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Expecting Relevancy: A Study of College Students' Recent Devotional Trends

With the American religious landscape changing so quickly, it is important now, more than ever, to acknowledge the effects of the Bible on daily life and decision making. According to Pew Research Center's 2015 article titled "America's Changing Religious Landscape," the percentage of Non-Christian faiths and Unaffiliated individuals is rising to fill the plummeting percentage of Christian believers. From 2007 to 2014, the percentage of Americans who identify as "Christian" dropped 7.8% with younger and younger people filling the "Unaffiliated" category. While over 71% of the American population identifies as Christian, only 36 million of the 245 million identified as Protestant in 2014—14.7% (Wormald). Protestants are the most likely group to interact with the Bible on a daily basis and are the most likely to live "Bible Centered" lives; however, this group of "Bible Centered" individuals only amounts for 9% of America's 2018 population. Young people, specifically Millennials aged 20-35, are much less likely to openly receive and interact with the Bible as compared to their parents and grandparents and are more likely to have a neutral attitude toward Bible engagement. Perception towards the Bible is quite obviously different for contemporary young people than their predecessors, bringing a decrease of Bible reading in America because of unrealistic expectations for immediate understanding and applicable results and a general ignorance of reading strategies; however, Addressing legalistic stigmas, promoting alternative reading strategies, and displaying the positive, long-term behavioral changes due to frequent devotions would motivate college students to commit themselves to personal devotions.

Methodology

My research consists of a large variety of surveys and interviews. I conducted an anonymous survey at Lee University geared to understand personal devotional trends, Biblical interactions, and Biblical motivators for reading among college students. The questions and results of my survey, Bible Engagement at Lee University, are outlined in the Appendix. I also held several interviews with knowledgeable, religious leaders to develop a better understanding of student devotions from an authoritative or ministry-based standpoint. These interviews were with Sprouts and Roots directors, Nathan and Belinda Eaton of Public Church in Cleveland, TN, ethics professor Kevin Snider at Lee University, and Reverend Ted Kiger of Trinity Assemblies of God in Mount Vernon, OH. I also interviewed a Lee University student, Ashley Nation, who does daily devotions to determine the nature of contemporary devotions.

The Current State of Bible Reading in America

Young people are infrequently reading the Bible on their own, and lower Bible literacy sources confusion on the purpose and accuracy of Scripture. Taylor University Center for Scripture Engagement's (TUCSE) "Christian Life Survey" helps decipher college students' opinions on the Bible. During the 2014-15 school year, they administered a questionnaire to over 6,000 students attending Christian colleges, finding both surprising and stereotypical truths. While not every student attending these schools identifies as "Christian," over 97% of them believe that Scripture is "the authoritative Word of God." This phrase is commonly circulated through church and school, sprouting from verses like John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (ESV), and 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work"

(English Standard Version). The overwhelming support of TUCSE's first statement could, partially, be simply a regurgitation of phrases and ideas circulated throughout students' childhood or education. Theorists such as Karl Barth, Immanuel Kant, and Ernst Troeltsch challenged the traditional ideas of accepting Scripture as literal truth, and through various historical criticism movements, it is no surprise that contemporary readers now view the statement "authoritative Word of God" differently than the ancient authors. When TUCSE then asked its participants to agree or disagree with the statement, "The Bible is without error in all that it affirms," only 79% agreed or strongly agreed, and in response to, "The Bible is inerrant--it has no error in it" 73% agreed or strongly agreed, meaning 24% of Christian college students who answered affirmatively to "Scripture is the authoritative Word of God" have put their faith in a text that, in their opinion, contains errors. Perhaps, even the idea of authority has changed through Christian colleges, as it now places less emphasis on truthfulness and inerrancy. This complexity is realized in students' conflicting opinions on whether or not to read the Bible literally; only 38% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "The Bible should be taken literally" with 39.6% of students responding neutrally to the same statement. These students then, believe, or perhaps have been trained to believe, that the Bible is authoritative but could be false or interpreted differently. With most students neutral on a literal interpretation of Scripture, it can be assumed that they are troubled or contemplative in this specific area of Biblical authority. There seems to be some discrepancy between Christian college students' opinions on Scripture, but an aura of reverence, holiness, and respect still circulates their general opinion of the Bible.

A section of TUCSE's 2014-15 "Christian Life Survey" involved Students' spiritual foci—whether that be God, others, or the Bible. They recorded responses to the following

statements: “‘The Bible is an important part of my daily life;’ ‘As I go through a normal day I think of Bible passages relevant to what I am doing;’ [and] ‘I talk about Bible passages with my friends’” (“Students’ Spiritual”), finding that, on average, just over 65% of students agree or strongly agree with these principles. Compared to the category about spiritual foci on God, to which 98% of students agreed or strongly agreed, this is strangely low. Students were more likely to have a spiritual foci on the Bible than on others; however, as aforementioned, according to The American Bible Society, only 9% of American adults live “Bible Centered” lives. These students claim to focus more on God than on others and the Bible, but if they fail to engage with the Bible on a regular basis, they must be learning Biblical principles from other sources.

According to Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay research, “‘Even among worship attendees, less than half read the Bible daily. The only time most Americans hear from the Bible is when someone else is reading it’” (Smietana). Furthermore, 87% of American households own a Bible, but one in ten Americans has never read any of it, with 13% having read only a few sentences (Smietana). While students and families own Bibles, they fail to read them regularly, resulting in a decrease in Bible literacy. Alec Gallup and Wendy W. Simmons’s 2000 study, “Six in Ten Americans Read Bible at Least Occasionally,” found that 73% of Americans in the 1980s read the Bible “at least on occasion,” meaning that from the 1990s to 2018, this percentage has dropped 25%. McConnell continues, “‘Those who have a habit of reading through the Bible a little each day say they have experienced this helpful, life-changing quality. Those who approach the book differently tend to say the Bible is positive but much less personal’” (Smietana). While most Christian college students value the Bible as a focus of their faith experience, most Americans fail to study Scripture enough to retain the life-changing influence of it. Perhaps students believe in the idea of Scripture but lack the motivation to pursue an impactful

devotional life, which, according to LifeWay's research, would happen if Americans were more dedicated to Scriptural study.

The Benefits of Daily Devotions

Frequent Bible study is the most effective way to grow spiritually, with significant behavioral changes observed when individuals read Scripture four or more times a week. According to the Center For Bible Engagement's 2009 study, "Understanding the Bible Engagement Challenge: Scientific Evidence for the Power of 4," "Disengagement from God's word has left American believers ignorant of basic Bible facts and truths, vulnerable to false teachings, and, in many cases, spiritually immature" (2). The author of Hebrews scolds believers for not properly engaging with Biblical study and righteous contemplation with the metaphor of milk and meat. He writes,

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb. 5:12-14)

The lack of current Bible reading in America has left the church in disarray, with 8 out of 10 Evangelicals leaving the faith by age 23 (Brown); however, for those who read the Bible four or more times a week, there are significant attitudinal changes. Those who are committed to personal devotions four or more times a week have 57% lower odds of getting drunk, 68% lower odds of having sex outside of marriage, 61% lower odds of viewing pornography, 74% lower odds of gambling, 228% higher odds of sharing their faith with others, 231% higher odds of discipling others, and 407% higher odds of memorizing Scripture (Cole and Ovwigho,

Understanding the Bible” 6-7). Adults who read the Bible one to three times a week or less have significantly higher percentages of damaging behavior and significantly lower percentages of positive behaviors, creating a large behavioral divide “between Christians who read or listen to the Bible at least four days a week and those who engage with scripture less often” (Cole and Ovwigho, “Understanding the Bible” 3). Consistent Bible reading implies either a dedication to the Christian faith, spiritual growth, or the means to spiritual growth, and those who pursue frequent Bible reading are often rewarded with morally positive behavioral changes.

The rewards of Bible reading are obviously dependent on the personal temptations and struggles of each Christian, but those who pursue God through Bible reading do, on average, notice significant changes in their spiritual lives. Individuals who read the Bible four or more times a week have a much lower likelihood (-60%) of “feeling spiritually stagnant” or (-44%) “feeling like they can’t please God” (Cole and Ovwigho, “Bible Engagement as the Key” 5). Daily devotions, then, are “the strongest and most reliable predictor of spiritual growth . . . and self-perception” (Cole and Ovwigho, “Bible Engagement as the Key” 6). Bible reading gives Christians their daily food, whether that be milk or meat, but with continual pursuance, Bible reading leads directly to spiritual growth. If, according to Christian standards, individuals desire positive spiritual enforcement and moral changes, consistent Bible reading is the best method to achieve this end; however, while positive behavioral changes could be a result of daily Bible reading, it is also possible that individuals who choose to read the Bible daily already live morally affluent lives. Correlation between Bible reading and moral behavior is confirmed, but whether or not Bible reading is causation is uncertain. Regardless, the Bible fulfills its readers through positive examples and theological foundation. The nature and familiarity of holiness

emerge in Scripture through the actions of Jesus and the early Christian saints. Kevin Snider, Christian Ethics Professor at Lee University, stated:

John Wesley, the Methodist theologian who lived in the 1700s, described Scripture reading as a work of piety and kind of a means of grace. This is one of the ways in which . . . we are shaped into Christians who are holy . . . It gets us into the inspired text, which is important, but it also gets us into the story and into the foundations of our theology consistently.

For those who desire spiritual growth, Bible reading produces a positive mindset and, with persistence, the desired result of holiness. The foundation for theology, the substance behind belief, is only found in the Bible, and a dedication to pursuing divine inspiration produces tangible results. Daily Scripture reading exposes the readers to consistent examples of holy Christian living, which, in turn, could create a desire for holy Christian living within the individual.

How College Students Interact with the Bible

Devotional trends are shifting from quiet reading to community-based conversations and interactive contemplation, which also causes students to approach Bible engagement with expectancy. In order to discover students' opinions on studying, as opposed to reading, the Bible, I conducted an anonymous survey at Lee University, asking students, among other questions, what "interacting with the Bible" means to [them]." One student responded: "Actually researching and delving into the Bible more. Knowing what certain things mean and how you can relate it to your life." This statement implies several things about Biblical engagement:

- outside research is essential, perhaps on the historical background of the ancient texts or theologians

- students must find, not simply search for, definitive answers to the troublesome questions and Biblical terminology Scripture emphasizes
- discovering how to apply these ancient texts directly to their personal circumstances is crucial.

This student in particular has the opinion that only through study, not divine inspiration or contemplation, can Biblical engagement flourish; he or she seems to want specific answers to personal troubles and might view the Bible as a means to understand his or herself better. This student reads the Bible one to three times a week on his or her own, reading, on average, less than one chapter each time. To the same interacting question, a student who reads 5 or more chapters of the Bible on his or her own everyday responded, “It means I read the word and apply it to my life, claiming the promises and [allowing] the word to shine on my life so I can change my actions and behaviors to be more like Christ's Example.” As opposed to the previous student, this individual seems to view the Bible as a means to interact with the divine and apply Biblical principles to their daily behavior. This same individual also responded to “What, if anything, would motivate you to read the Bible on your own more often?”, with “[Bible reading] is a part of my life and my lifestyle. It is a fresh word every day.” He or she seems to view the Bible as an ever-evolving source of inspiration and encouragement that changes his or her daily actions; however, only 14.71% of Lee students surveyed read their Bible every day. If this particular view of the Bible sprouts from daily reading, one can assume this perspective on “interacting with the Bible” is also a minority.

I also interviewed Nathan and Belinda Eaton, the Sprouts and Roots Directors and College Community Group Leaders at Public Church. In response to the question, “How do students interact with the Bible?,” Nathan said, “there is a desire, more now than in the past, for

students to know truth. . . whether that be historical, cultural, literal . . . if we believe Scripture is God breathed, what does that mean? I think students are looking into that.” There seems to be a trend among both students and pastors to prioritize truth and definite meaning when reading the Bible, realized primarily through the applicability and relatability of Scripture. Students who are not heavily engaged in the Word of God view Scripture as a means to understand their lives better, but the prerequisite for this application is absolute truth—a singular, True interpretation. Because the Bible, culturally speaking, is difficult for contemporaries to understand, they often feel that translations separate them farther from absolute meaning. One student affirms this by stating “diction” is the most difficult aspect of engaging with the Bible. He or she finds absolute Truth only in what he or she considers the “original texts,” even if these versions are difficult to understand. He or she wants, “to go back and read the old language, but then it becomes hard to understand . . . I compare [new translations] to the King James Version or New King James Version or as far back as I can be able to understand . . . to make sure things line up.” This student believes that NKJV or KJV are the most accurate translations contemporary readers can find, and that they possess the key to understanding Biblical Truth; however, even these translations carry some sort of religious bias.

Kevin Snider suggests that students who read only one particular translation could then have their theological principles reaffirmed through Scripture. He states: “[Students’] constant practices have a way of shaping [their] imagination, and [the Bible] does this in subtle ways that [they] don’t recognize. Constant engagement with a particular translation of Scripture can shape the way [they] read that Scripture and the theological ideas [they] come away with. Sometimes translations are guided by theology.” In some cases, Snider observes, learned ideas are positively extracted through particular theological backgrounds that certain translators leave in their

versions, meaning without proper study, translational Bible reading shapes theology. While students desire Truth, they often do not understand the effects translational reading has on their beliefs.

With the frequency of topical sermons, as opposed to expository or textual, it has become more common to read the Bible reflectively—in search for applicable verses and messages. The reader often approaches the Bible expecting to receive some sort of immediate answer, application, or divine inspiration that could parallel a personal or contemporary situation. This style of Bible reading is termed by Brian Malley as “devotional reading.” One student in my survey demonstrates this application by “interacting with the Bible” by “Thinking of how the Bible applies to life.” He or she believes that the purpose of daily devotions is to know how to apply Biblical principles or specifics to their personal lives—“Life-relevance is assumed, and this assumption may drive readers to read the Bible until struck by something that is relevant” (Franzen 397). Reverend Ted Kiger observes this trend in his own Assemblies of God church and states that in the past 50 years, “People [have become] hungry for more depth in the word of God. Study Bibles [are becoming] a craze . . . The result [is] people [are] more inclined to read scripture they [can] understand and relate too.” Elements of personal application and genuine study are prevalent in college students, perhaps because of a modern push for Biblical study beyond surface level. The alternative to devotional reading is one where the reader approaches the text unexpectedly to search for surprises to challenge his or her belief system, but this is a very uncommon approach in contemporary readers. As Bible literacy decreases, according to Prof. Kevin Snider, a desire for immediate Biblical interpretation and relevancy increases. Students who read the Bible less than four times per week seem to expect their devotions to yield immediate, tangible results in the form of life changing revelations; however, students who read

the Bible more often approach it as a means to model their behavior on the life of Christ and the saints. In a culture of immediacy, it is no surprise that a large portion of college students have life-relevancy expectations, but perhaps with more frequent study, this importance placed on Bible facts and singular Truth would be replaced with a deeper appreciation for a Biblical lifestyle.

Devotional Appearance

Contemporary devotions little resemble those of years past. College students are looking for more contemplative ways to understand Christianity, perhaps more frequently than attempting to understand the Bible itself. According to Nathan and Belinda Eaton, college students are discussing the Bible second-hand more than individually reading and interpreting Scripture for themselves. An interview with Ashley Nation, daily devotional reader, revealed her devotional genre is mainly testimonial. She follows a devotional book, *Daily Guideposts 2019*, which provides a daily Scripture, a personal story, and sometimes a concluding Scripture depending on the author's intent, but the main bulk of these one-page devotions is the authors' interpretation, encouragement, and experiences with Christianity. These devotions place value on second-hand interpretations of Bible reading which, according to the Eatons, is also a trend in Public Church. Belinda states, "A lot of times [college students] go to second hand sources like podcasts, Instagram, and chapel speakers. I think they would go to those sources potentially more so than the Bible." She continues to explain that she notices students first turning to their friends about ethical issues in their lives and later confirming their thoughts through Bible reading—a trend also apparent in my personal survey. Nation affirmed the use of social media as a form of encouragement in Christian life, implying its importance in sharing faith. She uses Facebook to share the daily Scriptures of her devotional book, and describes how one of her

Facebook posts encouraged another believer to also do personal devotions on a regular basis.

There is a component of community within personal devotions that encourages reading and sharing of Biblical principles; however, it seems that spreading encouragement and social media posts are perhaps more influential in college students' lives than Biblical study itself.

Conversations about the Bible sometimes take precedence over Scriptural study.

The Eatons also mentioned setting changes in the devotional habits of college students. While students may be doing devotions infrequently, the stereotype of “quiet space” devotions is disintegrating and leading to more public, community-based devotions. Belinda mentions that students are often doing their devotions in communal places like coffee shops, small groups, or hiking trails. These types of settings then provide a time of contemplation on the Word, whether that be on the drive home from the coffee shop or while hiking on a trail. Nathan describes these devotions as promoting a “[back and forth] relationship. [Students are] leaving time for God to speak to them afterwards.” This is congruent with a rising trend of students pushing back against legalistic stigmas that attempt to define a “good” relationship with God. Students seem to be very concerned with the methodology of devotions; they want their Bible reading or devotions to be genuine and relational, which, in their general opinion, means devotions look differently than they have in the past. No longer do most students believe devotions must take place in a “quiet space,” as their parents and grandparents might have done—their genuine, Biblical study comes from a rejection of church tradition. This change could stem from their perceived opinions on the spirituality of older generations. For example, if a student seems his or her parent read the Bible everyday in a “quiet space” and then that parent divorces his or her spouse or acts judgmentally, the student could then perceive these “quiet space” devotions as ineffective or disingenuous, leading to a rejection of this tradition. However, according to my survey, 82.4% of Lee

University students wish they read the Bible more often, perhaps implying that these contemplative devotional settings require more motivation to attend. Students have a desire for genuine Bible reading and relationship, but their methodology often fails to satisfy their spiritual cravings.

Hindrance from Frequent Devotions

The majority of my research supports the claim that college students have a desire to genuinely study the Bible but fail to prioritize Bible reading in their lives. There seems to be a growing demographic of Christians that believe in the conceptual authority of the Bible but simultaneously believe in its errancy, which could be the main hindrance that keeps college students from studying the Bible on a regular basis. In my survey, I asked students, “What, if anything, would motivate you to read the Bible on your own more often?” to which I received the following responses: “Some kind of tool to understand what on earth it could mean?” “More time,” and “A better understanding of it and being able to see it engaged with in my Christian community.” Students acknowledge a lack of Biblical understanding in their own lives but fail to see a solution to this problem within Bible reading. From these responses, it seems that they want to understand the complexities of the Bible before they actually begin reading it, perhaps a reflection of cultural stigmas against ignorance. Students not only expect to receive applicable interpretation through Scripture but also a profound understanding of the text without reading it on a regular basis. This expectation has, presumably, lead to a lack of devotional prioritization. Several Lee University students responded that “more time” or “accountability partners” would motivate them to read the Bible more often; however, a lack of time or community rarely stops college students from engaging in other recreational activities, implying “more time” is perhaps just a common excuse to avoid intentional devotions. These intense expectations for the Bible to

perform in certain ways could be the cause of a decline in personal reading, but with 82% of students claiming they wish they read the Bible more often, these excuses seem to be a deflection of a deeper issue. Students are not reading the Bible on their own possibly because they have not been taught how to intentionally engage with Scripture in a meaningful and behavior-changing way, and this lack of exposure causes them to have unrealistic expectations on the behavior of both God and his Word.

Bible Reading Motivators

Based on this research, college students would read the Bible more often if they were taught reading strategies, their pastors or spiritual leaders addressed legalistic stigmas, and they understood the long-term, positive results of daily devotions. According to Rev. Ted Kiger, “The stigma of discouragement comes from guilt that is placed on a Christian from the devil,” meaning that Christians who commit themselves to more frequent reading often feel guilty if they miss a scheduled reading day and then give up on personal reading entirely. With intense pressure for college students to stay in the church, young people may reject the legalism involved in traditional, daily devotions; however, because students are often unaware of alternative, genuine reading strategies, they feel discouraged to do devotions. Students would, perhaps, be more open to personal Bible reading if they saw the various approaches to genuine reading and study. They need to understand the complexities of the Word and be prepared to encounter troublesome passages and ideas—for an increase in personal Bible reading, students cannot expect to understand and apply every verse to their own lives. Addressing legalistic stigmas while teaching the benefits of intentionally troublesome passages would give college students an alternative to their traditional understanding of Scripture reading. Displaying the long-term, positive results of frequent Bible reading might also encourage this same behavior in their own

lives. As most students already want to read the Bible more frequently, they simply need to prioritize their devotions ahead of other distractions. If students observe and comprehend the behavioral and life-changing benefits of frequent devotions in the lives of others, they might also see the difference between *having* to read the Bible and *wanting* to read the Bible. The expectation for Christians to read the Bible could stereotype Bible reading as dull and ineffective, but if students were given constant, genuine reminders of trusted figures that enjoy reading the Bible, their perspective on Scripture itself could shift.

While there is no perfect solution to the decrease in young Bible readers, changing students' perspective on devotions and limiting their expectations for the text itself might result in motivated Bible reading. The behavioral and spiritual benefits of personal Bible study and contemplation are indisputable, but a general lack of understand of Biblical principles leads more and more people away from the church every year. As students are motivated by genuine, spiritual encounters, reframing their conceptions about the Bible is the perhaps the best way to show them how frequent devotions create the path towards genuine relationship and spiritual growth. The first step is to simply open the Word.

Appendix

Bible Engagement at Lee University Questions and Results

Total Participants - 34

1. How often do you read the Bible on your own apart from church services and chapel?
 - a. Everyday - 14.71%
 - b. 4-6 times a week - 11.76%
 - c. 1-3 times a week - 32.35%
 - d. Less than once a week - 41.18%

2. On average, how often do you think your peers read their Bibles on their own?
 - a. Everyday - 0.00%
 - b. 4-6 times a week - 26.47%
 - c. 1-3 times a week - 41.18%
 - d. Less than once a week - 32.35%

3. When reading the Bible on your own, how much do you read in one sitting?
 - a. 5 or more chapters - 8.82%
 - b. 3-4 chapters - 8.82%
 - c. 2-3 chapters - 26.47%
 - d. 1 chapter - 17.65%
 - e. Less than 1 chapter - 38.24%

4. Are you more motivated to read the Bible on your own or with friends?
 - a. On my own - 73.53%
 - b. With friends - 26.47%

5. Do you use a devotional book in addition to your Bible reading? If so, what book?

- a. I do NOT use a devotional book - 76.47%
 - b. I use a devotional book titled: - 23.53%
 - i. Answers varied
6. What does "interacting with the Bible" mean to you?
- a. Answers varied
7. How does reading the Bible on your own make you feel?
- a. Hopeful - 41.18%
 - b. Confused - 23.53%
 - c. Fearful - 2.94%
 - d. Loved - 14.71%
 - e. Other (please specify) - 17.65%
 - i. Answers varied
8. Do you wish you read the Bible on your own more often?
- a. I am happy with how often I read the Bible - 14.71%
 - b. I wish I read the Bible more often - 82.35%
 - c. I do not read the Bible on my own - 2.94%
9. What, if anything, would motivate you to read the Bible on your own more often?
- a. Answers varied
10. Do you think reading the Bible more often would impact your daily decisions?
- a. Yes - 82.35%
 - b. No - 17.65%

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