

Confidence, Conversation and Community: Bible Engagement in Canada, 2013

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Commissioned by the Canadian Bible Forum
and The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada



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Executive Summary

Three main factors drive Canadians' Bible reading frequency: confidence, conversation and community.

About one in seven Canadian Christians, or 14%, read the Bible at least once a week. The majority of Canadians, including those who identify themselves as Christians, read the Bible either seldom or never. Weekly Bible reading in Canada has fallen by half since 1996. Surprisingly, the frequency of Bible reading is much the same for older and younger Bible readers, a change since 1996 when older Bible readers were more frequent than younger Bible readers.

Confidence

- Only 18% of Canadians strongly agree the Bible is the Word of God, down from 35% in 1996. **Canadians who strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God are ten times as likely to read the Bible frequently (at least a few times a week) and six times as likely to attend religious services weekly as those who just moderately agree.**
- The majority of Canadians (69%) and half of Christians agree that the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions. Among Canadians, **almost no one (2%) who believes the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions reads it frequently.** Very few Canadians with that belief attend religious services weekly (6%). By contrast, Canadians who disagree that the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions are three times as likely to attend services weekly and nine times as likely to read the Bible frequently.
- One in seven Canadians (13%) and about one in four Christians (23%) strongly agree that the Bible is relevant to modern life. **Canadians who strongly agree the Bible is relevant are more than ten times as likely to read the Bible frequently, four times as likely to attend services weekly, five times as likely to reflect frequently on its meaning for their lives and almost ten times as likely to talk to others about it at least weekly as those who just moderately agree.**
- **Almost two-thirds of Canadians (64%) and six in ten Christians agree that the scriptures of all major world religions teach essentially the same things.** Those who do are likely to disregard the teachings of these texts and find a common ethic of social peace behind the texts.

The majority of Canadians, including those who identify themselves as Christians, read the Bible either seldom or never.

Conversation

- Only about one in ten Canadians (11%) and two in ten Christians (21%) reflect on the meaning of the Bible for their lives at least a few times a week. Canadians who reflect at least a few times a week are four times as likely to read the Bible frequently and twice as likely to attend services weekly as those who reflect just once a week or once or twice a month.
- Only 6% of Canadians and 11% of Christians talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least once a week. **Those who have conversations about the Bible at least once a week have more robust Bible engagement and religious commitment profiles than any other factor we've looked at: 63% attend religious services weekly compared to 16% of the**

Canadian population; 57% read the Bible at least a few times a week compared to 9% of the Canadian population; and 81% reflect on the meaning of the Bible at least a few times a week compared to 13% of the population.

Community

- More frequent church attendance is associated with confidence in the Bible. **The more frequently Canadians attend religious services, the more likely they are to strongly agree the Bible is the Word of God.** Those who have only moderate confidence in the Bible are less likely to attend services.
- During a time when church attendance was in decline, confidence in the Bible as the Word of God has remained constant for each level of attendance. **This suggests that something happens at church services to instill and nurture confidence in the Bible.**
- Bible reading is more prevalent in some religious traditions. Evangelicals are a small percentage of this study (7%), but account for almost half (43%) of frequent Bible readers. Comparatively, 13% of frequent Bible readers are Mainline Protestants, 11% are English Catholics, and 4% are French Catholics.
- **The Bible engagement of self-identified Christians as a whole is not very different from Bible engagement of Canadians generally.**

Our study found that it is important for people to believe that the Bible is the Word of God, that it is reliable and trustworthy, and that it has unique teachings.

Conclusions

Conversations about the Bible need to be participatory, not passive. **Conversations about the Bible drive other kinds of Bible engagement. To talk about the Bible you have to read the Bible, reflect on the Bible, and be present with others to talk about the Bible.**

Given that large swaths of the church lack confidence in the Bible and rarely participate in conversations about the Bible, there is work to do. Our interviews and survey suggest that most

Canadians know very little of the content of the Bible. Even when they have access to a Bible they are more likely to read in the meaning they assume lies under the text rather than engaging the text itself. This suggests that the Bible is not directly shaping much of the church in Canada.

Our study found that it is important for people to believe that the Bible is the Word of God, that it is reliable and trustworthy, and that it has unique teachings. Churches can strengthen Bible engagement by directly teaching these things.

Our study found that **reflection on the meaning of the Bible for people's lives is an important kind of Bible engagement, but that conversation with others about the meaning of the Bible is the key factor in deepening Bible engagement.** It also tends to promote stronger religious communities, because these conversations revolve around Christianity's central text.

Church leaders should create opportunities for people to talk about the meaning of the Bible for their lives. Implicitly, by talking about the meaning of the Bible, you teach people to have confidence in the

Bible because the very conversation communicates that there is meaning to be found for their lives. If churches prioritize conversations about the meaning of the Bible, it suggests that the Bible is an important document to have conversations about.

This study looks at the confidence that individuals have in the Bible, but **if churches are to strengthen the Bible engagement of their congregants, they themselves need to be convinced of the reliability, relevance, trustworthiness and divine origin of the Bible.**

Find resources to help individuals and churches strengthen Bible engagement at www.bibleengagementstudy.ca.

Introduction

Three main factors drive Canadians' Bible reading frequency: confidence, conversation and community.

Only one in seven Canadian Christians, or 14%, read the Bible at least once a week. The majority of Canadians, including those who identify themselves as Christians, read the Bible either seldom or never.

Canadians who frequently read the Bible are confident that it is the reliable word of God, that its teachings differ from those of other world religions, and that it does not have irreconcilable contradictions. There is a striking difference between Canadians who strongly agree with the Bible's reliability and uniqueness and those who only moderately agree.

A key characteristic of Canadians who read the Bible is that they have conversations about what it means for their lives, conversations with themselves (reflection) or conversations with others outside of religious services. This study also finds Bible engagement differences among Christian traditions. Evangelicals tend to have greater confidence in the uniqueness and reliability of the Bible, and tend to read it more frequently.

The Bible informs and transforms the lives of Christians. Bible engagement matters because it sustains and nourishes faith. Bible engagement and church engagement decline together; there is a clear correlation, although this study does not demonstrate that one causes the other.

In the last 25 years, Bible engagement and church attendance have fallen dramatically. This study serves as a benchmark to measure Bible engagement and to point to the characteristics of Bible-engaging Canadians.

This report is based on the ground-breaking Canadian Bible Engagement Study (CBES) of 4,474 Canadians conducted by Vision Critical on their Angus Reid Forum, and qualitative interviews. It describes the key findings of beliefs and activities that correlate with Bible reading among Canadians. This report is the first in a series based on the CBES data. Other reports will cover topics such as the translations of the Bible that Canadians read, formats of the Bible Canadians use, and Bible literacy. See Appendix for more information on the study.

The Canadian Bible Forum and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada sponsored the CBES, with funding participation from Stronger Together Grants. The members of the Canadian Bible Forum are the Bible League of Canada, Canadian Bible Society, Every Home for Christ, Gideons Canada, OneBook, Open Doors Canada, Scripture Gift Mission Canada, Scripture Union Canada, and Wycliffe Canada.

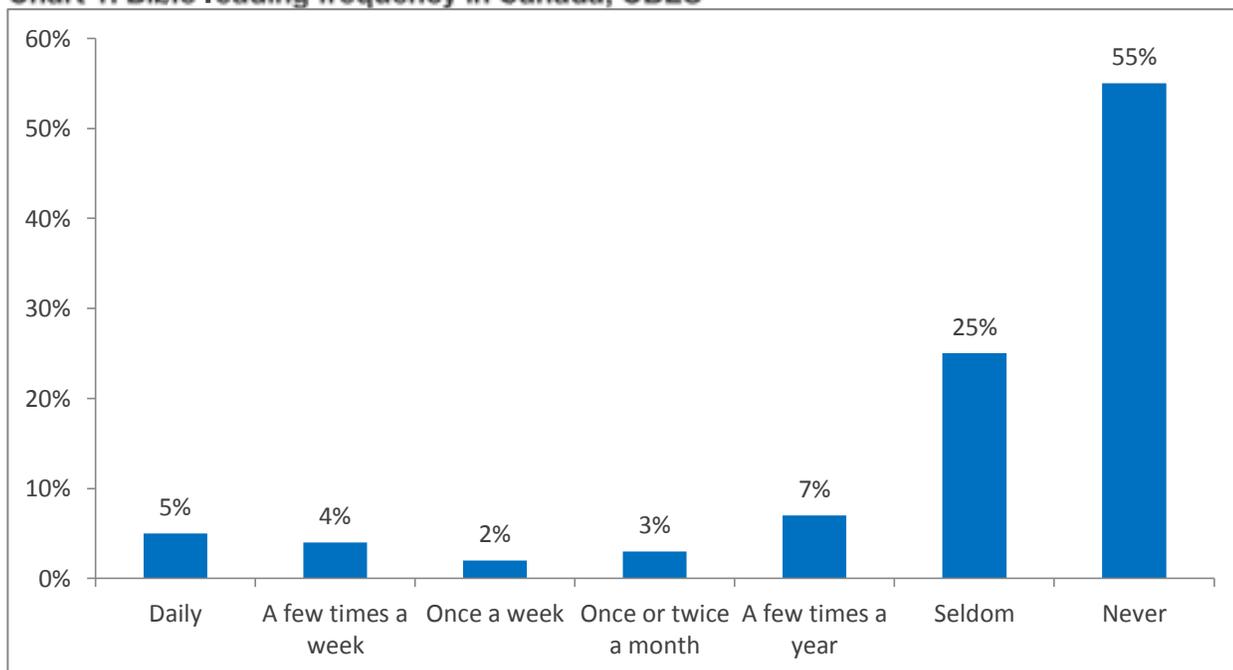
Bible Reading Frequency

Weekly Bible reading has dropped almost in half over the last two decades, among Canadians generally and also among Canadian Christians. The decline has been steeper among Mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions. The differences do not follow generational lines: young people are just as likely to read the Bible as older Canadians.

Fewer Canadians reading

The majority of Canadians, even those who self-identify as Christians, seldom or never read the Bible. Among Canadians, about 14% read the Bible at least monthly. Four in five Canadians report that they read the Bible seldom or never (see Chart 1).

Chart 1. Bible reading frequency in Canada, CBES



Among Canadians who identify themselves as Christians, one in five read the Bible at least monthly: 6% read daily, 6% read a few times a week, 3% read once a week, and 4% read at least once or twice a month. About 3 in 4 Canadians who identify themselves as Christian report that they read the Bible seldom or never (see Table 1).

The percentage of frequent Bible readers has dropped significantly in the last two decades, for the general population and for Christians. In 1996, 21% of Canadians reported reading the Bible at least weekly, compared to 11% in 2013. Among Christians, the percentage of those who read at least weekly fell from 27% in 1996 to 14% in 2013 (see Chart 2).

In 1996, more Canadians reported reading the Bible “once a week” or “once or twice a month” – answers in the middle of the scale of Bible reading frequency – than report so now. Over time,

Canadians have tended to shift to one end of the Bible reading frequency scale or the other, with most shifting to the less frequent reading end of the scale.

Religious tradition matters

Bible reading is more prevalent in some religious traditions. Evangelicals are a small percentage of the CBES sample (7%), but account for almost half (43%) of frequent Bible readers (once a week or more). Comparatively, 13% of frequent Bible readers are Mainline Protestants, 11% are English Catholics, and 4% are French Catholics.¹

Table 1. Bible reading frequency by tradition, CBES

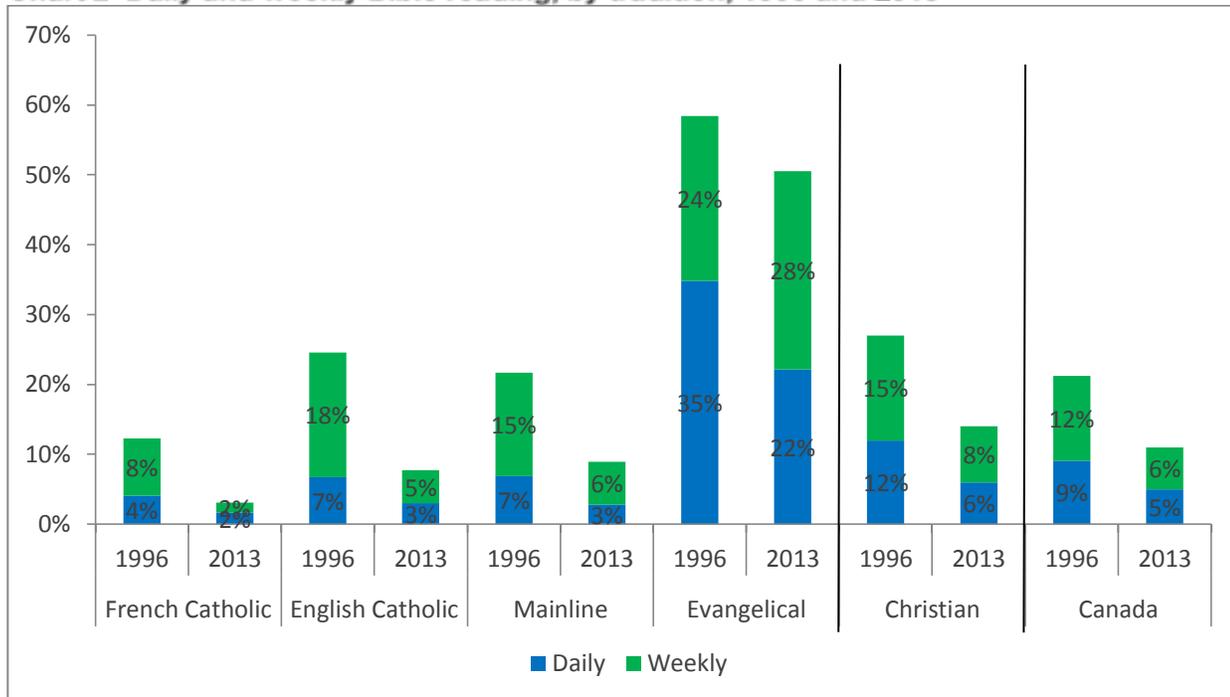
Frequency	Tradition				
	Catholic Fr.	Catholic En.	Mainline	Evangelical	Christian
Daily	2%	3%	3%	22%	6%
A few times a week	1%	3%	4%	22%	6%
Once a week	1%	2%	3%	6%	3%
Once or twice a month	1%	4%	4%	8%	4%
A few times a year	2%	9%	13%	6%	8%
Seldom	18%	32%	37%	21%	29%
Never	75%	48%	37%	15%	45%
At least a few times a week	3%	6%	6%	44%	12%
At least weekly	3%	8%	9%	51%	14%
At least monthly	5%	12%	13%	58%	18%

Column sections may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Bible reading has declined among all Christian traditions, with the most dramatic declines among Mainline Protestants and Catholics. Weekly Bible reading has dropped by more than half since 1996 for Catholics and Mainline Protestants (see Chart 2). Although Evangelicals read more frequently than other traditions, the percentage of Evangelical daily readers dropped by one-third since 1996. Nationally, weekly Bible reading fell by half.

¹ The remaining and substantial group of Bible readers come from other religious traditions.

Chart 2. Daily and weekly Bible reading, by tradition, 1996 and 2013



Sources: God and Society in North America, 1996 and CBES, 2013. See Appendix for more information about these studies.

No generational differences

Older Christians read the Bible at roughly the same frequency as younger Christians. Bible reading frequency is constant across the generations, in every religious tradition. This marks a shift from 1996, when older Christians were more likely to read the Bible frequently than younger ones.

Discussion

The difference between a mere Bible activity and Bible engagement is the intent to connect with God. Bible reading is often the precursor to other types of Bible engagement, so understanding how to encourage Bible reading will provide insight into how we can promote other kinds of Bible engagement as well.

Two decades ago, there were more Canadians in the middle range of Bible reading frequency, reading the Bible sometimes, once a month or so. That middle group of readers has collapsed, most of them migrating to the seldom or never categories of readers. Now, there tend to be two kinds of Bible readers: those who read at least a few times a week and those who read seldom or never. Either Bible reading is a regular habit or discipline, or it tends not to be done at all.

Discussion questions

- What prompts you to read the Bible, or discourages you from reading?
- Has your practice of reading the Bible changed over time? Why?
- What do you think might help you to deepen your engagement with the Bible?
- Has your church done anything that has encouraged you to read the Bible more regularly?

Confidence in the Bible

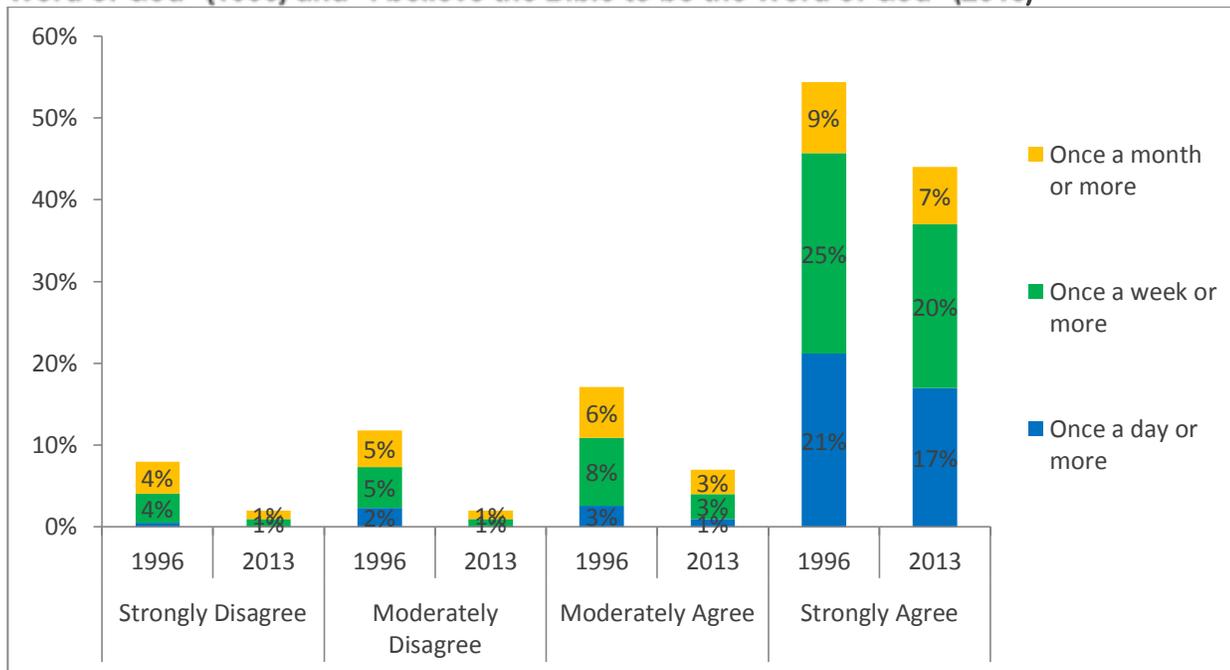
Canadians who frequently read the Bible are confident that it is the reliable Word of God, with a message that is unique among world religions and relevant to their lives. Those who strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God are far more likely to read and reflect on it and to attend religious services than are those who only moderately agree.

The Bible as the Word of God

Frequent readers believe the Bible is the Word of God

Canadians who believe the Bible is the Word of God are more likely to read it. The majority of Canadians (80%) who read the Bible at least weekly, strongly agree that it is the Word of God. However, Bible reading frequency is down from 1996 levels among all Canadians, regardless of how strongly people believe the Bible to be the Word of God (see Chart 3).

Chart 3. Frequency of Bible reading by agreement with “I believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God” (1996) and “I believe the Bible to be the Word of God” (2013)



Sources: God and Society in North America, 1996 and CBES, 2013. See Appendix for more information about these studies.

People who only moderately agree that the Bible is the Word of God are unlikely to read it. Weekly Bible reading among those with just moderate confidence in the Bible has dropped by more than half since 1996, from 11% to 4%.

Interviewees Ken and Tom understand the Bible as containing “God’s inspired words” or “information from God” and believe that it has a purpose. It “tells people how to get closer to [God]” and “develops a relationship, and understanding of God.”

I would say the Bible is God's inspired words. That it tells people how to get closer to him. And he also provided a plan for us to get connected to him through his only son Jesus Christ who died on the cross, that he takes away our sins or our wrongdoings, or that we have a connection with God. (Ken, 54 – reads the Bible daily)

The Bible is information about us from God and kind of like the blueprint of it. The intercession you know, the Holy Spirit in the belief process, it's like I was telling you, there's a lot of people that can read the Bible, and I mean it has a lot of information and a lot of people are duplicating it from, you know, philosophy and stuff like that ... so we read the Bible and there's a lot of information there but it develops a relationship, an understanding of God. (Tom, 56 – reads the Bible daily)

In their interviews, Scott and Michael explain their views on the Bible.

I felt that a lot of it [the Bible] was just, just kind of made up by crazy people and it's just been, it's just been polluted over the millenniums, you know. I think it's our, I think it's, one person tells the story and then another person and then a country gets all, it kind of gets fragmented and this and that. (Scott, 42 – never reads the Bible)

I think it's [the Bible] just a made-up fictional book. I think it's very well written and I think it's got so many contradictions and it and everything like that over time, it's probably just inevitable that everybody's put their own views into it and added to it. (Michael, 54 – never reads the Bible)

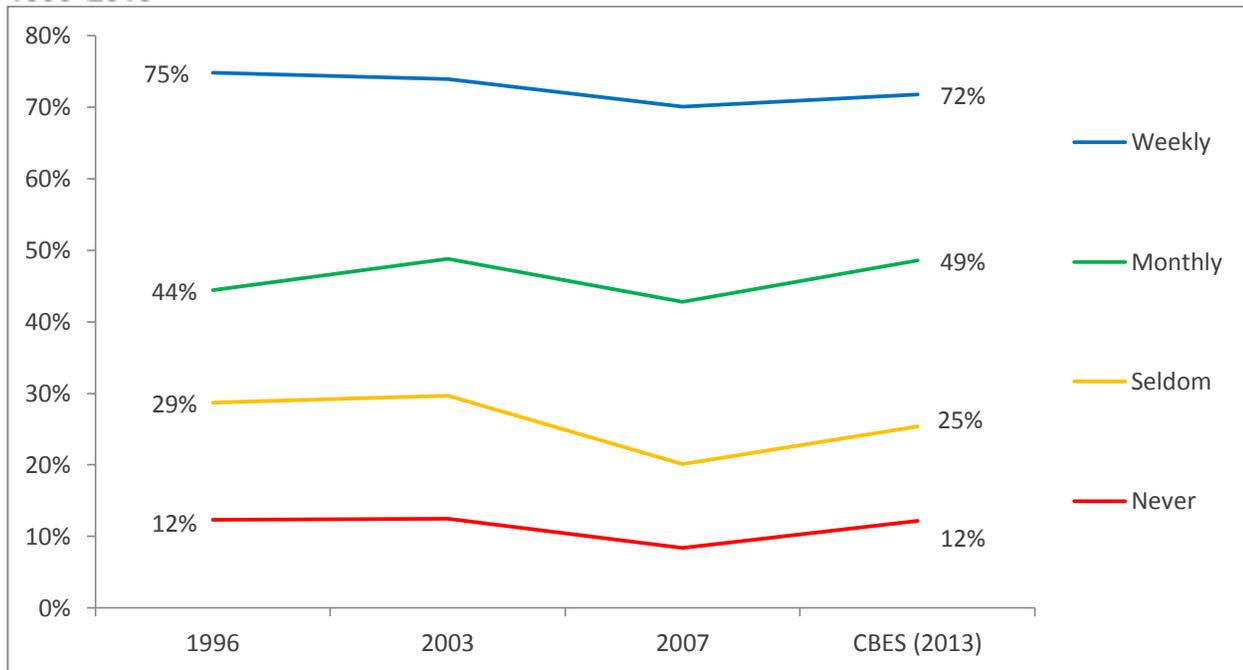
Scott and Michael indicate that they see the Bible as the product of “crazy people” or those who “put their own views into it.” They are both convinced that the Bible has been either intentionally or unintentionally corrupted in its transmission over time. Even if it was once the Word of God, they do not believe that the Bible today could possibly be God’s message. They never read the Bible.

Most frequent attendees have strongest confidence

More frequent church attendance is associated with confidence in the Bible. The more frequently Canadians attend religious services, the more likely they are to strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God (see chart 4). Those who have only moderate confidence in the Bible are less likely to attend services.

It is significant that over a time period when church attendance declined, confidence in the Bible as the Word of God remained constant for each level of attendance.

Chart 4. Strong agreement that the Bible is the Word of God, by attendance at religious services, 1996–2013



Sources:

God and Society in North America, 1996; EFC et al, 2003; EFC and CHEC, 2007; and CBES, 2013. See Appendix for more information about these studies.

Some traditions have stronger confidence than others

The level of agreement that the Bible is the Word of God varies by religious tradition. Catholic and Mainline Protestant affiliates are less likely than Evangelicals to strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God, and their confidence that the Bible is the Word of God has significantly declined from 1996 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Strong agreement that the Bible is the Word of God, 1996 and CBES (2013)

Tradition	1996	2013
French Catholic	30%	22%
English Catholic	45%	29%
Mainline Protestant	40%	23%
Evangelical	72%	70%
Christian	45%	32%
Canada	35%	18%

In some religious traditions, there is a strong relationship between frequent service attendance and confidence in the Bible. The vast majority of Evangelical weekly attendees (95%) strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God (see Table 3). About three in five English Catholic weekly attendees report strong confidence in the Bible, a ratio essentially unchanged from 1996. Strong confidence in the Bible among Mainline Protestant weekly attendees, however, has fallen by one-third since 1996, with only 50% reporting strong confidence in 2013, compared to 75% in 1996.

Table 3. Strong agreement that the Bible is the Word of God among those who attend religious services at least weekly, 1996 and 2013

Tradition	1996	2013
French Catholic	60%	— ^a
English Catholic	64%	60%
Mainline Protestant	75%	50%
Evangelical	96%	95%
Christian	76%	74%
Canada	75%	72%

^aNot enough observations.

There is a striking difference between those who strongly agree the Bible is the Word of God and those who only moderately agree (compare Tables 4 and 5). Canadians who strongly agree are six times as likely to attend services weekly, ten times as likely to read the Bible at least a few times a week, five times as likely to reflect on the meaning of the Bible at least a few times a week, and seven times as likely to talk to others about the Bible at least once a week.

Table 4. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who *strongly agree* that the Bible is the Word of God, by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Reflect on meaning of the Bible for my life at least a few times a week	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	18%	10%	29%	16%
English Catholic	40%	15%	37%	14%
Mainline	26%	19%	42%	14%
Evangelical	55%	61%	74%	49%
Christian	41%	32%	50%	28%
Canada	38%	31%	49%	28%

Table 5. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who *moderately agree* that the Bible is the Word of God, by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Reflect on meaning of the Bible for my life at least a few times a week	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	2%	1%	0%	3%
English Catholic	15%	3%	10%	4%
Mainline	10%	3%	13%	3%
Evangelical	11%	7%	15%	13%
Christian	10%	3%	9%	4%
Canada	6%	3%	9%	4%

The Bible and “Irreconcilable Contradictions”

Those who believe Bible is unreliable are less likely to read or attend

Most Canadians, 69%, believe the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions (see Table 6). Half of Christians hold the view that the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions, with the highest prevalence among English Catholics (59%) and Mainline Protestants (58%), and the lowest prevalence among Evangelicals (27%).

Table 6. Agreement that “the Bible has contradictions that cannot be reconciled,” by tradition

Tradition	Agree the Bible has contradictions that cannot be reconciled
French Catholic	52%
English Catholic	59%
Mainline	58%
Evangelical	27%
Christian	52%
Canada	69%

Among Canadians, almost no one (2%) who believes the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions reads it frequently (see Table 7). Very few Canadians with that belief attend religious services weekly (8%). A low percentage of Canadians (16%) who believe the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God.

By contrast, Canadians who disagree that the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions are more than three times as likely to attend services weekly, nine times as likely to read the Bible frequently, almost five times as likely to reflect on the Bible’s meaning, and five times as likely to talk to others about it (compare Table 8 with Table 7).

Table 7. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who agree that “the Bible has contradictions that cannot be reconciled,” by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God	Reflect on meaning of the Bible for my life at least a few times a week	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	3%	1%	14%	4%	5%
English Catholic	14%	3%	15%	9%	3%
Mainline	9%	3%	13%	14%	3%
Evangelical	19%	15%	36%	21%	18%
Christian	10%	3%	16%	10%	5%
Canada	8%	2%	7%	6%	3%

Table 8. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who disagree that “the Bible has contradictions that cannot be reconciled,” by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God	Reflect on meaning of the Bible for my life at least a few times a week	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	8%	5%	31%	10%	4%
English Catholic	27%	11%	49%	26%	11%
Mainline	17%	11%	38%	24%	9%
Evangelical	50%	55%	83%	68%	44%
Christian	27%	21%	51%	32%	18%
Canada	26%	18%	43%	28%	16%

Modern Relevance of the Bible

Few see the Bible as relevant to modern life

Just over one in ten Canadians overall and French Catholic Canadians (13%) strongly agree that the Bible is relevant to their lives (see Table 9). A slightly higher percentage of English Catholics (17%) and Mainline Protestants (18%) strongly agree that the Bible is relevant. About 6 in 10 Evangelicals (61%) strongly agree that the Bible is relevant to their lives.

Table 9. Strong agreement that “the Bible is relevant to modern life,” by tradition

Tradition	Strongly agree that the Bible is relevant to modern life
French Catholic	13%
English Catholic	17%
Mainline	18%
Evangelical	61%
Christian	23%
Canada	13%

There are striking differences between those who strongly agree that the Bible is relevant to modern life and those who only moderately agree (compare Tables 10 and 11). Canadians who strongly agree that the Bible is relevant are four times as likely to attend services weekly, more than ten times as likely to read the Bible frequently, five times as likely to reflect on its meaning for their lives at least a few times a week and almost ten times as likely to talk to others about it at least weekly.

These differences are particularly dramatic for Bible reading frequency. Mainline Protestants and English Catholics who strongly agree the Bible is relevant are nine times as likely to read the Bible frequently as those who moderately agree. Evangelicals who strongly agree the Bible is relevant are seven times as likely to read the Bible frequently.

Table 10. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who *strongly agree* that “the Bible is relevant to modern life,” by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God	Reflect on meaning of the Bible for my life at least a few times a week	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	28%	15%	69%	46%	19%
English Catholic	45%	27%	74%	43%	21%
Mainline	37%	27%	68%	54%	22%
Evangelical	61%	67%	95%	80%	56%
Christian	49%	44%	82%	63%	38%
Canada	48%	42%	79%	61%	37%

Table 11. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who *moderately agree* that “the Bible is relevant to modern life,” by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God	Reflect on meaning of the Bible for my life at least a few times a week	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	5%	2%	33%	2%	4%
English Catholic	19%	3%	30%	16%	4%
Mainline	10%	3%	17%	15%	3%
Evangelical	14%	9%	40%	20%	10%
Christian	13%	4%	27%	13%	4%
Canada	12%	3%	21%	12%	4%

Uniqueness of the Bible

Most see Bible teaching as the same as other world religions

About two-thirds of Canadians (64%) agree that “the scriptures of all major world religions teach essentially the same things.” A similar percentage of Catholics and Mainline Protestant share that belief, and more than one-third of Evangelicals (38%) (see Table 12).

Table 12. Agreement that “the scriptures of all major world religions teach essentially the same things,” by tradition

Tradition	Agree the scriptures of all major world religions teach essentially the same things
French Catholic	64%
English Catholic	68%
Mainline	65%
Evangelical	38%
Christian	60%
Canada	64%

Two-thirds of Canadians agree that the Scriptures of all major world religions teach essentially the same thing.

In qualitative interviews, Natasha, Joseph and Ian described how they find essentially the same messages in the teachings of the Bible and other religions’ scriptures.

Natasha is a 26-year-old professional who grew up in a devout Roman Catholic home. She continues to attend Mass but also participates in a Buddhist group and recently started reading the Quran:

All of them [scriptures of different world religions] are very similar when you really, when you really drill down. Um, the part of the Quran that I’m reading

right now is very rule-based, it’s very strict, but then again, if you read the Old Testament it’s also very rules-based, very strict, but if you read, your true digging down, if you’re looking for morality, or that actual essence of the book, what is the purpose of this, um, but all three of them [Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim scriptures], it’s very much a similar, a similar pattern.

Joseph, a devout 43-year-old Mormon, talks about the scriptures of Islam, Judaism and Christianity this way:

My understanding is that the Quran and the Torah as well, many of the stories of the Old Testament of, are the same. They believe in father Abraham, they believe in Moses, and they believe in father Adam. So in that respect, I don't know the Quran. ... I believe that what it [the Quran] teaches, though, in spirit is good.

Finally, Ian, a 65-year-old minister, says:

I do believe there are important truths in all the sacred texts. I've read the Quran a little bit and certainly felt that there are truths in there. The important thing for us in terms of how we read our text is how we take from it and apply it to our daily lives ... And so the Bible, as I understand it, was never written down as historical documentary. They were written down to tell stories that were illustrative of important truths. And so if you're reading the Bible that way we learn the most.

Natasha, Joseph and Ian all approach these scriptures by seeking a principle behind the text rather than what the texts themselves say. Natasha looks for “the actual essence” or “purpose” of the texts, Joseph looks for “the spirit” of the texts and Ian finds value not so much in the texts but in “how we take [truths] from [the various scriptures] and apply them.” The important thing for Ian is the method of taking and applying. Natasha finds the principles by “digging down.” Joseph discerns a spirit behind the text, and Ian looks for the truths that are illustrated by the text and which, significantly, are not the text.

Qualitative interviews reveal that people seek a principle behind the scripture text rather than what the texts themselves say.

When respondents were asked to elaborate on what principles they saw behind the text, their answers tended to be variants on the Golden Rule, such as:

Um, it's, um, teaching on morality, uh, like a social code of love and respect toward your fellow human beings.

Alexander, who grew up in a Baptist church but who rarely attends today, says this about religion and religious differences:

I don't know. I don't think it, I don't think it matters a whole lot. I think it's the, kind of, to give you faith and to give you hope, to believe the good things will happen, to believe in. ... I don't think one [religion] would be any better than the other.

Religion, then, for Alexander, is what gives you “hope to believe the good things will happen.” All religions are similar in effect since “one [religion] wouldn't be any better than the other.” For Alexander it is the effect, not the content, of religion that matters. While religion is seen to offer hope, Alexander rarely attends religious services, and he rarely reads the Bible – or any other religious text.

The belief that the Bible's teaching is unique, that it is not essentially the same as other world religions' scriptures, is correlated with significant differences in behaviour (compare Tables 13 and 14). Canadians who disagree that the scriptures of world religions teach essentially the same things, (i.e., those who

believe the Bible is unique) are twice as likely to attend services weekly, four times as likely to read the Bible at least a few times a week, twice as likely to reflect on the Bible's meaning at least a few times a week, and three times as likely to talk to others about it at least weekly.

Table 13. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who agree that “the scriptures of all major world religions teach essentially the same things,” by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God	Reflect on meaning of the Bible for my life at least a few times a week	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	5%	2%	21%	9%	7%
English Catholic	18%	4%	25%	14%	5%
Mainline	12%	5%	21%	18%	3%
Evangelical	15%	15%	43%	26%	14%
Christian	12%	5%	24%	15%	6%
Canada	11%	3%	13%	9%	4%

Table 14. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who disagree that “The scriptures of all major world religions teach essentially the same things,” by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God	Reflect on meaning of the Bible for my life at least a few times a week	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	7%	4%	25%	3%	1%
English Catholic	22%	9%	38%	21%	9%
Mainline	14%	10%	29%	18%	9%
Evangelical	57%	62%	86%	73%	51%
Christian	27%	22%	45%	30%	19%
Canada	24%	14%	27%	19%	12%

Discussion

What a person thinks the Bible is, to a large extent, determines what he or she does with it. If a person believes the Bible is the Word of God to his people, and believes that God is real and good, he is far more likely to devote time to reading it. But if a person believes that the Bible is corrupted or propaganda, he is unlikely to devote time to reading it.

The relationship between confidence and Bible reading is not linear, where a little more confidence results in a little more Bible reading. Confidence is fast becoming an all-or-nothing proposition: those who *strongly agree* the Bible is the Word of God read the Bible, and those who agree less strongly do not read.

It is astonishing that over a time when church attendance was in decline, confidence in the Bible as the Word of God has remained constant for each level of attendance. This suggests that something happens at church services that tends to instil and nurture confidence in the Bible.

Confidence in the Bible has implications beyond Bible engagement. Because confidence in the Bible—and Bible engagement generally—are correlated with other measures of Christian religious commitment, they can serve as a barometer of Christian religious commitment generally.

We are in an interesting situation in Canada. Although there is a fairly common sentiment that religious scriptures, and the Bible in particular, have been corrupted over time, there is another commonly held sentiment that there are principles behind the texts that remain accessible, constant, universal and uncorrupted. Most of the interview respondents who discerned common principles behind the scriptures of different world religions did not evidence much knowledge of the actual text of any of them. Usually these principles were described as ethics that made for social peace.

People who believe the Bible teaches essentially the same things as other world religions' scriptures do not tend to have robust Bible engagement or Christian religious commitment. If someone believes that the Bible is not unique and that its essential teachings are easily accessible through other sources, then he or she is likely to find the Bible unnecessary.

Discussion questions

- How would you describe your confidence in the Bible? Do you think it is the Word of God? Reliable? Contradictory?
- What strengthens your confidence in the Bible? Have you had experiences at church that have strengthened your confidence in the Bible?
- What do you do in your church to instil and nurture confidence in the Bible?

Conversation about the Bible

Canadians who frequently engage in conversations about the meaning of the Bible for their lives, either through reflection or conversations with others, are more likely to read the Bible frequently and attend church weekly.

Reflection on the meaning of the Bible

About one in ten Canadians (11%) reflect on the meaning of the Bible in their lives at least a few times a week (see Table 15). The percentage is slightly lower for French Catholics, at 7%, and slightly higher for English Catholics and Mainline Protestants, at 14% and 15% respectively. Just over half of Evangelicals (54%) reflect on the meaning of the Bible in their lives at least weekly.

Table 15. "I reflect on the meaning of the Bible in my life" at least a few times a week, by tradition

Tradition	Reflect on the meaning of the Bible in my life at least a few times a week
French Catholic	7%
English Catholic	14%
Mainline	15%
Evangelical	54%
Christian	21%
Canada	11%

There is a significant difference between those who reflect on the meaning of the Bible for their lives at least a few times a week and those who do so less frequently, just once a week or once or twice a month (compare Tables 16 and 17). Canadians who reflect at least a few times a week are twice as likely to attend services weekly, four times as likely to read the Bible at least a few times a week, and almost four times more likely to talk to others about the Bible at least once a week.

Table 16. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who reflect on the meaning of the Bible in their lives *at least a few times a week*, by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	41% ^a	28% ^a	94% ^a	40% ^a
English Catholic	52%	31%	68%	27%
Mainline	34%	26%	54%	21%
Evangelical	66%	73%	94%	60%
Christian	54%	49%	78%	43%
Canada	52%	44%	70%	39%

^aOnly 31 observations – use with caution.

Table 17. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who reflect on the meaning of the Bible in their lives *once a week or once or twice a month*, by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	12% ^a	8% ^a	53% ^a	13% ^a
English Catholic	34%	6%	54%	4%
Mainline	26%	8%	37%	8%
Evangelical	26%	21%	67%	19%
Christian	26%	10%	51%	9%
Canada	25%	10%	46%	11%

^aOnly 30 observations – use with caution.

Those who reflect on the meaning of the Bible at least a few times a week are more likely to attend services weekly, to read the Bible at least weekly and to talk to others about the Bible. Dramatic differences in religious commitment and Bible engagement are seen in some shifts from one frequency or belief to another. For example, reflecting on the Bible at least a few times a week yields results very different from those of reflecting less than a few times a week.

Conversation, participation, and community

Only one in ten Christians (11%) talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least once a week. One in three Evangelicals has these weekly conversations, whereas only one in twenty Catholic and Mainline Protestants do the same (see Table 18).

Table 18. "Outside of religious services, I talk to others about the Bible" at least once a week, by tradition

Tradition	Talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least weekly
French Catholic	4%
English Catholic	5%
Mainline	5%
Evangelical	36%
Christian	11%
Canada	6%

Only 6% of Canadians talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least once a week. However, those that have weekly conversations display marked differences in other measures of Bible engagement than those who have these conversations just a once or a few times a month and dramatic differences from Canadians generally.

About 16% of Canadians attend religious services weekly. Those who have conversations about the Bible weekly are more likely to attend services weekly than those who have conversations only a few times a month. More than six in ten Canadians (63%) who have weekly conversations about the Bible attend religious services weekly, compared to 43% of Canadians who have conversations only a few times a month (compare Tables 19 and 20). Canadians who have conversations about the Bible even once or twice a month attend weekly religious services at a rate almost three times higher than the Canadian average (16%). Similarly, only 9% of Canadians read the Bible at least a few times a week, but almost three times as many (29%) of those who have conversations at least once a month read the Bible frequently.

Conversation about the Bible at least once a week is the most significant factor for robust Bible engagement and religious commitment. Canadians who have weekly conversations about the Bible: 63% attend religious services weekly compared to 16% of the Canadian population; 57% read the Bible at least a few times a week compared to 9% of the Canadian population; and 81% reflect on the meaning of the Bible at least a few times a week compared to 13% of the population.

Table 19. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least once a week, by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God	Reflect on meaning of the Bible for my life at least a few times a week
French Catholic	— ^a	— ^a	— ^a	— ^a
English Catholic	60%	53%	64%	81%
Mainline	72%	55%	59%	76%
Evangelical	73%	80%	92%	92%
Christian	68%	64%	81%	86%
Canada	63%	57%	71%	81%

^a Too few observations to report.

Table 20. Religious commitment and Bible engagement among those who talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services *once or twice a month*, by tradition

Tradition	Attend religious services weekly	Read the Bible at least a few times a week	Strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God	Reflect on meaning of the Bible for my life at least a few times a week
French Catholic	— ^a	— ^a	— ^a	— ^a
English Catholic	43%	18%	57%	37%
Mainline	30%	20%	49%	56%
Evangelical	61%	59%	92%	76%
Christian	45%	33%	67%	56%
Canada	43%	29%	57%	47%

^a Too few observations to report

Canadians who regularly talk with others about the meaning of the Bible are very likely to reflect weekly on the Bible's meaning, read the Bible weekly, and strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God. Those with the most robust, all-around Bible engagement profile were frequently participating in conversations with others about the Bible. This frequent conversation with others is the key distinguishing factor.

In qualitative interviews, Mary and Connie describe their active participation in conversations about the Bible and their study to determine the meaning of passages. Mary described one of her conversations about the Bible like this:

I'm very close to our pastor and his wife, and they could recite the Bible backwards if they had to. Um, we attend community group once a week, and it's actually with our pastor. There's a group of us that meet every week to do Bible study and, and he's fantastic at helping you figure out the passage and what his interpretation of it is, and helps you find your interpretation of it. (Mary, 33 – reads the Bible a few times a week)

Canadians with the most robust Bible engagement frequently participate in conversations about the Bible.

Mary found the pastor to be “fantastic at helping you to figure out the passage.” However, as the conversation proceeded, she made clear that she was involved in the process of interpreting the passage and that the interpretation was her interpretation; **this was not merely a lecture**. Connie describes her participation in a similar group this way:

We [Connie and her husband] participate in a group that we call Community Group, which would be similar to a Bible study. [Expanding on her Community Group] We pray and we read, we discuss the sermon from the previous Sunday, and our church does what they call post-Sunday content, so it's like a page questions to discuss the things that are relevant to the sermon, so we usually aim to discuss those and sometimes we go off on rabbit trails and sometimes it's really focused, and at the end, we have prayer time together, where we just present, like, tell the group what's going on in our lives and what they can pray for us, and then we either sit as a group or split into smaller groups and pray for each other, and then we have a snack and we go home. (Connie, 28 – reads the Bible daily)

Connie's group is "similar to a Bible study," and is oriented to processing the previous Sunday's sermon, which presumably had some basis in the Bible. Connie does not describe the discussion and processing, but she is clear that in addition to "post-Sunday" discussion "we tell the group what is going on in our lives," and "we pray for each other." These personal components, significantly, take place after the "post-Sunday content" discussion, meaning that the processing of the Bible provides the social frame for the sharing and content that follows.

Bible study groups provide the social frame for discussion, processing, sharing and prayer.

By contrast, Gordon and Lindsay describe their experiences of family devotions when they were children in these ways:

There's regular Bible reading after every meal, just a short section of the Bible, right after lunch and dinner every day. And we grew up with that. That was just part of the routine. I didn't mind. I mean, especially as a kid, I enjoyed hearing the stories the Bible and the prayers were basically sort of the recited type prayers. It was one of those things that as I got older I just didn't get a lot out of because I just felt that they became things that were done as routine but there wasn't a whole lot of thought behind them. (Gordon, 49 – reads the Bible daily)

Periodically my parents would decide we should have family devotions, and then we would sit down together in the living room, in the morning before going to school or to the office and dad would read the passage, and I can't remember if you would say a little bit about it and pray, but that was never consistent. We would, maybe, a couple times, and then it would be months or years before we would do it again, but periodically they'd return to it but it never lasted. (Lindsay, 43 – reads the Bible daily)

Qualitative interviews reveal that family devotions are often non-participatory.

Unlike Mary and Connie, who experienced Bible discussions where they "figured out the passage" and "processed" the content of a sermon built on a Bible passage, Gordon found family devotions something that he "didn't get a lot out of" because "there wasn't a whole lot of thought behind [the devotions]." Setting aside the inconsistency of Lindsay's family devotions, the significant thing

about them was that they were essentially non-participatory for everyone except her father: "dad would read the passage," and while the quote suggests some ambiguity about who "[said] a little bit about it" and who "prayed," other contextual material strongly suggests that it was her father who did these things as well.

In the following excerpt from an interview, Andy describes what can happen when "Bible topics" take the place of the Bible in conversation.

Andy described a men's small group from his church like this:

It started with more, um, let's talk about topics from the Bible. And it was good. It's nice to get together with a bunch of guys and do this, but it was really missing the word of God. And actually one or two weeks ago I mentioned it to them all, you know, you look around the table and there are 15 guys or so, everybody's got their Bibles, they've got their Bibles open now, but five years ago when we started there was nobody bringing their Bible because we were just doing Bible topics. ...And I think the understanding of Scripture for all those guys, you know, for

the dozen or two dozen guys who frequent throughout the year, they've grown in their understanding of Scripture. (Andy, 34 – reads the Bible daily)

Andy described his group moving from discussing “topics from the Bible” to the Bible. Andy sees several differences in this progression. First, he says that the men who participated in the groups “[have] grown in their understanding of Scripture.” The context implies that prior to studying the Bible directly, they either had not grown in their understanding of Scripture or had not grown at the same rate. Second, studying the Bible directly led the men in the group to bring their Bibles to their meetings.

Studying a Bible topic is not the same as studying the Bible. When people study the Bible directly they grow in their understanding of Scripture.

Lindsay talked about how accountability played a role in a group's Bible engagement:

The people who were very influential for me were, ah, my college roommate and her boyfriend, Mike and Sue. Mike, at one point in college, was trying to set up accountability for Bible reading among a group of friends, and so he started to start a little newsletter group. And so, he called it the BS chicks and dudes, ha, ha, Bible Study Chicks and Dudes, and in it, um, it was accountability for Bible reading. So we were, we would track how much we had read and then it would be in the BS Chicks and Dudes, um, how much we had read. (Lindsay, age 43 – reads the Bible daily)

When we're accountable to someone with our Bible reading practices it positively influences our Bible engagement.

Lindsay's story does not have the Bible present in a group and at the centre of a discussion as with Andy's men's group, but encouraging Bible reading certainly was the central purpose of “Bible Study Chicks and Dudes.” What might be overlooked in this story is that Mike and Sue were “very influential people for me” and that this

influence was mentioned in the context of a story about a Bible reading accountability group. Influence and the role of this group that had the Bible at its centre are linked.

Both Andy and Lindsay participated in groups that placed Bible engagement or conversation at the centre of their activities. For each of them, these groups formed around Bible engagement are, or were, very important in their lives.

Discussion

It is important for people to actively participate in conversations about the Bible and its meaning. Conversations that promote Bible engagement need several factors working together: a context that promotes and nurtures confidence in the Bible, a purpose of discerning the meaning for participants' lives, and active participation. Reflection is a conversation with oneself.

Our study confirms that reflection has an impact on Bible engagement, but that it is conversation with others about the Bible that really takes Bible engagement to another level.

Conversation assumes participation. This participatory element is what distinguishes a conversation about the Bible from listening to a sermon or homily about the Bible. When listening to a sermon the

listener has the option of being passive. When someone engages in a conversation, he or she needs to be actively following the discussion, formulating responses, and trying to understand what is being said.

This study discovered differences between some small shifts of frequency or belief. For example, reflecting on the Bible a few times a week yielded very different results than did less frequent reflection.

Conversations about the Bible drive other kinds of Bible engagement. To talk about the Bible you have to read the Bible, reflect on the Bible, and be present with others.

Discussion questions

- What causes you to reflect on the meaning of the Bible for your life?
- Who do you discuss the Bible with?
- Why do you think those who have conversations about the Bible read it so much more frequently?
- What opportunities does your church provide to talk about the Bible?

Where do we go from here?

Bible engagement has been declining in Canada for several decades – likely longer. This is not, however, just a story about the Bible. It is a story about declining church engagement as well. To the extent that the Bible is the church's book, the fate of Bible engagement and church engagement are inextricably linked. Our study found that moderate Bible engagement is largely a thing of the past. Either people tend to frequently engage the Bible through activities like reading, reflections and conversation, or they don't.

Given that large swaths of the church lack confidence in the Bible and rarely participate in conversations about the Bible, there is work to do. Our interviews and survey suggest that most Canadians know very little of the content of the Bible, and even when they have access to a Bible they are less likely to engage the text itself than to read in the meaning they assume lies under it. This suggests that the Bible is not directly shaping much of the church in Canada.

Our study found that it was important for people to believe that the Bible is the Word of God, that it is reliable and trustworthy, and that it has unique teachings. Churches can strengthen Bible engagement by directly teaching these things.

Our study found that reflection on the meaning of the Bible for people's lives is an important kind of Bible engagement, but that conversation with others about the meaning of the Bible is the key factor in deepening Bible engagement. It also tends to promote stronger religious communities, because these conversations revolve around Christianity's central text.

In order to talk to people about the Bible, you have to read it, you have to reflect on it, and you have to be present with other people. And this is why it is so important for churches to facilitate and promote these conversations, because they drive all kinds of other Bible engagement.

Churches, then, should create opportunities for people to talk about the meaning of the Bible for their lives. Implicitly, by talking about the meaning of the Bible, you teach people to have confidence in the Bible because the very conversation communicates that there is meaning to be found for their lives. If churches prioritize conversations about the meaning of the Bible, it implies that the Bible is an important document to have conversations about.

Of course this study looks at the confidence that individuals have in the Bible, but if churches are to feed into the development of Bible engagement in their congregants, they themselves need to be convinced of the reliability, relevance, trustworthiness, and divine origin of the Bible.

It's the people who strongly agree who are the Bible engagers. You're either strongly in or you're out.

Find resources to help individuals and churches strengthen Bible engagement at www.bibleengagementstudy.ca.

Appendix: About the Study

The Canadian Bible Engagement Study (CBES) is a multi-phase study including

1. a literature review
2. a consultation with senior leaders from the Canadian Bible Forum
3. 44 semi-structured qualitative interviews in English and French
4. an Angus Reid Forum national survey (N = 4,474)

The literature review included Bible engagement studies from Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, the United States, and Canada from the past 40 years which were national in scope.

Of the 44 interviewees, 33 were recruited from Vision Critical's Angus Reid Forum (ARF) online research panel, and an additional 11 were recruited to augment the representation of recent immigrants or to take advantage of the investigator's travel to various parts of the country. Of the 33 ARF interviews, 5 were from Quebec and 4 of these were conducted in French.

The national survey was completed in two stages. First, a Bible reading frequency question was added to a May 2013 omnibus ARF survey to "pre-screen" in order to facilitate sampling quotas. We established quotas of 2,000 responses from those who read the Bible at least monthly (Readers) and 2,000 responses for those who read the Bible less often (Non-Readers). The survey ran on the ARF between June 26 and July 30, 2013, resulting in 2,038 Reader and 2,436 Non-Reader responses. Nineteen times out of 20, results for Readers will be accurate within 2.2%; and for Non-Readers, within 2.0%.

This report is based on selected variables from the CBES that had high explanatory power in a Shapley value regression analysis.

Rick Hiemstra of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and Bruno Déscorcy of Direction Chrétienne were the investigators for the English and French components of the study, respectively. The report was written by Rick Hiemstra.

This report drew comparative data from the following studies:

- 1996 – *God and Society in North America*: An Angus Reid Group telephone survey of 3,023 Americans and 3,000 Canadians. The members of the George Rawlyk Research Unit on Religion and Society from Queen's University were the Canadian investigators (<http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/QUEENS.asp>);
- 2003– An Ipsos Reid telephone survey of 3,172 Canadians sponsored by The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, Focus on the Family Canada, the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, and World Vision Canada;
- 2007 – An Ipsos Reid telephone survey of 1,000 Canadians sponsored by The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and Christian Higher Education Canada conducted in May and June 2007.



Commissioned by the Canadian Bible Forum and The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada