

## Michael Vlach: “Crisis in America’s Churches: Bible Knowledge at All-Time Low”: Theological Illiteracy in Christian Denominations; Whatever Happened to Theology?

### Crisis in America’s Churches: Bible Knowledge at All-Time Low

A crisis of basic biblical and theological knowledge exists in America’s churches, and church leaders must do all they can to address this growing problem, so say experts monitoring the beliefs of people in Christian churches across the United States.

“The Christian body in America is immersed in a crisis of biblical illiteracy,” warns researcher George Barna. “How else can you describe matters when most churchgoing adults reject the accuracy of the Bible, reject the existence of Satan, claim that Jesus sinned, see no need to evangelize, believe that good works are one of the keys to persuading God to forgive their sins, and describe their commitment to Christianity as moderate or even less firm?”

Other disturbing findings that document an overall lack of knowledge among churchgoing Christians include the following:

- The most widely known Bible verse among adult and teen believers is “God helps those who help themselves”—which is not actually in the Bible and actually conflicts with the basic message of Scripture.
- Less than one out of every ten believers possess a biblical worldview as the basis for his or her decision-making behavior.
- When given thirteen basic teachings from the Bible, only 1% of adult believers firmly embraced all thirteen as being biblical perspectives.

Gary Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College<sup>1</sup> in Wheaton, Illinois, asserts that biblical illiteracy is at a crisis level not just in our culture in general but in America’s churches.

“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,” he says.

Burge points to research at Wheaton College in which the biblical and theological literacy of incoming freshmen have been monitored. These students, who represent almost every Protestant denomination in the United States from every state in the country, have returned some “surprising results”:

- One-third could not put the following in order: Abraham, the Old Testament prophets, the death of Christ, and Pentecost.
- Half could not sequence the following: 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.

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<sup>1</sup> A four-year Christian liberal arts college founded in 1860, its “Statement of Faith” reflects the foundational biblical principles subscribed to by Grace Doctrine Church.

- 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, half did not know that the Passover story was in Exodus.

Like Burge, George Lindbeck, the famous Yale theologian, has commented on the decreasing knowledge of Scripture from a professor's perspective.

"When I first arrived at Yale, even those who came from nonreligious backgrounds knew the Bible better than most of those now who come from churchgoing families," he says.

This is also the view of theologian and author David Wells.

"I have watched with growing disbelief as the evangelical church has cheerfully plunged into astounding theological illiteracy," declares Wells in his book *No Place for Truth*.

Biblical illiteracy is not just a problem for American churches. A scientific survey called PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) tested the knowledge of people in thirty-two industrialized countries. The results of the study show an "insidious biblical illiteracy" even in Christian circles, says Volker Gaeckle, dean of studies at Albrecht Bengel \ ä'l'-brekht beng'-u\² Center in Tübingen \tü'-bing-an\³. "Churches should heed the PISA warning that text comprehension is a major problem."

### Theological Illiteracy in Christian Denominations

Barna has gone to the heart of the matter by researching the beliefs of churchgoing denominational members in America. The results are shocking—a profound lack of belief in essential Christian doctrines.

In his study of the beliefs of mainline Protestants (including Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians), Barna documented a rejection of key Christian doctrines. Only 35% of mainline Protestant church members believe Christ was sinless; 34% believe the Bible is totally accurate; 27% agree that works don't earn heaven; and 20% believe Satan is real.

Denominations which are more evangelical report higher levels of commitment to key theological truths than their mainline counterparts, but large percentages of people in these more theologically conservative churches still deny essential Christian doctrines.

Of Baptists (any type) in America, only 34% believe Satan is real. Only 43% believe that works don't earn heaven. Although most Baptists affirm that Christ was sinless and that the Bible is totally accurate, the majority is not strong. Only 55% affirm that Christ was sinless, and 66% hold that the Bible is totally accurate.

Of nondenominational Christian churches, Barna reports that 48% believe Satan is real; 60% say works don't earn heaven; 63% affirm the sinlessness of Christ; and 70% believe the Bible is totally accurate.

<sup>2</sup> German Lutheran theologian (1687-1752).

<sup>3</sup> A traditional university town in the state of Baden-Württemberg \bäd'-an-vuert'-am-berk\, Germany.

According to Barna, the denomination with the highest commitment to essential Christian doctrines is the Assembly of God denomination. In the AOG, 77% believe the Bible is accurate; 70% believe Christ was sinless. Yet only two-thirds (64%) affirm that works don't earn heaven. Only 56% believe Satan is real. So even in the most theologically committed denomination, large percentages of people still deny essential Christian doctrines.

Barna is particularly concerned with the number of people in Christian churches who deny one of the most essential of all Christian doctrines—the sinlessness of Christ.

"Literally millions of Americans who declare themselves to be Christians contend that Jesus was just like the rest of us when it comes to temptation—fallen, guilty, impure, and Himself in need of a savior."

## Whatever Happened to Theology?

Why is belief in important Christian truths and doctrines at such a crisis level?

First, as Burge has explained, there is a general failing of the church to transmit our religious culture to the next generation. This includes an overemphasis on personal experience to the exclusion of serious Christian education.

"In short, the spiritual life has become less a matter of learning than it is a matter of experiencing," he says. "This has resulted in Christian ministries that put less premium on education than they do on personal development and therapeutic wholeness."

This emphasis on personal development has affected what is coming from our pulpits, according to Burge.

"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."