



by Roberta Roberts

### **Biblical Illiteracy**

In the June-July issue of *Influence* magazine, the sub-title of an article caught my attention, “Biblical illiteracy is epidemic. Are we reclaiming our responsibility to rightly divide the Word of God?” This reminded me of a recent conversation that I had with one of the teachers from our home church in Oklahoma; she is a retired school teacher and former State Representative who has a passion for teaching, especially the Bible. The lack of general biblical knowledge has hindered secular education to the point that the “Bible Literacy Project” was launched in 2001. *The Bible and Its Influence* was published in 2005, and has been accepted in 8 states as a textbook for academic Bible study. This 387-page book not only gives an overview of the content of all the books of the Bible, but it also shows how the Bible has influenced literature, art, and history throughout the years. She was excited about it because it had provided a way to get the Bible back into the public schools of our state, with the hope that as the students studied the Bible academically, it would awaken a spiritual hunger.

Even though technology has allowed everyone who owns a smart phone to have access to the Bible in many versions and languages, it does not guarantee that people will read it, understand it, believe it, and apply it to their lives. A Pew Research survey in 2014 cites that in Latin America, the percentage of people who read or listen to scripture at least weekly outside of religious services varies from 12% in Chile to 57% in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Panama. Although the percentages were higher among professing Protestants over Catholics, there remains a great need for people to be challenged to read and study on their own.

## Reading Scripture

*% who say they read or listen to scripture at least weekly outside of religious services*

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Protestants</b>	<b>Catholics</b>	<b>Diff.</b>
Brazil	29	62	17	+45
Bolivia	23	59	15	+44
Venezuela	20	55	12	+43
Uruguay	15	51	10	+41
Colombia	33	68	28	+40
Peru	23	55	15	+40
Argentina	14	47	9	+38
Paraguay	24	58	21	+37
Ecuador	22	51	17	+34
Mexico	15	41	12	+29
Puerto Rico	29	49	20	+29
Chile	12	36	8	+28
Nicaragua	57	72	46	+26
Costa Rica	38	57	33	+24
El Salvador	57	75	51	+24
Panama	37	55	33	+22
Guatemala	52	66	44	+22
Dominican Rep.	55	75	54	+21
Honduras	49	62	44	+18

Q66a

Due to differences in question wording, data for U.S. Hispanics are not shown.

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

As a Bible School teacher, lack of biblical knowledge greatly impacts what I can teach and how deeply I can teach subject matters. One of the most extreme cases occurred when Jason asked the class of first-year students who built the ark, and a student replied, "Moses." Suddenly, the class time shifted from delving into the foreshadowing of salvation and judgement to retelling the basic story because some of the students really didn't have a clue as to what happened. The thought that this student probably would be pastoring a church within four years made us cringe and opened our eyes to the daunting task that we face as educators. We cannot assume anything about our students as they enter our schools, but we are responsible for teaching them and challenging them to higher levels. The writer of Hebrews states: "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!" (5:12). I can identify with his frustration.

### Combating Biblical Illiteracy

As we continued to see this trend of biblical illiteracy in our students, we began to investigate further. Whether they have grown up attending church or not

does not seem to be a determining factor in their knowledge. Through questioning students that seem to exhibit higher levels of biblical knowledge, I have learned one of the key factors: effective Sunday School teachers. Although I have not conducted an official survey of every student in every class, I have repeatedly heard the students mention the names of Sunday School teachers that impacted their lives and taught them the Bible. Some of them were pastors, but many times that was not the case. John York in *Missions in the Age of the Spirit* states that the three main factors for growth in the early church were the effectiveness of the itinerate prophets, the testimony of lives changed, and the effectiveness of the teachers in the local congregation. Not much has changed in 2,000 years. Effective Bible study (guided by competent teachers) is still the backbone of the church that keeps it grounded, centered and firm against worldly philosophies and attacks of the enemy.

Secular education has recognized the effects of Biblical illiteracy and is implementing a solution, but how many churches have done the opposite? As we itinerate we have seen a decrease in the number of churches with Sunday School or even small groups that study the Bible systematically. Sound expository biblical preaching is replaced with catchy topics based on human wisdom with the occasional Scripture reference. Somewhere along the way sound Bible study has been replaced with relevant topics and self-help tips. In his article, Mike Burnette put it this way:

“I would like to suggest that the primary tension within the Church does not arise from style disagreements, an age or gender gap, or even where we land on certain theological emphases. I would suggest that our main issue is that most Christians don’t read the Bible, don’t remember the Bible, don’t memorize the Bible, and don’t live according to the Bible. Biblical illiteracy is the epidemic in our churches. All other problems are the trickle-down result. Bad theology, bad practices, unbiblical living, racism, sexism and more are the natural result of Bible ignorance. People will not live by what they don’t know.”

The Bible remains the textbook for Sunday School/Bible Study. We may use different tools and methods to study it, but it is the foundational piece of all Christian education. Formats vary from traditional Sunday School to small groups to house groups to one-on-one discipleship, but the goal remains the same: the spiritual maturity of every believer (Eph 4:11-16), which is impossible without biblical knowledge.

As we personally recognized the importance of effective Sunday School teachers, we began to work with a couple of local churches to help develop their teachers. Instead of stopping at a one-time seminar, we got into the trenches and taught

alongside them to help them develop skills and to focus their teaching and make it applicable to the students. Slowly, we saw a transformation, both in the lives of the teachers and in the students. In one church, the children's Sunday School teacher roster grew from three untrained warm bodies to fifteen trained teachers who teach five levels of kids' classes every Sunday plus children's services. It took time and personal investment, but I believe that some of those kids will be attending the Bible school in the future. And when that happens, we won't have to reteach Noah's ark but will be able to go much deeper much faster. When they reach Facultad, they will be miles ahead of their peers. It all starts with a solid biblical foundation. As we help local churches to develop sound, systematic Bible study, we are helping our Bible schools and eventually ISUM and Facultad. We must not underestimate the importance of teaching consistent Bible study in the local church.

### **The Challenge**

So, as missionaries, what do we do? With intentionality, we continue to do what we do: we train, disciple, and encourage sound biblical education at every level from the local church to graduate studies. Every missionary is an educator. Over the past year, many of the articles published here have challenged us to remember the basics of the importance of teaching. In the ACLAME Summit in May we heard repeatedly the need for higher quality teacher training throughout our region; we need to replicate ourselves. There is a huge need for training teachers in every aspect of Christian education, from teaching Sunday School to kids to teaching in Facultad. We must all do our part to intentionally raise the bar for Christian education and discipleship, and it all starts with the B-I-B-L-E.

- Encourage pastors to seek training for their local teachers so that the classes are more effective and dynamic
- Provide training and encouragement for teachers at all levels
- Be the example; continue to learn how to teach more effectively
- Learn about and promote training opportunities: PROCEPA, Cumbres Educativas
- Get involved in Christian Education in your area

1. What are some resources/techniques that help you personally with consistently reading and studying the Bible?
  2. How can we stimulate interest and commitment to Bible study?
  3. What is the title of a good resource for Bible study in small groups that you have seen? (Spanish or English)
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Burnette, Mike. "What God's Word Does in Us and Through Us", *Influence*, Issue 12, June 2017\_July 2017, p. 45

<http://www.bibleliteracy.org/index.htm>

Pew Research Center, Nov. 13, 2014, "Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region". Downloaded from

<http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>