more, so learning the Bible requires some old-fashioned discipline. Certainly the value of church Bible studies that are based in concrete information (and from there moving on to personal application and theology) shouldn’t be overlooked. The Presbyterian Church’s *Present Word* curriculum offers the fruits of biblical scholarship in the context of faith-based studies, and the United Methodist Church offers *Disciple* products with information about the Bible’s historical context and literary characteristics. To encourage frequent and ongoing engagement with the biblical texts, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has launched the Book of Faith Initiative. With a Web site that features educational materials from a number of biblical scholars and an active social-networking function, it promises to live up to its tagline, “A conversation going on for eternity . . . and yet no awkward silences.”

Finding the time for such study is often a huge challenge, though. Carol Throntveit, director of adult education at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, observes that while many people say that they want to know more about the Bible, “it’s hard to get people to act on that professed desire.” So, in addition to weekly Bible studies, Mount Olivet offers an annual, one-hour “Bible-in-Life” event that features a notable speaker. Attendance at that lecture has been close to 1,000.

Other pastors pitch another option: allow ten minutes just before or after the service to provide some relevant remedial information about the biblical texts that appear in that week's lectionary or sermon.

In reality, attending a weekly worship service is all that most people do, and that brings us back to the sermon itself. In his book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Should Know . . . and Doesn't*, Stephen Prothero notes that before the 19th century the sermon was primarily an educational exercise, consisting of biblical exegesis and expositions of doctrine. Preachers sounded less like pastors and more like stodgy professors, and because they were paid by the town, it didn't matter if parishioners found the preachers to be deadly dull. With the acceptance of the First Amendment's separation of church and state and the rise of the revivalist style of preaching in the Great Awakening, entertaining, emotional and inspiring personal narratives were placed front and center, unseating biblical instruction.

Most preachers today try to balance the educational with the entertaining, while delivering a meaningful, inspiring and relevant message. No small task. They agree that learning about the Bible can and should happen at least partly in the context of a sermon, and they strive to integrate basic information about the Bible into an appealing discussion of the text's significance for the people in the pews. Campolo observes that evangelical preachers may have an advantage in that they can work through an entire biblical book, for example, rather than having to follow the dictates of a lectionary. He asserts that using such an expository approach "is a major contribution that preachers can make to their congregations' knowledge of the Bible."

Those who do follow the schedule of texts defined by their churches' lectionaries may be deliberate in regard to teaching about and from those texts. Because each week's scripture passages draw from both Old and New Testament books and do not necessarily progress from Sunday to Sunday in the order that they appear in the Bible, parishioners may have difficulty distinguishing one biblical book from another or miss the bigger picture. Nevertheless, some preachers find this variety of texts and the opportunity to compare and contrast them to be an advantage in teaching their parishioners about the Bible.

David Wolpe, rabbi and author of *Why Faith Matters*, takes a page from the sports announcers' repertoire to employ the recap to good effect. "You'll remember how in the story of Daniel, . . . [insert recap here]. Well, . . . [insert message here]." This

technique helps bridge the gap between parishioners who know the texts well and those people who may not know such references at all—without talking down to anybody.

Denise Honeycutt, director of mission for the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church, proposes scheduling occasional talk-back sermons during which congregants can ask questions and offer comments during the sermon time. This gives pastors an opportunity to take the pulse of their congregants, to correct misunderstandings or delve more deeply into a text that people find especially relevant or intriguing. Yet the logistics of sticking to the church service schedule, the challenge of fielding potentially inflammatory comments, and accurately addressing the range of possible questions may make this approach impractical.

Considering such techniques and ideas brings us to a more general question: What exactly do we mean by biblical literacy in the first place? Surely it involves simply knowing what the Bible is and what's in it; but for people of faith, such knowledge is inevitably bound up in questions about what the Bible means for their lives.

If the purpose of biblical literacy is no more than flattening the texts for use only as proof texts to argue a preconceived position, then Brad Hirschfield wants none of it. Hirschfield, president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership—and named one of the top 30 “preachers and reachers” by Beliefnet.com—distinguishes between learning basic information such as who David was, on the one hand, and professing a particular interpretation of David's story, on the other. The temptation exists even among the most well-meaning church leaders, schooled in the Bible's long and complicated history, to simplify biblical texts into easy, take-home lessons and tidy, bite-sized packages. The unspoken message is, then, that a person has gained biblical literacy by mastering a single, fixed way of understanding the Bible. Yet given the Bible's radically unique character, biblical literacy involves not only the mundane (yet crucial) business of knowing basic information but something more profound.

Biblical literacy means an ability to identify significant passages and stories, people, places and things in the Bible; it means knowing something about the Bible's organization, wide-ranging historical contexts and original languages (at least knowing that the Bible didn't emerge out of the ether fully formed in modern English). But perhaps more important, biblical literacy involves the recognition that there's always more to learn. Simply by virtue of the subject, the Bible is both

enormously complex and persistently engaging; it invites a life-long relationship. That, finally, is both the problem and the promise of biblical literacy.

Underlying the reasons for today's biblical illiteracy is this well-kept little secret: the Bible is incredibly difficult. It looks like any other book, with pages bound between two covers, but it is as dissimilar to modern books as Ursa Major is to a teddy bear. An ancient collection of texts from disparate times and places representing richly varied theological perspectives, a book with a checkered history of use, available to most people only in translations for which we have no original, and still revered by millions the world over as the inspired Word of God, the Bible doesn't lend itself to easy mastery.

Precisely there is the silver lining. "Part of the job of a preacher," observes Wolpe, "is to make the Bible strange, strange enough to awaken: 'Wow! What is this about?'" Everything that makes learning about the Bible so difficult also makes it intriguing, provocative and humbling. It stimulates an appetite to learn more. Perhaps the best form of biblical literacy a preacher can promote is this willingness to embrace what is delightful or maddening, paradoxical or ambiguous, mysterious and open-ended about the texts.

Honeycutt wrestles regularly with the challenges of general illiteracy among Christian communities that have little or no access to education, period. "The challenge in such circumstances," she observes, "becomes how to teach literacy beyond the literal, so that people have the critical tools to ask questions."

Many agree that the key to managing such complexity may be not so much a matter of "managing," after all. Instead, they counsel, just tell the stories. Over time, people will learn such basics as who Sarah was and the difference between Gospels and epistles—not necessarily as discrete and disconnected facts but in the holistic context of engagement with the richly layered texts.

"Told well and faithfully, the stories have such power," Adams-Riley says. "Trust the stories, trust the God who is in the stories." Share the texts and your own engagement with them, openly acknowledging how they resist tidy, once-and-for-all treatments.

"Real literacy," Hirschfield observes, "creates great independence . . . allowing people to wrestle for themselves with the big questions without necessarily providing a fixed resolution." Sharing the stories in a way that responsibly reflects

the multifaceted nature of biblical texts and their capacity to move and speak to us will inspire people to remember what they've learned and to want to learn more.

This should be good news both to parishioners and to preachers already anxious about meeting existing responsibilities. Developing biblical literacy includes mastering certain facts, yes. But when such crucial yet mundane learning is integrated with an appreciation for the complexity and incomparable uniqueness of the Bible—its antiquity and timelessness, its simultaneous opacity and transparent invitation to engagement—the journey of understanding is rich indeed. Humbly accepting that such biblical literacy is not a function of absolute mastery but a summons to inexhaustible learning and wonder, we enter into a profound relationship with a living text that is somehow mysteriously the very word of God.