

# The Greatest Story Never Read

Recovering biblical literacy in the church.

Jay Leno knew he had the perfect comedy routine. Roving through the audience of his late-night talk show, Leno asked people how much they knew about the Bible. "Name one of the Ten Commandments," he asked. A hand went up: "God helps those who help themselves?" Leno went on: "Name one of the apostles." No answer. But when he asked his audience to name the four Beatles, the names "George, Paul, John, and Ringo" flew from the crowd.

Last year I was listening to a speech on the radio given by a candidate for governor in Nevada. He wanted to propose a new tax on the gambling industry but did not want to give the impression that he was against Nevada's most powerful and lucrative industry. Appealing to biblical authority, he announced: "I want to be like King David in the Bible. He didn't kill Goliath, he just hurt him a little."

Obviously, we live in a postbiblical era where general knowledge of the Bible cannot be assumed. As a book, the Bible has been removed from the reading lists

of students so that they can barely recognize metaphors from great novels written before 1950. A professor from the University of Wisconsin told me about speaking to a seminar of highly motivated, intellectually keen students who did not recognize literary references to "Jonah" or "the prodigal son." She was forced to "decode" these cryptic images so that the students could see the underlying themes of the books they analyzed.

We may lament the neglect of the Bible in popular culture and secular education, but we can understand it. But what about the church? What about the *evangelical* church? If it is true that biblical illiteracy is commonplace in secular culture at large, there is ample evidence that points to similar trends in our churches.

For the last four years, the Bible and theology department at Wheaton College in Illinois has studied the biblical and theological literacy of incoming freshmen. These students are intellectually ambitious and spiritually passionate. They represent almost every Protestant denomination and

every state in the country. Most come from strong evangelical churches and possess a long history of personal devotion and Christian involvement (regular church attendance, youth groups, camps, missions, etc.). They use the Bible regularly—but curiously, few genuinely know its stories.

The Bible has become a springboard for personal piety and meditation, not a book to be read. These students very likely know that David killed Goliath, but they don't know why he did it or that Goliath was a Philistine or who the Philistines were.

When asked to complete a test in which a series of biblical events must be placed in order, our students returned surprising results. One-third of the freshmen could not put the following in order: Abraham, the Old Testament prophets, the death of Christ, and Pentecost. Half could not sequence: Moses in Egypt, Isaac's birth, Saul's death, and Judah's exile. One-third could not identify Matthew as an apostle from a list of New Testament names. When asked to locate the biblical book supplying a given story, one-third could

not find Paul's travels in Acts, half did not know that the Christmas story was in Matthew or that the Passover story was in Exodus.

This presents a formidable problem for anyone wishing to understand the spiritual thought-world of the New Testament. Each of the New Testament writers was steeped in the biblical stories of the Old Testament, and they all employed allusions to these stories in order to convey deeper meaning to their message. Students who cannot identify Samuel or David with ease (much less understand the deeper nuances in their stories in the Old Testament) are at a loss to understand the New Testament.

No literate Jew in the first century could miss the links between the parents of John the Baptist (Elizabeth and Zechariah) and Samuel (Hannah and Elkanah). It is like explaining American Christmas traditions (both religious and secular) to an immigrant who has just arrived from China. Santa Claus, manglers, and wise men mean nothing even though their images may appear everywhere. Without an understanding of the metaphors and the images driving a people's culture, it is not possible to understand their literature.

After reflecting on these test returns, I was interested to take my inquiry in a different direction. Surveying high-school seniors in youth groups found in strong evangelical churches would supply another confirmation of my suspicions. These students are the "pride" of our Sunday-school curricula. They have seen our programs since elementary school; they have watched VeggieTales repeatedly; sermons and Bible studies have been the staple of life. Youth leaders in a number of churches were eager to employ a short, 25-question objective test I wrote to study their students' Bible knowledge.

On my simple 25-question test, high-school youth groups aver-

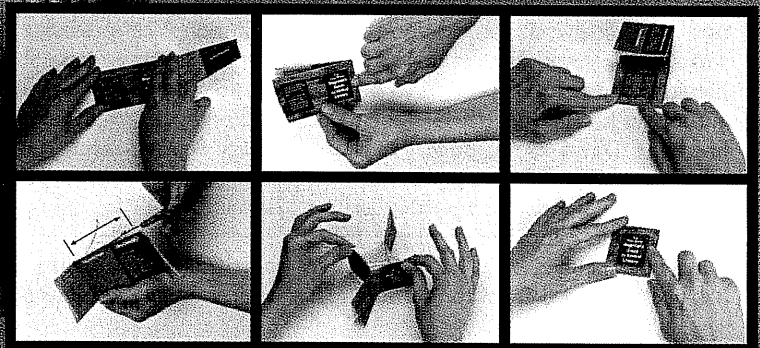
aged 50-55 percent correct. When these students were pooled, average responses to particular questions gave a more dramatic picture. Fully 80 percent could not place Moses, Adam, David, Solomon, Abraham in chronological order. Only 15 percent could place in order the major events of Jesus' and Paul's lives. Only 20 percent knew to look in Acts to read the story of Paul's travels. And while 60 percent could locate the Exodus story in the Old Testament, only 33 percent could find the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, and 80 percent did not know how to find the Lord's Prayer.

I do not want to leave the impression that once upon a time there was a "golden age" when everyone in the church was biblically literate. Many of the deficiencies we see today also existed in the 1950s. But I would argue that the baseline of minimally acceptable Bible knowledge has shifted.

What is changing is the loss of our conviction that the church has a content-rich educational mission. Despite their limited successes, flannelgraphs and workbooks from 35 years ago tried to relay the basic elements of the biblical story. Today we seem to want to teach timeless Christian themes that spring from those



**Mature Christians** want to know much more about the Bible than the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes. But everyone has to start somewhere. Here's a handy little guide to provide some basics. Who doesn't need to be reminded of the 12 tribes of Israel or Jesus' 12 disciples? Tuck it or give it away for handy reference.



STEVE AND CARLA SONHEIM

stories, while leaving the stories themselves behind.

### Biblical literacy matters

I have had friends tell me that a working knowledge of the Bible does not matter. The Christian faith, they argue, is a matter of faith and the Spirit—not reason, not theology. Christianity is not about the recitation of facts about the Jesus of history; it is about knowing the living Christ, the Jesus of the church who indwells his people today. Scripture becomes Scripture when God speaks through it to our hearts (they argue). The facts of the Bible are the stuff of academic exercises, reserved for the doctors and leaders of the church.

But it does matter. The Reformation was at the very least a reminder of what is the ultimate source of authority in Christian thought and life. Roland Bainton describes the common view: “The reformers dethroned the Pope and enthroned the Bible” (*The Cambridge History of the Bible*). Throughout the sixteenth century, Luther argued passionately that the Scriptures are not only the sole basis for faith, but they are accessible to every person, even commoners. Hence, a person possessing a sound understanding of the Old Testa-

ment and New Testament could tap spiritual wisdom more accurately than any bishop. The Scriptures were a divine resource, Luther urged, a guide to truth unavailable anywhere else.

To disregard this resource—to neglect the Bible—is to remove the chief authority on which our faith is built. We are left vulnerable, unable to check the teachings of those who invite us to follow, incapable of charting a true course past siren voices calling from treacherous islands such as TV programs, popular books, and enchanting prophecies displayed on colorful Web sites. I am amazed at the number of times mature Christians have come to me bearing ideas discovered in some spiritual flea market, ideas about the Spirit or prayer or eschatology or prosperity that flatly contradict the plain teaching of the Bible.

But the importance of this virtue lies deeper still. To be a people “of the Book” is to be a people that knows how to use the Bible as a divine gift. In a world that seems intent on rejecting every source of authority, it is a precious thing to discover and acknowledge—to embrace with one’s whole heart—the divine book that can comfort and guide. Christians who have never had this gift, who possess a Bible and don’t read it, who know a few stories

without being immersed in its world, who possess no sense of the potency of special revelation for them, live with a remarkable impoverishment. Yes they can be Christians, but they are not rich Christians who drink from deep and precious wells.

Once, when I lived in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Chicago, the city was rebuilding the neighborhood playgrounds and we were all busy watching new swings and bark chips being delivered. One day workers poured a small, concrete retaining wall. Later that night, when the cement was still drying, women on my street walked to the playground and wrote Hebrew sentences with carpentry nails in the cement all around the perimeter. They were verses from the Psalms, one mother told me. “God’s Word is powerful, wonderful, beautiful, and I want my children to be surrounded by it even when they play.” What a gift, not only to be a child surrounded by psalms when working the swing sets, but to be a child growing up in a world in which Scripture is genuinely the source of life and wisdom in the daily affairs of living.

### Digging at the root problem

The problem, in essence, is that we are in danger of losing the imaginative and lin-

#### Bible Chronology

Old Testament 101

Creation, Adam and Eve

The Fall

Noah and the flood

Abraham and the patriarchs

Joseph taken to Egypt

Hebrews captive in Egypt

Moses and the Exodus

The Ten Commandments

Israelites enter the Promised Land

Period of the Judges

The Monarchy: Saul, David, Solomon

Divided kingdom

#### The Lord's Prayer

Our Father which art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread

As we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever

Amen

Matthew 6:9-13 (compare Luke 11:2-4)

#### Beatitudes

Blessed are:

the poor in spirit

those who mourn

the meek

those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

the merciful

the pure in heart

the peacemakers

those who are persecuted for righteousness sake

Matthew 5 (compare Luke 6)

#### Ten Commandments

1. Do not have any other gods.
2. Do not make idols.
3. Do not take the Lord's name in vain.
4. Remember to keep the Sabbath holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not kill.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.
10. Do not covet.

Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5

#### Twelve Tribes of Israel

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph (two half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh), Benjamin

Genesis 49

#### Twelve Disciples

Simon (Peter), Andrew, James (son of Zebedee), John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Thaddaeus, Simon the Cananaean, Judas Iscariot

Matthew 10

#### New Testament 101

Rebuilding of Jerusalem and temple

Return to Israel

Exile in Babylon

Southern Kingdom overthrown

End of Northern Kingdom

Birth of Jesus

Coming of John the Baptist

Jesus' baptism and ministry

Jesus' death and resurrection, ascension

Pentecost and formation of church

Apostles spread the gospel

Paul's conversion

Paul's missionary journeys

#### The Itty-Bitty Beginner's Guide to Biblical Literacy

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. Genesis 1:31a (NRSV)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16 (NLT)

guistic world of the Bible. The Bible does not provide us with the mental furniture of our lives anymore. And what is most surprising is that this is as true in the church as it is for the secular culture.

The well-known Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck has argued that the church today is in danger of failing to transmit our religious culture to the next generation (*Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*). Lindbeck shows how secular culture has successfully defeated some of the pillars of church life (such as Sunday observance) and challenged the educational legitimacy of still others (Sunday school). In short, the spiritual life has become less a matter of learning than it is a matter of experiencing. This has resulted in Christian ministries that put less premium on education than they do on personal development and therapeutic wholeness.

In the 1960s I went through confirmation in the Lutheran Church of America. It was two years of tough memorization and study followed by an examination. The bar was raised high, and we knew it. Some churches have moved the educational bar so low, students step over it without effort. Now we're simply grateful that they want to take the step at all.

Lindbeck points to the encroachment of "postmodernism," which pastors may decry, but which has influenced the pastorate beyond measure. Religious certainty is anchored less to historical and theological fact than it is to compelling spiritual encounters. Thus sermons become more therapeutic and less instructional; and the validity of what we do on Sunday morning is grounded in what we feel, not in what we think. "That was a great service" may well be a reference to the skill of the worship band, not the insight of the preacher.

One junior-high-school student was listening to a youth leader trying to explain to a class the meaning of Genesis 1. The discussion simply catalogued the many questions Genesis 1 might raise without providing solid answers (a typical postmodern exercise). The leader wrote the questions laboriously on the chalkboard. At the end of the hour, a precocious sixth grader raised his hand and commented aloud: "I've learned one thing here: If you want answers about life, you'd better look for them at school. If you want questions and opinions, come to church." There could be no more damning indictment.

Historical exegesis is fast becoming a lost art in the pulpit. Rather than explaining the historical setting of a passage, texts become springboards for devotional reflection. Biblical passages are taken out of context as the preacher searches for those stories that evoke the responses or attitudes desired. The heart of a "good" sermon is fast becoming the "emotional work" that can be done in 20 minutes preaching time.

I have asked youth leaders whether their students were learning the content of the faith (solid theological categories) or the stories of the Bible (the chronology, the history, the characters, the lessons). One remarked, "It is hard to find time. But I can say that these kids are truly learning to love God." That is it in a nutshell. Christian faith is not being built on the firm foundation of hard-won thoughts, ideas, history, or theology. Spirituality is being built on private emotional attachments.

Is it any wonder then that our young people and adults do not know the stories of the Bible? That they cannot reason theologically? No one is teaching them. No one is modeling it for them. No one is announcing that the biblical story is The Story that defines our identity and life in the church.

Recently I worked for three weeks at an archaeological dig in Israel and met up with a large group of students from a Christian college. We discussed theology as we cleaned Byzantine pottery. "I'm a Christian," one sophomore argued, "but I really don't think the Bible has anything to say about most moral questions." And we had just been discussing that morning the ethics of alcohol, abortion, and premarital sex.

### The challenge for the church's ministry

We should not despair. This is not a challenge we cannot take in stride within the numerous ministries of the church. Just a few years ago no one would have guessed the emergence of a ministry touching hundreds of thousands of men (Promise Keepers). Who would have predicted the strategic, creative ministries to young people in their twenties that are being launched today? I was speaking this spring at a large new church planted in a

Sacramento suburb. In three years it has grown from 500 to 3,000 people, and the pastor explained that in any weekend service, over half of the congregation was made up of either new converts or non-Christians. He is making the Bible a part of their church culture, and whenever visitors attend they are given a new Bible in a contemporary translation. This church is swimming in Bibles, and to possess and carry a copy is one of the cultural badges of membership there.

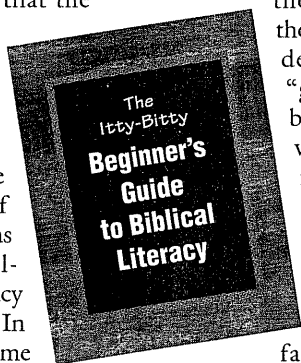
What strategies are available to help us address this difficult situation? The first step must be diagnosis. Leadership must assess the true condition of the flock before it is fed. A simple questionnaire (like the 25-question test I wrote) will give unparalleled insight. It is like taking a treadmill stress test and then talking about your fitness plan.

We must also reconstruct the educational ministry for the church. The adult education committee of the church where I worship is developing four "core" classes for all its members: Old Testament Survey, New Testament Survey, Christian Doctrines, and Christian Disciplines. Each "core class" will be 12 weeks long and offered each autumn. Every four years a complete cycle of instruction will be completed.

Parachurch ministries offer yet another strategy to supplement the educational curriculum. Take Bible Study Fellowship\* (BSF) as an example. Begun in 1952, BSF today hosts 950 groups in 47 states and 30 countries. There are groups for men, women, and even singles. Seven courses are recycled each year (Genesis, Matthew, Moses, John, Minor Prophets, Acts, Romans) and led by instructors trained at the international headquarters in San Antonio, Texas. It is rigorous, Bible-based, and strictly interdenominational. To get a local chapter started, all someone has to do is contact BSF headquarters and meet the area supervisor (210-492-4676).

We also need to be alert to the educational dimension of the church's sermons (see "I Love to Tell the Story to Those Who Know It Least," p. 49). This year I was preaching at a nearby church on the Sunday following Easter. It dawned on me that many sitting in the pews might not know the bare essentials of the Easter story. As I spoke, I rehearsed and rein-

\* Bible Study Fellowship International, 19001 Blanco Rd., San Antonio, TX 78258-4019. For the history of this ministry, see A. W. Johnson, *Created for Commitment* (Tyndale).





forced the events and the characters of the story. Repetition is one secret of strong teaching. Today I never fail to replot familiar ground from the pulpit in order to assure that my audience knows "the facts of the story" and their theological implications.

Finally, we need to identify young men and women in the church who have gifts of teaching and intellect and encourage them to pursue their gifts. Last year one such student was in my classes at the col-

lege. Leigh Ann is now attending Fuller Theological Seminary, and I have no doubt that her vision for herself will come true: someday she will be a considerable teaching presence either in the American church or in Africa.

I often see students who feel called to ministry. But we cannot assume that their call is to work in traditional pastoral ministry. Some have remarkable gifts of teaching: agile minds, persuasive communication skills, and the intellectual

capacity to build curricula that will bless God's people.

We need to help these students and the churches to rediscover the "teaching pastor" as a desperately needed vocation. We must encourage them, equip them, and point them in directions that will help bring about the rebirth of biblical literacy and informed faith in North America. **CT**

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**Biblical  
preaching in a  
post-Christian  
culture.**

# I Love to Tell the Story to Those Who Know It Least

LILLIAN DANIEL

**R**ecently, on Children's Sunday, we went through the ritual of presenting the third graders with their own Bibles. Some of the

children receiving Bibles were brand new to church life. We may have been giving them the first Bibles they would see in their homes.

To liven things up, I gave the children a pop quiz. I said, "I'm going to call out three names of books in the Bible. You tell me which ones are false. First, the Gospel of John, the Gospel of Paul, and the Gospel of Stewart." The adults laughed and the children knew that there was no Gospel of Stewart in the Canon. As for the Gospel of Paul, they claimed a deep familiarity with it.

I realized I had to make my public quiz easier. I told them there would only be one true book in the next list, and I asked them to choose among the books of Malachi, Shalakai, and Jai-Alai.

"The book of Jai-Alai is the right one," called out a child. Jai-Alai is a popular betting sport in Connecticut. Sadly, it would be more familiar to the average child than a book of the Old Testament.

"Okay, now try this list: Habbakuk, Chewbacca, and Pistachio." The children laughed. They thought that all three were made up.

"That's why we are giving you these Bibles," I said, undiscouraged.

My quiz confirmed yet again that I can never assume biblical literacy in my New England congregation. Here in my main-line Protestant Congregational church that lies in the shadow of Yale University, the preacher can never be too basic.

Increasingly, people wander into our

church with a similar story. They were raised by parents who believed children ought to “choose their religion for themselves.” They had parents of different faiths or no faith who preached a generic morality across the dinner table in the hope that something would sink in. Then, after these children were old enough to have busy social schedules, they were offered the option of attending religious institutions their parents had thus far ignored. Few chose to.

I compare this method to sitting your child down and saying, “Now, Johnny, I want you to choose your own career path in life, and so I’m not going to teach you to read.”

Today, as adults, with vaguely spiritual yearnings for community in an atomized New England city, these people shop for churches. These adults bravely try to follow the worship service, but I know that ultimately it will be the stories of the Bible that will open their hearts to Christ and this Christian community.

Few praise their parents for raising them without any religious training. They have been left without a framework in which to consider life’s mysteries, and when they do enter a church, they feel illiterate.

Yet those who were unchurched are not the only ones who feel this way. Often I am pulled aside by parents who confess that even though they were raised in the church, they do not feel able to share the basics of their faith. Some were raised on sermons that skirted the Scripture or apologized for it. One new member told our denominational executive that while he was church shopping, he had visited 12 churches in which he could not tell whether the minister believed in Christ.

Adults raised in Christian churches will volunteer for the nursery but seldom to teach Sunday school. They worry that they cannot answer their children’s basic questions about how churches operate and support themselves, let alone explain ancient rituals and traditions. I understand, because I am a product of the same religious education as many of my members.

In one church I was raised in, Sunday school was small and unimaginative. “Draw a picture of the baby Jesus,” we were told each week. “Okay, now you can trace him. Want to make him into a puppet?” The Jesus of my grade-school years was more cute than compelling.

In another church, Sunday-school teachers were encouraged to be “relevant.” Instead of Bible stories, we did situational ethics. “Imagine yourself in a sinking ship.

The lifeboat only has room for 12 and there are 13 who need saving. What would you do?” Lifeboat dilemmas and debates on the Cold War took the place of Scripture memorization. When Jesus made an appearance in these debates, we tended to imagine him carrying a guitar. We learned a lot about how we felt but little about the God who created us. Raised in the church in an age of cultural relativism, some end up like a football player who graduated from high school without learning to read, sent out into the world biblically illiterate.

**I**lliteracy is a useful model to describe many adults who are brave enough to wander into churches today. With illiteracy comes shame and embarrassment, common emotions among the adults who privately confess that they know less than their children about the Bible.

These parents are indeed courageous. They try to provide for their children what they did not receive, and risk not having all the answers. I, in turn, adjust my preaching to help these parents.

Thus, in sermons today I know that before that Scripture is read, it is helpful for me to provide an introduction. In the past, I would have included extensive historical detail. Today I am careful to mention whether the book is in the Old or New Testament, with a further explanation of what that means. I go so far as to say, “Since this reading is from the Old Testament, the story took place long before Jesus lived.”

I do not jump from passage to passage as a preacher with a biblically literate congregation can. Instead, I go in depth with one passage, always retelling the story. My goal with every sermon is that those who heard it will remember which passage was preached on, and that when they hear it again, they will remember having heard it before. I attempt to nurture the familiarity I cannot take for granted.

This leaves little time for showing off my graduate education, or my multisyllabic words, but the rewards are great. After church I might be told, “That story was fascinating. I never heard it before.” I am careful to remind them I did not make it up.

As a preacher, I have worried about how my basic explanations fall upon ears that already know and love the Bible. These saints assure me they do not mind, and I trust the Scripture to do its work. Our Savior preached a new word using familiar metaphors—of a mustard seed or a mother hen—so that anyone could understand. Yet

the manner in which he described God’s love was so profound that the top scholars of his day and the high priest were fascinated as well. As the old hymn goes, “I love to tell the story, for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.”

Within Protestant history, the Reformation stands out as a revolution based on the belief that all people can read and interpret the divine revelation of Scripture. As today’s preachers bemoan biblical illiteracy, we would do well to remember the time when believers were not allowed to read God’s Word for themselves at all.

So when a lay reader introduces the reading on Sunday morning by saying, “Our Old Testament reading this morning comes from the Book of Romans,” I do not lament an innocent mistake. Instead, I celebrate the opportunity we have to learn together, and the way in which Christ’s power breaks through as we hear a text. The Scripture stories upon which we build our faith will reveal their own layers of meaning and relevance to our lives. We may start off listening with a skeptical ear or reading with a critical eye, but soon enough these stories are reading us.

As we spend more time with the Bible, and those in our community grow more familiar with the Word, it would be tempting to assume a growing literacy. Yet in God’s irony, the church grows, and continues to attract brave souls who dare to enter a world with unfamiliar customs and a strange text. By God’s grace, those well-versed in Scripture will never dominate the church, and we will always have room for the obvious questions. For instance, at last year’s Christmas pageant rehearsal, one of the children saw the familiar shepherd’s costume and exclaimed, “You mean we’re doing the same story we did last year?”

Six months after the Christmas pageant, at the church picnic following the Bible presentations, I noticed one of the children climbing a rock above the choppy Long Island Sound, as athletic as any third grader could be. As he scrambled from rock to muddy rock, he carried his new Bible with him above the waves.

The child had refused to put his Bible down since he had received it that morning. Did he get any of the Bible pop quiz questions right in church? Of course not. That’s why we gave him the Bible. **CT**

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