

BIBLE LITERACY AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE CHURCH

Although most Americans consider themselves Christian, many do not know the basic facts fundamental to the faith. Consider these statistics:

- Only 40% of Americans know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount.¹
- 40% of American Christians believe that the Book of Mormon, the Koran, and the Bible all express the same spiritual truths.²
- Only half of American adults can name any one of the four Gospels.³

Some groups struggle more than others in attaining Bible literacy. Adults under the age of 30 and people who attend small churches express greater difficulties with Bible knowledge than older adults and members of large churches.⁴

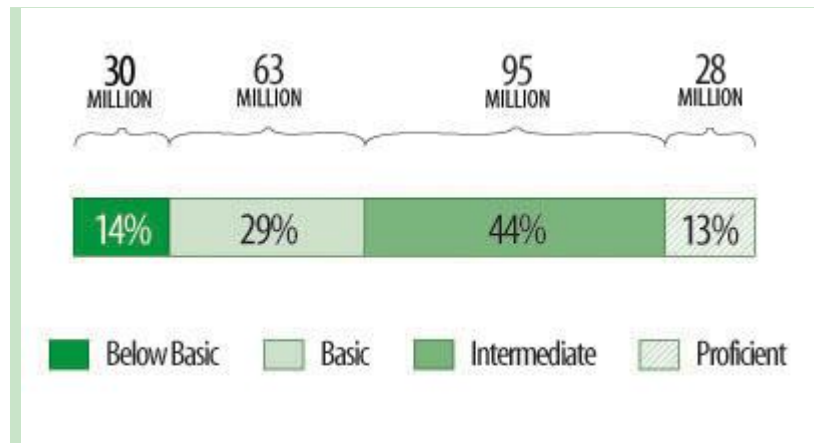
Fortunately, the past decade has brought great advances in consumer technology—developments with the potential to bring the Word of God to individuals who are functionally illiterate, too busy or prefer not to read, or not affiliated with a bricks-and-mortar church. First, we'll look briefly at these groups and their challenges in knowing the Bible. Then, we'll turn to new digital technology that surmounts these challenges, bringing the Good News to those who are currently left out with traditional Bible instruction.

BARRIERS TO BIBLE LITERACY

Poor literacy skills, lack of time, and the huge growth in the number of unchurched individuals all contribute to Americans' low level of Bible literacy.

Difficulty with reading keeps people from knowing the Word of God

The low level of prose literacy in this country, represented in the chart at right, is one of the least-recognized obstacles to evangelism and discipleship. People who read and write with ease may be surprised to find that nearly half of all American adults are non-literate in English or have difficulty with the written word.



Literacy skill levels among American adults

Chart from: http://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp

According to the U.S. Department of Education's 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 43% of American adults—93 million people—function at below-basic or basic literacy levels. An additional 11 million are considered non-literate in English.⁵

Below-basic literacy, the lowest level, means that an individual is restricted to "no more than the most simple and concrete literacy tasks," such as signing a form.⁶ Basic skills, measured in the next level, are those "necessary to perform simple and everyday literacy activities."⁷ Basic skills allow a person to find a television program listing in TV Guide or compare the prices of two tickets, but does not enable a casual reading of the local newspaper—let alone daily, meaningful Bible study.

People with poor reading skills lose more than just job opportunities and financial prospects. These individuals also face two particular challenges in receiving God's Word: 1) dependency upon others, and 2) a learning style that differs from the way most Bible teaching is done in this country.

First, people who cannot read fluently have restricted access to the Scriptures and are dependent upon others to know what the Bible teaches. Audio Bible listening programs empower individuals to discover the Word of God for themselves—and they are highly accessible to people who may feel intimidated by a printed book.

Second, literate and non-literate people process information differently. For historical and cultural reasons, most American pastors and Bible teachers use an expository style of teaching. While this works well for the highly literate, people with oral communication styles require storytelling and dialogue, not exposition, to understand and retain information.⁸ The way that Jesus taught is the ideal way to reach people who can't read, and Audio Scripture recordings bring His teachings directly to their hearts and minds.

Finally, many people who can read simply prefer not to. They would rather receive their information from electronic and other audio and visual media. In fact, in a recent year, one quarter of Americans did not read a single book.⁹

On-the-go lifestyle crowds out quiet time

Until the advent of audio recordings, the only way most individuals could know exactly what the Bible teaches was to read it for themselves—yet few believers read the Scriptures regularly. In fact, just 54% of Protestant adults read the Bible at least once a week.¹⁰ Even those who read the Bible rarely conduct a thorough reading. A Gallup poll of U.S. Christians found that only 28% regularly study the Bible to find direction for their lives.¹¹

What accounts for this low rate of Bible readership? In a survey of more than 500 pastors, 47% cited lack of time as the main reason more Christians don't read the Bible.¹²

The notoriously on-the-go American lifestyle is a prime reason people feel pressed for time. With the average commute time at 23.4 minutes a day, most American workers spend more time driving to work each year (100 hours) than they spend on vacation time away from work (80 hours).¹³ Mothers spent an average of 405 hours in the car in 2008—equivalent to nearly 17 days.¹⁴

The unchurched population is growing

Functional and biblical illiteracy and hectic lifestyles aren't the only factors to complicate evangelism and discipleship. In the past 15 years America has seen huge growth in the number of unchurched individuals, defined as adults who have not attended a Christian church service within the preceding six months (other than for holidays or special events).¹⁵ The unchurched population is nearly 100 million Americans.¹⁶ Of these, 24% are Christian and 13 to 15 million are born again!¹⁷

Unchurched individuals hold a wide variety of beliefs. Interestingly, a quarter of them believe in the total accuracy of Bible teachings. At the same time, just over half (51%) believe that Jesus committed sins.¹⁸

As tens of millions of Americans migrate away from churches, the trend is toward non-traditional forms of religious instruction, including online resources. Close to 82 million Americans use the Internet for spiritual or religious activities.¹⁹

NEW TECHNOLOGIES MAKE THE BIBLE ACCESSIBLE

The American church faces numerous challenges in teaching the Bible. Widespread functional and biblical illiteracy, hectic lifestyles, and a growing number of unchurched individuals all require new forms of Bible instruction. The good news: New technologies can reach unevangelized and undisciplined individuals, regardless of their lifestyle or ability to read. The popularity of consumer technology and the MP3 audio format means that MP3 Bibles can reach groups who are left behind with traditional methods of Bible teaching.

Most Americans own cell phones and entertainment technology

In one of the most striking social changes of the last decade, ownership and use of consumer technology has risen dramatically. Consider the following:

- 85% of American adults own at least one type of personal computer.²⁰
- Nearly half of respondents in a recent poll said they own an HDTV.²¹
- 71% of teens and 85% of adults own a cell phone.²²

Christians are solidly part of this trend. Born-again Christians comprise 40% of the consumer technology market, and evangelical Christians are more likely than other Americans to have Internet access and cell phones.²³

Ownership of iPods and other MP3 players is skyrocketing

In addition to these familiar forms of consumer electronics, there's a new kid on the block: MP3 technology. MP3, a method of compressing digital data, is revolutionizing the entertainment industry.²⁴ MP3 files can be burned onto CDs or played on computers or special players such as the iPod.

Although several brands of MP3 players are sold, Apple dominates the pack, topping 70% of market share as of the quarter ending March 28, 2009.²⁵ A few statistics illustrate the enormous popularity of digital music players:

- Apple Computer Inc. announced in 2007 that it sold more than 100 million iPods in the 5½ years after launching the device.²⁶
- Customers snapped up more than 45 million iPhones and iPod Touches in just two years.²⁷
- 48% of African-Americans have accessed the Internet through a mobile device—a figure that is 50% higher than the national average.²⁸
- Born-again Christians account for more than one-third of the market for iPods, MP3 players, and mobile computers.²⁹
- 78% of teens own mobile music players such as iPods.³⁰

MP3 and the Bible: a match made in heaven

MP3 technology offers a new and exciting way to bring the Bible to people who are not being reached with traditional means. Here are just a few of the advantages of MP3 Audio Bibles:

- Audio Bible programs present the Word of God in the way that oral communities learn best.
- MP3 and similar files can be loaded onto iPods and other digital music players, an excellent way to reach teens and young adults.
- People who rely on the Internet for religious instruction are likely to be receptive to a high-tech format.
- Church leaders can influence the unchurched by encouraging Bible listening programs that use the wildly popular MP3 format.
- Members of small churches can improve their Bible knowledge without taxing their church's limited resources.
- Busy people can listen to the Bible during ordinary daily activities.
- Time spent in the car can be redeemed.
- By listening for just 28 minutes a day, a person can complete the New Testament in just 40 days.

For more information on Audio Bible programs, please contact Faith Comes By Hearing at FaithComesByHearing.com or 1.800.545.6552.

SOURCES CITED

¹ Michael J. Vlach, *Americans and the Bible: Bible Ownership, Reading, Study and Knowledge in the United States*, citing George Gallup, Jr., *The Role of the Bible in American Society* (Princeton: The Princeton Religion Research Center, 1990). <http://www.theologicalstudies.org/page/page/1572910.htm>

² *Most American Christians Do Not Believe that Satan or the Holy Spirit Exist*, Barna Research Group, Ltd. (April 10, 2009). <http://barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/260-most-american-christians-do-not-believe-that-satan-or-the-holy-spirit-exis>

All statistics cited from <http://www.barna.org> are from Barna Research Group Ltd., a biblical research group: "Barna Research Group, Ltd. (BRG) is a full-service marketing research company located in Ventura, California. BRG has been providing information and analysis regarding cultural trends and the Christian Church since 1984."

³ Vlach, *Americans and the Bible*.

⁴ *Christians Say They Do Best At Relationships, Worst In Bible Knowledge*, Barna Research Group, Ltd. (June 14, 2005) (defining "small churches" as those with an average weekend attendance of under 100). <http://barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/177-christians-say-they-do-best-at-relationships-worst-in-bible-knowledge>

⁵ *National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)*, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. http://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp

⁶ *Facts About Adult Education: 2003 NAAL Report* (accessed August 28, 2009). http://swearercenter.brown.edu/Literacy_Resources/NAALReport.doc

⁷ *National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)*, U.S. Department of Education.

⁸ *How Oral People Learn and Communicate*, StoryRunners.com (citing research by Dr. Jim Slack). <http://www.storyrunners.com/Explore/Orality/OralLearners.aspx>

⁹ Alan Fram, *One in Four Read No Books Last Year*, The Associated Press (August 21, 2007). <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/21/AR2007082101045.html>

¹⁰ *Protestants, Catholics and Mormons Reflect Diverse Levels of Religious Activity*, Barna Research Group, Ltd. (July 9, 2001). <http://barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/54-protestants-catholics-and-mormons-reflect-diverse-levels-of-religious-activity>

¹¹ George H. Gallup, Jr., *How Are American Christians Living Their Faith?*, Gallup.com (August 19, 2003). <http://www.gallup.com/poll/9088/How-American-Christians-Living-Their-Faith.aspx>

¹² Hosanna/Faith Comes By Hearing phone survey of 500 pastors representing 50+ denominations (1996).

¹³ Robert Longley, *Americans Now Spend More Than 100 Hours a Year Commuting* (April 2005), citing U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. <http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/censusandstatistics/a/commutetimes.htm>

¹⁴ *Survey Shows Moms Spent 405 Hours Behind the Wheel in 2008*, MotherProof.com (December 15, 2008). <http://www.motherproof.com/press-room/story/survey-shows-moms-spent-405-hours-behind-the-wheel-in-2008/>

¹⁵ *Unchurched Population Nears 100 Million in U.S.*, Barna Research Group, Ltd. (March 19, 2007). <http://barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/107-unchurched-population-nears-100-million-in-the-us>

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *One in Three Adults Is Unchurched*, Barna Research Group, Ltd. (March 28, 2005). <http://barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/182-one-in-three-adults-is-unchurched>

¹⁹ *64% of online Americans have used the Internet for religious or spiritual purposes*, Pew Internet & American Life Project (April 7, 2004). <http://www.pewinternet.org/Press-Releases/2004/64-of-online-Americans-have-used-the-Internet-for-religious-or-spiritual-purposes.aspx>

²⁰ *Americans' On-the-Go Lifestyles and Entertainment Appetites Fuel Increasing Reliance Upon Technology*, Barna Research Group, Ltd. (February 7, 2006). <http://barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/163-americans-on-the-go-lifestyles-and-entertainment-appetites-fuel-increasing-reliance-upon-technology>

²¹ *While HDTV Resides in More Households, Interest in Blu-ray Remains Lukewarm*, The Harris Poll (June 18, 2009). http://harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/pubs/Harris_Poll_2009_06_18.pdf

²² *Teens and Mobile Phones Over the Past Five Years: Pew Internet Looks Back*, Pew Internet & American Life Project (citing information scheduled to be published in April 2010 for adult cell phone ownership). <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/14--Teens-and-Mobile-Phones-Data-Memo/1-Data-Memo/1-Introduction.aspx?r=1>

-
- ²³ *Americans' On-the-Go Lifestyles*, Barna Research Group, Ltd.
- ²⁴ Marshall Brain, *How MP3 Files Work*, How Stuff Works.com.
<http://www.howstuffworks.com/mp3.htm>
- ²⁵ Jim Dalrymple, *Strong iPhone and iPod sales drive Apple profits to \$1.21 billion*, Macworld.com (April 22, 2009).
<http://www.macworld.com/article/140162/2009/04/appleearnings.html>
- ²⁶ *100 Million iPods Sold*, Apple, Inc. (April 9, 2007).
<http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2007/04/09ipod.html>
- ²⁷ *AdMob's Mobile Metrics: June 2009 Mobile Metrics Report*, AdMob, Inc. (July 23, 2009). <http://metrics.admob.com/2009/07/june-2009-mobile-metrics-report/>
- ²⁸ *Wireless Internet Use: Summary of Findings*, Pew Internet & American Life Project. <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/12-Wireless-Internet-Use.aspx?r=1>
- ²⁹ *Americans' On-the-Go Lifestyles*, Barna Research Group, Ltd.
- ³⁰ Anastasia Goodstein, *Teen Marketing: Apple's the Master*, BusinessWeek.com (August 16, 2007).
http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/aug2007/tc20070815_636359.htm

Report compiled by

Faith Comes By Hearing®

2421 Aztec Road NE · Albuquerque, NM 87107-4224
505.881.3321 · 800.545.6552 · info@fcbhmail.org · FaithComesByHearing.com