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## People of the Word?

April 29, 2008 | Karen Swallow Prior

“The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t read them.”

This insight, offered by Mark Twain more than a century ago, was confirmed recently by an extensive report from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) on the sad state of reading in America today. The findings of the report, *To Read or Not to Read*, indicate that Americans are reading less and that their ability to comprehend what they do read is declining. The strong correlations found in the report between reading and comprehension levels and social, civic and political involvement suggest far-reaching and sobering implications of this trend.

According to the NEA, the average American spends nearly two hours a day watching television but only seven minutes of leisure time each day reading. One of the report’s most alarming findings is employers’ reporting of less than one-third of employees with a four-year college degree read prose at a proficient level. Because of the strong correlation between reading and writing skills, it is not surprising, then, that employers cite written communication as the skill most lacking among both high school and college graduates.

As troubling as this is, the decline in reading, comprehension and writing skills has consequences well beyond the workplace. Bolstered by detailed figures and extensive surveying, the report indicates that “good readers make good citizens.” The more people read, the more likely they are to vote, volunteer, attend museums and cultural events, exercise, and even attend sporting events. On the other hand, deficient readers are disproportionately represented among the populations of both the imprisoned and the unemployed.

While the report does not provide data on Christians specifically, the implications for Christians are compelling. If the most culturally and politically engaged citizens are reading citizens, then who more than Christians ought to read?

Yet, the relationship of Christians to the written word has significance even beyond the importance of cultivating minds that conform to the excellence of Christ. For Christianity is a

religion of the written word. From the moment of God's imprinting his law on the stone tablets at Sinai, to the reminder that "in the beginning was the Word," to the solemn sealing of His written testimony at the end of the Revelation, God is a God of the written word. His people are a "people of the book."

The centrality of the written word — and the reading of it — is not only our Christian heritage, but also our gift to the world. The invention of the printing press, the single most consequential event of the modern era, was a product of the Protestant Reformation, an event centered on the importance of each individual being able to read the Bible for himself. The very fact that most people today can read is the direct result of this momentous event.

While the rest of the world squanders the gift of reading, Christians can embrace our heritage — indeed our very identity — as people of the Word merely by picking up a good book.

*Dr. Karen Swallow Prior is Associate Professor of English at Liberty University.*