BIBLICAL LITERACY: TOWARD A WORKING DEFINITION

By Tanner F. Hickman, EdD

and

Stephen C. Smith

Introduction

Hosea 4:6 declares, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...” While this text addresses the specific and personal knowledge of God, the general issue of ignorance of Scripture has existed for ages. As T. J. Wray notes, people have used the Bible to defend historical atrocities simply by misinterpreting a particular passage to best defend an act of “human barbarity.”¹ Even avowed atheist Richard Dawkins admits, “A native speaker of English who has never read a word of the King James Bible is verging on the barbarian.”²

For years now, Evangelicals, especially Southern Baptists, have bemoaned the issue of biblical illiteracy. Noting various surveys—Miller (1932), Pageant (1949), Bennett (1949), “The Bible and You” Test (1963), Gallup (1955 and 1982), and the Barna Research Group (1990)—Findley Edge demonstrates that biblical illiteracy has been prevalent throughout the twentieth century, both in the general cultural and within the church.³

This need for concern seems strange since, according to the Barna Group, 85.0 percent of adult households own a Bible.⁴ This same survey shows that the trend of ownership has declined steadily since 1993.⁵ However, owning a Bible often does not equate to reading the Bible, let alone engaging the Bible. Perhaps George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli sum up the issue best: “Americans revere the Bible—but, by and large, they don’t read it. And because they don’t read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates.”⁶
Without a working Bible knowledge, Christians lose a main source of instruction, strength, renewal, direction, inspiration, and influence.

The problem may not be the identification of illiteracy, but with the definition of literacy itself. Indeed, illiteracy cannot be confirmed or fully addressed unless a strong and workable definition of literacy exists. Yet, such a definitive statement evades many students of the issue. Basically, one may know what biblical literacy should include but cannot state exactly what biblical literacy is. Perhaps a clearer statement of biblical literacy can assist us in addressing the needs to combat successfully biblical illiteracy. Thus, we need a stronger definition of biblical literacy. Perhaps the following examination will help in developing a working standard for a definition of biblical literacy.

**Basic Biblical Literacy**

**Literacy**

To develop a definition for biblical literacy, one must understand the basic definition of literacy. The term *literacy* itself harkens unto the term *literature*, which when broken down even further, implies an understanding of letters and words. Hence, the foundation of literacy rests upon the ability to read and write. Historically, most basic forms of education consist of reading, writing, and reasoning.\(^7\) In this same vein of thinking, Jon D. Miller simplifies the components of literacy to the state of being learned and, more commonly understood, the ability to read and write.\(^8\) Although Stephen P. Norris and Linda M. Phillips interject that learning can exist without the ability to read and write, literacy still depends on text.\(^9\) As such, although some forms of literacy may be experiential, text remains the basic component of all literacy.
However, at this point a consensus definition of literacy eludes most educators. Sylvia Scribner explains that most definitions of literacy arise from the classification and labeling of individuals and groups dependent upon the needs of the defining party for the implementation of specific programs.\textsuperscript{10} Essentially, the definition of literacy varies according to the needs of the organization defining the term.

For example, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) defines literacy as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.”\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, in its definition of literacy, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) acknowledges the cultural influences on individual literacy and includes abilities to use technology to enable the individual to critique, analyze, and engage information.\textsuperscript{12}

The challenge to create a meaningful definition exists in other cultures. For example, Morris H. Shamos declares that achieving a meaningful definition of scientific literacy is impossible because science cannot be reduced to only a few issues and science education is difficult to convey to the public.\textsuperscript{13} Literacy must go beyond mere reading and writing; to be literate, one must be able to engage the literacy basics—reading and writing—to engage the immediate and connecting cultures. In other words, although literacy is based on reading and writing, basic literacy is not enough to be socially or culturally literate. To be truly literate, one must be able to put this knowledge and understanding into practice. Basic literacy provides the building blocks to establish levels of higher levels of literacy. Thus, literacy is not a one-step achievement, but rather an ongoing process.

Biblical Literacy
Sadly, defining literacy according to a biblical worldview suffers from the same restraints that secular education face; namely, such a definition relies on outside influences and factors. Therefore, various organizations and studies dictate current definitions (or, better, inclusions to the definition) of biblical literacy. A satisfactory definition of biblical literacy does not exist for many persons.

In his seminal work, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t*, Stephen Prothero admits the basis of all literacy falls on the ability to read and engage one’s basic religious tradition. In the case of Christianity, religious literacy involves a core knowledge of biblical history, core beliefs, and stories. Although Prothero seeks a religious literacy—one that includes all religions (not specifically Christianity) that reside in the United States for a civic and secular agenda—he admits that an understanding of Christianity and the Bible provides the core ingredient for achieving educational functionality.

Additionally, biblical literacy according to the Bible Literacy Project consists of the following five basic components:

1. Knowing the books of the Bible.
2. Being familiar with common Bible stories.
3. Being familiar with popular Bible characters.
4. Being able to recognize common biblical phrases.
5. Being able to connect that knowledge to references in literature.

Yet, the Bible Literacy Project mainly limits the definition of biblical literacy to a basic knowledge and familiarity of Bible facts. Indeed, the only aspect of connection comes from the final component, that of reference to literature.

Likewise, in *Biblical Literacy: The Essential Bible Stories Everyone Needs to Know*, Timothy Beal contends that in order to be culturally literate, one must be biblically
literate. In other words, according to Beal, to understand literature, one must know and understand Bible literature.

Prothero, the Bible Literacy Project, and Beal conclude that biblical literacy provides a literary key to a sound basic education. Dawkins also concedes the need to read the Bible for its “outstanding literary merit.” In other words, these sources relegate biblical knowledge to the role of an aid for cultural interaction. Unfortunately, these sources limit the knowledge of the Bible to mere identification of Bible facts and trivia, but offer very little in the application of such knowledge. To do so, misses the full impact of biblical literacy. As David Platt emphasizes, “What we’re after is not information — that’s not what biblical literacy is about. Biblical literacy is about transformation, where people are obeying Christ.” Like its secular counterpart, biblical literacy must go beyond just the basics; just knowing about the Bible is not enough.

Scientific Literacy and Levels of Literacy as a Means to Define Biblical Literacy

The scientific community may lend assistance in achieving a working definition or understanding of biblical literacy. In *Composition and the Rhetoric of Science: Engaging the Dominant Discourse*, Michael J. Zerbe acknowledges the difficulty in defining literacy for science based on cultural diversity; he opts instead for a progressive definition of scientific literacy. Rather than a singular limiting definition, Zerbe instead offers a progressive definition model of literacy in three levels: autonomous, critical, and ideological, with each level building on its predecessor. Briefly, an autonomous level of literacy is a basic literacy, consisting of being able to read and understand. A critical literacy means that in
addition to reading and understanding text, the individual can interpret, analyze, and explain text. Finally, an ideological literacy builds upon the previous levels, with the individual able to engage the source material to interact with society. As the highest level of literacy, ideological literacy enables an individual to possess cultural significance and relevance towards shaping cultural philosophy and praxis. In essence, ideological literacy empowers an individual to not only be a part of society, but to change society intelligently and willfully.

Zerbe’s model of scientific literacy offers a firm understanding of how to achieve biblical literacy. Basically, to become biblically literate requires progressive learning, experience, and application.

Again, the purpose of this work is to provide specific standards that will lead to a definition of biblical literacy. Such a definition would then lend itself to implementing efficient biblical literacy praxis within the local church. The following sections offer a potential model of biblical literacy using the terms basic, intermediate, and advanced as descriptors.

A Model of Biblical Literacy

Basic Biblical Literacy

Using Zerbe’s discourse as a model, churches also can develop a working model of biblical literacy. In fact, churches enact such a model that includes basic, advanced, and ideal literacy levels. In almost every church, children are trained in memorizing Bible verses, learning Bible stories, and participating in Bible drills. Inherent to these equipping tools is the realization and acceptance of the Bible as Truth. Such steps would be consistent
with Zerbe’s understanding of an autonomous level or basic literacy. In fact, for the purposes of creating a working model, this research opts for the term *basic literacy*.

While essential, Scripture memorization, Bible stories, and knowing where Bible passages are located fall short of true application education. Similarly, students must learn the letters of the alphabet, the sounds these letters provide when pronounced, how the combination of these letters to form actual words, and how words form sentences, which eventually lead to ideas. As such, the literacy that Prothero and Beal offer provides only a basic biblical literacy, knowledge of facts that come from coaching or reading. Such learning, however, leads to a life-long practice of reading the Bible so that a deeper understanding and application can occur. Hence, such a basis is necessary to secure a foundation so that an individual may advance to the next level.

Intermediate Biblical Literacy

Every year at Vacation Bible Schools across the United States, children recite the Pledge to the Bible: “I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God’s Holy Word. I will make it a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path, and will hide its words in my heart that I might not sin against God.” Interestingly, these words echo the concept of what will be labeled here as an *intermediate biblical literacy*. A well-grounded knowledge of the Bible is essential toward living a life devoted to Christ. Christians must read the Bible by self-study, attending Sunday School, and participating in group Bible study. Here, Christians begin to further explore the basics learned earlier, digging deeper into understanding and meaning. As R. C. Sproul explains, “The Bible is addressed primarily, though not exclusively, to our understanding. That means the mind.” To understand is to comprehend and differentiate
a Christian worldview from other worldviews. Understanding is a deeper level of learning that exceeds the acquisition of facts to an internalization of knowledge and the shaping of values that relies ultimately on the work of the Holy Spirit.

Such literacy advances personal growth, meaning the Christian wants to know the Lord more fully every day, which echoes Paul’s command in Romans 12:2: “And be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” (Romans 12:2) In other words, each day, the rational expectation for a Christian is to experience a new, changed mind than he or she possessed before; when Christ lives in a person, his or her mind cannot help but be different because Christ lives in that person. As a result of this renewed mind, a Christian must learn the Word of God—not by mere memorization, but as an application to his or her personal life—which promotes experiential growth.

In 2 Timothy 2: 15, Paul writes, “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” Paul indicates a sense of urgency (as Marvin R. Vincent indicates, the original passage began as “make haste”) As William Barclay notes, Paul urges Timothy “to present himself, amidst the false teachers, as a real teacher of the truth.” Studying—not merely reading—the Bible in this sense (to accurately interpret and apply the Word of God) would alleviate Beal’s protest of fear of those who are hesitant to read and interpret the Bible. Here, such diligence in studying God’s Word leads to application of what is learned. Thus, in disagreement with Beal, reading the Bible at this stage of biblical literacy is very much about “getting it right.” At this intermediate stage, biblical literacy includes the ability to discern, or comprehend fully, God’s Word for a more meaningful purpose than personal application.
In the first two levels alone, a progressive maturation can be observed. However, to stop at this current level cheats not only the individual, but also the world. In other words, biblical maturity involves applying God’s Word not only to one’s life, but also in an attempt to transform the world for Christ. George H. Guthrie explains that application assists “renewal and ongoing growth in the Christian life.” Thus, as James 1:22 instructs, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” Without application, biblical literacy stagnates.

Advanced Biblical Literacy

James 2:17 provides a theme for the final stage of this proposed biblical literacy: “Even so faith, if it has not works, is dead, being alone.” Thus, to enter into a level of biblical maturity, or advanced biblical literacy, one must put his or her faith into action. Knowledge alone, while wonderful and useful, does not compare to practice, which allows for experience, which in turn promotes a new depth of maturity and learning. As Sproul observes, “The Christian who is not diligently involved in a serious study of Scripture is simply inadequate as a disciple of Christ.” As Christians mature, they become equipped to serve; service to the Lord is their purpose. This equipping comes from reading the Bible, resulting in a bridge between knowledge and action. An advanced biblically literate person expresses in word and deed the knowledge obtained through study.

In agreement with this thinking, N. Allan Moseley, professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, states that a Christian should be able to

1. Think in a manner that is consistent with the propositional truth of the Bible,
2. Learn why the truth of the Bible is both reliable and rational,
3. Understand the ways in which a biblical worldview differs from other worldviews,
4. Live in accord with the truth of the Bible, and
5. Develop the ability to communicate to others coherently and compellingly the basis and implications of a biblical worldview.\textsuperscript{30}

A well-grounded knowledge of the Bible is essential toward living a life devoted to Christ, which leads to making disciples of Christ. Romans 10:17 states, “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Further, James 2:26 explains, “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” Likewise, knowledge without action is useless. Advanced biblical literacy extends beyond personal application; it requires Christ-centered action.

Perhaps Matthew 28:19-20 serves an example of this maturity: “Go therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” Within the idea of making disciples lies the concept of teaching. Mature Christians cannot help but desire to share Jesus Christ to the world as a result of Christ indwelling in them (Galatians 2:20).

Sadly, even some Christian institutions overlook this fact. As Frank E. Gaebelein observes, “It is entirely possible for students to go to some seminaries and come out knowing much about higher criticism, dialectic theology, the philosophy of religion, sociology, worship programs, and the like, and yet have only a bowing acquaintance with great portions of Scripture.”\textsuperscript{31}

Thankfully, this observation only applies to some Christian institutions. One of the goals at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary (MABTS) is to train students to live their faith by putting their learning into practice. The practical missions program at MABTS
requires that student witness on a continual basis. Such a stipulation necessitates a level of maturity based on biblical knowledge.

Consequently, advanced biblical literacy also means that one recognizes that learning is never complete; in fact, it truly takes maturity for a person to admit that he or she does not know all there is to know concerning the Bible. Biblical literacy is a spiritual practice that is dynamic in nature, but never fully realized in this life. Truly, biblical literacy is a practice of living that leads to a desire to learn more and live a life abiding ever deeper in Christ.

**Conclusion**

True biblical literacy extends to a level of comprehension that enables one to understand the importance of Bible doctrine and deeper theological concepts, which in turn should enhance the desire to think, learn, understand, live, and develop into a culture-changing Christian living the faith they proclaim.

Nevertheless, biblical literacy cannot be achieved in one step, nor can the process truly ever be completed in this lifetime. Rather, biblical literacy is an ongoing process, motivated by the desire to be more like Christ. As 1 Peter 1:16 instructs, “Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.” Although a cultural revival in biblical literacy offers a promising start for re-introducing the Bible to the population, Evangelicals cannot be satisfied with mere knowledge or understanding of the Bible as a means for cultural literacy. Rather, the goal of Christians must be not only the knowledge and understanding of the Bible, but also the application of Scripture to evangelize and disciple the world around them as a result of Christ transforming their lives. Such a goal cannot be accomplished without some level of biblical literacy.
Defining biblical literacy provides only a first step. Evangelicals—indeed, all Christians—must promote biblical literacy. Sadly, as the Barna Group reported in 2009, no progress or attempts are being made to foster biblical literacy. Two possibilities for this tragedy exist. First, up to now, no clear or workable definition for biblical literacy has existed; thus, no means to counteract biblical illiteracy could be enacted logically or efficiently. Second, and even more tragic, a deep apathy pervades many evangelicals so that few wish to enact initiatives to promote biblical literacy. However (and thankfully), this latter possibility seems unlikely as demonstrated by the recent Read the Bible for Life initiative, a joint effort by LifeWay Christian Resources and B&H Books to improve biblical literacy by fostering

- an understanding of how to read the parts of Scripture well,
- a perspective on the Bible as a grand story God has written on the world,
- a grasp of the themes of Scripture that thread their way powerfully and beautifully from the beginning to the end of this book of books, and
- sound application of the Scripture to modern-day life.

Hopefully, Read the Bible for Life will provide a much-needed boost to biblical literacy. Indeed, it contains the basic aspects promoted within this discussion: reading, understanding, and applying Scripture.

As with any work in progress, the study and promotion of biblical literacy cannot rest with a definition. The goal of this discussion was to provide a working model for biblical literacy that will lead to an effective definition. The following working definition is suggested:

1. Biblical literacy consists of three components: basic, intermediate, and advanced.
   a. Basic biblical literacy is rooted in knowledge of the Bible as Truth, including Bible facts, stories, and verses.
b. Intermediate biblical literacy builds upon a basic biblical literacy toward a personal application to achieve a personal piety that should lead to an outward transformation.

c. Advanced biblical literacy is the culmination of Bible knowledge and personal application to affect disciple making for the Kingdom of God.

2. Biblical literacy is a dynamic discipline never fully completed in this life but must be consistently harnessed.

3. Biblical literacy leads to a Christ-centered worldview that should lead to global spiritual transformation, involving the ongoing process of disciple making.

4. Biblical literacy is a sign of Christ indwelling within the Christian.

More work is required, especially in the application aspect of biblical literacy for church education and church leaders. As Luke 12:48 states, “But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.” As implied, obtaining biblical literacy requires additional learning and application to win souls, disciple people, change the world, and exalt Christ.

Biblical literacy is a life-long spiritual journey, rooted in the desire to know more of Christ through his Word and living out what is learned. The student of Scripture should know foundational elements of the Scripture narrative, yet possess a deeper knowledge of doctrine to live out what they know for the glory of God. As 2 Peter 3:18 urges, “But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever.”

The foundation of biblical literacy always comes back to reading the Bible.


3 Findley B. Edge, Teaching for Results (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 143-152.
5 Ibid., 11.
15 Ibid., 18.
27 Ibid., xv.
29 Sproul, Knowing Scripture, 26.
30 N. Allan Moseley, Thinking Against the Grain (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2003), 22.