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Understanding the Bible Engagement Challenge: Scientific Evidence for the Power of 4

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Many Bible verses clearly attest to the power of God's Word:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Hebrews 4:12 (NIV)

Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. James 1:21 (NIV)

so is my word that goes out from my mouth:

It will not return to me empty,

but will accomplish what I desire

and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:11 (NIV)

Unfortunately, today many Christians fail to tap into that power regularly. As a result, our spiritual growth stagnates. We rely on only our own strength to deal with daily trials and temptations, making it more likely that we will fall. Those falls hurt us and hurt our witness.

The Evangelical community has recently recognized that most Americans own Bibles, but very few actually read them. Nine out of ten (93%) Americans say that they own a Bible (Robinson, 2002). In fact, the average American household has four Bibles (Harper-Collins San Francisco Book Catalog, May-August 2007) and the Bible still remains the best-selling book of

all time (Business Week, 2005). Even in this country that has been described as a land of “religious free-lancers” (Grossman, 2009), most Americans still believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God (Newport, 2007).

Unfortunately, owning a Bible and believing it’s the inspired word of God typically does not mean that people actually read the Bible. However, only about six in ten Americans say they read the Bible at least on occasion, down from three-fourths in the 1980s (Gallup & Simmons, 2000). Less than two out of five read the Bible at least once a week. In addition, only one out of four American Christians completely agree with the statement that they regularly study the Bible to find direction of their lives (Gallup, 2003).

A lack of scriptural engagement produces several consequences. Disengagement from God’s word has left American believers ignorant of basic Bible facts and truths, vulnerable to false teachings, and, in many cases, spiritually immature. As our research has demonstrated, those who read the Bible at least four times a week are less likely to engage in behaviors such as gambling, pornography, getting drunk, and sex outside marriage.

There are definite signs that Christians are struggling in the battle against such temptations. Studies by several different organizations suggest that about half of men attending church are involved in pornography (Genung, 2005). A significant minority of self-identified born-again Christians, particularly those under 35, has cohabited, and divorce rates are just as high among born-again Christians as among other groups (Barna Research Group, 2001). An estimated 8 out of 10 youth from evangelical Christian homes walk away from their faith by age 23 (Brown 2006).

All of these disturbing trends stem from one common source. Many Christians are losing the day spiritually because they are not connecting with God through His Word regularly. For several years now the Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) has researched why so many

Americans own Bibles, but never read them. Along the way, we've also revealed major differences in the moral behavior and spiritual maturity of believers based on their level of scriptural engagement. Specifically, we have discovered through our research large behavioral differences between Christians who read or listen to the Bible at least four days a week and those who engage with scripture less often. These differences include both moral behavior as well as how prepared the individual is to serve God and impact the world.

In this paper, after a brief description of our study methods, we describe rates of scriptural engagement in the U.S. today. Next the scientific evidence for the power of four scriptural touches a week is presented. The final section reviews the factors that help and hinder Bible engagement.

Research Methods

The belief that people are experts on their own lives remains one of the key principles guiding our research. Our data come from internet-based surveys of over 40,000 Americans ranging in age from eight years to more than 80. Surveys include both random samples of the general population and non-random samples of self-identified Christ-followers. To get the most complete picture possible, we include a mix of both close-ended and open-ended questions, covering topics such as:

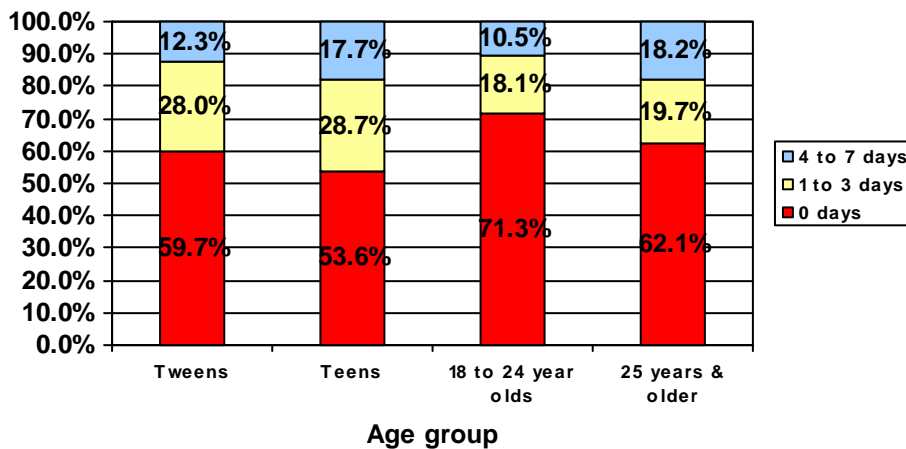
- Religious preference & beliefs
- Beliefs about communicating with God
- Beliefs about spiritual growth and maturity
- Religious service attendance
- Engagement in prayer & Bible reading

- Daily temptations
- Risk & moral behaviors

Rates of Bible Engagement in the U.S.

So how involved (or rather uninvolved) are Americans in reading or listening to the Bible? Figure 1 shows how often members of different age groups read or listen to the Bible in a given week. Clearly the majority of Americans do not hear from God at all through His Word. How many people do not read or listen to the Bible at all varies by age group, from slightly more than half of teens (ages 13 to 17) to seven out of ten young adults (ages 18 to 24). A minority, ranging from one-fifth of adults to almost three-tenths of tweens (ages 8 to 12) and teens, engage scripture on one to three days a week. Relatively few read or listen to the Bible on most days of the week.

Figure 1. Days Per Week Reading or Listening to the Bible (General Population).



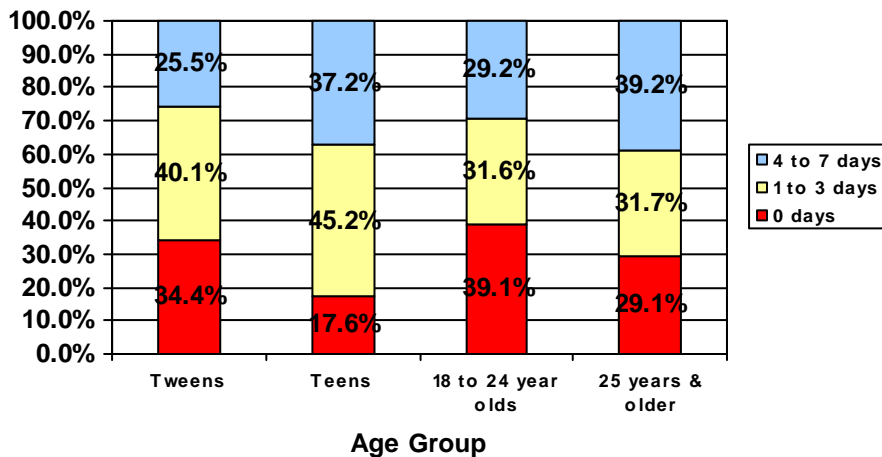
As expected, scriptural engagement rates are higher among those who identify as born-again Christians. However, considering that these are believers, the rates remain disturbingly

low. In fact, most people who claim to follow Christ do not read or listen to the Bible on most days of the week.

As shown in Figure 2, about one-fifth (teens) to two-fifths (young adults) of Christ-followers do not hear from God at all through His written Word in a given week. Three out of ten adults read or listen to the Bible one to three days a week. Tweens (40.1%) and teens (45.2%) are more likely to be engaged in scripture at this level.

This leaves a minority of believers who do read or listen to the Bible at least four days a week. The size of this group ranges from one-quarter of tweens to about two-fifths of teens and adults who are 25 and older.

Figure 2. Days Per Week Reading or Listening to the Bible (Self-Identified Born Again Christians).



Several other statistics further illustrate the extent to which many believers are disconnected from the Bible. Three-fourths of young adult Christ-followers (ages 18 to 24) have not read the entire Bible. Among older adults (ages 25 and up), more than half have not read all of God's Word at least once. Generally, these are not believers. In fact, the young adults have followed Christ for an average of 7 years, while older adults have done so for an average of 15 years.

In terms of Bible knowledge, ten questions on basic Bible facts revealed some important holes. For example, three out of ten teens did not know who preached the Sermon on the Mount. Half of young adults and more than one-third of older adults could not identify the town where Jesus was born. As the next section shows American Christians' disengagement from scripture holds several far-reaching implications.

Bible Engagement & Behavior

The low rates of Bible engagement among American Christians have tremendous ramifications for local churches and the Body as a whole.

Like sheep, we tend to drift away from our Shepherd.

Living in a world filled with temptations, disconnection from God's Word can increase our chances of giving in to those temptations. Without a firm grasp of the Bible,

nurtured through daily reading or listening, we weaken our ability to defend the faith we claim, less confident to share that faith with others, and more vulnerable to falling prey to false teachings.

The data collected by CBE attest to many of these effects. For example, statistical analyses reveal that, controlling for other factors, such as age, gender, church attendance, and prayer, Christians who are engaged in scripture most days of the week have lower odds of participating in these behaviors:

- ↓ Getting drunk = 57% lower odds
- ↓ Sex outside marriage = 68% lower odds
- ↓ Pornography = 61% lower odds
- ↓ Gambling = 74% lower odds

What are the consequences of disengagement from God's Word?

The individual believer is weakened & the Christian community as a whole is weakened.

↓ Any of these habits = 57% lower odds

The “power of 4” is evident when we consider that for some of these behaviors (getting drunk and sex outside marriage) examined there is no statistical difference between Christians who read or listen to the Bible two to three days a week and those who do not engage scripture at all or only once a week. For those behaviors where there is an effect for engaging scripture two to three days a week, the effect is much smaller than for four or more days a week.

More scripture engagement also produces a Christian who is more involved in spreading the Good News. Controlling for other factors, those who read or listen to the Bible at least four days a week have higher odds of participating in these behaviors:

↑ Sharing faith with others = 228% higher odds

↑ Discipling others = 231% higher odds

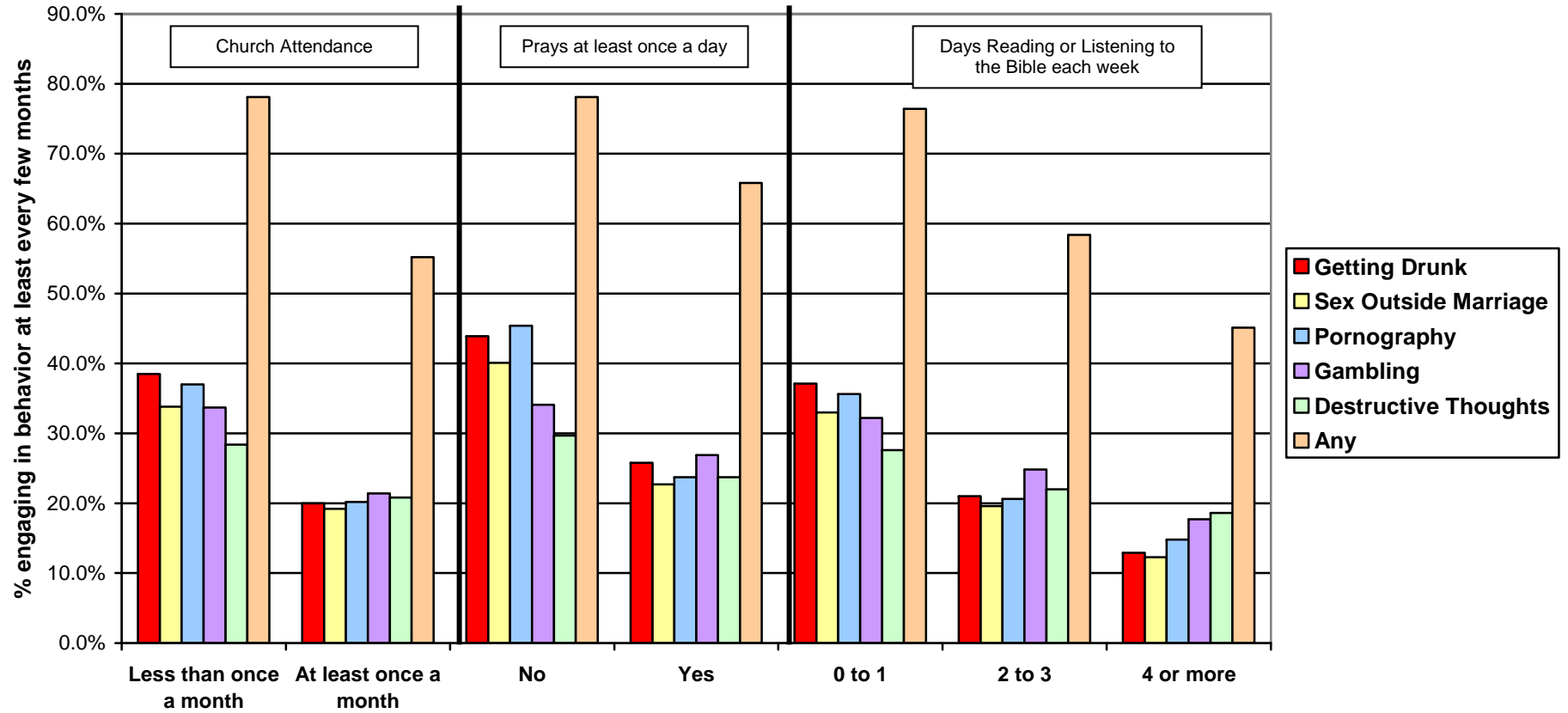
↑ Memorizing scripture = 407% higher odds

While these findings are truly impressive, it is important to note that they are based on research with a select sample – namely, 8,665 self-identified Christian adults who were willing to participate in an on-line survey about Bible engagement. This leads to the question: Are the results generalizable to the U.S. population?

A similar survey with a random sample of 2,967 U.S. teens and adults confirms that indeed the power of scripture engagement at least four days of week is evident. Scripture engagement more reliably predicts moral behavior than traditional measures of spirituality, such as church attendance and prayer. In addition, how often one reads or listens to the Bible seems a particularly strong protective factor for teens.

In order to understand the relationship between Bible engagement and moral behavior, our survey asked a series of questions about how frequently the respondent engages in smoking, getting drunk, gambling, pornography, sex outside marriage, and destructive thoughts. Figure 3, on the following page, shows that among adults, those who attend church, pray, or read the Bible are significantly less likely to engage in these behaviors. In terms of scriptural engagement in particular, those who read or listen to the Bible at least four times a week are the least likely to participate in any risk behavior and the least likely to engage in five of the seven specific behaviors examined.

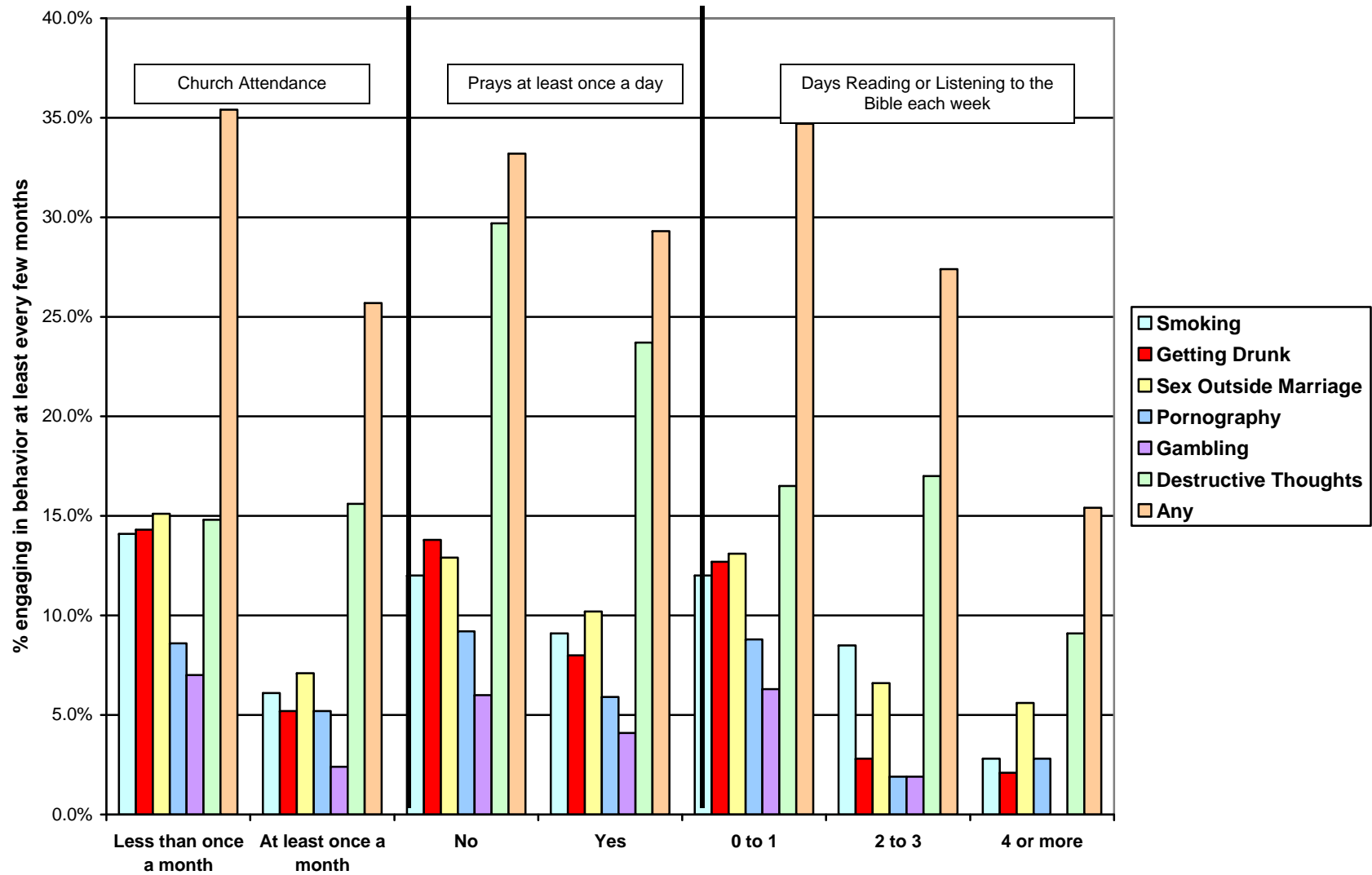
Figure 3. Spiritual Disciplines & Risk Behaviors Among U.S. Adults.



When we examine spiritual disciplines and risky behavior among teenagers, a somewhat different picture emerges. Figure 4 shows that teens that read or listen to the Bible are significantly less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Moreover, those who do so at least four times a week have the lowest rates of involvement in all behaviors except pornography.

In contrast to what we found with adults, prayer and church attendance are not as strongly correlated with risk behaviors among teens. Those who attend church at least once a month are less likely to engage in any of the risk behaviors examined, except for destructive thoughts. Prayer is only predictive of a lower likelihood of getting drunk and of having destructive thoughts about oneself or others. However, given the current epidemic of violence among teens, it is sobering to find that even among those teens who pray at least once a day, nearly a quarter also say that they have destructive thoughts at least once every few months.

Figure 4. Spiritual Disciplines & Risk Behaviors Among U.S. Teenagers.



Some may be quick to point out that Bible engagement is correlated with religious preference, church attendance, and prayer. So how do we know that Bible engagement uniquely predicts behavior? Multivariate statistical models, that control for the effects of many predictors simultaneously, provide the evidence. Detailed results of these models are presented in the Appendix.

According to Table 1, among adults, frequent Bible engagement is related to lower odds of engaging in that risky behavior. For example, controlling for the other variables in the model, the odds of a person who reads or listens to the Bible four or more times a week engages in pornography are 51% lower, than the odds of a person does not read or listen to the Bible at all. The odds of someone who engages scripture at least four times a week participating in any of these activities are 61% lower than the odds of someone who does not engage scripture at all.

Consistent with the findings from our previous studies, we also find that there are no statistically significant differences between those who read or listen to the Bible one to three times a week and those who spent zero days doing so. In other words, for adults, engaging scripture for less than four days a week does not appear to have the same protective factor as doing so for four or more days.

Table 1. Odds Ratios of Engaging in Risk Behaviors - Adults.

	Getting Drunk	Sex Outside Marriage	Pornography	Gambling	Any Habit
Identifies as a born again Christian	↓37%	No effect	↓28%	↓30%	No effect
Attends church at least once a month	↓38%	↓31%	↓30%	↓26%	↓53%
Prays at least once a day	No effect	No effect	↓25%	No effect	No effect
Reads/listens to the Bible 4 or more days/week	↓49%	↓51%	↓51%	↓43%	↓61%
Reads/listens to the Bible 1 to 3 days/week	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect

Among teens, the relationship between Bible engagement and moral behavior is even more dramatic. As Table 2 shows, we find no effects for church attendance and prayer among teens. Identifying as a born-again Christian is only significant for lowering the odds of getting drunk. Scripture engagement is the best of the spiritually-based predictors, reaching statistical significance in three of the five models for teens. Those who read or listen to the Bible at least four days a week have lower odds of smoking, getting drunk or engaging in any of the risk behaviors examined than their peers who do not read the Bible at all. Similarly, teens who engage scripture one to three days are less likely to smoke, get drunk, or participate in a risk behavior than those who do not engage scripture at all.

Table 2. Odds of Engaging in Risk Behaviors - Teens.

	Smoking	Getting Drunk	Sex	Pornography	Any Habit
Identifies as a born again Christian	No effect	↓61%	No effect	No effect	No effect
Attends church at least once a month	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect
Prays at least once a day	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect
Reads/listens to the Bible 4 or more days/week	↓82%	↓80%	No effect	No effect	↓69%
Reads/listens to the Bible 1 to 3 days/week	↓55%	↓62%	No effect	No effect	No effect

In sum, these analyses confirm what CBE's initial research with Christ followers revealed: a powerful relationship between engaging scripture at least four times a week and moral behavior. Among adults, reading or listening to the Bible at least four times a week lowers the odds of engaging in harmful behaviors such as getting drunk, having sex outside marriage, using pornography, and gambling. These effects remain even after we control for other factors, such as church attendance. Perhaps more important is the fact that we find no statistically significant differences between those who read or listen to the Bible only one to three days a week and those who do not at all.

Our models also show that Bible engagement was the best spiritually-based predictor among 13 to 17 year olds, significantly predicting three out of the five risk behaviors examined. Again the odds of participating in a harmful behavior were lowest for teens who read or listen to the Bible at least four times a week.

Additional data with Christians shows that the more people read or listen to the Bible, the more they share their faith and disciple others. Emerging evidence from on-going studies further suggests that the more Christ-followers read or listen to the Bible, the better they are able to define spiritual growth, the higher they rate their own spiritual growth, and the less likely they are to experience periods of being stalled in their spiritual growth.

The mounting evidence of the power of God's word in helping believers win the day spiritually makes the lack of scripture engagement among so many today even more discouraging. If Christ-followers believe the Bible is the Word of God and that He wants them to read it, what keeps them from doing so? We explore that question in the next section.

What Keeps People from Reading the Bible?

I remind you that God wrote a Book; and He only wrote one. I wonder what we'll say to Him at the Judgment Seat of Christ if He asks us, "Did you read My Book? I mean one time in your entire life did you read My whole Book?"

Woodrow Kroll, August 2009

When asked what hinders them from reading or listening to the Bible regularly, most people say in one way or another that they are "too busy" or "don't have enough time." Other culprits such as the distractions and interruptions of life often get blamed as well.

Many who give reasons such as these also acknowledge that they are really just excuses and the real problem is that they have not made staying in God's Word a priority in their lives.

The following quotes illustrate this theme:

My own lack of priorities and not scheduling a special time to do that.

A crazy schedule. No good excuse! :o(So basically not making good use of my time and making things that shouldn't be a priority over engaging the Bible.

Heart issues can also keep someone from reading or listening to the Bible. While some may run to God and to the scriptures, others run in the opposite direction when faced with discouragement, anger over unanswered prayers, feelings of guilty, or confusion over the behavior of other believers:

If I am discouraged..or struggling with a situation then sometimes I just dont want to go there.

My own feelings of inadequacy

Heart issues that I am not quite ready to give up to God.

Past anger at Father.

A lot of confusion right now about other people's "Christian behavior" and where God is when he promises his love and attention.

Sometimes we as believers get too comfortable. Our lives are going well and so we are lulled into the false belief that we don't need to be hearing from God through His Word:

My flesh - a self-confidence that I know enough and don't need it anymore.

Belief that not doing so won't affect my life

When everything is going well I tend to rely on myself instead of God.

I guess getting too "busy", but really that stems from a belief system that does not really believe how important God is in my life or just how vulnerable I really am with Satan

Three final factors, namely lack of accountability, being unsure where to start or what plan to follow, and difficulty understanding or interpreting biblical passages, are mentioned by only a minority of believers. However, they are still worthy of note for two reasons. First, all three are in essence "resource" issues. For some believers, connecting with a plan or study or system that works for them could provide the key to their establishing a lifetime habit of regularly Bible reading.¹

Who mentions these hindrances also makes them worthy of note because they are not primarily new believers. For example, in one survey, all of the respondents who mentioned a lack of accountability had followed Christ for more than ten years. Three-fifths of those who say they don't have a plan to follow or don't know where to start have been following Christ for at least 20 years. All of the people who mentioned having difficulty understanding have been believers for at least three years, and half have followed Christ for more than 20 years. These

¹ It is also important to note that "not having a plan" may be, in some cases, an excuse given for what is really a lack of motivation. At least in Western society, technology brings a plethora of Bible reading plans that are often just a mouse-click away. For example, a quick Google search for "Bible reading plan" brings up more than 120,000 possible links.

data point out that we can't assume that scripture engagement is just an issue for new believers. Clearly, even some who have been in the faith for many years or even decades, still struggle with knowing how to go about reading and understanding the Bible. The following quotes illustrate responses that relate to these themes:

Being alone in doing it. Other people engaged in "studying" the Bible is the key to keeping me an active Bible reader.

Making time to get everything done....I think it would help to find someone to be accountable to besides myself.

The daily distractions of life...lack of personal motivation if I'm not in a group that keeps me accountable

I'm not sure where to read. People talk about studying the bible but I just don't know how to do it on my own. I took the titus womens summer study and I was behind in class because I didn't understand how verses from different parts of the bible were related.

I don't know what to read or study. I do not have a Bible reading purpose or direction.

I think one of the main issues is that I don't always know the best way to go about reading the Bible and having it apply/affect my life. This along with time and energy...however none of these are good, just excuses.

Difficulty interpreting the real meaning

I've read through it a few times, but don't feel like I know it well despite that. so not getting a personal application out of a passage I read doesn't help me ponder it, which doesn't make me think it's necessarily beneficial.

Get depressed because when I read it, I don't always understand it and so many of the passages are depressing to me

Not having a translation or notes - without these the old testament is hard for me to understand.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have made the case that disengagement from the Bible is the most critical challenge facing the Christian community today. Unique among world religions,

Christianity is about a relationship that God very much desires to have with each one of us. For the relationship to grow and mature, it must include regular two-way communication whereby the Christ-follower hears from God (through scripture) and talks to God (through prayer). Today too many of us are focusing on one-way communication and, thus, losing the day spiritually to the temptations and concerns of this world.

The good news is that four scriptural touches a week can make a huge difference in turning this tide. However, to get God's people engaged in God's Word, we must push past the "too busy" and "no time" excuses. Finding a way to get hearing from God through the Bible back on believers' priority lists will go a long way towards building a stronger Christian community and a more effective witness for Christ.

Appendix A. Detailed Logistic Regression Results.

Odds Ratios from Logit Models Predicting Odds of Engaging in Risk Behaviors - Adults.

	Smoking	Getting Drunk	Sex Outside Marriage	Pornography	Gambling	Any Habit
Age	0.99*	0.95***	0.95***	0.96***	1.00	0.97***
Female	0.95	0.81*	1.23	0.23***	0.63***	0.73*
Married			0.11***			
Identifies as a born again Christian	0.91	0.63**	0.94	0.72*	0.70**	1.02
Attends church at least once a month	0.41***	0.62**	0.69*	0.70*	0.74*	0.47***
Prays at least once a day	1.39**	0.89	0.82	0.75*	1.49	1.22
Reads/listens to the Bible 4 or more days/week	0.85	0.51**	0.49**	0.49**	0.57**	0.39***
Reads/listens to the Bible 1 to 3 days/week	1.02	0.82	0.78	0.76	0.76	0.74
-2 Log Likelihood	1436.69	1189.69	1162.05	1135.8	1375.33	1411.95
Model Chi Square	85.14***	363.79***	633.86***	470.74***	82.17***	259.90***

N = 2,159 *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Odds Ratios from Logit Models Predicting Odds of Engaging in Risk Behaviors - Teens.

	Smoking	Getting Drunk	Sex	Pornography	Any Habit
Age	1.28**	1.28**	1.56***	1.34*	1.30***
Female	0.76	0.64	0.70	0.22***	0.87
Identifies as a born again Christian	1.27	0.39*	0.62	1.00	1.06
Attends church at least once a month	0.61	0.76	0.62	0.89	0.86
Prays at least once a day	1.54	1.40	1.66	1.12	1.33
Reads/listens to the Bible 4 or more days/week	0.18**	0.20*	0.51	0.34	0.31***
Reads/listens to the Bible 1 to 3 days/week	0.45*	0.38*	0.66	0.65	0.76
-2 Log Likelihood	195.02	175.51	197.56	160.01	329.95
Model Chi Square	34.44***	50.92***	46.80***	41.68***	46.20***

N = 808 *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

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