

Why People Read the Bible

By Bob Young

An article by David Briggs (*Association of Religion Data Archives*, March 7, 2014) summarizes the just-released study on “The Bible in American Life.” The study, conducted by the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, gives insights into how often and why Americans read the Bible outside of worship. About half of the population of the United States reads the Bible on their own. Of that number, half read at least weekly and about 80% open their Bibles at least once a month. Only 17% said the Bible was a part of their daily lives.

With regular church attendance near 15-20%, the research is encouraging. But what most caught my attention was the reason people read the Bible: “far and away the No. 1 reason they pick up Scripture is for personal prayer and devotion.” Other reasons respondents gave were to learn more about their religion and to seek guidance in personal decisions and relationships. Researcher Arthur Farnsley II noted that people are looking for “meaning in their life.”

According to the study, Americans have a high opinion of the Bible. Nine in 10 Americans who read the Bible on their own consider Scripture to contain the literal word of God or the “inspired Word of God.” Nearly two-thirds of people who do not read the book at home have the same view of the Bible.

Interesting results include:

- The most popular texts include Philippians 4:13, John 3:16, Psalm 23, and the story of David and Goliath.
- The King James Version remains the top choice of Bible readers with 55% saying they most often read the King James Version.
- Thirty-one percent read the Bible on the Internet and 22 percent use e-devices.

Noticeably absent from the top reasons for reading the Bible is the desire to seek and know God’s will. This may reflect a cultural shift in society and in American religion generally. While the Bible is recognized as a valuable resource, its authority as the revelation of the will of God is diminishing. The Bible is more often seen as a self-help tool or a resource for spiritual devotion and prayer. Even when it is seen as a source of guidance, the application may focus more on daily life choices than on obeying God.