

Liberty University School of Divinity

**Understanding the Factors that Motivate or Hinder Regular Bible
Reading Among Adult Christians to Increase Bible Reading Among Believers**

A Thesis Project Submitted to
the Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

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Thesis Project Approval Sheet

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“Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ Says the Lord of hosts.” (Zechariah 4:6)

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“...but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised..” (Proverbs 30:30)

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Abstract

Scholarly discussion abounds on the subject of low Bible readership within the Body of Christ. However, gaining an understanding of key the factors that motivate or hinder Bible reading among adult Christians, and developing strategies to reverse this trend through preaching and Christian Education, is an area of the research that was sparsely addressed by the precedent literature. As a result, the purpose of this study is to help pastors and Christian educators better understand the motivating factors that influence regular Bible reading and to propose action steps that can increase Bible reading among the Body of Christ.

This study follows a qualitative and phenomenological research design. It is based upon the Bible reading experiences of six adult, Christian, research participants selected from the locales of central California and Norfolk, Virginia. Each research participant completed a single Bible reading questionnaire about their Bible reading beliefs and practices.

The results of this study revealed that motivation to read the Bible is significantly influenced by the positive, personal, experience that the reader gains from engaging the teachings of the Scripture. Reading the Bible with others was also found to be crucial to maintaining Bible readership. In contrast, the key hindrance to regular Bible reading was the perceived lack of time created by life and work responsibilities. Based on these motivating factors, this research provides targeted recommendations to help foster regular Bible reading through both preaching and Christian education.

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¹ Paul Martin Henebury, “Jesus Christ, The Logos of God: An Inquiry into The Johannine Prologue and Its Significance,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 8:23 (2004), 87-90.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Consistent and personal Bible reading is a practice that is commanded and encouraged repeatedly throughout the Scripture.² Beginning with the introduction of God's Law to the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai³ and continuing to the teachings of Jesus Christ in the New Testament,⁴ the Word of God has played a central and influential role within the life of the Believer. Whether reading the Bible to gain guidance concerning God's will on various matters of life, or reading the Bible to be emboldened and motivated by the sovereignty of God displayed throughout the biblical narratives, the Word of God is spiritual food that feeds the Christian's soul in a way that nothing else can.⁵ Despite the Bible's numerous commands and encouragements for Christians to engage in consistent reading (and application) of the Scripture,⁶ reading the Bible is a spiritual discipline that many professing Christians do not regularly engage.⁷ In fact, scholarly discussion abounds on the subject of biblical literacy and on the problem of low Bible readership among various groups within the church.⁸ In the meantime, minimal Bible reading continues and the spiritual condition of the Christian who does not regularly read the Bible is impacted. The results are spiritually crippling. As stated by one pastor and scholar, "...many people are [...] hearkening to other words that promise to ensure their

² Ps. 1; Heb. 4:12; Deut. 8:3; Josh. 1:8-9

³ Exod.19-20.

⁴ Matt. 4:4; Lk. 4:4.

⁵ Matt. 4:4; Lk. 4:4; Deut. 8:3

⁶ Ps. 1; Heb. 4:12; Deut. 8:3; Josh. 1:8-9

⁷ "State of the Bible 2018," Research Releases, Barna, last modified July 10, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-Bible-2018-seven-top-findings/>

⁸ Judith Stack-Nelson, "Beyond Biblical Literacy: Developing Readerly Readers in Teaching Biblical Studies," *Dialog* 53, no. 4 (2014): 294.

identity. [They] are following stories [...] that enslave rather than free them." ⁹ Consensus on the importance of Scripture within the life of Christians abounds. As other scholars confirm, "Christian spiritual formation echoes the historic understanding that the Scriptures underlie and provide sustenance for the journey of being reformed into the imago Dei."¹⁰ As also stated, "Since the beginnings of the Christian faith, God's revelation has been tied directly to the Bible. If you want to know God, either theologically or relationally, the Christian perspective is that you do this by the word of God, the Bible. God speaks to us through the Bible."¹¹ Ultimately, Jesus Christ, provides the ultimate affirmation within the gospels that the engagement of Scripture is non-negotiable for those who desire to be His disciples.¹²

In response to the vital need for increased Bible reading among members of the Body of Christ, many scholars have produced research on the state of Bible literacy. Some researchers have also tested different methods for engaging students, millennials, and others in the practice of personal Bible reading to understand the phenomenon of low Bible readership among those of the Christian faith. Despite this research, gaining an understanding of the key factors that motivate and hinder Bible reading among adult members of the Christian faith, and developing a strategy to reverse this trend through preaching and Christian education, is an area of the research that remains sparsely addressed.

⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Growing Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Ashland: Lexham Press, 2019), 40; 42.

¹⁰ Diane J. Chandler, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Formation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 95.

¹¹ J. Michael Reed, "Reading Behavior and Bible Reading Frequency Among Evangelical Emerging Adults" (D.Min. Thesis, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 36, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

¹² Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3; John 15: 1-10.

The goal of this research is to broaden the knowledge about Bible reading motivators and to propose action that can directly address the issue through both theology and practical application. The findings of this research are also intended to provide pastors and ministry workers with essential data on the Bible reading perspectives, values, and theological positions of a small sample of research participants to better understand how greater engagement of the Scriptures can be fostered among adult Christians.

Ministry Context

A Brief History and Observed Themes

Grace Abounds Association of Pastors (GAAP) is an association of pastors co-founded by the researcher in Pasadena, California, during the summer of 2013. Founded (at the time) by two newly ordained pastors and recently graduated seminary students, Grace Abounds Association of Pastors emerged with the objective to teach the Word of God using teaching styles and evangelism methods of greater inventiveness than what was being offered through the traditional church format. The founders of Grace Abounds Association of Pastors desired to engage members of the community that were being overlooked by models of preaching and Bible teaching that did not account for the diversity of life circumstances and experiences that so many community members reflected. An illustration of these diverse community members included individuals who simply needed to work on days typically established as “church” days or individuals who felt uncomfortable approaching a traditional church due to prior negative experiences with the church or the presence of challenging life circumstances that the individuals believed would be spurned by members of the church.

Considering these observations, Grace Abounds Association of Pastors began its association by instituting a pastoral office within a residential Pasadena, California, community.

The purpose was to engage individuals and families within the community who identified as Christians and demonstrated an interest in the Word of God, yet who were not being served by a traditional church. Through the availability of drop-in pastoral counsel, outdoor preaching held in local parks, college campuses, and other public forums, and through creative community engagement, the researcher and co-founder began to witness a theme of low Bible engagement among community members professing to be Christian.

Since its founding in 2013, the initial theme of low Bible reading discovered among community members professing to be Christian in Pasadena, California, has continued to present itself within different communities, cities, and states within which Grace Abounds Association of Pastors has since ministered. Grace Abounds Association of Pastors has ministered to several communities since 2013 and presently ministers from the city of Norfolk, Virginia. Despite the diverse communities that have been engaged, however, the theme remains consistent that low Bible readership is a prevalent issue that needs to be addressed.

Considering the theme of low-Bible readership that Grace Abounds Association of Pastors has encountered among many Christians in several communities, a major objective of GAAP is to propagate increased Bible reading among those to whom the association of pastors ministers. By advancing more creative methods to teach the Word of God, such as biblically based news writing, digital platform preaching and teaching, and a variety of Christian education projects and pastoral outreach, Grace Abounds Association of Pastors seeks to promote greater knowledge and engagement of the Scripture.

Considering that the Word of God is the sole handbook for defining and forming Christian faith and identity, it is imperative that Christians read the Scriptures. Low Bible readership among Christians creates greater vulnerability to attacks on the Christian's faith.

Eventually, the Christian without a regular intake of God’s word will succumb to the secular ideals and lifestyles of the culture around them. Without intervention, they may also suffer spiritual shipwreck that disables their light and witness in the world.

Present Ministry Locale

The present locale of Grace Abounds Association of Pastors is within the historic downtown neighborhood of Norfolk, Virginia. The neighborhood is just one out of 120 historic neighborhoods within the city of Norfolk.¹³ One of three metropolitan cities within the southeastern locale of the state of Virginia, Norfolk, is a port city¹⁴ that stretches along the Elizabeth River.¹⁵ Historically, Norfolk has a record of industry and growth¹⁶ as well as a long history of serving as a site for many significant military campaigns.¹⁷ Much activity has been witnessed by the city of Norfolk during several wars, including the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the American Civil War.¹⁸ Equally, characteristic of the city of Norfolk is the world’s largest naval complex and harbor that presently operates on its shores.¹⁹ Several universities and colleges are present within the community of Norfolk²⁰ and several historic and modern churches populate the city.

¹³ “Neighborhood Histories,” The City of Norfolk, accessed January 27, 2021, <https://www.norfolk.gov/680/Neighborhood-Histories>.

¹⁴ “Norfolk,” Virginia is for Lovers, accessed January 27, 2021, <https://www.virginia.org/cities/Norfolk/>.

¹⁵ “Norfolk,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed January 27, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Norfolk-Virginia>

¹⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica, “Norfolk.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Norfolk City, Virginia, County,” Quick Facts, U.S. Census Bureau, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/norfolkcityvirginiacounty>.

²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, “Norfolk City, Virginia, County.”

The cultural demographic of the city of Norfolk is represented, almost equivalently, by both African-American and European-American community members at 42.1% and 49.3% respectively.²¹ The next largest cultural demographic represented within the city of Norfolk is represented by Latino-American community members constituting 8.5% of the total demographic.²² Fifty-six percent of community members work within the civilian workforce of Norfolk, Virginia.²³ Tourism appears to be an important industry for downtown Norfolk, as several hotels and restaurants occupy the main streets. The college student and young adult population is also noteworthy within the downtown area. A centrally located shopping mall and community college regularly draws young people to the vicinity.

Although Grace Abounds Association of Pastors presently operates from the city of Norfolk, Virginia, ministry outreach to California, and other U.S. communities, remains essential to the association.

Individuals Reached by the Ministry

Those reached by the pastoral ministry of Grace Abounds Association of Pastors represents a diverse spectrum of community members. Through the distribution of biblically based news and digital platform preaching and teaching, Grace Abounds Association of Pastors ministers to individuals from diverse cultures, geographic locations, and socio-economic backgrounds. Nevertheless, the points of commonality among most recipients of Grace Abounds Association of Pastors' ministry outreach and teachings can be identified as follows:

²¹ "Norfolk City, Virginia, County," Quick Facts, U.S. Census Bureau, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/norfolkcityvirginiacounty>.

²² U.S. Census Bureau, "Norfolk City, Virginia, County."

²³ Ibid.

- 1) Recipients primarily identify as Christians or express familiarity with the Christian faith.
- 2) Recipients are primarily adults within the age group of 25 - 65 years old.
- 3) Recipients are individuals residing within the United States.
- 4) Recipients directly express or otherwise demonstrate low engagement with the Bible.

Problem Presented

The problem identified by this researcher is that many individuals to whom Grace Abounds Association of Pastors ministers are not engaged in consistently reading the Bible. This lack of engagement with the Bible poses a threat to the well-being and stability of the Christian's faith by making the Christian more susceptible to error in their understanding of the gospel message and by making them more susceptible to accepting lifestyles and worldviews that directly contradict Jesus' call to transformation, to holiness, and to bear good fruit. For this reason, it is imperative for Christians to remain rooted in the teachings of the Bible through a continual intake of God's word by consistently reading the biblical text.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of the factors that both motivate and hinder regular Bible reading among adult Christians and to propose ministry action through preaching and Christian education that will foster an increase in Bible reading among those to whom Grace Abounds Association of Pastors ministers. Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to help pastors and Christian educators in all ministry contexts to increase the practice of regular Bible reading among those to whom they are called to shepherd.

Basic Assumptions

Four basic assumptions accompany the researcher into the process of understanding the motivating factors of regular Bible reading among a sample of adult Christians within the ministry sphere of Grace Abounds Association of Pastors. These basic assumptions, and the data to be collected, will serve to inform the proposed action steps that will culminate from the research. Where these basic assumptions differ from the actual data collected during the research process, it will be the data and the resulting facts that serve as the guide for the proposed ministry action produced by the research. The basic assumptions that accompany the researcher are delineated as follows:

Bible Reading Positively Impacts Spiritual Well-Being

In accordance with biblical illustrations and teaching, it is this researcher's basic assumption that personal Bible reading positively impacts the spiritual lives of those who maintain its practice. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments of the biblical canon, the Word of God is identified as the essential ingredient to spiritual and physical fruitfulness.²⁴ In like manner, the Word of God is identified as an essential ingredient to maintaining righteous and pleasing works before God.²⁵ *Keeping* the Word of God is further identified as essential to a successful endeavor of following Jesus Christ.²⁶ Jesus Christ describes the Word of God as the necessary food that man ultimately needs to thrive.²⁷ Based upon these biblical teachings, this researcher proceeds

²⁴ Ps. 1-3; Ps. 112; Josh. 1; Mat. 4:4; Deut. 8:3; Jn. 15:7

²⁵ Ps. 119; Josh. 1; 2 Tim. 3:16

²⁶ Matt. 7:24-27

²⁷ Matt. 4:4

with the presupposition that the spiritual well-being of those who begin to regularly read the Bible will be greatly increased and multiplied.

Increased Bible Reading is an Objective that Can be Realized by Pastors and Christian Educators

The second basic assumption that this researcher brings to the research process is the basic assumption that both pastors and Christian educators can attain the objective of increasing Bible reading among those to whom they minister. While researchers abundantly recognize a problem with low Bible readership among American citizens, Christian students, and among many others who identify as members of the Christian faith, a strategy to understand the key motivators behind this low level of Bible readership is minimally addressed.

Despite the grim research reflecting low Bible readership among Americans in general and Christians in particular, this researcher maintains the assumption that an increase in Bible reading among adult members of the Christian faith is an attainable goal that can be tackled once it is better understood why so many adult Christians read the Bible so little and why other adult Christians contrast this trend and continue to maintain avid readership of the Bible.

Many Adult Christians do not Understand the Importance and Role of Bible Reading

The third basic assumption that this researcher brings to the research process is the basic assumption that far too many Christians are uninformed about the importance and role of reading the Bible within the Christian's life. Although the Bible is the "world's bestseller"²⁸ and "one of the oldest books in the world,"²⁹ this researcher has developed the assumption that Bible reading

²⁸ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *From God to Us Revised and Expanded: How We Got Our Bible* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 8.

²⁹ Ibid.

must not be understood by many Christians as central to their Christian faith, Christian practice, and ultimately their Christian transformation. Instead, the researcher has observed that it is mostly the concept of faith that looms greatest within the mind of so many Christians. The problem with this, however, is that it is the Word of God that is needed to inform one's faith and it is the Word of God that is needed to sustain one's faith as a Christian.³⁰

Bible Reading is Motivated by Personal Experience and Affirmative Christian Teaching

The fourth basic assumption that the researcher brings to the research process is the basic assumption that Bible reading among adult Christians is most likely motivated by a positive personal experience that the reader has gained from reading the Biblical text and from the Christian education that they receive to further affirm the importance of Bible reading with the Christian's life. Based upon the researcher's encounter with adult Christians who do spend significant time reading the Bible, the researcher has observed that the motivation behind such reading is commonly the positive experience that the reader has with the encouragement and the instructive truth encountered in the biblical text. Such readers commonly affirm the life building, the comforting, and the transformative power of God's word as they apply the teachings of the Bible to their personal lives and experiences. Additionally, those who read Bible regularly are further encouraged by the teachings within the Bible itself that the Scriptures are essential to their Christian walk.

Based upon these assumptions and observations, the researcher commences this project with the outlook that Bible reading among adult Christians can be motivated. By helping the reader to see and experience (for themselves) the power of God's word at work in their lives and

³⁰ Gal. 1:6-10; Jn. 14:6; Jn. 1:1-14

by encouraging Bible readership through strategic preaching and Christian education programs, this researcher believes that Bible reading can be increased among Christians.

Definitions

Specific terms will be applied within this work to define important characteristics of the research. The following are significant terms that this project will use and the intended meaning of these terms for the purposes of the research.

Grace Abounds Association of Pastors

Grace Abounds Association of Pastors (GAAP) is an association that creatively teaches the word of God through the written word, the spoken word, and through art.

Adult Christian / Professing Believer in Jesus Christ

The term “Adult Christian” as used within this project refers to an individual 18 years of age or older who self-identifies as a Christian. The phrase “Professing Believer in Jesus Christ” when used within this research refers to the individual who expresses personal faith in Jesus Christ. The phrase is used interchangeably with the term “Christian.” Individuals who profess faith in Jesus Christ may or may not yet fully understand or espouse all the doctrines of an expressly Christian faith. The phrase simply identifies those who identify themselves as believers in Jesus Christ or as Christians.

Bible / Scripture

The terms Bible and Scripture are used interchangeably within this research and refer specifically to the sixty-six books of the protestant biblical canon, it is more generally described

by Merriam as the “...the sacred scriptures of Christians comprising the Old Testament and the New Testament.”³¹

“Regular” Bible Reading

The term “regular” when referring to Bible reading refers to an individual’s personal reading of the Bible that happens often³² and at somewhat structured intervals.

Bible Reading

The term “Bible reading” as used within this project refers to an individual’s personal reading of the Bible. Such Bible reading can be accomplished in groups, with family, or by oneself. Within this project, neither attendance of church services nor listening to Christian programs is counted as Bible reading. Bible reading is narrowly defined within this project to measure an individual’s personal engagement with the Holy Bible as a primary, rather than secondary, interaction with the Word of God. Bible reading is also narrowly defined within this project to determine how often adult Christians spend time receiving the unfiltered truths of the Scripture.

Bible Engagement

The phrase “Bible engagement” within this research refers to an individual’s personal reading, analysis, and application of the biblical text. The phrase “Bible engagement” is also used interchangeably with the phrase “Bible reading.”

³¹ “Bible,” Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Bible>

³² “Regular,” English Dictionary, Cambridge, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/regular>

Traditional Church Fellowship

The Phrase “traditional church fellowship,” as used within this project, refers to church attendance or church facilitation that typically occurs within the four walls of a designated physical structure and where members typically meet in-person according to a consistent schedule to receive biblical instruction and to fellowship with other Believers. The phrase “church fellowship” is intended to illustrate the concept of “church” with which most Christians have become familiar within American culture and society. The term “traditional” when applied to the church in America defines the “...customs or way of life of a particular group of people, that have not changed for a long time.”³³

Limitations

Within this study, several key limitations are imposed that must be noted. These limitations reflect conditions that are beyond the control of the researcher that will have varying amounts of influence upon the study and upon the implementation of the project intervention. Certain limitations will also impact the data that will be collected for this project. The limitations that bear upon this study are delineated as follows:

Limited Sample Group

Within this study, the sample of research participants is limited to individuals with whom the researcher can gain access. In some cases, the researcher may need to gain permission from an outside organization to access its population of adults. In other cases, the researcher will be limited to contacting prospective research participants by phone who are listed within pre-

³³ “Traditional,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/traditional?q=traditional>

established phone databases. Since these databases primary list individuals who have land-line phone service, this significantly limits the diversity of individuals that the researcher will be able to access through its phone administered questionnaires. Even when participants directly respond to announcements of the study and agree to complete a questionnaire, the researcher will be limited to surveying individuals who have the personal motivation to take time out of their schedules and complete a questionnaire. Each of the preceding instances limit the demographic of participants that the researcher will be able to access for participation within the study.

Reliance on Self-Reporting

The reliance upon self-reporting is another important limitation of this project. Within the questionnaire, participants will be asked to describe their personal Bible reading habits and to specify their views on the Bible and on Bible reading. It is expected that some participants may feel pressure to present what they consider to be a more favorable representation of their Bible reading habits than what is accurate. In other cases, research participants may not be very accurate in reporting their Bible reading habits simply because they cannot remember. Additionally, some participants may simply want to complete the survey quickly and may not take the time to provide the most accurate responses.

Unintended Influence

Unintended influence is also a significant limitation of this project. Because the researcher will be directly engaging the research participants by administering the questionnaires that they will answer, the research participants may be unintentionally influenced by the researcher's presence to provide specific responses to the questions provided. The participants may be influenced to adjust their answers simply because someone who is personally invested in the research is present.

Data Collection Instrument

Although the data collection instrument (the questionnaire) used for this study is designed to provide research participants with a range of responses that reflect their own experiences and perspectives, it is inevitable that the responses of some research participants may fall outside of the available responses that are provided within the instrument. This may either alter the information that is provided by the research participant or it may result in the research participant providing data outside of the bounds of what the questionnaire is designed to measure. In either case, the data may result in less than accurate, incomplete, or unmeasurable data provided by some participants completing the questionnaire.

Delimitations

In addition to the limits that bear upon the research project as previously mentioned, delimitations established by the researcher will also place restraints upon the scope of the project and upon the data that is collected. These delimitations will determine those who are qualified to participate in the research and will determine various aspects of how the research is conducted. The delimitations that this researcher has placed upon the project provide important boundaries within which the project can be implemented. This ensures that the data collected is relevant, specific, and insightful. The following are the delimitations that serve to control this study.

Age of Participants

The age of participants is an important delimitation of this study. As such, only individuals who are 18 years of age or older will be permitted to participate within the questionnaire. By limiting research participants to adults, the data collected will reflect the experiences and perspectives of individuals who have a more rooted and mature perspective as

well as a greater range of experience from which to draw as they consider and answer the questions provided within the questionnaire.

Faith of Participants

The faith of the participants within the research is the most significant delimitation of the research. To participate within the research, prospective research participants must self-identify as members of the Christian faith. This allows the project to specifically measure the Bible reading habits of a Christian sample group so that a Christian education strategy can be developed to increase personal Bible reading among a Christian population.

Participant Anonymity

Anonymity of the research participant's identity and the corresponding answers that they provide within the questionnaire is a delimitation of this study that is intended to provide research participants with the freedom to provide accurate answers to questions. The delimitation of anonymity supports the collection and analysis of data that has a higher probability of accuracy. By providing research participants with the ability to participate in the research anonymously, some of the limitations that impact participant response can be offset, thus providing greater confidence in the data collected.

Method of Data Collection

The method of collecting data for this study is limited to in-person and over-the-phone administration of a single questionnaire to research participants. Data will not be collected through online or mail-in options. This measure is meant to ensure that the data collected is full and complete and to ensure that research participants have the opportunity to ask questions if there is any aspect of the questionnaire that they do not understand.

Thesis Statement

When the factors that motivate or hinder regular Bible reading among adult members of the Christian faith are clearly understood and identified, pastors and Christian educators will be equipped to pro-actively incite regular Bible reading among those to whom they minister through various preaching and Christian education programs.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

Literature Review

Reading the Bible plays a crucial role in the life of the Christian.³⁴ For this reason, the Bible provides numerous encouragements for Christians to engage in consistent reading (and meditation) on the Scripture.³⁵ Church leaders spanning the centuries have also encouraged believers to uphold the Word of God.³⁶ Reading the Bible, however, is a spiritual discipline that many Christians do not regularly engage³⁷ despite the Bible's ease of access through text and digital sources³⁸ and despite the Bible's abundant availability. In response to this reality, many scholars have produced research on increasing Bible literacy and have proposed various methods of engaging congregants in Bible reading. Specific research that is focused on understanding the common factors that motivate or hinder consistent Bible reading among Christians as a whole and research to understand how these common factors can help pastors and Christian educators to increase Bible reading among those to whom they minister is a subject that is not fully addressed by the literature.

In response to this gap in the literature, this review of literature will examine current research on the following themes that contribute to this study: 1) The state of Bible reading in

³⁴ Joshua Choonmin Kang, *Scripture by Heart: Devotional Practices for Memorizing God's Word* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press Books, 2010), 18.

³⁵ Ps. 1; Heb. 4:12; Deut. 8:3; Josh. 1:8-9.

³⁶ Alexandria of Clement, Saint, G. W. Butterworth, and Clement of Alexandria Staff, *The Exhortation to the Greeks: The Rich Man's Salvation; to the Newly Baptized*. Vol. 92. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 7.

³⁷ "State of the Bible 2018," Research Releases, Barna, last modified July 10, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-Bible-2018-seven-top-findings/>

³⁸ Peter Phillips, "The Pixelated Text: Reading the Bible within Digital Culture," *Theology* 121, no. 6 (2018): 405-406.

America, 2) Factors that motivate Bible engagement within the educational context, 3) Motivating Bible reading within the congregation, 4) Creative tools for fostering Bible reading, 5) Historically based approaches to Bible reading, and 6) The impact of Bible reading on the Christian.

Bible Reading in America

Barna Research discovered during their 2018 study on the State of the Bible that 48% of Americans report reading the Bible during one-year.³⁹ Of the 48% of American adult Bible readers, 14% of these Bible readers report reading the Bible daily.⁴⁰ Following daily readers, 13% of American adults report reading the Bible several times throughout the week, and 8% of American adults reading the Bible once during the week.⁴¹ Despite the small percentages of American adults who read the Bible daily or several times throughout the week, Barna Research also discovered that 66% of American adults still desire to learn about the Bible to some degree and 29% of American adults strongly desire to learn about the Bible.⁴²

Further research by Philip Goff, Arthur Emery Farnsley, and Peter Johannes Thuesen within their 2012 nation-wide General Social Survey (GSS) and National Congregation Study III, by comparison, reported that 48% out of the 50% of Americans who are reading any form of religious text are solely reading the Holy Bible.⁴³ The research produced by Goff et.al., reports

³⁹ “State of the Bible 2018,” Research Releases, Barna, last modified July 10, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-Bible-2018-seven-top-findings/>

⁴⁰ Barna, “State of the Bible 2018.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Philip Goff, Arthur Emery Farnsley and Peter Johannes Thuesen, *The Bible in American Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

that only 9% of these Bible readers (from 2012) are reading the Bible daily.⁴⁴ The remaining 39% of Americans who read the Bible are reported by Goff et. al. to read much less frequently. Most of these American adult Bible readers report that they read the Bible at least monthly.⁴⁵ The nuance within the research produced by Goff et. al., compared with the research provided through Barna, is that Goff et.al. more broadly surveys the reading habits of Americans as it pertains to their engagement of all forms of religious texts within the timeframe of a year. As such, the research produced by Goff et.al. provides the bigger picture that reading the Holy Bible is preferred among American adults who report reading any religious text at all.

The unique aspect of the research provided by Goff et. al. is also the report by Goff et. al. that Americans who are reading the Bible are doing so for specific reasons. According to the research produced by Goff. et.al, American adults who are reading the Bible report that they are mostly reading for “personal edification and growth.”⁴⁶ Also, of the 9% of Americans who report reading the Bible daily within the report provided through Goff et. al., such readers are twice as likely to read the Bible for guidance on prevalent social issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and war.⁴⁷ Overall, Goff et. al. reports that Bible readers who are reading with a specific purpose in mind are much more likely to be regular readers of the Bible.⁴⁸ By comparison, Barna focuses on the positive impact that American readers of the Bible (those who read the Bible monthly)

⁴⁴ Philip Goff, Arthur Emery Farnsley and Peter Johannes Thuesen, *The Bible in American Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 28.

⁴⁵ Philip Goff, Arthur Emery Farnsley and Peter Johannes Thuesen, *The Bible in American Life*, 28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*,19.

perceive the Bible to have on their behavior and personal faith.⁴⁹ The findings that both Goff et.al. and Barna present within their research provide support for the argument that motivating factors play an important role within regular Bible reading. Barna also provides hope that Bible reading is not neglected by Americans for lack of interest.

Factors that Motivate Bible Engagement within the Educational Context

As it pertains to motivating Bible engagement within an educational context, Judith Stack-Nelson argues that motivation to engage the Bible can be fostered by employing specific teaching methods among students in the classroom. Noting that many theology students become discouraged when engaging the scriptures from an the entirely academic perspective as is commonly taught within Christian higher education,⁵⁰ Stack-Nelson proposes a new method of teaching that counters this discouragement among students and fosters greater motivation among students to confidently engage the Bible. Stack-Nelson refers to the teaching method as a process of developing “readerly readers.”⁵¹

Asserting that motivation is best attained in an environment where personal interest and direct engagement are present, Stack-Nelson’s teaching method serves to equip students with literary tools that are supportive of student imagination, of openness, and of attentiveness when reading the Bible. Stack- Nelson asserts that such literary tools enable students to make a greater personal connection with the biblical text which ultimately results in increased motivation and

⁴⁹ “State of the Bible 2018,” Research Releases, Barna, last modified July 10, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-Bible-2018-seven-top-findings/>

⁵⁰ Judith Stack-Nelson, "Beyond Biblical Literacy: Developing Readerly Readers in Teaching Biblical Studies," *Dialog* 53, no. 4 (2014): 294.

⁵¹ Judith Stack-Nelson, "Beyond Biblical Literacy," 295.

increased engagement with the biblical text.⁵² Stack-Nelson also asserts that teaching students to use such literary tools equips the student to move beyond dependence on “experts” to define meaning within the Biblical text and helps the student to better hear and interpret the text for herself.⁵³ Stack-Nelson argues that such engagement with the biblical text, coupled with helpful expository tools, develops students of the Bible who are confident in their abilities to engage the Scripture⁵⁴ which ultimately result in greater Bible engagement.

Rito Barring also addresses the issue of motivation as it pertains to Bible engagement among a student population. Yet, Barring’s research presents insights that differ somewhat from the findings of Stack-Nelson. Although both Stack-Nelson and Barring focus their attention on a student population, Barring’s research more broadly emphasizes the *inner* motivations of students as it pertains to *personal Bible reading*. Considering these differences, Barring proposes that it is an understanding of student attitudes and reading preferences that are key to the task of developing motivation for reading the Bible.⁵⁵

Based upon Barring’s assessment, and the implementation of a Bible Reading (BR) Attitude Scale, Barring discovered that Bible reading among Catholic, Filipino college students is not an activity that can be encouraged as an academic exercise or motivated through authoritative pressures from the church or other figures.⁵⁶ Rather, according to Barring’s findings, Bible reading

⁵² Judith Stack-Nelson, "Beyond Biblical Literacy: Developing Readerly Readers in Teaching Biblical Studies," *Dialog* 53, no. 4 (2014): 295.

⁵³ Judith Stack-Nelson, "Beyond Biblical Literacy," 294.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁵⁵ Rito V. Baring, "Understanding Student Attitudes Toward Bible Reading: A Philippine Experience," *Religious Education* 103, no. 2 (2008): 163-164.

⁵⁶ Rito V. Baring, "Understanding Student Attitudes Toward Bible Reading," 171-174.

is an activity that is best approached as a personal faith exercise that engages the heart of the reader.⁵⁷ The similarity between Barring and Stack-Nelson, however, is that Barring also asserts that motivated Bible reading among Catholic Filipino college students is an “imaginative,”⁵⁸ and “person-oriented”⁵⁹ experience. As such, Stack-Nelson and Barring agree that readers need the flexibility to study outside of the bounds of strict scholarly inquiry so that readers can more personally engage with and be challenged by the God of the scriptures.

Motivating Bible Reading within the Congregation

Motivating Bible reading among Christians within the context of the church is a subject addressed by Kimberly Secrist Ashby, pastor of Fallston Presbyterian Church in Maryland. Within her article, Ashby shares the findings that she and three other pastors discovered after leading a multi-church-wide, 31-chapter, condensed Bible education effort to increase the Bible knowledge of congregants within each of the pastor’s respective congregations. Secrist discovered that significant transformation in Bible engagement and comprehension is possible among congregants after leading such an effort through small groups and weekly sermons that are collectively and strategically focused on the same objective.

After witnessing her own congregation benefit from the church-wide (and multi-church-wide) effort to increase congregant Bible knowledge, Secrist shared how congregants that formerly had little understanding of such things as the connection between the Old and New Testament narratives (and the revelation of God expressed within each) or congregants who

⁵⁷ Rito V. Baring, “Understanding Student Attitudes Toward Bible Reading: A Philippine Experience,” 171-174.

⁵⁸ Judith Stack-Nelson, "Beyond Biblical Literacy: Developing Readerly Readers in Teaching Biblical Studies," *Dialog* 53, no. 4 (2014): 165.

⁵⁹ Judith Stack-Nelson, "Beyond Biblical Literacy," 177.

previously felt uncomfortable answers questions about their faith (the therefore opted-out of sharing their faith altogether), later reflected a transformation in understanding.⁶⁰ Following the church-wide Bible education effort, members responded with excitement and motivation. For some, this excitement and motivation resulted in the desire to re-start prior attempts to read the Bible.⁶¹ Congregants also expressed a newfound understanding of God's amazing character and unique relationship that God offers to share with human beings. Ultimately, many expressed a new understanding of the Bible's grand story as well as an ability to personally relate to the events and experiences of God's people as witnessed within the biblical text.⁶²

In contrast to the congregation-wide bible literacy effort led by Secrist, researcher Kevin Bryan Barnes reveals the results of working to increase Bible engagement during a six-week inductive Bible study with a single group of adult congregants. Acknowledging the increasingly diminished Bible literacy of members of the Christian community, Barnes' identified a hesitancy of the congregants within his context to engage the Bible in an inductive interpretive manner. According to Barnes, the inclination of the congregants was instead to rely on the biblical interpretation provided by the pastor.⁶³ To address this dependency on the pastor and the lack of confidence to personally study and understand the message of the biblical text, Barnes discovered that providing congregants with the basic tools to conducted inductive Bible study

⁶⁰ Kimberly Secrist Ashby, "Learning the Bible Together: A Presbytery Experiment in Biblical Literacy," *Presbyterian Outlook* 199, no. 13 (2017): 26.

⁶¹ Kimberly Secrist Ashby, "Learning the Bible Together," 26.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Kevin Bryan Barnes, "A Bible Study About Studying Bible: An Introduction to Inductive Bible Study," (D.Min. thesis, Asbury Theological Seminary, Willmore, 2018) ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 110.

within a supportive environment helped to increase the reader's confidence to personally engage the Bible.⁶⁴

Within both congregational contexts expressed by Secrist and Barnes, the theme of hesitancy to engage the Bible based on a lack of biblical knowledge was present among congregants. Nevertheless, Secrist and Barnes also demonstrate that these hesitancies can be positively impacted through the employments of intentional Christian education and pastoral teaching.

Creative Tools for Fostering Bible Reading

Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray highlight a more creative approach to engaging the Bible. Through the act of teaching, Roncace and Gray demonstrate how a variety of creative art forms can be used to foster such things as Bible reading skills. Film is one creative art form that Roncace and Gray discuss within the text. As illustrated by Roncace and Gray, film is a medium that can be used to help the reader more closely consider the things that they see (and often do not see) within the biblical text.⁶⁵ As Bible students witness the visual rendition of well-known Bible narratives as they play on the big screen, many begin to see well-known biblical narratives in new light.⁶⁶ In addition to viewing the production of well-known Bible narratives, however, Roncace and Gray also illustrate how popular films that are not biblically based can also be referenced to illustrate concepts that the reader finds within the Scripture.⁶⁷ In these cases, the

⁶⁴ Kevin Bryan Barnes, "A Bible Study About Studying Bible: An Introduction to Inductive Bible Study," (D.Min. thesis, Asbury Theological Seminary, Willmore, 2018) ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 121-122.

⁶⁵ Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray, *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts*, vol. no. 53. (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 89.

⁶⁶ Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray, *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts*, 89.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

visual illustrations provided through film help the reader to more vividly understand the implications of a biblical concept or message.⁶⁸

Mark Hinds also considers such creative modes for teaching and learning within the Christian education context. Although Hinds speaks to the over-abundant use of print materials within the Christian education context, Hinds presents the compelling argument that newer generations which value visual and aural presentations require more contextual modes of instruction.⁶⁹ According to Hinds assessment, the use of more relatable non-text materials is essential to the learning process of younger generations of adult Christians.⁷⁰ Such insight can also prove relevant to the subject of increasing individual Bible reading among adult Christians.

The niche of Roncace and Gray's approach to increasing Bible engagement through film, however, is that Roncace and Gray illustrate the use of film among students of the Bible who have often become so familiar with biblical narratives that they benefit from creative approaches to reading and examining the biblical text so that they can see the text with a fresh perspective.⁷¹ As such, it is debatable whether such an approach would benefit adult Christians who have yet to develop familiarity with the biblical text. For novice Bible readers, using film might also serve to distract readers from the biblical text. Nevertheless, the idea of utilizing visuals to foster and enhance the Bible reading process is nonetheless warranted. Jesus, himself, utilized visuals

⁶⁸ Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray, *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts*, vol. no. 53. (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 89.

⁶⁹ Mark D. Hinds, "Wisdom's Gift: Generation x and the Problem of Print-Oriented Religious Education," *Religious Education* 96, no. 4 (2001): 514; 518.

⁷⁰ Mark D. Hinds, "Wisdom's Gift: Generation x and the Problem of Print-Oriented Religious Education," 514; 518.

⁷¹ Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray, *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts*, 89.

through parables and analogies to illustrate the Kingdom of God and the correct application of God's Law.⁷²

E-Bibles and Traditional Bible Reading

Tim Hutchings addresses another perspective from which to understand and evaluate Bible reading and Bible engagement. Within his research, Hutchings specifically examines the method of e-reading as it pertains to accessing and engaging the Bible. Paying specific attention to online Bibles and the abundance of downloadable Bible apps that have become increasingly popular in recent years, Hutchings surveys a sample of e-Bible readers to better understand the perceived "advantages and disadvantages"⁷³ of this relatively new form of accessing the Bible. Based upon Hutchings' preliminary review of the subject, the pros and cons of such modes of accessing the Bible is widely debated.

As cited by Hutchings, researchers on both ends of the spectrum shed light on the potential of e-Bibles. For some, e-Bibles are seen as a format that can liberate readers to personally engage and interpret the Bible without the traditional filters and controls inherent in more traditional forms of engaging the Biblical text such as through a church or religious institution.⁷⁴ Others view e-Bibles as lacking the cohesiveness that the traditional biblical text has in its printed form. Such argue that an e-format of the Bible encourages a fragmented and incomplete view of the Biblical story, message, and theology.⁷⁵ Despite this potential for

⁷² Matt. 20: 1-16; Luke 14:5

⁷³ Tim Hutchings, "E-Reading and the Christian Bible," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 44, no. 4 (2015): 425.

⁷⁴ Tim Hutchings, "E-Reading and the Christian Bible," 425.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 426.

fragmented Bible comprehension proposed by some researchers, Hutchings also reports that e-reading, whether for religious or non-religious purposes is known to increase a reader's frequency of reading.⁷⁶

The findings that Hutchings, himself, contributes to the research through his survey of e-Bible readers is that 58% of e-readers report the ease of access provided by e-Bibles (as well as the ease of access to interpretive resources provided by e-Bibles) as a format of the Bible that makes regular study of the Bible a more viable option.⁷⁷ As further revealed through Hutchings' survey, 94% of e-readers found e-Bibles to have a beneficial and positive impact on reading habits and reading frequency.⁷⁸ Many readers reported a tendency to spend more time than usual engaging the scripture during downtime since the scripture is so easily available on personal computers and mobile devices. Hutchings' research additionally revealed, however, that 19.5% of e-Bible readers report a potential drawback to an e-version of the biblical text.⁷⁹

One respondent expressed the concern that e-Bible formats could inadvertently cause the sacred scriptures to be misunderstood as just another digital app.⁸⁰ Another respondent to Hutchings' survey expressed concern that the screen form of e-Bibles can be a hindrance to prayerful reading due to the pre-existing tendency to associate computer use with work or study.⁸¹ The data provided throughout Hutchings' survey also reported a general concern from

⁷⁶ Tim Hutchings, "E-Reading and the Christian Bible," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 44, no. 4 (2015): 429.

⁷⁷ Tim Hutchings, "E-Reading and the Christian Bible," 433.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 445.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 435.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

respondents that e-Bible usage can lead readers to a jumbled and selective reading rather than systematic and comprehensive approach to studying and understanding the biblical text.⁸²

Within a second study conducted by Hutchings, the influence of two of the most popular e-Bible apps, YouVersion and GloBible, (apps distinctly created by Evangelical companies) became the focus of Hutchings' research.⁸³ Within this study, Hutchings identified the ability of Evangelical hierarchies to maintain evangelical influence on the formation of the reader's understanding of the Bible and the reader's approach to reading and engaging the scripture through such digital Bible reading apps.⁸⁴ In the process of presenting these findings, Hutchings research also revealed the effectiveness that e-Bibles can have in both engaging e-readers with the biblical text and also providing theologically significant guidance to reduce the potential for e-Bibles becoming what theologian Tom Beaudoin termed a "wandering cyberBible," wherein established scriptural interpretations are unwittingly eroded.⁸⁵

In contrast to the findings presented by Tim Hutchings, English instructor Amy Maupin highlights the importance of the written letter in her article that discusses and compares the traditional written word produced through hand-written letters to that of the more common digital word that is most often mass produced within 21st century texts, emails, and other digital correspondence.⁸⁶ According to Maupin, the written word, specifically those produced through

⁸² Tim Hutchings, "E-Reading and the Christian Bible," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 44, no. 4 (2015): 436.

⁸³ Tim Hutchings, "Design and the Digital Bible: Persuasive Technology and Religious Reading," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32, no. 2 (2017): 205.

⁸⁴ Tim Hutchings, "Design and the Digital Bible," 212-213.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁸⁶ Amy Maupin, "From the Scroll to the Screen: Why Letters, Then and Now, Matter," *The English Journal* 105, no. 4 (2016): 63-65.

hand-written letters, provides the reader (and the writer) with a more personal and genuine expression of the human heart.⁸⁷ According to Maupin, "...real letters from real people provide a glimpse into those deeper parts...Letters carry personal truths than define the human race. When one studies a letter, one sees inside the life and mind of a specific person."⁸⁸ The relevance that Maupin's insight has to the debate over the effectiveness of digital verses text versions of the Bible is significant. Although many researchers debate the effectiveness of the print verses the digital version of the biblical text, Maupin identifies that it is the originating source of the word, as well as its truth bearing nature, that is key. If the word that is transcribed (such as God's word transcribed within the pages of the Bible) are a genuine reflection of the authors inner heart (which the Bible reveals itself to be), whether that word is transcribed on ancient scrolls, printed on paper by modern printing presses, or projected on the screens, tablets, and phones of today's post-modern readers, the content and source of the word being read is essentially what matters and is ultimately what will impact the heart of the recipient.

Contributing to Maupin's discussion, Lauren Singer and Patricia Alexander present one last point to the discussion of whether digital reading can serve as effectively as the reading of text in its printed format. According to a study conducted by the researchers where the differences between reading digital texts verses reading printed texts was examined, researchers Singer and Alexander discovered that readers tasked with reading longer texts within a digital format tended to experience a decrease in reader comprehension of that text.⁸⁹ However, when

⁸⁷ Amy Maupin, "From the Scroll to the Screen: Why Letters, then and Now, Matter," *The English Journal* 105, no. 4 (2016): 63.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Lauren M. Singer and Patricia A. Alexander, "Reading on Paper and Digitally: What the Past Decades of Empirical Research Reveal," *Review of Educational Research* 87, no. 6 (2017): 1028.

readers between the ages of 6 and 18 read only short passages within a digital format, such differences in comprehension between the reading of print verses digital text appeared non-existent.⁹⁰ Based upon these findings, Singer and Alexander conclude that both digital and printed texts play important roles within the learning and comprehension of readers. Such findings contribute to the considerations that pastors and Christian educators must take when seeking to foster increased Bible reading among their congregants.

Historically Based Approaches to Bible Reading

In addition to creative factors that motivate Bible reading and engagement, researchers have also studied historically based *approaches* to Bible reading. Mark Maddix is a researcher who argues for the “pre-modern” approach to Bible reading within the context of the church. The approach that Maddix describes is one that shifts the focus away from a critical method of engaging the biblical text to a “reader-centered”⁹¹ method where the reader directly applies the teachings and insights discovered in the biblical text to life of the reader.⁹² Maddix and other scholars describe this form of Bible reading as “formative”⁹³ and argue that this method is both essential to discipleship and consistent with the Bible reading practices of the early church.⁹⁴ In addition to fostering discipleship, Maddix asserts that the formative approach to Bible reading

⁹⁰ Lauren M. Singer and Patricia A. Alexander, "Reading on Paper and Digitally: What the Past Decades of Empirical Research Reveal, " *Review of Educational Research* 87, no. 6 (2017):1028.

⁹¹ Mark A. Maddix, "Rediscovering the Formative Power of Scripture Reading for the Church," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 15, no. 1 (2018): 42.

⁹² Maddix, "Rediscovering the Formative Power of Scripture," 35.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

helps to re-ignite the Christian's desire to read the Bible by removing the obstacles of more technical scripture inquiry.⁹⁵

A second approach to Bible reading that has been studied by researchers is the S.O.A.P method created by Dr. Wayne Cordiero.⁹⁶ The S.O.A.P method (an acronym for Scripture, Observation, Application, and Prayer) is modeled after the historically based Bible reading practice of Lectio Divina⁹⁷ and shares commonalities with the "formative" method studied by Maddix. Both reading methods encourage the reader to directly apply the biblical text to the life and context of the reader. The difference between the two approaches, however, is that Cordeiro intends the S.O.A.P method to be specifically applied as a personal Bible reading tool rather than a Bible reading approach conducted as a group. Jonathan Elswick is one researcher who has studied the impact of the S.O.A.P method of Bible reading. Within Elswick's study, numerous congregants with low Bible engagement participated in nine-weeks of personal Bible reading while implementing the S.O.A.P method.⁹⁸ Elswick discovered that the personal reading accomplished through the S.O.A.P method the Bible was essential to the spiritual growth of the readers.⁹⁹ Specifically, Elswick discovered that church members of various backgrounds all experienced heightened levels of spiritual flourishing after reading one Bible chapter daily for nine-weeks while implementing the S.O.A.P method of personal Bible reading.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Mark A. Maddix, "Rediscovering the Formative Power of Scripture Reading for the Church," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 15, no. 1 (2018): 36.

⁹⁶ Jonathan Dieter Elswick, "The Impact of the Soap Method of Bible Engagement on Select Congregants of Crossway Church" (D.Min. thesis, Capital Seminary, Lancaster, 2018), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 7.

⁹⁷ Elswick, "The Impact of the Soap Method of Bible Engagement," 9.

⁹⁸ Jonathan Dieter Elswick, "The Impact of the Soap Method of Bible Engagement on Select Congregants of Crossway Church" (D.Min. thesis, Capital Seminary, Lancaster, 2018), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 113-114.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

The Impact of Bible Reading on The Christian

In addition to factors that motivate Bible reading and approaches to Bible reading that encourage discipleship and spiritual formation, researchers have also discussed the specific impact that Bible reading has upon the life of the reader. Joshua Choonmin Kang, a Bible scholar who specializes in scripture memorization, defines the impact of the Bible within the life of the reader as comparable to a seed that is planted, and which yields fruit within the life of the reader.¹⁰¹ Kang notes that the Bible has the power to transform the perspective of the reader. As a result, even adverse life events can be transformed within the lives of those that memorize the Scripture as opportunities for spiritual growth and maturity.¹⁰² Although Kang's findings about the impact of Scripture upon the reader are aligned with the findings of Maddix and Elswick, Kang provides the unique contribution that the words of the Bible themselves, and not just the method of reading, are the key catalyst of growth within the life of the reader.

Angela Lou Harvey, whose research focuses on the Christian practice of *spiritual* reading of the Scripture, discusses the key component of a reader's perspective and belief while reading the Scriptures. Harvey notes that it is the "...striving towards God throughout the entire process of one's reading"¹⁰³ that brings about the formation of the reader. This "striving towards God" that Harvey describes differs from reading that is done for leisure or the purpose of acquiring information.

¹⁰¹ Joshua Choonmin Kang, *Scripture by Heart: Devotional Practices for Memorizing God's Word* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Books, 2010), 18.

¹⁰² Joshua Choonmin Kang, *Scripture by Heart: Devotional Practices for Memorizing God's Word*, 18.

¹⁰³ Angela Lou Harvey and R. W. L. Moberly, *Spiritual Reading: A Study of the Christian Practice of Reading Scripture* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: James Clarke & Co, 2016), 5.

Jan Johnson is another biblical scholar who recognizes the impact of the Bible within the life of the reader. Specializing in the scripture meditation practice of Lectio Divina, Johnson helps readers of the Bible to engage the Scriptures more profoundly through meditation. Within her book, Johnson describes how reading the Bible enabled the psalmists of old to excel in wisdom and to maintain obedience and commitment to the laws of God.¹⁰⁴ Like Kang, Johnson recognizes that the words of the Bible themselves critically influence the heart of the reader.

Bible Reading, Perspective, and Individual Response

Church growth principles can also provide insight into the importance of Bible reading within the setting of the local church and the Body of Christ as a whole. Church growth scholar, Gary McIntosh discusses the requirement that followers of Jesus Christ not only have a reverence for the Word of God in a general sense, but that they more importantly have a commitment to observing and applying the principles and teachings provided therein within their everyday lives. McIntosh notes that when a demonstrated commitment to keeping the Word of God is in place, church growth is fostered. As McIntosh states succinctly within his text, “Seeing the Bible as authoritative is crucial, but it is just one dimension of having the right premise. Another dimension of this principle of biblical church growth is passion...Just having a commitment to God’s word is not enough to experience biblical church growth. There must also be passionate involvement in following God’s purpose and obeying his commands.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Jan Johnson, *Meeting God in Scripture: A Hands-on Guide to Lectio Divina* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 20.

¹⁰⁵ Gary McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003) Ch.3.

McIntosh's premise that a proper understanding of God's word will play a crucial role in the type of response that the believer will have to the Word of God (i.e. personal involvement and obedience) aligns with the observations of biblical scholars John Lee Thompson, Timothy George, and Scott Manetsch. Within their biblical commentary on Genesis 1-11, Thompson, George, and Manetsch examine the power of God's word displayed within Genesis 1-11 and the total dependence that the created world is demonstrated to have upon the Word of God to sustain its existence. As stated by Thompson, George, and Manetsch,

If a reader who has any sort of confidence in Scripture should contemplate the ordering of God's work as explained by Moses, it will be quickly recognized that God's strength and power are infinite. Then one will also understand that this universe and all its parts depend on his will and word. Once persuaded that everything was created *ex nihilo* solely by the father's co-eternal word we will conclude that this one and same [Father] keeps all things in existence as far as he wishes...we will realize at once that power does not give rise to itself, nor does the hand of change move itself. We will simultaneously begin to perceive that we are part of the universe that entirely arises and abides by the power of the one word of God...¹⁰⁶

McIntosh, Thompson, George, and Manetsch all demonstrate within their texts that the reader's understanding of the Word of God will significantly impact both the growth of the believer as well as the worldview with which the believer will approach both life and faith.

Ultimately, McIntosh, Thompson, George, and Manetsch also demonstrate that one's desire and commitment to consistently reading and studying the word of God will be impacted

¹⁰⁶ John Lee Thompson, Timothy George, and Scott M. Manetsch, *Ancient Christian Commentary on the Scriptures: Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 81-82.

by how one understands the Word of God. Church planters Steve Smith and Ying Kai, who have developed a successful and biblical process for continuously planting and growing new churches, also recognize that it is the posture of submission to the teachings of God's word among the church plant leaders and members that leads new churches to grow and multiply at such productive rates.¹⁰⁷

Ministry leaders beyond the realm of church planting likewise recognize the importance of a readers' posture towards the Word of God. In summarizing the work of Kevin Vanhoozer, Kevin Storer illustrates this well. As Storer states, "Proper reading of Scripture, then, can only start with a right First Theology, a stance of faith that Scripture is God's speaking action..."¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Factors that motivate Bible reading among adult Christians outwardly seem to vary by context and by population. As a result, biblical scholars, pastors, and professors each develop unique approaches to support increased Bible reading and literacy within their respective congregations and ministry settings. However, the key motivator for Bible reading among adult Christians, regardless of context, appears to be related to the level of assurance that a reader has that she can interpret and understand the biblical text for herself. In like manner, motivation to read the Bible is significantly tied to a reader's personal, positive, experience with the biblical text. This positive experience is gained by readers through the process of applying the biblical

¹⁰⁷ Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T A Discipleship ReRevolution: The Story Behind the World's Fastest Growing Church Planting Movement and How it Can Happen in Your Community* (Monument: WigTake Resources, 2011) 79.

¹⁰⁸ Kevin Storer, *Reading Scripture to Hear God: Kevin Vanhoozer and Henri De Lubac on God's use of Scripture in the Economy of Redemption* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015; 2014), 3.

teachings to their personal lives and circumstances and by subsequently reaping the good fruits from such personal applications.

Similarly, factors that hinder Bible reading among adult Christians (as demonstrated within this literature review) commonly relate to discouragement, uncertainty, and a lack of experience among adult Christians with handling and reaping the benefits of the biblical text. Each of these findings within the literature review support the thesis that pastors and Christian educators can strategically increase Bible reading within their respective ministry settings simply by understanding why some are motivated to read the Bible and why others are discouraged from reading the Bible and by creating an action plan to address both within preaching and Christian education programs.

Theological Foundation

The reading of God's word (the Bible) is intended to be a regular and life sustaining activity that provides the Spirit, the sword, and the bread required for the victorious Christian life.¹⁰⁹ It is by the Word of God that Christians are spiritually formed into the character of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it is *only* by the Word of God that Christians have the tools to live authentically as Christ followers. Eugene Peterson explains this well when he states that, "The Christian Scriptures are the primary text for Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality is, in its entirety, rooted in and shaped by the scriptural text."¹¹⁰ Without God's word to provide man with the truth about God and the truth about man's humble position within God's creation, man

¹⁰⁹ Jn. 6:63; Jn. 6:35; Matt. 4:4; Deut.8:3; Heb. 4:12; Eph. 6:17

¹¹⁰ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006), 15.

is easily led down destructive paths and persuaded to espouse false teachings, ideals, and attitudes that jeopardize his very life.

In addition to staving off the false narratives and destructive philosophies from the societies in which the Christian lives, the Word of God also provides the critical nourishment needed for the Christian to develop into a healthy, whole, and effective representative of the gospel. Dawid Ledwon expresses this when he states that, ““The word of God is not only a point of escape or a defensive tool...like bread and water it is above all necessary for life. This basic truth is fully developed by all the canonical figures in the Gospels, but it stems from the Old Testament””¹¹¹

Parallel to Ledwon’s observation that it is the Old Testament that initiates the teaching that God’s word provides the sustenance that man requires, the theological foundation of this thesis project seeks to demonstrate, starting with the Old Testament, that, according to the teachings and illustrations of the Scriptures, the Word of God *must* have priority within the life of the Christian.

The Word of God Spoken from “...the Beginning”

The concept of God’s word is first introduced to the reader of the biblical text within the first chapter of the book of Genesis. Within Genesis chapter one, the reader witnesses an astounding display of God’s word as God’s word speaks forth the entirety of creation and all its glory. By the expression of God’s word, light is manifested (Gen. 1:3-5), the heavens are established (Gen. 1:6-8), boundaries for the oceans are set (Gen. 1:9-10), vegetation flourishes (Gen. 1:11-12), the constellations are fixed (Gen. 1:14-18), life abounds (Gen. 1:20-25), and the

¹¹¹ Dawid Ledwoń, "Bread and Water as Metaphors for the Word of God in the Four Gospels," *Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny* 70, no. 2 (2017), 110.

creation of man in the image and likeness of God is determined and accomplished (Gen. 1:26-28). Culminating Genesis chapter one, God speaks forth instruction for how man and all creatures are to receive nourishment from the fruit of God's creation (Gen. 1:29-30) and, ultimately, God declares all the manifestations of His Word (all that He created) to be "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

The expression of God's word in Genesis chapter one reveals several qualities for the reader to comprehend. Immediately, the reader sees that God's word creates light where formerly there existed darkness (Gen. 1:2-3). In addition to this light, God's word speaks forth order and boundaries (Gen. 1:6-10). By establishing heavens to separate waters beneath the heavens from waters above and by confining the oceans to their designated locations (thus making room for dry land), the Word of God established order within the earth that allowed for the growth and production of life in its various forms (Gen. 1:6-10). The third attribute that is evident within the word spoken forth from God is the attribute of life. As God speaks, life is produced in the form of vegetation, of living creatures, and ultimately of human beings. Finally, God's word spoken forth at the culmination of Genesis chapter one reveals the attribute of sustaining life through the mandates that God provides to the human beings God has created.

The attributes of God's word within Genesis chapter one, alone, provide abundant support for the priority of God's word within the life of the Christian. Based upon the manifestation of God's word in Genesis chapter one, alone, it can be reasonably argued that God's word is also the source of life and sustenance for man's spiritual life.

In addition to the display of God's word within Genesis and the conclusions that can be drawn concerning the continual need for God's word within the life of the Christian, the scripture further illustrates the significance of God's word beyond Genesis chapter one. *All throughout* the

narratives provided in Genesis, God's word is spoken into his creation to specific people at specific times giving insight into the nature of God's words and the necessity for God's people to continually reflect upon and maintain the life-giving mandates that God provides.

God's Word to God's People

The first significant example of the Word of God in relationship to human beings can be found within Genesis chapters two and three and the conclusion of Genesis chapter one. Within the second and third chapters of Genesis, God appears to first speak his word directly to Adam (Gen.2:15-17). Within God's first discourse with Adam, God outlines the good work that He has outlined for Adam by establishing Adam as a caretaker of the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). Following this, God further provides Adam with instruction on what Adam may freely enjoy as food within the garden and what Adam must not enjoy as food, specifically the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest Adam should eat of it and die (Gen. 2:16-17). Genesis chapter one also records God speaking to Adam and Eve together by speaking over them both the blessing and the command that Adam and Eve be fruitful and multiply, that they fill and subdue the earth, and that they exercise dominion over all animals on the earth (Gen. 1:28). The word spoken by God to Adam and Eve reveals the goodness and care of God as God provides Adam and Eve with the knowledge of all that they can freely enjoy, while also warning them to abstain from that which would do them harm.

Despite the life-sustaining word of blessings and the instruction provided to protect the goodness that God had established for Adam and Eve, Adam and Eve were eventually persuaded by the deceptive words of the serpent instead (Gen.3:1-7). The deception led Adam and Eve to eat of the fruit which God forbade and forewarned would bring about their death. Ultimately, Adam and Eve's transgression against God's word brought about a rupture in the relationship

between God and human beings. Timothy Ward discusses this rupture in the relationship between Adam, Eve, and God within his book, *Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God*. As described by Ward, God's word is the very nature and extension of God. As a result, the transgression which Adam and Eve committed against God's word was consequential. As defined by Ward, "Scripture makes the point quite clearly that God's words in some way convey his presence."¹¹² For this reason, Ward further states, "...when Adam and Eve disobey God's spoken command they fracture their relationship with God himself. From God's side, when the words of his command are set aside by his creatures in favour [sic] of their own desires and their own claims of wisdom, then God himself has been set aside."¹¹³

A second significant example of the work of God's word within the life of man can be seen in Genesis chapter six during which God speaks to Noah concerning the judgement determined for humanity for the corruption and violence with which man had grievously filled the earth (Gen. 6:11-13). Despite the destruction determined by God for the abounding evils of man, the life-giving depiction of God's word as seen in Genesis chapter one remains consistent as God provides Noah (the only righteous man to be found) along with his immediate family (and several animals) with a means of escape. By the word that God speaks, Noah is provided with both the wisdom to know what lies ahead and Noah is also provided with the instructions necessary to build an ark to remain safe and secure during the flood that destroys the remainder of humanity (Gen. 6:13-22). Without the provision of God's word as spoken to Noah (and without Noah's corresponding response of obedience), Noah too could have been swept away by

¹¹² Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 30.

¹¹³ Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God*, 27.

God's wrath. It is the life-giving and life-sustaining Word of God, however, that intervened on Noah's behalf.

A third significant figure within the book of Genesis whose experience with God's word cannot be overlooked is Abraham. God's work within the life of Abraham (initially called Abram) provides yet another example of the Word of God speaking life into the lives of men. Similar to the experience of Noah, it is the spoken Word of God that calls Abraham out of his present situation (of his country and his father's household) and it is the Word of God that directs Abraham to a new land that he will ultimately inherit (Gen 12:1). By speaking the promise that Abraham would become both a great name and nation and that Abraham would be a blessing to all families of the earth, the Word of God established a new course for Abraham's life (Gen. 12:1-3). Although Abraham was a man who initially worshipped idols (Joshua 24:2), and a man whose wife was unable to conceive children, God altered the direction of Abraham's existence by speaking the Word of God into his life.¹¹⁴

The Introduction of God's Word in Written Form

The spoken Word of God within the lives of individuals represents only one form of God's word presented in the biblical text. As seen within the book of Exodus, a new format of God's word enters the biblical record as the spoken Word of God is recorded, for the first time, by the very finger of God (Exodus 31:18). This initial inscription of God's word is later re-recorded at the hand of Moses. However, these words, described within Exodus 31:18 and Exodus 24:12 as the "tablets of the Testimony" containing the "laws and commandments" of

¹¹⁴ Gen.12:4; 7-9; 15:6; 17:1-27 notably demonstrate a posture of faith and obedience on behalf of Abraham in response to the word spoken to him by God. This response of faith in God's Word, and obedient action, is consistently illustrated throughout the Bible as a key component to the fulfillment of God's Word within the lives of man (see also Lk. 1:45; Mk. 9:23; Jn. 11:40).

God, contained the very mandates of God intended to ensure the continued blessing and fruitfulness of the Children of Israel as they entered the Promised Land. The written Word of God was also intended to ‘convey God’s message to his people with the same authority as His spoken word.’¹¹⁵

What is commonly understood by many as God’s imparting of the Ten Commandments (although many other commands were also provided), can also be understood as the imparting of God’s guidebook intended to ensure the peace, the wholeness, and the enduring success of people in relationship with God. In response to the gift of God’s Law, Israel’s charge was simply to keep God’s commandments and to continually reflect upon and maintain faithfulness to the righteous laws that God provided.¹¹⁶

God’s Word for God’s Success

The importance of continually reflecting upon God’s Law within the Exodus and Deuteronomistic narratives is further illustrated within the book of Joshua during the critical time that leadership of the Children of Israel was transferred from Moses to Joshua. At the very start of Joshua’s tenure to lead the Children of Israel to the Promised Land, the Word of God was, once again, emphasized as central to Joshua’s prosperity and success.¹¹⁷ The key to leadership success that God provided Joshua, however, starkly contrasted the leadership advice within most leadership literature today. Rather than focusing on Joshua’s abilities and traits, the focus of God’s instructions to Joshua centered, once again, on retaining and meditating upon the Word of God. As God resolutely stated to Joshua before Joshua led the Children of Israel across the

¹¹⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 215.

¹¹⁶ Deut. 6-8.

¹¹⁷ Josh. 1

Jordan into the Promised Land, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.”¹¹⁸

God’s Word When Kept or Forgotten

Beyond the initial introduction of God’s Law to the Children of Israel within the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, the books of Kings and Chronicles are also replete with illustrations of the rise and fall of both Judah and Israel (and their Kings) in direct correlation with their faithfulness to keeping God’s Law as the center of their thoughts and actions.¹¹⁹ Those who maintained their commitment to God and God’s Law, although never exempted from trials and hardships, were nonetheless provided protections, miraculous deliverances, and uncommon boldness and successes to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds and obstacles.¹²⁰ Those who forsook God’s Law, though they may have experienced temporary advancements and worldly successes, ultimately collapsed and were overcome by the righteous judgements of God.¹²¹

The rising and falling of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah directly related to whether Israel and Judah were remembering and keeping the laws and commandments provided by God. The on-going cycle of forgetting and then remembering God’s word demonstrated the necessity that Israel and Judah continue rehearsing the previous works and commands of God.¹²² As God spoke to the Children of Israel in Deuteronomy 8:1-3,

¹¹⁸ Josh. 1:8

¹¹⁹ 1-2 Kings; 1-2 Chronicles

¹²⁰ 1-2 Kings; 1-2 Chronicles

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Daniel Durken, *The New Collegeville Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), 293.

Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers. And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

Of important note within God's word to the Children of Israel in Deuteronomy 8:1-3 is God's statement that "man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord." As noted by R.T. France within his commentary on Matthew which discusses Jesus' own use of this passage to reject Satan's temptations, the comparison that God makes between bread and 'every word of God' pertains to the need for prioritization of God's word within the life of God's people.¹²³ As stated by France, "The contrast... is of course paradoxical: God's word does not fill the stomach. But it is a question of priority...Obedience to God's will takes priority..."¹²⁴

The "Logos" of God¹²⁵ in the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John further illustrates the unique significance of God's word within the life of the Christian. The meaning of the word "logos" that John uses to describe God's word within the Gospel of John has been a significant subject of inquiry for biblical scholars. Paul Henebury explores the meaning of the term "logos" within his article "Jesus the Christ, the Logos of God: An Inquiry into the Johannine Prologue and Its Significance." Within his article, Henebury advances that the term "logos" is a word that expresses more than mere "concepts,

¹²³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew France* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2007), 146.

¹²⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew France*, 146.

¹²⁵ Paul Martin Henebury, "Jesus Christ, The Logos of God: An Inquiry into The Johannine Prologue and Its Significance," *Conservative Theological Journal* 8:23 (2004), 87-90.

ideas, or rationale.”¹²⁶ Instead, Henebury’s research considers the usage of “logos” in the works of ancient Greek philosophers and studies how John’s usage of the term may have been influenced and shaped by the usage of the term “logos” by Greek philosophers during John’s lifetime.

Henebury’s examination of the term “logos” in ancient Greek philosophy significantly broadens the term’s meaning for the reader of John’s Gospel. As explained by Henebury, Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus and the Stoics began using the word “logos” in a way that was less connected within material expressions and more expressive of the shaping and organizing forces of the universe.¹²⁷ As stated by Henebury, “From about the 6th century B.C., the Greeks, beginning with Heraclitus, started to give logos a special philosophical nuance in their descriptions of reality...Stoicism would later teach that it stood for that which gives the cosmos its shape and substance.”¹²⁸

Francis Martin and William Wright also contribute to the historical usage of the Greek word “logos.” Like Henebury, Martin and Wright point out the influence of Greek philosophers as well as other contemporaries of John who helped shape the word’s meaning. Jewish theologian Philo of Alexandria is one such individual, specifically, identified by Martin and Wright who provided even further nuance to the meaning of “logos” during John’s era. As noted by Martin and Wright, “...Combining elements from Greek philosophy and Jewish religion, the Jewish theologian Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of the New Testament authors wrote of God’s

¹²⁶ Paul Martin Henebury, “Jesus Christ, The Logos of God: An Inquiry into The Johannine Prologue and Its Significance,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 8:23 (2004), 87-90.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Paul Martin Henebury, “Jesus Christ, The Logos of God,” 87-90.

logos as the intermediary between the material world and God who is absolutely beyond the world.”¹²⁹

Jesus the Christ; God’s Word in the Flesh

The insight that Henebury, Martin, and Wright provide concerning the “logos” of God, corresponds with the definition of God’s word that John describes within his account of the gospel. In the first chapter of John verses 1-3 and verse 14, the writer of John’s Gospel declares that Jesus, himself, is the Word of God in human form - the very life-giving word which God spoke forth at the beginning of creation (Jn. 1:1-3; 14). As Craig Keener describes, Jesus is “...the full embodiment of the Torah made flesh.”¹³⁰

The significance of John’s teaching that Jesus exists as the manifestation of God’s word is another topic that many biblical scholars have critically analyzed throughout the years. Christian theologian and early church father, Athanasius of Alexandria, addressed the concept of Jesus being the manifestation of God’s word by providing compelling insight. To refute Arian heresies that disputed John’s revelation of Jesus as God’s word due to their humanistic understanding of spoken words, Athanasius described the essential difference between the words that man speaks, and the word spoken by the infinite God and Creator. As stated by Athanasius, “The words of human beings neither live nor operate anything...God’s word is not merely pronounced, as one may say, nor is it the sound of accents, nor should we think of his Son as his command. Rather he is the radiance of light and so is perfect offspring from perfect being. And so he is also God, since he is God’s image. For “the word was God,” says Scripture.”¹³¹

¹²⁹ Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 33.

¹³⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 331.

¹³¹ Joel C. Elowsky and Thomas C. Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary in Scripture: John 1-10* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 75.

Athanasius' description that God's word (Jesus) as the "perfect offspring"¹³² of God from God's "perfect being"¹³³ and of Jesus reflecting the "radiance of God's light,"¹³⁴ in addition to Henbury's finding concerning the term "logos," further reveals the nature of God's word. Not only does the Scripture reveal God's word as the creating force of the universe, but it also reveals that the Word of God is the very substance of Jesus Christ who is the perfect reflection of God. These findings alone provide the clarity that regular engagement with God's word is essential to the life of the one who professes to follow Jesus Christ. Adding further clarity, however, Jesus speaks directly to his followers about the Word of God when he commands his disciples to remain rooted in his words in order to maintain their positions as His disciples. As Jesus states in John 15: 4-8,

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. "I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

Within the New Testament as a whole, Jesus exemplifies the total fulfillment of God's word through his very life and ministry.¹³⁵ By fulfilling both the letter, and the spirit of God's Law through his atoning work and teaching ministry, Jesus illustrated that the Word of God remains central to the fulfillment of God's will.

¹³² Joel C. Elowsky and Thomas C. Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary in Scripture: John 1-10* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 75.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Matt. 5:17-20

Becoming Transformed by the Word of God

The Scripture paints a compelling picture about the importance of God's word. From the Scripture, the reader can see that God's word produces life and guides human beings to walk in the wisdom and righteousness of God. The specific process that is intended when God's people remain engaged with God's word, however, is a transformation of the mind and heart that directly influences man's beliefs, actions, and attitudes toward God and the world around him. The Apostle Paul demonstrates this understanding well in the book of Romans Chapter 12 verse 2. Within this passage, the Apostle Paul, provides the Roman congregation with the vital instruction to, "...be transformed by the renewing of your mind."¹³⁶ It was this transformation of the mind that the Apostle Paul stated would enable the church to understand and to fulfill God's will for righteous living (Rom. 12: 2). Without transformation of the mind, however, the church would undoubtedly remain conformed to the false teachings and ungodly practices of the world around them (Rom. 12:2).

Victor Copan describes the process of renewal of the mind as a process of "acquiring the character of Jesus."¹³⁷ Copan describes how "acquiring the character of Jesus"¹³⁸ involves studying the example of Jesus Christ and conforming to the "virtues and character qualities of Christ himself" rather than the often contradictory "virtues" of the society.¹³⁹ Copan further describes how this process of forming the mind must also shape the inner being if it is to be an

¹³⁶ Rom. 12:2

¹³⁷ Victor A. Copan, *Changing Your Mind: The Bible, the Brain, and Spiritual Growth* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2016), 8.

¹³⁸ Copan, *Changing Your Mind*, 8.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

authentic transformation.¹⁴⁰ Without the inner transformation, individuals become snared into the false righteousness of trying to present actions that do not reflect the true heart and beliefs of the individual.¹⁴¹ As otherwise noted by Dallas Willard, “Spiritual transformation is not about behavior modification. It is about changing the sources of behavior, so the behavior will take care of itself. When the mind is right and the heart is right and the body and the soul and the relationships that we have in our social world are right, the whole person simply steps into the way of Christ ...”¹⁴²

A further description of the transformation process that takes place through continual engagement of the Word of God is the development of a new identity and new life priorities.¹⁴³ Through the Word of God, the reader gains access to the truths about God and about who God has created the reader to be in relationship with God. These truths introduce the reader to a new understanding about himself and about the purpose of the reader’s life. Alastair Sterne describes this process of developing a new identity in Christ as the acquiring of a new life focus that is equivalent to what the Apostle Paul describes as the “upward call”¹⁴⁴ and the goal of salvation.

Adding to the shifting of focus that the Scriptures bring to the life of the Christian is the moral and ethical framework that the Scripture provides the Christian in order to live out their faith in obedience to God. As explained by Willard concerning the need for this framework even

¹⁴⁰ Victor A. Copan, *Changing Your Mind: The Bible, the Brain, and Spiritual Growth* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2016), 9.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴² Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 14.

¹⁴³ Alastair Sterne, *Rhythms for Life: Spiritual Practices for Who God made You to Be* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 123.

¹⁴⁴ Phil. 3:14-15

from a purely ethical and philosophical perspective, "...the moral life suffers when there is lack of knowledge of the essential properties, relations, and distinctions that fall within it. It cannot be lived as well as it could be if such knowledge were available. It is difficult not to think that we would do better in it if we had knowledge by which to guide it."¹⁴⁵

The Spirit of God, Good Soil, and the Reception of God's Word

When addressing the importance of God's word within the life of the believer and God's command throughout the biblical account that human beings feed upon the imparted Word of God, the role of God's Spirit within this process of discernment and reception also becomes an essential factor to consider. Within the Gospels, Jesus identifies the crucial role of God's Spirit when Jesus asked the disciples to identify the Son of Man (Matt.16:13). Although Jesus, as the incarnate Word of God, was daily engaged with the disciples through personal apprenticeship and the first-hand manifestation of God's miracles, Jesus recognized that it was only by the Spirit of God that the disciple Peter was able to recognize Jesus as the "Son of God" (Matt. 16:16). As Jesus stated to Peter in Matthew 16:17, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven."¹⁴⁶ In contrast, many others to whom Jesus preached the Word of God, despite the evidence of God's Spirit present within Jesus, remained blinded to the understanding that Jesus was the anticipated Messiah (Matt. 13:14-15).

For those who remained blind to the revelation of God through Jesus Christ, many of these individuals demonstrated a lack of faith or, in some cases, a willful rejection of God caused

¹⁴⁵ Dallas Willard, Steven L. Porter, Aaron Preston, et. al., *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge*, 1st. ed. (Boca Raton: Routledge, 2018), 4.

¹⁴⁶ Matthew 16:17, NIV.

by unrepentant sin (Matt. 11:20-24). As Jesus noted concerning the Pharisees' lack of faith and their rejection of God, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw *it*, you did not afterward relent and believe him." (Matt. 21:28-32). As also noted by Jesus within the Gospels concerning the condition of the Pharisees, it was the love of worldly praise, prestige, and earthly goods, rather than love for God and the things of God, that prevented the Pharisees from receiving Jesus as the Messiah (Lk. 11:39-53).

Beata Urbanek also discusses the connection between the Spirit of God and the reception of God's word by the hearer. According to Urbanek's assessment of biblical texts, it is the Spirit of God being active within God's word that draws the hearts of human beings to the faith and knowledge of God.¹⁴⁷ In conjunction with this working, however, Urbanek also identifies the condition of the hearer's heart as a significant factor that enables God's word to take root within the life of the hearer. As stated by Urbanek, "The third aspect of the acting of the Spirit – which takes place through the herald of the word – is bringing the addressees of the message to faith and conversion. When the addressees' hearts are open, the Holy Spirit comes to them when the word of God is heard."¹²² The condition of an open heart, as Urbanek describes it, compares with Jesus' Parable of the Sower sowing seed among various soil conditions. As stated by Jesus within Luke 8:15 concerning the Word of God sown among the good soil, "But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."

¹⁴⁷ Beata Urbanek, "The Holy Spirit Acting in the Message of the Word of God," *Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny* 71, no. 4 (2018): 342.

Scripture reveals that the Spirit of God, in conjunction with good soil, plays a crucial role in the ability for God’s word to take root within the lives of the hearer. These factors emphasize the importance that hearers not only listen to and rehearse God’s word, but that the hearer is also willing to receive the Holy Spirit’s direction, instruction, and correction in order for God’s word to take root and produce the life-sustaining fruit that God intends for his people.

Conclusion

The Word of God, as illustrated throughout the Bible, reflects the character, identity, and life-giving attributes of the God who speaks them. Unlike the words of man, the Word spoken by God is living and powerful¹⁴⁸ - and is revealed to be the very Son of God moving and acting throughout the history of creation. Without a continual intake of God’s word, man demonstrates a pattern of falling into sin against God, of succumbing to Satan’s deceptions, and of becoming separated from God. With these factors in mind, this project’s purpose to increase regular Bible reading among Christians is one that is thoroughly rooted within the theology of the Scriptures. Jesus, himself, demonstrated the importance of Scripture when Jesus replied with these words to the Adversary who was attempting to turn Jesus away from God’s righteous plan for Jesus, “...man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every *word* that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Heb. 4:12

¹⁴⁹ Matt. 4:4

Theoretical Foundation

Approaches to Reading the Bible

Several approaches to reading and engaging the Bible have been developed in response to the emphasis that the Bible, itself, places upon reading and meditating on the Scripture. Historically, studying the Scriptures as a personal practice has been a method engaged by many members of the Jewish community.¹⁵⁰ As a result, many early Christians also spent time dedicated to the personal study of the Scriptures at the encouragement of their religious leaders.¹⁵¹ Before the rise of widespread literacy, most members of the early church received the Scripture primarily through liturgy and oral readings of the biblical text.¹⁵² Within 21st century, however, the need for greater Bible engagement among American Christians is a significant concern even with a mostly literate population.

Methods to address the lack of Bible engagement among American Christians commonly focus on teaching Bible reading skills or engaging congregants toward various Bible reading plans. The purpose of these approaches is often to determine their impact on a reader's spiritual life or on the reader's inclination to continue reading the Bible. The following theoretical foundation reviews some of the current approaches to increasing (or enhancing) Bible reading that are presently being applied within ministry.

¹⁵⁰ Jonathan Dieter Elswick, "The Impact of the Soap Method of Bible Engagement on Select Congregants of Crossway Church" (D.Min. thesis, Capital Seminary, Lancaster, 2018), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 40.

¹⁵¹ Elswick, "The Impact of the Soap Method," 40.

¹⁵² Jeffrey D. Bingham, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010; 2009), 294.

Lectio Divina

Since the fifth century, one method of engaging in personal study of the Scripture is the method of meditation and reflection known within the Christian community as Lectio Divina (Divine Reading).¹⁵³ With the method of Lectio Divina, Christians are encouraged to take hold of¹⁵⁴ (or grasp) and to keep¹⁵⁵ the precepts of Scripture. The underlying assumption of the Lectio Divina method is that God desires to commune with the reader. For this reason, the reader engages in the meditative process of reading, reflecting, responding, and resting.¹⁵⁶ The goal is to help the reader to hear and to draw nearer to God.¹⁵⁷ Jan Johnson, a seminary professor and spiritual director who teaches the method of Lectio Divina to achieve these aims, describes the meditative practice of Lectio Divina as a tool that helps both novice and seasoned Bible readers alike to encounter God through the scriptures in new and fresh ways.¹⁵⁸

Scripture Memorization

Scripture memorization is another method of Bible engagement that is commonly used within ministry. With the practice of Scripture memorization, the reader is still encouraged to personally meditate and reflect upon the words of Scripture, but with the objective to retain the words of Scripture within the mind and heart and to draw upon the memorized Scripture for

¹⁵³ Jonathan Dieter Elswick, "The Impact of the Soap Method of Bible Engagement on Select Congregants of Crossway Church," (D.Min. thesis, Capital Seminary, Lancaster, 2018), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 40.

¹⁵⁴ Jan Johnson, *Meeting God in Scripture: A Hands-on Guide to Lectio Divina* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 13.

¹⁵⁵ Jan Johnson, *Meeting God in Scripture: A Hands-on Guide to Lectio Divina*, 13.

¹⁵⁶ Jan Johnson, *Meeting God in Scripture: A Hands-on Guide to Lectio Divina* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 13.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

guidance and support throughout his or her daily life.¹⁵⁹ Joshua Choonmin Kang is one supporter of this method of Scripture engagement and describes how retaining the Scripture through memorization is akin to planting seeds within one's "interior garden"¹⁶⁰ that will ultimately produce spiritual fruits.¹⁶¹ Although scripture memorization does allow the reader to retain select portions of the Bible within the heart and memory, Scripture memorization is not a method that aims to increase the Christian's Bible reading as a whole.

Analytic Bible Reading

In contrast to the Bible reading methods of Scripture memorization and Lectio Divina, analytic Bible reading is another approach to increasing (and enhancing) Bible engagement among members of the Christian faith. With analytic Bible reading, the reader has a greater focus on discerning and dissecting the truth¹⁶² within a biblical passage or narrative than on personal meditation and reflection. Although analytic Bible reading is most often used for academic inquiry to examine such things as historical, contextual, linguistic, and cultural factors that impact interpretation and doctrine, it is also a method of Bible reading that has been encouraged by church leaders¹⁶³ to help lay Bible readers more soundly understand and apply the teachings of Scripture.

¹⁵⁹ Joshua Choonmin Kang, *Scripture by Heart: Devotional Practices for Memorizing God's Word* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Books, 2010), 108.

¹⁶⁰ Joshua Choonmin Kang, *Scripture by Heart: Devotional Practices for Memorizing God's Word* 18.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁶² Thomas Evan Evans, "An Exploration into How People Read the Bible," (D.Min. thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey, 2004), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 15.

¹⁶³ Rito V. Baring, "Understanding Student Attitudes Toward Bible Reading: A Philippine Experience," *Religious Education* 103, no. 2 (2008): 163.

Ministry practitioners who teach analytic Bible reading tools commonly desire to increase Bible literacy among congregants and to empower their congregants to soundly interpret and understand the teachings of the Bible for themselves. With the tools to analyze the biblical text, one study reports that congregants demonstrated a small but measurable inclination to begin interpreting the message of the Bible on their own rather than relying solely upon the pastor to provide the meaning of the biblical narratives.¹⁶⁴

Formative Bible Reading

The formative method of Bible reading is discussed by researcher Mark Maddix within his article “Rediscovering the Formative Power of Scripture for the Church.” Unlike analytic Bible reading that is focused on scholastic analysis of the Biblical text, the formative approach to Bible reading emphasizes the spiritual formation of the reader through the consistent reading and direct application of the Bible’s message to the reader’s life and experiences.¹⁶⁵ Within the formative model of Bible reading, the guidance of the Holy Spirit is emphasized just as it is emphasized within *Lectio Divina*. Thus, while listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the reader is attentive to hearing the personally applicable message of the biblical text being studied.

Maddix describes this form of Bible reading as a second inspiration of meaning that is provided by the Holy Spirit to equip readers with discernment concerning the will of God that is directly related to their lives.¹⁶⁶ Practically applied, the formative method of Bible reading requires cooperation of the reader with the movement of the Holy Spirit. As such, the posture of

¹⁶⁴ Kevin Bryan Barnes, "A Bible Study About Studying Bible: An Introduction to Inductive Bible Study," (D.Min. thesis, Asbury Theological Seminary, Willmore, 2018) ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 110.

¹⁶⁵ Mark A. Maddix, "Rediscovering the Formative Power of Scripture Reading for the Church," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 15, no. 1 (2018): 35.

¹⁶⁶ Mark A. Maddix, "Rediscovering the Formative Power of Scripture," 35-36.

a formative Bible reader includes openness to biblical text, active listening, and a willingness to be formed and shaped by the message of God's word.¹⁶⁷

Bible Reading Plans

Recognizing the need for increased readership of the Bible among congregations and members of the Christian faith is a concern for many leaders in Christian ministry. Both Cheryl Hunt and David Weber sought to address this concern among their constituents by using systematic reading plans that engaged participants in an outlined amount of daily Bible reading. For Hunt, the reading was presented as an aural activity during which participants listened to a portion of Scripture daily for 30 minutes. For Weber, participants mostly engaged in the traditional reading of the Bible covering four chapters of the Bible a day, coupled with prayer, reflection, and a weekly sermon to address the week's reading. Within both events, participants described gaining a greater understanding of God, spiritual enrichment, and a heightened interest in the Bible.¹⁶⁸ Weber's observation that many Christians read only "bits and pieces"¹⁶⁹ of the Bible and as a result live out an "emaciated"¹⁷⁰ faith witnessed a change among congregants as a result of the daily Bible reading. Hunt's approach also rendered fruitful results. Participants from both events demonstrated considerable growth. As Hunt summarized regarding her own study,

¹⁶⁷ Mark A. Maddix, "Rediscovering the Formative Power of Scripture Reading for the Church," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 15, no. 1 (2018): 35-36

¹⁶⁸ Cheryl Hunt, "Be Ye Speakers of, and Listeners to, the Word: The Promotion of Biblical Engagement through Encountering the Scriptures Read Aloud," *Expository Times* 129, no. 4 (2018): 149; David Webber, "If You Want to Know God, Read His Book--the Whole of it: Many Christians Feed on the Bible Like Sparrows, which Leads to an Emaciated Faith," *The Presbyterian Record* 128, no. 9 (2004): 36.

¹⁶⁹ David Webber, "If You Want to Know God, Read His Book--the Whole of it: Many Christians Feed on the Bible Like Sparrows, which Leads to an Emaciated Faith," *The Presbyterian Record* 128, no. 9 (2004): 36.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

“Taken together, [...] comments suggest that listening to a dramatized reading of the Bible, particularly of an unfamiliar translation, can promote a deeper engagement with the text...[and] can also be transformative and affect some participants at an emotional level.”¹⁷¹

The Approach of This Research

Differing from the approaches to increasing Bible engagement that are reflected within the literature review and within the current ministry practices just highlighted, the approach of this research is to gain an understanding of the motivations and hindrances to Bible reading that are present within the Bible readers themselves. Based upon this understanding, this research intends to propose tailored action steps to increase Bible reading that directly address why individuals are commonly hindered from regularly reading the Bible. Further, this research aims to leverage the factors that do motivate regular Bible reading among Christians as incentives for Bible readers to access the scripture more frequently for their personal flourishing and spiritual transformation. This approach to increasing Bible reading enables pastors and Christian educators of Grace Abounds Association of Pastors to be the most strategic and intentional about fostering increased Bible reading among the Christians to whom they minister. This approach also helps other pastors and Christian educators to determine the most appropriate Bible reading methods for the congregants within their own respective ministry contexts.

¹⁷¹ Cheryl Hunt, "Be Ye Speakers of, and Listeners to, the Word: The Promotion of Biblical Engagement through Encountering the Scriptures Read Aloud," *Expository Times* 129, no. 4 (2018): 149.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Purpose & Problem Re-stated

The problem of low Bible readership among professing Christians as identified within the first chapter of this research is one that affects the entire spiritual well-being of the individual believer. The need to increase Bible readership, therefore, is a responsibility that can be significantly addressed by Christian leaders within the Body of Christ. Pastors and Christian educators have unique influence within the lives of those to whom they are called to minister. As such, Christian leaders need the tools and necessary data to effect change within their congregations as it pertains to increasing Bible readership.

Considering the need for greater insight into the problem of low Bible readership among professing Christians, the purpose of this study is to help pastors and Christian educators of Grace Abounds Association of Pastors to better understand the factors that are encouraging or discouraging regular Bible reading among the adult Christians to whom they minister. The data collected through this study has, thereby, resulted in the proposal of specific action steps to support the increase of regular Bible reading among the adult Christians to whom GAAP ministers.

Intervention Design

Throughout this project, the research follows a qualitative and phenomenological research design. Described as social research¹⁷² “...grounded in the social world of experience”¹⁷³

¹⁷² Patricia Leavy, *Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods, Arts-Based, and Community-Based Participatory Research Approaches* (London: The Guilford Press, 2017), 5.

¹⁷³ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 57.

that “studies things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them”¹⁷⁴, the qualitative research method applied within this study enabled the researcher to accomplish two important objectives:

First, qualitative research allowed the researcher to probe for an explanation to the phenomenon of low Bible readership among Christians that is abundantly reported in surveys of Americans. Using the research instrument of the questionnaire, the researcher was able to gain insight into the research participant’s perceptions about Bible reading, why participants chose (or chose not) to read the Bible, and what factors impacted (whether negatively or positively) the reading habits of the research participants. As Patricia Leavy describes the explanatory feature of qualitative research, “When we want to explain causes and effects, correlations, or why things are the way they are, explanatory research is appropriate.”¹⁷⁵

The second objective that the qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to accomplish is “Community Change”¹⁷⁶ and “Action.”¹⁷⁷ Ultimately, the qualitative research method enabled the researcher to identify and propose corrective action that can be taken to increase the level of Bible readership among the community of Christians to whom Grace Abounds Association of Pastors ministers. This approach is also known as action research, wherein, “...an inquiry [is] conducted by educators in their own settings in order to advance their

¹⁷⁴ J. W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 44, Quoted in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2011) 3.

¹⁷⁵ Patricia Leavy, *Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods, Arts-Based, and Community-Based Participatory Research Approaches* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2017), 5.

¹⁷⁶ Leavy, *Research Design*, 6.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

practice and improve their student’s learning”¹⁷⁸ or, as quoted by Sensing “social research [is] carried out by a team that encompasses a professional action researcher and the members of an organization, community, or network, (“stake-holders”) who are seeking to improve the participant’s situation.”¹⁷⁹

The phenomenological aspect of the qualitative research design has also been integral to the methodology of this study. The collective shared experiences provided by the research participants about Bible reading practices in the context of their everyday lives align with phenomenology’s purpose to provide “a detailed account of human existence”¹⁸⁰ through “direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced”¹⁸¹ and through “first-hand experience”¹⁸² with the event being studied.

Consequently, the findings produced by the research questionnaire and literature review within this study, have equipped the researcher to analyze and interpret the collective “motivations and actions”¹⁸³ of the research participants and to ‘compare, distinguish, form

¹⁷⁸ Sara Efrat Efron and Ruth Ravid, *Action Research in Education: A Practical Guide* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2013), 2.

¹⁷⁹ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 56, Quoted in Davydd J. Greenwood and Morten Levin, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 3-4.

¹⁸⁰ Dan Zahavi and Taylor z and Francis, *Phenomenology: The Basics*, 1st ed. (Boca Raton: Routledge, 2019), 2.

¹⁸¹ “Phenomenology,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/phenomenology#ref68550>

¹⁸² Antonio Cimino, *Phenomenology and Experience: New Perspectives*, Vol. 18 (Boston: Brill, 2019), 6.

¹⁸³ F. C. Lunenburg and B. J. Irby, *Writing a Successful Thesis or Dissertation: Tips and Strategies for Students in the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2008), ch. 5.

connections, and put into relation¹⁸⁴ the collective data on Bible reading and the influences that encourage or discourage this essential discipline within the lives of Christians.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

Research Instrument

The research instrument selected to gather data for this study was the use of an individual questionnaire. The first ten questions of the questionnaire pertained, solely, to the participant's relationship to Bible reading. The final two questions related to demographic information on both the age and gender of participants. Demographic questions were initially included within the questionnaire to enable the researcher to identify trends and similarities within the answers of research participants who demonstrated similar age ranges or the same gender.

The questionnaire incorporated both closed-ended and open-ended questions as well as descriptive¹⁸⁵ and opinion questions¹⁸⁶ for the purpose of providing greater insight into the phenomenon¹⁸⁷ of low Bible readership. Although, Sensing identified open-ended questions as a preferable tool for qualitative research stating that "Open-ended questions let the interviewee pursue any direction and use any words to express what they want to say,"¹⁸⁸ open-ended questions were mainly presented as a final answer option for participants who did not feel that

¹⁸⁴ Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 46.

¹⁸⁵ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 87.

¹⁸⁶ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 88.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

the closed-ended responses best represented their perspectives or experiences. This open-ended option within the questionnaire answers ensured that participants were not inadvertently led to predetermined responses that did represent the participant's position.¹⁸⁹ The specific open-ended questions options presented within the questionnaire related to reading motivation, personal beliefs about the Bible, and opinions about increasing Bible reading. These questions were stated within the questionnaire as follows:

7. What things motivate you to read the Bible?

8. What things hinder or discourage you from reading the Bible?

9. What Do You Believe is the Purpose of the Bible?

10. What Would Help You to Spend More Time Reading the Bible?

Although open-ended questions have been identified as a preferable form of question used within qualitative research, the closed-ended (non-demographic) questions that were presented within the questionnaire were specifically chosen to provide a standard measurement of the participant's frequency of Bible reading and the manner in which participants were reading the Bible. Willem Saris describes the process of choosing between open and closed questions as a decision to be weighed based upon the quality of information that will be yielded by the question type.¹⁹⁰ In the event that closed-ended questions provide more information, Saris advances that such are preferable and also provide data that is easier to process.¹⁹¹ The closed-

¹⁸⁹ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 89.

¹⁹⁰ Willem E. Saris, *Design, Evaluation, and Analysis of Questionnaires for Survey Research*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Wiley, 2014), 101.

¹⁹¹ Saris, *Design, Evaluation, and Analysis*, 101.

ended questions that were included within the questionnaire pertained to reading regularity and the type of Bible reading achieved by the participant. An example of these closed-ended questions within the questionnaire is as follows:

1. On average, how often do you spend time reading the Bible outside of weekly church services? (Note: Group or family Bible study also counts as time spent reading the Bible.)

A. Everyday B. Every Week C. Every Month D. Every Year

4. How would you describe your Bible reading habits? (Select the option that most closely reflects your Bible reading habits.)

A. I Most Often Read the Bible as an Entire Story – From Genesis to Revelation

B. I Most Often Read the New Testament Portion of the Bible

C. I Most Often Read the Old Testament Portion of the Bible

D. I Most Often Read a Favorite Book or Group of Verses in the Bible

E. I Do Not Have Bible Reading Habits

The questionnaires for this study, with one exception, were administered primarily through phone-based contact with the research participants. Prospective research participants within the community were contacted by phone and verbally provided the introductory information concerning the study to determine whether the prospective participant would be interested in contributing their experiences to the research. The prospective participants who were interested in partaking in the study were then verbally provided the consent information by phone, the questionnaire questions were verbally presented to the research participant by phone,

and the answers provided by the research participant were verbally provided to the researcher by phone and recorded by the researcher directly into a word processing application on the researcher's laptop.

The prospective research participants who were contacted by phone, fit into the following two categories of community members: 1) Prospective participants with a local proximity to GAAP or who were located in communities to which GAAP has ministered, and 2) Prospective research participants who were employed at local churches or Christian faith-based organizations within Norfolk, Virginia and central California.

The decision to administer the research questionnaires by phone was influenced by the current COVID-19 pandemic and the precautions outlined by health and governing officials to avoid in-person interactions with community members beyond one's immediate family.¹⁹² In light of these concerns and the established precautions within various communities, the researcher determined that phone issued questionnaires would be the best course of action to engage prospective participants in the research while ensuring both the safety of the participants and the researcher.

Important considerations that influenced the design of the research questions stemmed significantly from the researcher's ministry experience and engagement with community members. A common theme that the researcher encountered within ministry to community members professing to be Christians is the tendency for such individuals to confess to spending time in prayer and seeking answers from God through prayer, yet simultaneously demonstrating little engagement with the Scripture. Another common theme witnessed by the researcher is the

¹⁹² "How to Protect Yourself and Others," Your Health, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified, February 4, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>

tendency for individuals who do demonstrate some engagement with the Scriptures, to be primarily versed in common biblical passages with little understanding of the biblical context of these passages or to be selective readers of the Bible rather than reading the Bible as a whole narrative. Additionally, many community members have demonstrated negative perceptions and inaccurate understandings of the Old Testament scriptures. Based upon these themes witnessed while engaging community members, the researcher designed specific research questions for the questionnaire that would specifically gauge the participant's type of engagement with the Scriptures.

Based on the teachings of the Scripture, itself, and supported by examples encountered through the review of literature within this study, it is the researcher's position that exposure to the entire biblical text is essential for Christians to understand the full context of God's character and to have a full understanding of God's righteous requirements. It is also the researcher's position, based upon Scripture, that the written Word of God, itself, contains the complete guidance and the answers that Christians are seeking from God within their lives. Without holistically reading the Scriptures, however, it is the researcher's position that Christian individuals will remain unknowledgeable of the truths that God has already revealed, and that are readily accessible for their consumption.

Additional considerations that influenced the design of the research questionnaire was the need for further clarity about why Christian individuals have been demonstrating low engagement with the Bible. The assumption held by the researcher at the start of the research was that low Bible reading was most likely caused by one or more of the following reasons: 1) Bible reading is not viewed as an essential exercise within the life of the individual Christian (thus, time for Bible reading is hard for the individual to make), 2) Bible reading exposes the reader to

convicting teachings that the individual does not want to hear and, 3) Bible reading is perceived as a boring or challenging exercise that is best left to pastors and Christian educators who will teach and interpret the Bible's message.

Participant Protections

Within the field of social science research, participant protections play a significant role within the process of engaging participants and recording the experiences (the data) that the research participants agree to provide during the research process. Because the information that the individuals provide can be sensitive and impactful to their social lives and livelihoods, it becomes an imperative that researchers carefully, “develop clear data management protocols about where and how [they] store data and how [they] transfer data.”¹⁹³ By implementing secure data protection procedures and practices the researcher is able to maintain the ethical imperative to “do no harm” to participants who have agreed to share their experiences during the research process. In accordance with these considerations, the following protections have been applied within this research to ensure the well-being of the research participants.

Data collection and storage. The data collected from the research questionnaires during the study has been stored on a password-locked computer owned by the researcher. Additionally, access to the data collected through the questionnaire has also been restricted solely to the researcher. Increasing the protection of the participants, the questionnaire, itself, collected no personal or identifying information from the research participants. Thus, pseudonyms were not a required feature to disguise the identity of the participants during this study. In addition to the data protections just noted, the identities of the research participants were kept completely

¹⁹³ Sage Publications, *Confidentiality in Social Research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018), 2.

anonymous for the purposes of this research. Research participants were verbally read the informed consent document prior to participation in the research; however, research participants were not required to sign and return the consent document to the researcher. This step further protected the identity of the participants by ensuring that the participant's signature on the consent form could in no way be matched with the answers provided by the participants on the questionnaire.

IRB approval. Preparation to work safely with human participants within this study was obtained through Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Within this process, the reviewers from Liberty University's IRB department examined the steps, procedures, and tools proposed to engage human research participants within this study and, subsequently, corrections and feedback were provided to the researcher to ensure the adherence to ethical standards outlined by the IRB department prior to engagement with human participants. Ultimately, IRB exemption¹⁹⁴ was obtained by the researcher which certified the ethical and safe procedures that were implemented within this study.

Ethical principles. Several ethical principles are fundamental to the qualitative social research process. Although these guiding ethical principles can be expressed in slightly different ways by different social research experts and organizations,¹⁹⁵ Sensing describes the following four principles as foundational to most lists of ethical principles that he has encountered: 1) To do no harm to human participants, 2) To exercise beneficence toward human participants, 3) To maintain the autonomy of the human participant, and 4) To act in accordance with justice toward

¹⁹⁴ See Appendix A: IRB Exemption, 97.

¹⁹⁵ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 32.

human participants throughout the research process.¹⁹⁶ Additional expressions of ethical principles that direct the qualitative research process include “respect for persons”¹⁹⁷ and “respect for communities.”¹⁹⁸ As cited by Sensing of the Family Health International’s description of ethical principles,¹⁹⁹ the principal of “Respect for Persons”²⁰⁰ consists of upholding “the dignity of all research participants”²⁰¹ and ensuring that those involved with the research “...will not be used simply as a means to achieve research objectives.”²⁰² Furthermore, “Respect for Communities”²⁰³ constitutes the responsibility of the researcher to “respect the values and interest of the community”²⁰⁴ particularly when the community may be “affected by the research process or its outcomes.”²⁰⁵

Standards of research ethics have also been foundational to the implementation of this qualitative research study. As reiterated by Rose Wiles, conducting an ethical program of

¹⁹⁶ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 56, Quoted in N. Mack, et. al., *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector’s Field Guide* (Research Triangle Park: Family Health International, 2005), 32.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 33.

¹⁹⁸ ¹⁹⁸ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 56. Quoted in N. Mack, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 33.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 9.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

research will consist of “...the application of key moral norms (or principles)”²⁰⁶ that have been established by the “...research community to which [the researcher] belong[s].”²⁰⁷

CITI training. Consistent with the definition of ethical research, the researcher has also participated in the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) that provides training to “universities, healthcare institutions, technology and research organizations, and governmental agencies”²⁰⁸ on the standards of “Research, Ethics, and Compliance.”²⁰⁹ This CITI Program training was completed as required by the Rawlings School of Divinity Institutional Review Board for those conducting research involving human participants.²¹⁰

The CITI Program training completed by the researcher provided the researcher with knowledge of standards of ethical principles and compliance as well as an overview of the history of human research protections, the ethical standards and principles that inform these protections, and the regulatory bodies that govern human subject research within the United States. Recognizing, as Sensing describes, that a research process involving the participation of others and that publishes its findings is a “political act and a wielding of power”²¹¹ ethical principles within this research have been carefully maintained to preserve the emotional,

²⁰⁶ Rose Wiles, *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?*, 1st ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 12.

²⁰⁷ Rose Wiles, *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?*, 12.

²⁰⁸ “Research, Ethics, and Compliance Training,” CITI Program, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://about.citiprogram.org/en/homepage/>

²⁰⁹ CITI Program, “Research, Ethics, and Compliance Training.”

²¹⁰ See Appendix C: CITI Certification, 99.

²¹¹ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 54.

psychological, and physical well-being of the research participants who have participated in this research.

Informed Consent

Consistent with the ethical principles of maintaining the autonomy of research participants and respecting individuals and communities, is the requirement of informed consent within qualitative social research. Defined by Bruce Berg as the “... knowing consent of individuals to participate as an exercise of their choice, free from any element of fraud, deceit, duress, or similar unfair inducement or manipulation,”²¹² the informed consent document was verbally presented to prospective research participants prior to engagement in the study, wherein prospective participants were provided information addressing several key components of the study to which they ultimately agreed. This process of informing the participant was the means to divulge the ethical principles of the research, the professional oversight provided,²¹³ the institutional affiliation of the researcher, and the rights and confidentiality of the research participant.

Within this study, research participant consent was obtained primarily by phone. Additionally, participants were ensured that their participation would remain anonymous without the collection of any personal identifying information throughout the process of the study. For these reasons, consent from participants was verbally received (rather than being received via signature). The presentation of the consent document was also verbally presented to the research participant by phone. The key components of the consent form as presented to the research participants were as follows:

²¹² Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 6th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2007), 47.

²¹³ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 32.

Research purpose. The first item introduced to participants from the informed consent document addressed the nature and the purpose of the research being conducted. Research participants were immediately informed that the purpose of the research was “...to help pastors and Christian educators better understand factors that encourage or discourage regular Bible reading among adult Christians.”²¹⁴ and that the data collected would result in “... a plan to support regular Bible reading among adult Christians.”²¹⁵ This introduction to the research outlined for research participants the specific parameters of the research. The introduction also outlined for research participants the type of information and experiences that the participants would be asked to contribute to the study. Following this introduction to the research, research participants were then introduced to the procedures that would be carried out within the research to gather the type of data specified within the introduction to the research.

Research procedures. Directly following the introduction to the research, participants were informed of the express proceedings involved in the research process. Research participants were informed that they would be asked to, answer a questionnaire over the phone and that the questionnaire would require a specified amount of their time. By specifying the means for conducting the research and the amount of time required of the research participants, participants were able to gauge whether their participation in the research would be something feasible for their schedule and whether they would be interested in participating through the procedures delineated. Upon the participant’s determination that he or she would be willing to contribute their experiences to the research in the manner specified, the research participants were then introduced to the risk factors that would be involved in their participation.

²¹⁴ See Appendix B: Consent Form, 98.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

Risks to participants. The risk factors of participating in the research were identified within the informed consent document as minimal. Research participants were informed that their participation in the research would involve the equivalent risk that what they would encounter “in everyday life.”²¹⁶ This point within the consent document was intended to inform the research participant that the risks they would encounter were no greater than what they would encounter in a non-dangerous and non-threatening daily context. Considering the heightened risks that have been prevalent within today’s “everyday” setting (including the health risks present during a worldwide pandemic) it was the researcher’s hope that this clause would accurately relay that participation in the study was indeed a venture of low risk.

Benefits to participants. Following the identification of risks involved with the research the *benefits* of the research were also identified. Within this section of the informed consent document, it was identified that direct benefit should not be expected by the research participant, but that the broader social benefit of their participation was a potential worth consideration. As such, the research participant was informed of the potential for increased, “...regular Bible reading within the Christian community.”²¹⁷ This point within the informed consent document was intended to relay to the research participant that a direct advantage or compensation was not a feature of the research, but that their participation still had the potential to impact, for better, the Christian community as it related to the subject of increasing regular Bible reading.

Participant confidentiality. Confidentiality of the research participant was a significant element of the informed consent document presented to the research participant during the

²¹⁶ See Appendix B: Consent Form, 98.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

introductory stage of the research process. Considering the need for data reflecting the most accurate presentation of the research participant's Bible reading habits, the feature of anonymity was extended to the research participants to help ensure that the experiences shared by the research participants within the questionnaire were not consciously or subconsciously altered based upon the research participant's concern that their responses would be publicly linked to their identity. Research participants were thus informed by the informed document that their privacy would be protected and that, "...personal, identifying information..."²¹⁸ would not be requested within the questionnaire.

Conflict-of-interest disclosure. Following the points covered about participant confidentiality, the conflict-of-interest disclosure provided further assurance to the research participant that the connection between the identity of the individual participant and the data that they provided within the study would remain anonymous even to the researcher. Although the researcher did approach some prospective research participants with prior acquaintance with GAAP or GAAP pastors, the informed consent document explained that potential conflicts of interest would be minimized since the researcher would be unable to identify which participant disclosed which information without the help of personal identifiers. The conflict-of-interest disclosure also informed participants that their decision to participate in the research would, in no way, impact their relationship with GAAP.

Voluntary nature of the study. The voluntary nature of the study was also a key component to the informed consent document. Within this section of the informed consent document, research participants were made aware that participation in the study was a voluntary

²¹⁸ See Appendix B: Consent Form, 98.

endeavor. As such, the research participant’s decision to contribute or not to the research would ultimately be inconsequential to their “...current or future relations with Liberty University.”²¹⁹ Additionally, research participants were informed of their freedom to, “...answer any question or to withdraw at any time, prior to completing the questionnaire...”²²⁰ without encountering any negative repercussions. This provision within the informed consent document further preserved the autonomy of the research participant.

How to withdraw from the study. Analogous to the voluntary nature of the study, the informed consent document also provided participants with notification that withdrawal from the study was available at any time during the research process. Participants were informed that participation could be easily discontinued by notifying the researcher of the participant’s decision. The consent document also provided participants with the assurance that the information they provided prior to their withdrawal would, “... not be recorded or included in the study.”²²¹

Research oversight and contact information. The final point covered within the informed consent document provided research participants with pertinent contact information to both Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board as well as contact information to the researcher’s faculty mentor. Providing these contacts to research participants was intended to provide participants with greater trust in the study’s veracity and to provide research participants with a greater level of confidence knowing that access to an entity or individual assigned with overseeing the research process was available and accessible should the research participant have any questions during the research process.

²¹⁹ See Appendix B: Consent Form, 98.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

Research Participants

The individuals contacted to participate in this study consisted of a sampling of community members within both Norfolk, Virginia, and central California. Participants were contacted within these Virginia and California localities based upon two important factors: 1) Prospective participants either had a local proximity to GAAP or were located in communities to which GAAP has previously ministered, and 2) Prospective research participants were employed at a local church or Christian faith-based organization.

In choosing prospective research participants, the researcher's primary goal was to obtain a sampling of research participants reflective of community members to which GAAP has engaged through its public community engagement and pastoral outreach. To accomplish this objective, a sampling of community members within the Norfolk, Virginia and central California communities who had publicly listed contact information were first contacted by phone and introduced to the research. The process of contacting community members by phone based solely on their location and available contact information in phone databases proved, however, to be a tedious process that did not yield the participation that was initially anticipated. Many of the individuals contacted were not available or were not interested in completing a questionnaire. It was also uncertain whether the individuals being contacted would meet the research participant criteria.

As a result of this discovery, the researcher opted to refine the sampling of community members to those who were specifically employed in local churches within both Norfolk, Virginia, and central California communities. These prospective participants were selected based upon the understanding that community members working within these settings would typically

meet the research participant criteria of individuals who profess to be Christians and they would also be much easier to access by phone.

Sampling Method

The sampling for this study reflected both a maximum variation and purposive sampling approach. Sensing notes that maximum variation sampling, “increase[s] the inclusivity of your project”²²² and has the ability to produce value rich information despite the variation in “age, gender, marital status, employment, ethnicity, etc.”²²³ that one might assume will produce divergent views and experiences. As Sensing explains, “Small sample groups from a heterogeneous group might seem like a problem because no one will be alike, but when any common pattern emerges from great variation, then value of the information increases...the discovery is of greater significance in answering your question.”²²⁴ Although, participants within this research all reflected the common characteristics of being adults who identify as Christians and who were employed in local churches and Christian organizations, the participants still reflected variation in age, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and denominational affiliation.

The purposive sampling method was also employed within this study by selecting participants who demonstrated the common identifiers as being both Christians and adult members of the community. As Sensing defines this method, “Purposive samples select people who have awareness of the situation and meet the criteria and attributes that are essential to your research.”²²⁵

²²² Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 84.

²²³ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 84.

²²⁴ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 84.

²²⁵ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 83.

Sensing further notes that such a sampling approach has the ability “to provide depth”²²⁶ to the research findings.

By utilizing both the maximum variation and purposive sampling methods just defined, the data collected within this study concerning the Bible reading practices of the research participants was able to provide important revelations about factors that are encouraging and discouraging Bible reading among as specific sample of adult Christian community members.

Intervention Overview

The process of collecting data for this study entailed a sequence of steps that resulted in the implementation of the described research design. The following outline delineates the sequence of steps that were taken by the researcher to facilitate the data collection process for this study:

- 1) Obtain CITI certification and IRB approval of research for conducting research with human participants.²²⁷
- 2) Locate prospective participants within the Norfolk, Virginia community.
 - I. This process first comprised accessing public phone directories for community members within specific zip codes in proximity to GAAP’s location and who were available to be contacted by phone.
 - II. The second step within this process was to locate several churches within Norfolk, Virginia and central California communities via online searching. Based upon the search results, a list of local churches and church contact information was compiled. This information provided access to

²²⁶ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 83.

²²⁷ See Appendix A and C, 97, 99.

prospective research participants who were working primarily in local churches.

- 3) Contact prospective research participants by phone.

Within this step of the process, prospective research participants were contacted and read the introductory script detailing the purpose of the study. Interested community members either opted to participate in the research during that same phone call or to schedule a later time to answer the research questionnaire.

- 4) Provide prospective research participants with verbal presentation of the consent form.

This step entailed reading the consent form to the participants via phone and confirming that the prospective participants agreed to participate in the research. This step was commenced on the same day that research questionnaire was completed by phone.

- 5) Read questionnaire questions to research participants and record the answers provided.

This step involved carefully reading each question to the research participant as outlined within the questionnaire. After the reading of each question, the answer provided by the research participant was then typed by the researcher directly onto the questionnaire. The research questionnaire was formatted as a word processing document making it feasible to record each participant's responses by phone. A phone headset was also utilized by the researcher to enable the researcher to both listen to the research participant's response and record the answers simultaneously.

- 6) Record notes and observations to After-Action Log

This step commenced at the conclusion of each phone questionnaire with the research participant. The researcher recorded notes and observations about the questionnaire

process into the After-Action Log for analysis of themes after gathering all completed questionnaires.

- 7) Conduct analysis of the data provided by participants.

Conducting an analysis of the data provided by participants involved the process of data triangulation. Within this process, the data provided through the questionnaires, data gathered through the literature, and the data produced through the researcher's observations were analyzed to determine the presence of "themes, slippages, and silence"²²⁸ contained within the data.

- 8) Compose targeted action steps based on the research findings for GAAP to implement through its preaching and Christian education programs to foster increased Bible reading among Christian community members.

Data Triangulation

Data triangulation was the method used to analyze and interpret the data collected within this study as it pertained to the phenomenon of low Bible readership and the factors that are motivating or hindering Bible reading among adult Christians. The purpose of providing a three-tiered collection of data surrounding the subject of Bible reading habits within this research was to provide a well-rounded examination of the issue. By analyzing the responses of the research participants, compared with findings of the literature, and coupled with the recorded observations of the researcher, the research was able to identify trends, common experiences, and also diverging experiences about Bible reading motivation contributed by each of the sources.

²²⁸ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 211.

Specifically, the researcher examined Bible reading surveys conducted by other researchers and Christian organizations that address the Bible reading habits of Christians. Surveys from the BARNA Research Group and the American Bible Society were notable contributors to this subject. Additionally, the research contributions from fellow ministry researchers that addressed Bible readership within their unique ministry contexts have been consulted within the research. Many pastors and Christian educators are witnessing the need for increased Bible reading and are implementing a variety of approaches to increase reading of the Bible among those to whom they minister. The third angle from which the data was interpreted was from the recorded observations of the researcher. The after- action log maintained by the researcher added further thickness to the interpretation process. As stated by Sensing concerning the contributions of the researcher, "...your expertise as the minister, researcher, and active participant will be the filter of all the data. Therefore, it is imperative you record your observations, interpretations, and insights in a formal way and display them as a data set."²²⁹

The data provided from these three sources was intended to strengthen the reliability of the interpretive process. Described by Sensing as "multiple data-collection technologies designed to measure a single concept or construct"²³⁰ that "provides a complex view of the intervention,"²³¹ data triangulation was what provided the tools to produce a "thicker"²³² assessment of the revealed

²²⁹ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 75.

²³⁰ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

Bible reading motivators and the ways in which these motivators can be harnessed to increase Bible read within the Body of Christ.²³³

²³³ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 72.

Chapter 4: Results

Within Chapter 4 of Results, the researcher will examine the actual (versus the anticipated) findings that the researcher discovered through the process of administering the Bible reading questionnaire to a group of six adult Christian research participants concerning the manner in which they engage and view the importance of the Bible within their everyday lives. Based upon the researcher's ministry experience of encountering community members through GAAP's pastoral outreach who demonstrate minimal engagement with the Biblical text, this study has sought to gain insights into the causes of low Bible readership among such adult Christian community members. The following, therefore, is a re-establishment of the purpose of this research, the findings that have resulted from the research process, and the researcher's analysis of these findings based on the three points of data triangulation discussed within the methodology of the research.

Research Purpose

As stated within the first chapters of this research, the purpose of this Doctor of Ministry Thesis Project has been to gain an understanding of the factors that both motivate and hinder regular Bible reading among adult Christians and to propose action steps based upon these findings that can increase regular Bible reading among the adult Christians to whom Grace Abound Association of Pastors ministers through its preaching Christian education ministries. Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to help pastors and Christian educators in all ministry contexts to increase the practice of regular Bible reading among those to whom they are called to shepherd.

Locating the Research Participants

Within the methodology chapter of the research, it was identified by the researcher that obtaining willing participants among a broad spectrum of community members who were publicly listed in phone databases was a more tedious and unyielding process than the researcher had envisioned. Although the researcher specifically selected to contact community members who lived within pre-established California localities to which GAAP has previously ministered or who were situated in proximity to GAAP's present locale in Norfolk, Virginia, such community members were significantly disinterested in participating in a research questionnaire on Bible reading. It was additionally discovered that reaching prospective participants by phone from a public phone database at times resulted in more non-working phone numbers and voicemail machines than it did human contacts.

As a result of this discovery, the researcher prayerfully sought out a more targeted audience of community members who would be more accessible by phone and who would, more likely than not, meet the established pre-qualifications to participate in the research. The insight thus provided to the researcher was to contact community members who worked within local churches in the Norfolk and central California communities that the researcher was seeking to reach. The result of this insight and further prayerful preparation, was the yielding of six adult Christian research participants who all demonstrated a willingness to contribute their Bible reading experiences to the research for the advancement of increased Bible reading within the Body of Christ.

Questionnaire Findings

The American Bible Society (ABS) and the Barna Research Group discovered within their 2020 State of the Bible collaborative Survey of American Bible reading trends that 34% of Americans never read the Bible.²³⁴ Adding to this statistic, of those Americans that do read the Bible, only 9% of Americans reported reading the Bible every day and only 3% of Americans reported reading the Bible as frequently as four or more times a week.²³⁵ Despite the small percent of Bible reading reported among Americans in general, the survey also identified that 49% percent of Americans believe the United States would be “worse off”²³⁶ if the Bible were not present within American society.²³⁷

In contrast with the findings of lower Bible reading rates within the State of the Bible 2020 survey and the 2018 Barna survey reviewed within the literature, the data collected within this study of six adult Christian research participants reflected individuals who demonstrated higher Bible reading rates than the national averages of overall American citizens. Starting with the first question on the questionnaire, the researcher encountered significantly higher rates of reported Bible reading than what was reported by the 2020 survey by the American Bible Society as well as those findings produced by Barna as reviewed within the literature at the beginning of the study. More than 65% of participants within the study, for instance, reported reading the Bible “every day” (Figure 1.) and 100% of participants reported that it was “very important” for them to spend time regularly reading the Bible. (Figure 2.) Such regular Bible

²³⁴ American Bible Society, *State of the Bible 2020*, prepared by Jefferey Fulks and John Farkuhar (Philadelphia: American Bible Society, 2020), 24.

²³⁵ American Bible Society, *State of the Bible*, 24.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

reading reported by the participants also reflected higher rates than the 3% of Americans who were reported by the ABS to read four or more times a week. (Figure 3.)

Question 1: On average, how often do you spend time reading the Bible outside of weekly church services?

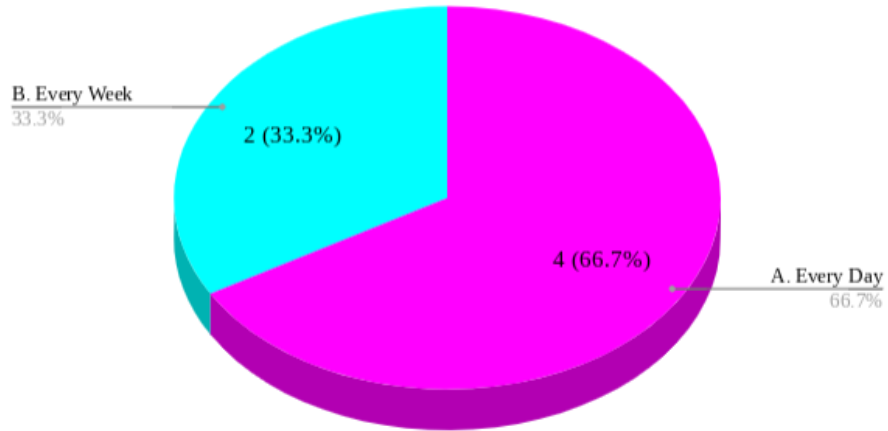


Figure 1. Question 1: On average, how often do you spend time reading the Bible outside of weekly church services?

Question 2: On average, how frequently do you spend time reading the Bible?

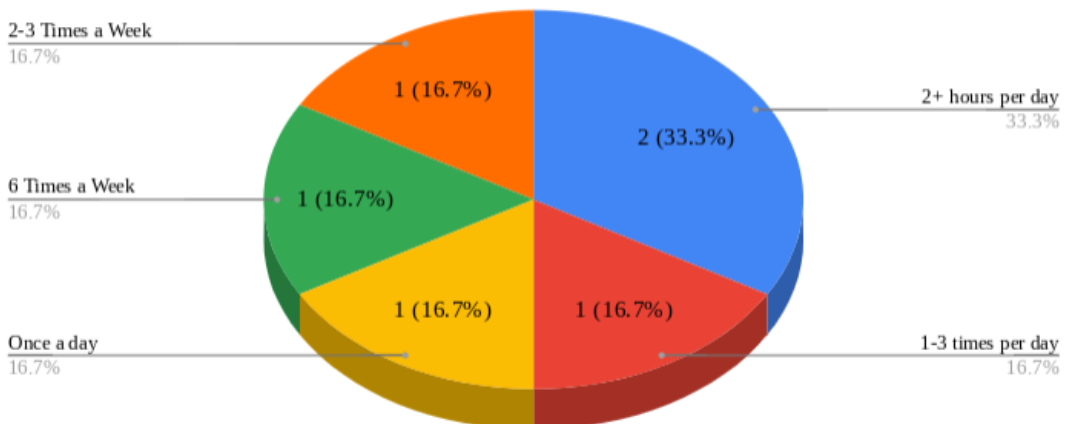


Figure 2. Question 2: On average, how frequently do your spend time reading the Bible?

Question 3: How important is it to you that you spend time regularly reading the Bible?

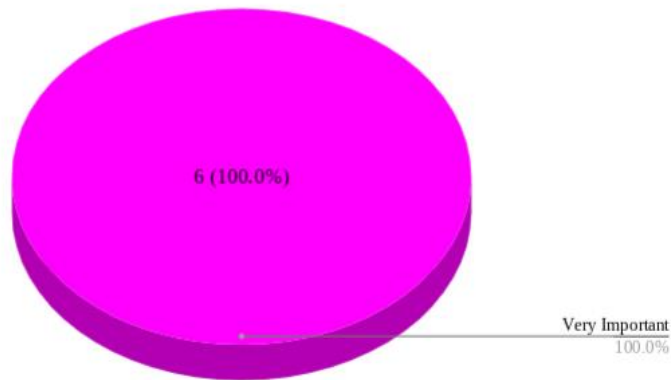


Figure 3. Question 3: How important is it to you that you spend time regularly reading the Bible?

In addition to these findings, all research participants demonstrated a strong conviction that the reading of the Bible in its entirety was also “very important” or at least “somewhat important.” (Figure 4.)

Question 5: How important is it to read the Bible from the beginning to end?

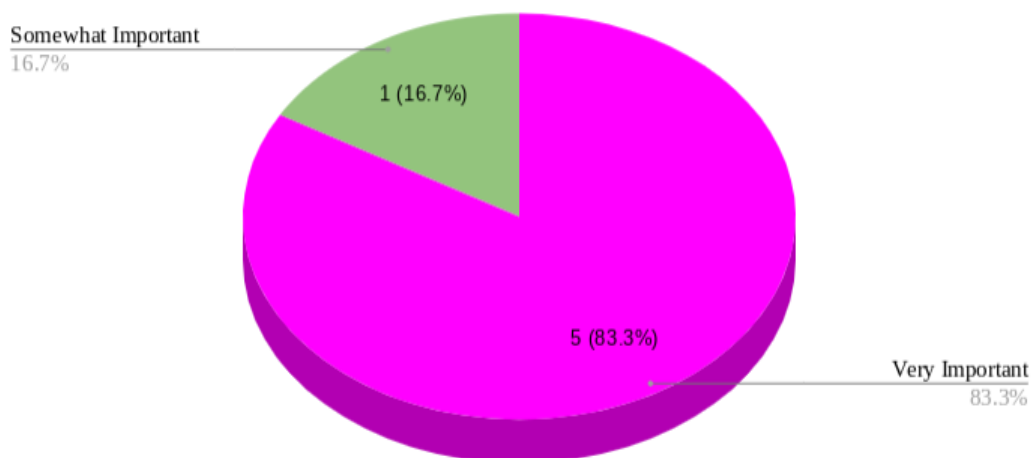


Figure 4. Question 5: How important is it to read the Bible from the beginning to end?

The critical findings of this study, however, were those that identified the factors that both motivated or hindered Bible reading among research participants despite their demonstrated value for the Bible and the regular engagement of the biblical text within their lives. Within question 7 of the questionnaire, for instance, 50% of research participants demonstrated that “guidance and encouragement” provided within the Scriptures motivated them to read the Bible. (Figure 5.) Additionally, 66.7% of those who reported that “guidance and encouragement” motivated them to read the Bible, also reported that “to understand God” was an additional key motivator for them to spend their time engaged in Bible reading. (Figure 6.)

Question 7: What things motivate you to read the Bible?

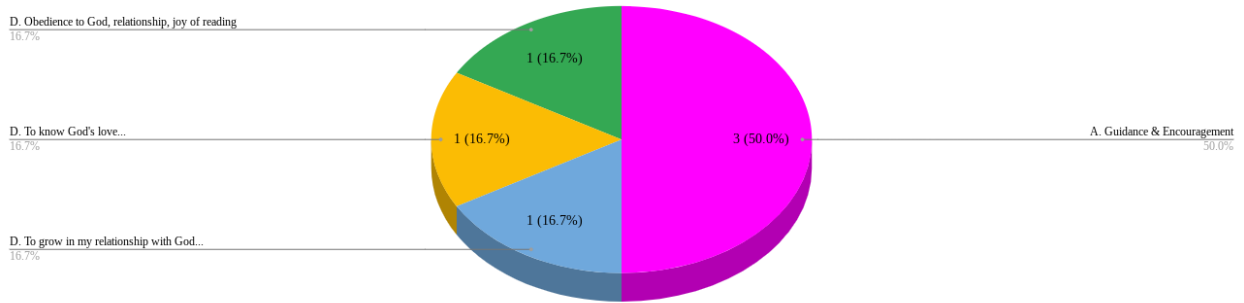


Figure 5. Question 7: What things motivate you to read the Bible?

Question 7: Participants who aswered A. 'Guidance and Encouragement' also answered...

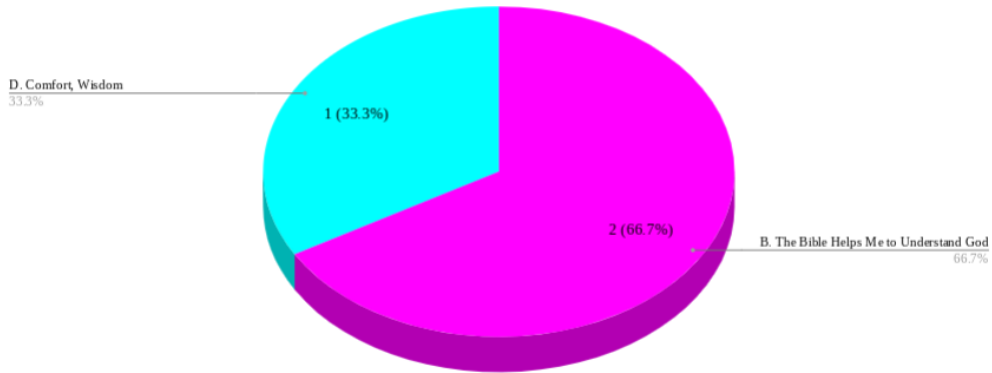


Figure 6. Question 7: Participants who answered A. 'Guidance and Encouragement' also answered...

The second critical finding within the study were the factors that research participants reported as hindrances or discouragements to maintaining regular Bible readership. Question 8 identified that 50% of participants reported a “lack of time” as the cause for discouragement or hindrance to their Bible reading. Participants who provided this response stated that work kept them busy. (Figure 7.)

Question 8: What things hinder or discourage you from reading the Bible?

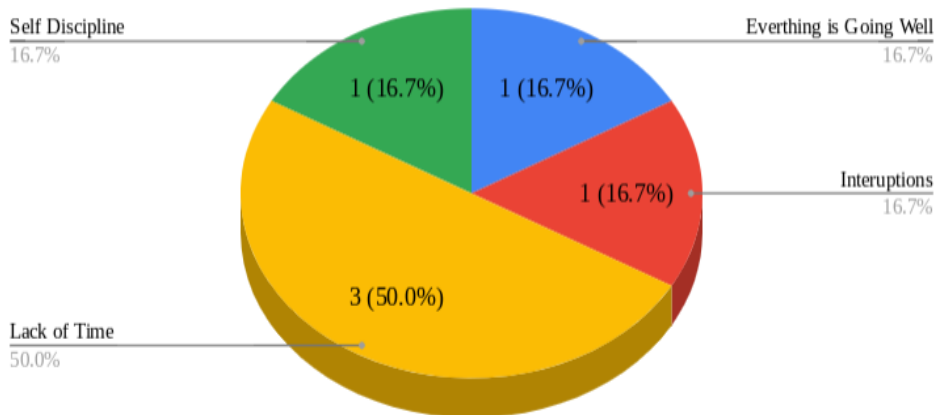


Figure 7. Question 8: What things hinder or discourage you from reading the Bible?

Other hindering factors that were mentioned by participants included “interruptions” during one’s designated study time and the perceived need for greater “self-discipline” for maintaining consistency with Bible reading. One participant also described becoming “careless” at times in his relationship with Jesus as a hindrance to regular Bible readership. Significantly, all research participants expressed that they experienced hindrances even though all research participants expressed heightened levels of Bible reading.

One unexpected answer provided by a research participant pertaining to the factors that hinder Bible reading was the response “when everything is going well.” This response provided by the research participant illustrated the challenge experienced to remain vigilant with one’s Bible reading regardless of whether the circumstances in one’s life appear favorable for maintaining such Bible readership or not. The response provided by the research participant also demonstrated the overall challenge of remaining vigilant with one’s spiritual disciplines at any time, whether one is presently “in season and out of season” as the Apostle Paul describes in 2 Timothy 4:2.

Other insightful findings revealed through the questionnaire are also found in Questions 9 and 10. Within Question 9, the research participants responded to the following question: “What do you believe is the purpose of the Bible?” Each of the research participants responded uniquely to this question with responses ranging from such answers as “To teach that God is King” to “A guide for living.” (Figure 8.) The theme among all responses, however, was the acknowledgement that the Bible is intended to teach about God in some way, i.e., teaching about who God is, teaching about what God requires for Christian living, or teaching about how to live in communion with God. Participants also stated that the purpose of the Bible is to facilitate a relationship with God. (Figure 8.)

Question 9: What do you believe is the purpose of the Bible?

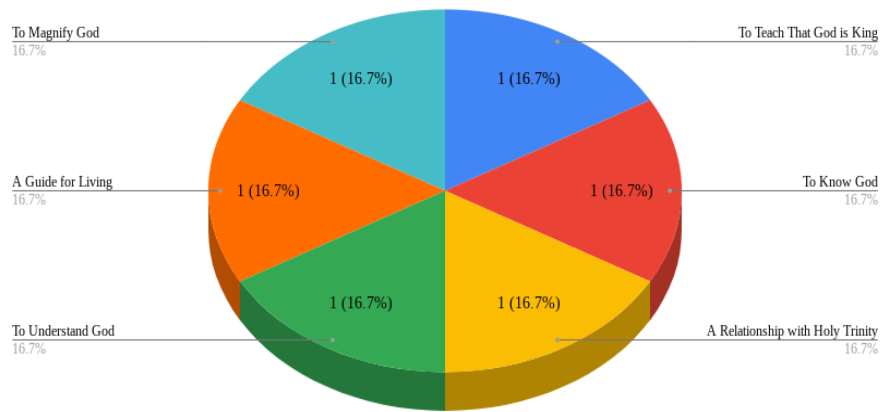


Figure 8. Question 9: What do you believe is the purpose of the Bible?

The third critical finding of the research pertained to Question 10. Question 10 asked research participants the following question: “What would help you to spend more time reading the Bible?” To this question research participants provided a mixture of responses. 33.3% of participants stated that having more time or less work would help them to spend more time reading the Bible. (Figure 9.) The remaining 66.7% of research participants responded that reading with others, having the accountability of others, or having a timelier group study with one’s Bible study members would help them to spend more time reading the Bible.

Conclusion

The research participants engaged within this study were all interested in contributing their experiences to the Bible reading questionnaire to foster increased Bible reading among Christians. All participants also demonstrated heightened levels of Bible reading. Additionally, each participant expressed a strong conviction that the Bible was essential to their lives.

Compared with the researcher’s ministry experience of engaging community members who demonstrate little engagement with the Scriptures and compared with the data expressed in

the review of the literature, this sample of research participants was a refreshing exception to the trend of low Bible reading among Christians in America. Despite this exception, the participants who shared their experiences collectively provided the understanding that, regardless of one's Bible reading level, factors that hinder an individual within the discipline of Bible reading, will be a universal challenge to overcome.

Question 10: What would help you to spend more time reading the Bible?

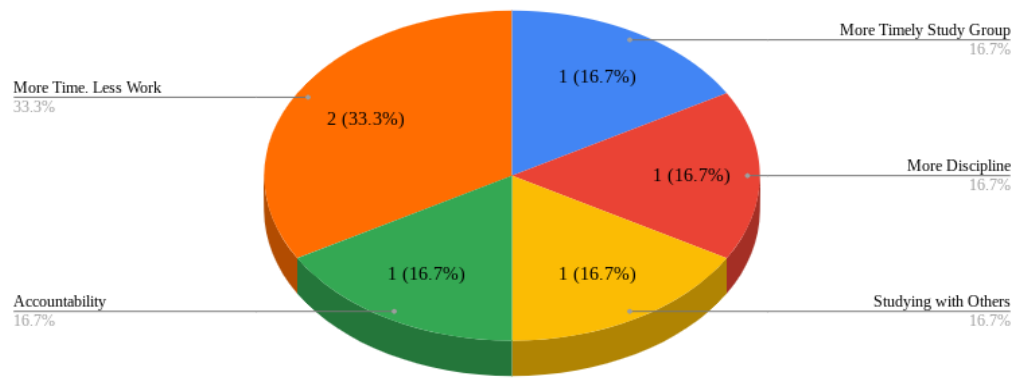


Figure 9. Question 10: What would help you to spend more time reading the Bible?

The participants also revealed that the factors that motivate Bible reading among Christians is most often related to the positive experience that the reader gains from reading and applying the Scriptures to their individual lives. As one participant insightfully noted, “One thing that greatly sparks me (and makes sure) that I read [the Bible] is to have power in my daily life. I need to experience God’s Spirit in my daily life. That greatly keeps me reading the Bible.” Identifying these important motivators to Bible reading was the intention of this study. The following chapter will, therefore, examine the implications of these findings for increasing Bible reading among those to whom Grace Abounds Association of Pastors ministers and for increasing Bible reading among the Body of Christ overall.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As stated throughout the course of this study, the problem of low Bible readership among professing Christians is an issue that significantly impacts the spiritual well-being of believers. The need to increase Bible readership, therefore, is a responsibility that must be addressed by leaders within the Body of Christ. Because pastors and Christian educators have unique influence within the lives of those to whom they are called to minister, Christian leaders must be provided the tools and the necessary data to effect change within their congregations as it pertains to increasing Bible readership.

Considering this need for increased Bible readership, the purpose of this study has been to primarily provide the pastors and Christian educators of Grace Abounds Association of Pastors with the tools to better understand the motivating factors that are encouraging and discouraging regular Bible reading among the adult Christians to whom they minister. The data collected through this study has, thereby, resulted in the following proposal of specific action steps to support the increase of regular Bible reading through both preaching and Christian education programs.

Action Step 1: Proactively Facilitate Community

An important theme that arose within the research was the importance of group Bible study and the accountability of fellow Christians in the effort of remaining consistent with one's Bible reading discipline. Significantly, several participants in the research identified this need. In response to the importance of group study and accountability, it is imperative to strategically facilitate accountability networks among fellow Christians and to encourage and equip fellow believers to commune in groups of two or more for shared Bible study sessions throughout the week. For family units this can be more easily attained. Nevertheless, even for individuals this

goal can be attained. As demonstrated throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains feasible (and it is even easier in many cases) for individuals to fellowship and to commune together through the use and the advantages of technology.

Action Step 2: Emphasize the Benefits of Bible Reading

Each participant within the research demonstrated a strong understanding of the need for Bible reading within their individual lives. Each participant also demonstrated a heightened level of Bible reading. Additionally, most participants report that the Scripture had a positive impact on their lives. This reveals the need to emphasize the impact and the need for the Scriptures regularly through preaching and Christian education. It is not sufficient for Christians to simply attend a church service on a Sunday. Christians need a regular and personal engagement with the Scripture in order to remain rooted and founded in Christ - and it is those who are called to shepherd God's people that have the ability to influence this change through preaching and teaching.

Action Step 3: Prioritize the Spiritual Disciplines

Each of the research participants within the research worked in some capacity within the church. Some were support personnel, some were pastors, and some were Christian educators. It was significant, however, that a lack of time and business from work hindered many in their effort to read the Bible. In response to this hindrance, it is imperative that all ministry workers be provided personal time during work hours not only to each lunch but to feed on the Word of God for their spiritual sustenance. It is not the business of works that produce the fruits that God requires, rather it is abiding in Christ and seeking God's kingdom first.

Recommendations for Further Research

The primary recommendation for further research is to survey an additional sample of Christian community members that one would encounter while ministering in the community. While it was not feasible to take this approach during this study, this approach will certainly yield additional insights into the Bible reading hindrances and motivations of a wider sample of Christians from various backgrounds, experiences, and levels of faith.

Additionally, conducting a study of Christian community members who specifically have low levels of Bible reading would be informative. During the process of contacting prospective research participants, there were several instances that workers within the church declined to participate. In many of these cases the individuals first suggested that another member of the church, most often a Bible teacher or a Pastor, should answer the questionnaire instead. It appeared that such individuals did not feel comfortable or confident sharing their Bible reading habits. It would therefore be useful to understand the Bible reading motivations and hindrances of individuals who are less confident (and perhaps, less engaged) in their Bible reading practices.

Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Exemption

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 23, 2020

Albany Stephens
IRB Exemption 3998.102320: Understanding and Addressing the Factors that Motivate or Hinder Personal Bible Reading among Adult Christians

Dear Albany Stephens,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if . . . the following criteria is met:

(i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.
Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971

Appendix B: Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
10/23/2020 to --
Protocol # 3998.102320

Consent Form

Understanding Factors that Motivate or Hinder
Bible Reading Among Adult Christians

Rev. Albany Stephens

Liberty University
Rawlings School of Divinity

You are invited to participate in a research study that seeks to understand factors that motivate or hinder regular Bible reading among adult Christians. You have been selected as a possible participant because you are at least 18 years of age and you identify as a Christian. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

Rev. Albany Stephens, a doctoral candidate in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to help pastors and Christian educators better understand factors that encourage or discourage regular Bible reading among adult Christians. The data collected through this study will result in a ministry manual and strategic plan to support regular Bible reading among adult Christians.

Procedures: If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activity:

1. Answer a questionnaire over the phone. The questionnaire will require approximately 20 minutes of your time.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

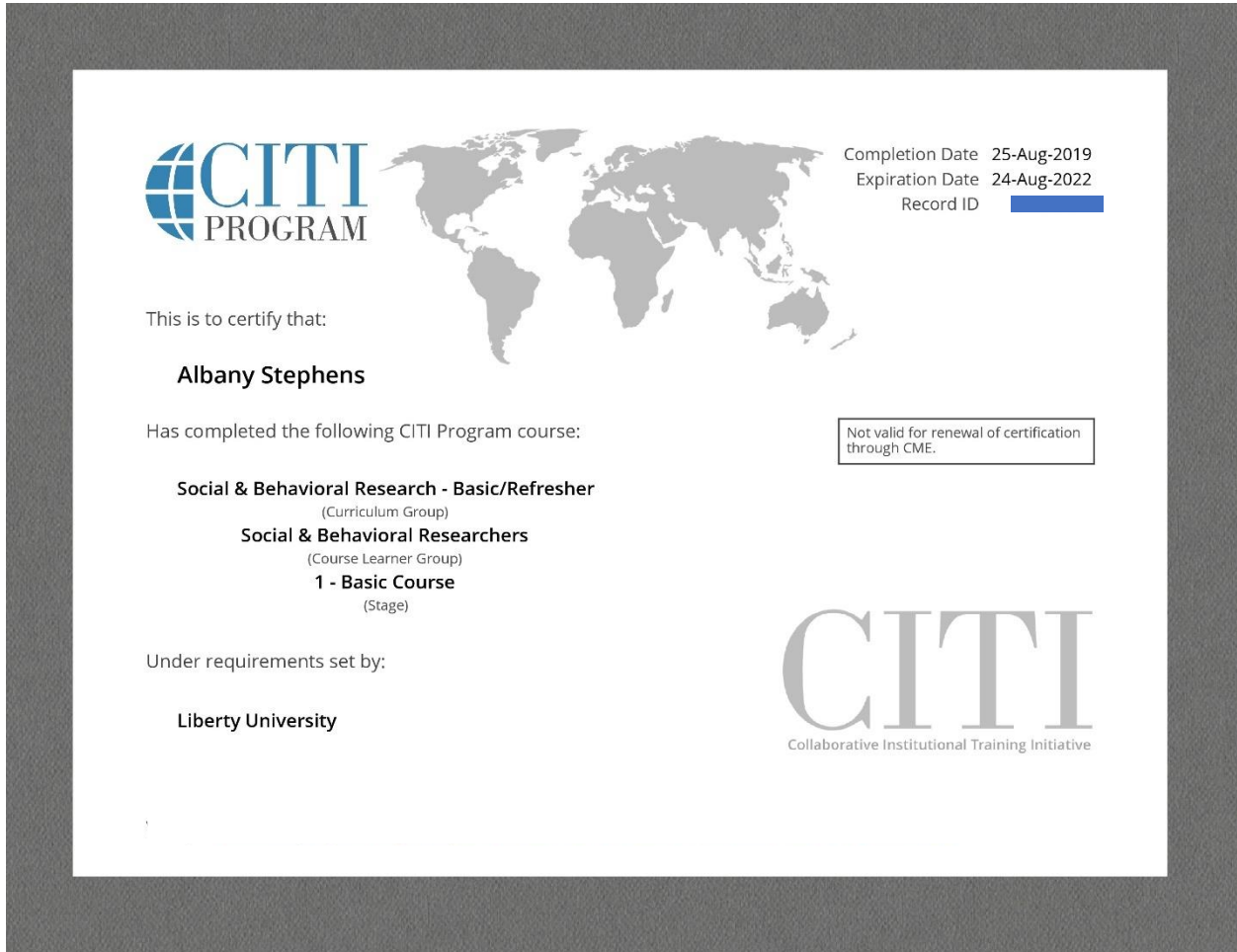
Benefits to society includes the potential to increase regular Bible reading within the Christian community.

Confidentiality: To protect the privacy of participants, participation in this study will be anonymous. For this reason, personal, identifying information **will not** be requested within the questionnaire.

The data collected through this study may be used in future research or presentations. The data collected will be retained for at least three years from the completion of this study. Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and password-locked USB drive.

Conflicts of Interest Disclosure: The researcher serves as pastor at Grace Abounds Association of Pastors. To limit potential conflicts, the study will be anonymous. As such, the researcher will be **unable** to personally identify participants by the responses they provide.

Appendix C: CITI Training Certificate



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