



CHRIST CHURCH

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Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹

Dear Friends in Christ,

Happy Easter! Throughout Eastertide we celebrate the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light. May we, who have been raised with him, abide in his presence and rejoice in the hope of eternal glory. Amen. The topic of this Chronicle is the Scriptures and the importance for Christians to, as the above Collect states, “hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life”.

THE DIFFICULT REALITY OF BIBLICAL ILLITERACY

Led by Deacon Michael Kurth, our Adult Christian Learning group recently read and discussed the book People of the Way, by the Rev. Dr. Dwight Zscheile. Dr. Zscheile states as his thesis that, “the future of the Episcopal Church in the United States depends upon attending first and foremost to God’s life and movement and discovering how Episcopalians are particularly gifted and called to join up with that movement.”² He states that “engaging the Bible is vital”³ if we are to attend to God’s life and movement, yet he correctly notes that “we can no longer assume that people know the Bible when they come to church or that the brief episodes served up in the lectionary fit together into any kind of coherent whole in

¹ Collect for Proper 28, 1979 BCP; This Collect first appeared as the Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent in the 1549 BCP

² Pg. 4, People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity by Dwight J. Zscheile, Church Publishing, New York, 2017

³ Pg. 91, People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity by Dwight J. Zscheile, Church Publishing, New York, 2017

people's minds.”⁴ Dr. Zscheile makes a strong case – and one I agree with – that basic Biblical literacy is something that our Western society has lost and something that Episcopalians need to have if they are going to speak with any authority or integrity about Jesus Christ. It is essential to remember that one of the things Jesus did on that first Easter Day after his resurrection was to “open [his disciples’] minds to understand the scriptures.”⁵

If you are not yet convinced that Biblical illiteracy is a real issue, take a look at a few eye-opening quotes from an article written by Ed Stetzer in 2015 that appeared in *Christianity Today*.⁶

“A recent LifeWay Research study found only 45 percent of those who regularly attend church read the Bible more than once a week. Over 40 percent of the people attending read their Bible occasionally, maybe once or twice a month. Almost 1 in 5 churchgoers say they never read the Bible—essentially the same number who read it every day.”

“The United Kingdom Bible Society surveyed British children and found many could not identify common Bible stories. When given a list of stories, almost 1 in 3 didn't choose the Nativity as part of the Bible and over half (59 percent) didn't know that Jonah being swallowed by the great fish is in the Bible. British parents didn't do much better. Around 30 percent of parents don't know Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, or the Good Samaritan are in the Bible. To make matters worse, 27 percent think Superman is or might be a biblical story. More than 1 in 3 believes the same about Harry Potter. And more than half (54 percent) believe The Hunger Games is or might be a story from the Bible.”

I have been an Episcopal Priest for fourteen years and have led countless Confirmation Classes and Adult Bible Studies in three different congregations, and I can attest to the fact that a significant percentage of Christians of all ages do not have a basic knowledge of the Bible. I'm also a dad, and I can tell you there are only two places where most children learn about the Bible: in church and at home. An exception should be noted for children who attend Christian schools; those children do learn about the Bible and have chapel mixed into their regular routine. My kids go to public school in Pelham, and what they know of the Bible they learned in church (worship and Sunday School) or at home.

Biblical illiteracy is a reality throughout our society and it affects many Christians (including clergy households). It is also nothing new, and it isn't a secret.

⁴ Pg. 92, *People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity* by Dwight J. Zscheile, Church Publishing, New York, 2017

⁵ Luke 24:45, New Revised Standard Version

⁶ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/july/epidemic-of-bible-illiteracy-in-our-churches.html>

FIFTY YEARS (OR MORE) OF CULTURAL SHIFT

There was a time not so long ago that some knowledge of the Bible and its stories could be assumed, even in unlikely places like pop music. I'd like to offer two somewhat off-the-wall examples of that.

Fifty years ago the Rolling Stones⁷ released their second, greatest hits album entitled "Through the past, darkly". The album cover featured the band members posing behind and pressed up against a large pane of glass. The name and album cover art were an (at the time) obvious riff on 1 Corinthians 13:12 from the King James Version, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." The reference even included the comma before "darkly". The Stones understood the meaning of the text: a greatest hits album is only a first step to deeper knowledge of the band. They were nodding to and having fun with the culture they grew up with, and it was a reference that most any English person would get because Christianity was intertwined with culture.

I keep a copy of this album in my office as a reminder that the Church can no longer assume that people have a basic knowledge of the Bible. People from a certain generation get the reference, but I have yet to meet anyone under sixty who gets it who isn't both a Stones fan *and* an Episcopal Priest.

Thirty years ago the Beastie Boys⁸ released "Paul's Boutique". The album features a song called "Shadrach", which includes the following lyrics

I once was lost, but now I'm found
The music washes over and you're one with the sound
Who shall inherit the earth, the meek shall
Hey yo I think I'm starting to peak now Al
And then the man upstairs I hope that he cares
If I had a penny for my thoughts I'd be a millionaire
We're just three M.C.'s and we're on the go
Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego

I'm not sure how many people in the late 1980s got the overt references to the Book of Daniel (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are the three young men who are thrown into the fire by King Nebuchadnezzar), to the Parable of the Prodigal Son ("I was lost, but now I am found"), and to the Sermon on the Mount ("The meek shall inherit the earth"), but the Beastie Boys knew enough of the Bible to yoke all of these reference together into one song.

⁷ The Rolling Stones are an English rock band formed in London in 1962.

⁸ The Beastie Boys were a were an American rap rock formed in New York City in 1981.

These examples may be a bit eccentric, but I think they underscore the reality that some Biblical literacy among popular music enthusiasts could be assumed as recently as the 1980s. I don't think we can make that assumption today, and I think that it is unlikely that such overtly Biblical references would appear on any popular album/song released in 2018.⁹

THOU SHALT NOT SCOLD

It is really easy to see this as a huge problem and shift gears into scolding all of the institutions and people who might bear some responsibility in this cultural shift. We can blame all the usual suspects: schools, parents, kids, technology, misplaced priorities, government policies, the Democrats, the Republicans, etc.

Playing the blame game and scolding are not helpful. I'm actually not sure referring to it as a *problem* is helpful. Did the Apostles who spread the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection think it was a problem that the Roman Empire was Biblically illiterate? Do missionaries think it is a problem when they tell the stories of Jonah, Moses, and Deborah to people who have never heard their stories before? Do we think it is a problem when a visitor walks into Christ Church for the first time and asks to learn more about Jesus? The reality of Biblical illiteracy is a *reality* and an *opportunity* for you, for me, and for all Christians.

We have the opportunity to be like the first Apostles. Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures", they read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested those texts, and they shared what they had learned with the people they encountered. They weren't professional religious people, they were tax collectors, fishermen, zealots, etc. They were regular people who took a deep dive into the Bible and became fluent in it. This is not a problem, this is a great time to be a Christian.

"I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."¹⁰

PRACTICAL & EASY NEXT STEPS

I've discovered that I can't tell people what to do – at least I can't with any positive outcome. I can encourage, I can invite, I can teach, I can create opportunities, I can help, I can share, but I can't force. I want to encourage you to read the Bible more often and

⁹ There are plenty of Christian rock and hip hop bands out there today, but none have reached the level of international popularity of the Rolling Stones or the Beastie Boys.

¹⁰ John 4:35-38, New Revised Standard Version

regularly, and as much as you can, encourage those around you to read the Bible more often. Doing that informs your faith and allows you to share what you believe with others.

One day when I was 22 or 23, living in New York City, working as a paralegal, it occurred to me that I didn't know much about the Bible. Sure, I had gone to Sunday School, knew some of the stories, and went to church regularly, but I didn't really know the contents of any given book. That evening I read Judges. The next evening I read Acts. It was a start, and from that point I knew the basics of those books. Obviously I learned more in Seminary, but the simple act of reading an entire book was hugely important for me gaining a better understanding of the faith I claimed to believe. I encourage you to take an evening this week and read an entire book of the Bible. Pick a book and plow through it.

Over the years I've picked up several Jesus movies. Some are good, some are really boring. Recently I discovered four movies (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) all produced by one company with the same cast and the same production team. The movies offer a great way to see a single scene from the different perspective of each evangelist. You can buy them on Apple or Amazon for about \$6 each. Just look up Gospel of Mark (Lionsgate). You can watch any of these movies with your family. Think of it more as watching a documentary than the Hunger Games (which is not part of the Bible). You and your family will get the full story of Jesus as told by one of the Evangelists.

Recently I found myself making several long drives alone. I decided that I would use the opportunity to hear a spoken word version of the Letter to the Hebrews. Finding decent spoken word versions of the Bible is harder than you might think. Most versions use the King James Version which is beautiful but not the English I speak – a friend of mine referred to the KJV on tape as a great cure for insomnia. I discovered [The Streetlights Bible](#) on Apple Music (it is also on Amazon, Spotify, and Pandora). It is the New International Version (NIV) which is a modern, colloquial, English translation set to hip-hop beats. It may or may not be for you, but I thought it was pretty great and easy to understand and follow. I listened to Hebrews three times on one trip.

If you have kids at home, find an age appropriate way for them to learn Bible stories. I just purchased [The Action Bible](#), a graphic novel version of the Bible for my kids. It is basically a comic book, and since they are into comic book heroes, I think they will find the format familiar and readable. They can discover for themselves that Samuel, not Superman, is a hero in the Bible.

The Daily Office (Morning Prayer) is my go-to for regular Bible reading. Every Monday through Thursday a group of us meet in the morning for 20-30 minutes in the Church Library to pray, learn about some obscure saint, and read three passages of Scripture. We read in the Scripture in sequence, and right now we are reading through Exodus, Colossians, and the Gospel according to Matthew. Please consider joining us. It's a great way to pray and read the Scriptures regularly. If you can't be present with us, I hope you will consider praying the Office on your own. There are numerous online versions. I use "eCP", an

iPhone/Android app that makes it easy. There are free online resources too: Google “Mission Saint Clare” or “Bede’s Breviary” for two easy-to-use Daily Office resources.

Every Thursday morning in the Library we offer a Bible Study. The group gathers over food and coffee, looks back at the prior week’s sermon, and looks ahead to the Sunday lections. Michael Moynihan facilitates the discussion and the group welcomes anyone who want to join. I invite you to come once and try it out.

Beginning in May I will offer an evening Bible Study each month called “The Rector’s Good Book Club”. On Tuesday, May 8, 7:00 p.m., in the Library, we will explore the Letter to the Hebrews. I ask that you read the entire Letter to the Hebrews in advance. After a brief intro to the book, we will explore any themes participants wish – please come with a few questions. The Good Book Club continues Tuesday, June 12, 7:00 p.m., in the Library, with the Acts of the Apostles. Please try to read the Gospel according to Luke and the Book of Acts in advance. Pizza will be provided both evenings.

I encourage you to carve out some time to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Bible. “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”¹¹ “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”¹²

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Matthew Hoxsie Mead". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name of the signatory.

The Reverend Matthew Hoxsie Mead, Rector

¹¹ 2 Timothy 3:16, New Revised Standard Version

¹² Hebrews 4:12, New Revised Standard Version