

# Maintaining a Pure Prophetic Flow With Prayer

Are you building walls of religion or towers of prayer? Your answer could denote the difference between a woe-filled fate and a fulfilled destiny.

Prophets obsessed by the fear of man or unholy desires will not fulfill God's ultimate plan. We must be careful, then, not to prophesy according to the party line in order to establish and preserve popularity in ministry circuits. If we fall into this trap we find ourselves in danger of perverting the gift of God by building walls of religion.

True prophets are not always the most popular five-fold ministry gift on the block because they are bold enough to release a word of the Lord that deals with sin or that warns the local church of potentially unpleasant circumstances coming down the proverbial pike. In order to properly carry this mantle, genuine prophets must build towers of prayer.

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## Steve Hill: Time Is No Longer on Our Side

**Note From Daniel Norris:** *My friends, I can't help but feel heavy at this moment—perhaps you feel the same. The news that has broken over the past few days, not weeks, shows how quickly our world is spiraling into chaos. Things are no longer as they once were.*

*I wept as I heard the stories of the atrocities taking place*

*in Mosul. A Christian community has been removed, children are being beheaded, homes of Christians are marked, believers forced to convert or face the sword. These are stories, the likes of which, we haven't read about since the 1940s.*

*My prayers are with our brothers and sisters who truly understand what Paul meant when he wrote, "all those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). I imagine their perspective about what it means to be a Christian is very different from our own. What a shame. We all have the same Christ, the same Gospel, but we yet we live very different lives.*

*I wonder how a message of prosperity works with a congregation that suffers this kind of persecution. How does a series on becoming a better you connect to a man who was just beaten? Perhaps they have something to teach us about the blessing of true Kingdom prosperity that comes from persecution or how suffering brings about our perfection (Matt. 5:10, 1 Peter 5:10).*

*Our world has changed. The days of building bigger buildings is over, it's time to build bolder believers. As the last seconds upon the clock begin to tick away, our churches do not need to be called to slumber but to action. Now is not the time for silence in the sanctuary. This kingdom is quickly fading away, the wise already have their eyes on the next.*

*I am reminded of a word the late Steve Hill spoke during the Brownsville Revival. The text is truly relevant for the hour we now live. As I read it this morning, I received a much needed rebuke to set my eyes upon eternity and live today as if it is all I have. I offer the text to you as well:*

*The more I read the Word, the more I am convinced that the preaching of John the Baptist, Paul, Peter and Jesus Christ contained truths that modern-day preachers seek to avoid. It makes me think, "Dear God, we've only given half the message!"*

The other half is something that is about to happen. I'm afraid that isn't going to be as sweet as the first half. America knows I'm right, because most know in their gut that they are racing toward judgment.

The Lord recently woke me up from a sound sleep and I felt an urgency emanating from the voice of Jesus, a warning that time itself was no longer on our side. The grains of sand, my friend, are at the base of the funnel in the eternal hourglass. Only a few moments remain. The hands on the clock are moving toward midnight. The curtains of this major production we call life are about to close upon the last scene. There will be no encore. There will be no second opportunity. The play will soon be over. Only moments remain for many of us to write the very last act in our lives.

It is time to pay close attention to the voice of God. Too many of us have squandered most of our days in the past year in selfish pleasure and pursuits. Nothing was done to advance toward Christ, so precious souls continue to deteriorate in sin rather than exert domination over sin.

Ask yourself, "Did I seize every opportunity to go after God, or did I laze away the days drifting aimlessly and hopelessly away from Heaven's peaceful harbor?" Whatever you do, don't tell yourself, "Well, this doesn't apply to me." This word isn't just for one or two; it's for you!

Yes, judgment is coming, but judgment always knocks first at the house of God!

For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? (1 Pet. 4:17-18)

This is a clarion call. You will be summoned and held accountable for your choices. This is an arrangement in which

you answer to the Judge concerning the charges leveled against you. It is a "pop quiz" of the most dreaded kind. It is like the brushing up to the edge of hell, peering in, feeling the fervent heat of the flames, but not yet falling in headlong. It's like standing in the holding cell knowing that in a few minutes, you will face the right arm of the law in a life-or-death decision of guilt or innocence. It is time to think about your destiny. Are you ready to give all to the Lord?

Times of judgment are times of godly fear, self examination, and serious contemplation. The good news is that when you are found guilty (and you will be), there is hope. Only one advocate is qualified to take your place before the Father because He alone was willing to pay the price to set you free. You had better let Jesus stand in for you before the Judge.

The Lord has been extremely patient toward you and many others up to this point, but even His patience will wear thin. He has cared for you. Now is the time for you to care for Him. He gave up all of Heaven and made His way to the world for you. It's time for you to give up all the world and make your way toward Heaven for Him. He has called unto you. Now is the time for you to call unto Him. Time is running out! Just as the sun rises to bring us a new day, don't forget friend, it also sets ushering in a cloak of darkness. Just as there has been a dispensation of grace and mercy, there is coming a time, a season of Judgment and wrath.

"I have blessed you," saith the Lord. "Now it is time for you to bless Me. I have given you My life. Now it is time for you to give me yours. I have fulfilled my part. Now is the time for you to fulfill yours. I walked on the Earth for you. Now is the time for you to walk on the Earth for me. I have called to you. Now is time for you to call unto me.

*Evangelist **Steve Hill**, who passed away earlier this year, preached at the Brownsville Revival for five years, was pastor emeritus of Heartland World Ministries Church and authored 13*

*books, including Spiritual Avalanche.*

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# **Vilifying Israel's 'Disproportionate' Response Appears Illogical**

When observers describe or denounce Israeli military actions against terrorists in Gaza as “disproportionate,” they glibly assume sweeping legal conclusions without sufficient proof or analysis. But the evidence shows that Israel has acted with disproportionate decency, while Hamas has committed war crimes.

Hamas' indiscriminate rocket and missile attacks—which now total about 3,500 in the last month—target primarily Israeli civilians. The effects of Hamas' attacks have been serious—contrary to what most media reports suggest:

1. Increasing premature births
2. Shutting down Israel's biggest airport, blocking 90 percent of incoming and outgoing passengers
3. Forcing about 8 million people to live on the edge 24/7, fearing that if their missile-defense system or scramble to shelters falters, they could die
4. Constant interruptions throughout the day and night with as little as 10 seconds to find shelter
5. Billions of dollars in economic damage

The principle of distinction requires belligerents to

distinguish between combatants and civilians. Hamas' violations of this principle amount to a double war crime: first by targeting Israeli civilians, and second by using Gazan civilians as human shields for these attacks, thereby making it much harder for the IDF military response to distinguish Gazan combatants from noncombatants.

Hamas exhorts Gazans to act as human shields, and its combat manual encourages this war crime while admitting that Israel avoids civilian casualties—an avoidance that Hamas exploits for tactical advantage. Legal scholar Alan Dershowitz deftly highlights yet another proof of Hamas war crimes: Hamas chooses to locate its military efforts in the most densely populated parts of Gaza, instead of in the far less populated areas nearby—a decision calculated to maximize Gazan civilian deaths. Cynically breaking all rules, Hamas even uses ambulances to transport fighters and converts Gaza's hospitals into command centers, weapons depots, and rocket-launch sites.

Hamas perfected suicide bombing and is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and Europe, so its war crimes are unsurprising, even if the media concealed Hamas' barbarism for the last month. But what of the oft-repeated but seldom questioned claim that Israeli military actions are "excessive" or "disproportionate?"

The first duty of any state is to provide security to its citizens. Adjusting for size differences (the U.S. has about 473 times Israel's land mass, and 40 times Israel's population), what would be the U.S. military response if Al-Qaeda took over Mexico and launched about 47,300 projectiles per day at the U.S. mainland, killing 120 U.S. civilians and 2,560 soldiers and causing significant property damage, widespread insecurity, and travel shutdowns? Such a comparative context supports those proclaiming that the IDF and Benjamin Netanyahu deserve a Nobel Peace Prize for their restraint during such a challenging war.

As of August 9, Israel's military has attacked about 5,000 targets in Gaza (4,762 during the first 29 days of Operation Protective Edge and a few hundred more since) resulting in 1,915 deaths (according to the Hamas-run Gaza Ministry of Health). Even if this total were accurate and represented entirely civilian deaths, the strike-to-kill ratio absurdly implies that Israel's military needs about 2.5 attacks to kill one person.

But if Israel's goal were just to kill Gazans, it could kill well over 1,915 with a single airstrike. Why spend so much on intelligence gathering and precision-guided bombs (or force Israeli citizens to endure so many costly weeks of war) when the IDF could raze half of Gaza in an hour? The fact that the IDF has struck so many times with proportionately few casualties shows the extent of its restraint and precision while destroying the terrorist infrastructure threatening Israelis.

Israel has made extraordinary efforts to minimize civilian casualties—despite Hamas' plan to maximize them. Israel aborts airstrikes that will result in excessive civilian casualties, warns civilians to clear areas that will be targeted, and loses ground troops in densely populated areas like Shejaiya to avoid airstrikes that would kill far more Gazan civilians. Israel chose not to target Gaza City's main Shifa Hospital, even though it knew that Hamas leaders were cynically hiding there, and an airstrike could have substantially harmed Hamas' military leadership.

As this article explains, Israel sacrifices blood and treasure to minimize harm to Gaza's civilians. And yet somehow Israel is still accused of deliberately targeting civilians even when Hamas' misfired rockets are responsible or when an IDF mistake happens. But as Colonel Richard Kemp argues, "Mistakes and malfunctions happen in all fighting armies and in all conflicts. Do those who condemn the killing of Palestinian civilians as deliberate acts by the IDF suggest that ...

incidents in Gaza [in which the IDF accidentally kills Israeli soldiers] are also intentional?"

Some of the same media outlets that rushed to portray Israel as using disproportionate force have belatedly acknowledged that fighting-age men are vastly over-represented among Gaza's dead, strengthening Israel's claims all along that it has done its best to target combatants and avoid civilians.

Israel's restraint is all the more remarkable given the genocidal intent of its enemy, as clearly stated in the preamble to Hamas' covenant and demonstrated by Hamas' genocidal missile attacks on Israel's nuclear reactor (for more on Hamas' genocidal plans, see this article by Jeffrey Goldberg). Would the U.S. military be as careful as Israel has been to avoid civilian casualties when confronting an enemy trying to kill millions of Americans and destroy the U.S.?

The knee-jerk assumption that Israel uses disproportionate force oversimplifies complex situations requiring deeper analysis and overlooks the powerful factors limiting Israel's military:

1. Internally, Israeli democracy subjects leaders to checks and balances from a vigorous political opposition, independent investigations (such as the Winograd Commission), and a defiantly free press and protest culture (including anti-war protests in Tel Aviv); so when about 90 percent of a normally fractious democracy supports military action, the country clearly faces very serious and legitimate threats.

2. Externally, the military actions of Israel are more scrutinized than those of any other country (as Bret Stephens brilliantly highlighted in 2009), and therefore always carry a greater risk of war-crimes accusations, anti-Semitic attacks abroad, and unprovoked attacks from neighboring countries (over a dozen rockets were fired at Israel from Lebanon during the current conflict in Gaza). Such realities compel Israel to

use force judiciously.

In the end, Israel must protect its citizens from an Iran-backed terrorist army that is disproportionately willing to kill Israeli and Gazan civilians. It continues to face disproportionate blame despite its disproportionate efforts to defend its population more humanely than any state in history has. Only if Israel decisively defeats Hamas can real peace come to Gaza—one more reason to let Israel's soldiers finish the job before granting them the Nobel Peace Prize.

*Noah Beck is the author of The Last Israelis, an apocalyptic novel about Iranian nukes and other geopolitical issues in the Middle East.*

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## Church Sweeps up Mess After Ferguson Protests

On the fourth morning after Michael Brown's death, residents from different parts of the region came together to pick up the pieces.

Some were young, some old. The majority arrived as part of the faithful. Others trickled in after spotting volunteers marching up and down West Florissant under the hot sun. Carrying brooms and large garbage bags, they collected whatever they could find: rubber bullets, broken glass, liquor bottles, tear gas grenades.

"I needed to come out today just to get some stability," said Gary Park, 34, an auto mechanic who lives near the area in Ferguson where Brown was shot and protests erupted. Close by is the looted and burned QuikTrip that sits as a symbol of the

severity of the unrest that resulted from an unnamed cop fatally shooting an unarmed 18-year-old.

“I wanted some encouragement,” Park said.

Park is a member of Passage Community Church in Florissant, which together with a few other local congregations, organized the Wednesday morning cleanup. Pastor Joe Costephens said that although the trash-collecting effort was a last-minute plan, more than 100 people joined the endeavor.

It was a simple act but not an insignificant one, especially since authorities reported two shootings only the night before. In fact, the continued violence has put future volunteer efforts on hold, Costephens said.

Elise Park, 31, a stay-at-home mom, arrived with her two young children who were excited by the novelty of using garbage pickers.

“I was very encouraged coming out here today, seeing all the groups helping,” Park said. “It’s an opportunity for me to invest and really become part of the community.”

Others, including a group of 20 somethings, came out to help on their own.

Larry Fellows, 28, of Ferguson, said that since the shooting he’s been doing what he can to spread a little cheer. Together with a group of friends, Fellows walks the neighborhood’s roads, handing out free water, snacks and cleaning supplies.

Fellows, who works for a health care company, said recent demonstrations aren’t just about the Michael Brown shooting.

“This has been building up for years,” he said.

He said he’s even offered supplies to police, but authorities rebuffed his offers.

Fellows believes that attitude is part of the reason the community remains angry.

“We’re the enemy.”

In an attempt to inspire compassion, another volunteer, Derrick Spencer of St. Louis, said he planned to return a sign to his truck’s windshield that recites a line from the New Testament: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

“We can’t take justice into our own hands,” Spencer said. Those who loot businesses are doing so at the expense of Michael Brown, he said.

After working for two hours, nearly 20 people gathered in the parking lot of First Baptist Church in Ferguson and held hands in prayer. They prayed for the family of Michael Brown and for businesses in the area that have been damaged by the riots.

Michael Williams of St. Louis, who described himself as a troubled individual who had managed to reset his life, was among those in the crowd. He said he wanted to show that “everybody is not about the rioting. Everybody is not about the destruction.”

Williams said he knows there are good police officers out there. “Most of us believe in doing the right thing, but this came to a boiling point,” he said.

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*Lilly Fowler is the religion reporter at The Post-Dispatch.*

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# Following Michael Sam, Another Football Player Comes out as Gay

An Arizona college football player has told a magazine he is gay, probably making him the first active major college football player to come out publicly.

Chip Sarafin, an offensive lineman at Arizona State University, told a local gay sports magazine he decided to start telling his teammates last spring about his sexuality.

"It was really personal to me, and it benefited my peace of mind greatly," Sarafin said in an interview in the August issue of *Compete* magazine.

He said he wanted his teammates to hear the news from him and not from "the college rumor mill."

Sarafin is thought to be the first active Division I college football player to say in public that he is homosexual.

His announcement followed a groundbreaking revelation in February by defensive end Michael Sam, who said he was gay after his final college football season finished in Missouri.

Sam, a Southeastern Conference defensive player of the year, was drafted in the seventh round by the St. Louis Rams and would become the National Football League's first openly gay player if he makes the team.

Sarafin, at 6-foot-6 and 320 pounds, is competing as a graduate student after receiving his bachelor's degree in biomedical engineering this spring.

The native of Gilbert, Arizona, is involved in research relating to football head injuries, the school's website says. He also is active with several community groups, including those attempting to end discrimination and bullying in youth sports.

Top Arizona State sports administrators said they strongly supported Sarafin and praised his accomplishments.

Vice President of Athletics Ray Anderson said in a statement the player "embodies all the characteristics that sets our student-athletes apart and allows our university to maintain an environment of inclusiveness and progression."

Head football coach Todd Graham said Sarafin is well on his way to becoming successful once his playing days are over.

"Diversity and acceptance are two of the pillars of our program, and he has full support from his teammates and the coaching staff," Graham said.

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*Reporting by David Schwartz; editing by Daniel Wallis and David Gregorio.*

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## **Jeremy Lin Reveals the Biggest Sin He Struggles With**

Christian NBA player Jeremy Lin recently opened up about the sins he struggles with.

The 25-year-old Lakers guard admitted he is not as humble as some people may believe in a question-and-answer session on Facebook during what he called Fan Appreciation Week.

"I'm not humble. Pride is [the] greatest sin I struggle with," Lin wrote. "But I'd say as I get older, go through more experiences in life and face tougher obstacles, I realize that I'm more sinful and need God more than I ever imagined."

Lin, one of the NBA's few Asian-American players, rose to fame in February 2012 when he scored 25 points in one game with the New York Knicks and led the team to a seven-game winning streak. He became the first player in NBA history to score at least 20 points and have seven assists in each of his first four starting games, which led to the phenomenon known as "Linsanity."

He spent the next two seasons with the Houston Rockets, where he averaged a mere 28 minutes a game. But the Christian athlete is ready to put what he's learned to use and begin a new chapter with the Los Angeles Lakers.

"When I look back on not just this past year but maybe the past two years, I think I've learned and grown a lot as a person, as a Christian and as a basketball player," he told reporters last month, according to . "From the minute I stepped into Houston until now, I'm definitely a much more complete player. I've learned how to do a lot of things I maybe never had to do before."

However, Lin said he is not trying to relive his banner season with the Knicks.

"It's been a huge weight off my shoulders. I'm not trying to recreate Linsanity. I'm not trying to be that phenomenon that happened in New York. I think I just want to be myself, more than ever," he said.

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# **Dumb and Dumber: How Biblical Illiteracy Is Killing Our Nation**

America can be proud of many things: our innovation, generosity and entrepreneurial spirit are unsurpassed. Yet when it comes to our nation understanding one of the greatest gifts ever given to humanity—the Bible—we're moving from dumb to dumber ... and it's no laughing matter.

Both inside and outside the church, there is a problem. Non-Christians don't have even the general idea of the Bible they once did. Christians are not seeing the life change that real Bible engagement brings. The result is a nation in spiritual free fall, and while most cultural analysts point to such culprits as church leadership scandals and government failings, the true answers start with the foundational Word of God—if we'll take seriously the challenge, look to best practices in the research, and faithfully and fruitfully engage the Scriptures.

## **The Challenge: Biblical Literacy Is Getting Worse**

The Bible's impact on American culture is unmistakable; it has shaped our laws, social systems and even language. People unknowingly quote biblical phrases every day. It's a tragedy so many have used phrases such as "the good Samaritan," "you reap what you sow," and "do unto others" but don't actually know the Scriptures or the Savior to which they point.

Study after study in the last quarter-century has revealed that American Christians increasingly don't read their Bibles, don't engage their Bibles, and don't know their Bibles. It's

obvious: We are living in a post-biblically literate culture.

Just as critical is the second word of the Bible literacy problem: *literacy*. Pew Research tells us that 23 percent of us didn't read a single book in the last year. That's three times the number who didn't read a book in 1978. Whether it's the Internet, video games, the TV or increased time spent on entertainment and sports, Americans are spending less time between the pages of any book, not just the Good Book.

The situation should be different with Christians. We believe the Bible is the Word of God—His divinely inspired, innerant message to us. To experience the Bible firsthand, whole people groups have learned to read, and new translations were created. Yet a recent LifeWay Research study found that only 45 percent of those who regularly attend church read the Bible more than once a week. Over 40 percent of the people attending are reading their Bibles occasionally—maybe once or twice a month, if at all. In fact, 18 percent of attenders say they never read the Bible.

There is no excuse. It's not as if we don't have access. The average American—Christian or not—owns at least three Bibles. Even those who don't have one in their home can download it free to their smartphone or “steal” a Gideon Bible from a hotel room. The Word of God is more available than ever. People have died to bring us what has led to modern translations of Scripture, yet we are dying from lack of knowledge.

### **Part of a Larger Problem**

Bible illiteracy isn't an isolated problem, though; it's part of a larger pattern of low spiritual engagement that must be addressed. They are all related.

Simply put, we have a biblical literacy deficit in part because we have a spiritual maturity deficit. Plenty of

research shows the correlation between spiritual maturity and reading the Bible. If you want spiritually mature Christians, get them reading the Bible. That's a statistical fact, but more importantly, it's a biblical truth.

Most Christians desire maturity. Our research shows 90 percent of churchgoers agree with the statement, "I desire to please and honor Jesus in all I do." Almost 60 percent agree with, "Throughout the day I find myself thinking about biblical truths." Most of us desire to please Jesus, but few of us bother to check with the Bible to find out what actually pleases Jesus.

Reading and studying the Bible are still the activities that have the most impact on growth in this area of spiritual maturity. As basic as that is, there are still numerous churchgoers who aren't reading the Bible regularly. You simply won't grow if you don't know God and spend time in His Word.

So, yes, Bible illiteracy is a big problem. But Bible engagement is a key part of the solution.

### **It's All About Engagement**

The bottom line is that too many Christians are simply not reading and studying their Bibles. This goes beyond simple trivia questions aimed at revealing how few facts we know about our Bibles. American evangelicals increasingly lack a spiritual depth. Our lives betray a lack of Christian character. We don't seem to be very Christlike to a watching world. So what do we do about it?

There are several things we can do to reverse biblical illiteracy here in America. At LifeWay Research, we define Bible engagement as "allowing God, through His Word, to lead and change an individual's life—one's direction, thinking and actions." When we compiled all the data from our most recent study on Bible engagement, we found this maxim to be true: *Engaging the Bible impacts one's spiritual maturity more than*

*any other discipleship attribute.* In fact, “reading the Bible” topped our list of things we found impacting spiritual maturity (followed by such things as praying for unbelievers, confessing sins and asking God for forgiveness, and witnessing to an unbeliever).

With research showing Bible engagement being so important to life change and spiritual maturity, is there any doubt our failure to read our Bibles impacts everything? The Holy Spirit works through the Scriptures, leading us to maturity in every area. That can't happen if we are not in the Word.

### **What Leads to Bible Engagement?**

When we talk about research, we look for things that predict—if you do one thing, you're likely to do another. We found eight things that lead to a higher likelihood that people will engage the Bible, which leads to growth in everything else. (Spiritual growth is a cycle—a cycle that leads to maturity!)

- 1) Confessing sins and wrongdoings to God and asking for forgiveness.
- 2) Following Jesus Christ for years (i.e., the longer you've been a disciple of Jesus, the more serious your commitment to engaging the Bible).
- 3) Being willing to obey God, no matter how costly the decision.
- 4) Praying for spiritual status of unbelievers.
- 5) Reading a book about increasing your spiritual growth (excluding the Bible).
- 6) Being discipled or mentored one-on-one by a more spiritually mature Christian.

7) Memorizing Bible verses.

8) Attending small classes or groups for adults focused on Bible study.

Our research shows that as Christians increase their participation in small groups, their Bible engagement scores go up. For example, average Bible engagement scores were as low as 60.6 when there was little or no participation in small groups, and as much as 79.4 when a believer participated in a small group four or more times a month.

No matter how you look at it, Bible engagement is related to spiritual growth. Growing Christians don't just read the Bible; they value and engage it because God is at work in their lives.

### **Faithful and Fruitful: How Do We Fix the Problem?**

Of course, you already knew that reading the Bible helped you to grow. It's actually *doing it* that's a challenge. So what are some ways churches are helping people to engage the Scriptures more intentionally? Based on our work with churches, we've seen a few patterns as well. Those producing the most fruit concerning Bible engagement ...

- **See the Bible as a whole.** It's not just *that* we read our Bibles, but the *way* we read our Bibles that increases biblical literacy. I believe there's a link between biblical illiteracy and our habit of fracturing the Bible into pieces and parts. We read a verse here, a chapter there. We need a quick verse for anxiety, so we run to Matthew 6:34 ("Take no thought about tomorrow, for tomorrow will take thought about the things of itself"). We need another verse about fear, so we jump to 1 John 4:18 ("There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear"). These verses can help when we're dealing with life's difficulties, but a steady diet of

verses and chapters digested in this way amounts to spiritual “fast food” from our McBibles. We need a whole Bible approach to Bible reading and study.

I serve as general editor of The Gospel Project, a curriculum that takes such an approach. In two years, we’ve gone from zero to over 500,000 weekly users. Why? Because people see walking through the Bible, following Scripture’s redemptive storyline, as a way to combat biblical illiteracy. The Bible isn’t 1,000 stories or even 66—it’s one story. Helping people see this encourages them to read the Bible more faithfully and fruitfully. Some resources for this include *The Drama of Scripture* (Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew), *Gospel-Centered Teaching* (Trevin Wax), *The Story: The Bible as One Continuing Story of God and His People* (Zondervan) and, for kids or families, *The Jesus Storybook Bible* (Sally Lloyd-Jones).

- **Create a plan, personally or congregationally.** It’s critical for church leadership to challenge believers to be in the Word of God, consistently growing in their knowledge of the Scriptures. I often hear of people who’d rather read devotional books than read the Bible. That’s because most of us need a specific plan to consistently be in the Word.

One thing I do for my own Bible engagement is to make a habit to read through the Bible once a year. If I simply read the parts I think I need the most, I’ll miss a big part of God’s design for my growth. Though my tendency, like many Christians, is only to read the New Testament, I need to spend time in the Old Testament as well. It’s essential for all believers to get the full picture of God’s revelation.

You, or your whole church, can follow a plan. There are plenty available online and already in many Bibles. You can lead your church through plans from YouVersion, George Guthrie’s *Read the Bible for Life* or others. The important

part is that you and your congregation are engaging all of God's Word.

- **Teach the Bible.** Teaching through books of the Bible at church models for the hearers how to read the Bible on its own terms, especially the unfolding of the one storyline of the Bible that culminates in Christ. Fighting biblical illiteracy means preaching from the pulpit the way people read the Bible—moving through the text.

When people see and hear their pastors preaching the text as a whole and allowing the text to determine the message (not vice versa), they go home and read their Bibles the same way. When they see us jumping around the text in sermons, they jump around in life. Let's teach them that the Bible is worth engaging, one book at a time.

- **Use a modern translation.** We can combat biblical illiteracy by committing to reading, studying, teaching and preaching from a modern translation. The English-speaking world has never had it so good. In the past 50 years, Bible translation teams have produced a dozen or more very good translations of the sacred text. For the last 400 years, the dominant (almost ubiquitous) translation for the English-speaking world was the King James Version. But the English language has changed. Not only do we not converse in King James English, we don't *think* in that kind of English.

It's important to have a translation that communicates God's Word into our thoughts and beliefs in a natural way. When we read from a translation that resonates with us—something like the Modern English Version, releasing this month and covered throughout this issue of *Charisma*—we are much more likely to make Bible-reading a habit, and our time in the Word will be much more rewarding. A Bible that communicates in everyday language is one that is much easier applied to everyday life.

## **We Need the Word**

We take aim at the heart of biblical illiteracy when we commit ourselves once again to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is not “you do.” The gospel is “what Jesus did.” Reading the Bible won’t make us a Christian, but it helps us to grow as one.

The Word that became flesh has given us His Word. In it are the words of life—for us and for others. The more we embrace the gospel and what Jesus has done for us in His life, death, resurrection and ascension, the more we begin to think and act like the kingdom citizens we are. Being part of Christ’s new creation means having a new “want to” toward the Scriptures.

In fact, reading the Bible is actually part of the abundant life Christ has given us. The Word comes alive in us through the Spirit as we engage it. God has given us His Word to correct, rebuke, train and reprove us—to train us in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). And as the Spirit works in us through the reading of the Word, the transforming power of the gospel, through the filling of the Spirit, is at work in us.

The Word of God is essential to where we are right now. Grab a modern translation, take someone with you (maybe your whole church), and let’s engage the Scriptures to see the change it brings—even to a nation badly in need of it. We need not be dumb and dumber when it comes to the Bible. We can be faithful and fruitful in the Word instead.

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**Ed Stetzer** *leads Lifeway Research, an evangelical research firm specializing in research on church and culture.*

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A companion analysis to this article, with more stats, can be found at

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# Lesbians Bully Bridal Shop Over Gay-Wedding Gowns

First Christian bakeries, then Christian photographers, now Christian bridal shops. It's hard to believe the gay agenda isn't specifically looking for Christian business owners to bully.

The latest news comes out of Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania. A lesbian couple reportedly wanted to set an appointment at W.W. Bridal Boutique but were told, effectively, "We don't cater to lesbians."

"We feel we have to answer to God for what we do," owner Victoria Miller told *The Press Enterprise*. And providing those two girls dresses for a sanctified marriage would break God's law."

The lesbians didn't take too kindly to Miller's stance and posted their complaint on Facebook. Of course, the post went viral, and gays and others sympathetic to the lesbians' cause tanked their social-media rankings with one-star reviews.

One man commented, "Jesus made everyone feel welcome, shame you are not a follower of Christ."

Another wrote on Yelp, "Your business should be shut down. I bet back in the 50's and 60's you people would have discriminated against blacks and before that Japanese and before that, Jews. It's always some group or something with you religious bigots. #lgbtrights"

What happens now? *The (New York) Daily News* reports the Bloomsburg Town Council is planning to hold a meeting on

Monday to discuss the incident. Specifically, the paper says, council members are debating whether to propose legislation that would ban businesses from refusing to serve LGBT customers.

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## **Story of Divorce-Seeking 'Pregnant Man' Takes Redefinition of Marriage to Whole New Level**

A woman who became a transgendered man and made headlines by giving birth to three children can divorce her wife of more than 10 years, an Arizona appeals court ruled this week, rejecting a lower court's decision.

A three-member panel of the Arizona Court of Appeals unanimously decided on Wednesday that the divorce can proceed because Thomas Beatie's 2003 marriage in Hawaii was considered legal in Arizona.

"As the Beaties' Hawaii marriage was lawfully entered in Hawaii and is not deemed void by Arizona law, the marriage is valid within this state," Judge Kenton D. Jones wrote in the 12-page opinion.

The court's decision overturns a ruling made in March 2013 by a Maricopa County Family Court judge that blocked the divorce.

Judge Douglas Gerlach denied the divorce on the grounds that Beatie had not shown she was a man when she married another woman in 2003, and thus could not show she and her wife had

been a heterosexual couple. Same-sex marriages are not recognized as valid in Arizona.

Beatie, 40, was born a woman, but has lived as a man since her 20s after hormone treatments and surgery to change her gender. Beatie was legally allowed to change her birth certificate and other documents to reflect her now being a male.

She first gained notoriety after stopping the testosterone treatments and deciding to have a baby when her wife was unable to conceive because she'd had a hysterectomy.

She made the rounds of national talk shows as the "man with the thin beard and baby belly" when she became pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl in 2008. Two other children followed in the next two years.

Beatie filed for divorce in 2012, seeking dissolution of his marriage with plans to marry her new girlfriend.

Beatie's attorney, David Michael Cantor, said he hopes that the appeals court ruling goes beyond this one case.

"People are going to have to get used to the fact that transgender people exist, and they deserve the same rights and responsibilities that everyone else have," Cantor told Reuters. "That includes the right to get married and the right to be divorced and the responsibilities that go along with all that."

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*Editing by Dan Whitcomb and Sandra Maler*

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# Christian Rock Star: 'I'm Gay. God Loves Me Just the Way I Am'

Millions in America's Bible Belt have sung along to Vicky Beeching's gospel songs. Now, they may be crying out with confusion over the Christian rock star's latest revelation: She's a lesbian.

"What Jesus taught was a radical message of welcome and inclusion and love. I feel certain God loves me just the way I am, and I have a huge sense of calling to communicate that to young people," the British gospel singer told *The Independent*.

Beeching has written, recorded and performed popular worship songs over the last 10 years, including "The Wonder of the Cross," "Above All Else" and "Glory to God Forever" (with Steve Fee). She has also performed at U.S. megachurches and music festivals.

"When I think of myself at 13, sobbing into that carpet, I just want to help anyone in that situation to not have to go through what I did, to show that instead, you can be yourself—a person of integrity."

Beeching's revelation shouldn't come as a complete shock. She tested the waters in April when she came out in support of gay marriage, then followed up with posts on LGBT theology in April and June. Now, she's setting out to change church views on gays and lesbians with what sounds like Matthew Vines-type theology.

"It takes work to assess the historical context of verses—like when Paul said 'women should be silent in church'. When we look at their historical context, and assess the original language they were written in, some of these verses they make

sense in a completely different way than they do from a first scan," she wrote in her last blog post.

"The deeply entrenched views of the church on any topic are unlikely to change overnight. They have changed regarding slavery. They have changed, in many places, regarding the role of women. But it requires work to get there; to prayerfully examine the Bible. If you're willing to do that, I'm going to recommend great places to start reading."