

Does reading the Bible make you liberal?
November 4, 2011

Eighty-nine percent of American households own a Bible — on average, four per home — and a new study has discovered frequent Bible reading can turn people liberal, at least in some ways. Research conducted by a Baylor University student discovered that the more a person reads the Bible, the more that person opposes the Patriot Act, supports abolishing capital punishment, and believes science and religion are compatible.

The liberalism cuts across political, economic and regional differences. The study found that while frequent Bible reading does increase opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, most of those who read the Bible on a daily basis believe it's important for a Christian to seek social and economic justice in order to become a better person.

The reasons for these results are mixed, experts believe, with one saying that frequent Bible readings can uncover nuances missed the first time. Aaron Franzen, who did the research, says, "The ubiquity of references to the Bible promotes the idea that we all know what it says and, consequently, reading it is simply a habitual and ultimately meaningless activity," which is why he thinks those who read it more often pick up on a message of social justice that those who read it infrequently might miss.

Do you think frequent Bible readings engender a more liberal attitude to social justice, punishment and science?

Answer:

I was intrigued to read that frequent Bible-reading, according to a Baylor University student's research, seemed to encourage people to be more liberal in terms of social justice, capital punishment and acceptance of science. But I was disturbed by the fact that this same pursuit appeared to make readers less progressive on the topics of abortion and same-sex marriage. I find that result problematical, since the Scriptures say almost nothing about either one of these topics. In fact, Jesus was never quoted with any opinions about these topics. Instead, the message of love for all people, even "publicans and sinners," was central to his teachings.

It is that compelling message that is reflected in the Unitarian Universalist theme of "Standing on the Side of Love," a phrase adopted to honor the marriage of same-sex couples and later expanded to encompass our love for many other marginalized people. It is a value that is central to one of our modern hymns, composed by the Rev. Jason Sheldon, with the repeated line: "Emboldened by faith, we dare to proclaim, we are standing on the side of love." Love is a gift that provides us with happiness beyond measure. It is incomprehensible to me that anyone should be denied the opportunity to express that love freely.

My hope is that the love expressed within the Christian scriptures can be broadened to welcome all people — those who read the Bible, and those who do not. I believe that love, rather than judgment, can, and should, become a way of life for all people of faith.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

The short answer to this week's question is yes. I have never been able to understand how believers of any stripe could read the Gospels and/or read the great Hebrew prophets and not insist on fairness for those without power, without standing, in our society.

I was in high school in the late 1950s and in college in the early 1960s, and the issue of racial equality was never a question for me. If we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, how could we whites, especially in church, not give black people equal rights? For me, it was the biggest no-brainer in the history of mankind, to paraphrase a radio commercial that I keep hearing. And yet the bigotry and blindness that we white folks practiced in our lily-white churches was dumbfounding to me.

What is especially gratifying about the survey is that it wasn't taken at some ultra-liberal East Coast Ivy League school, but at Baylor, in Texas. Baylor, in Waco, and sometimes pronounced "Whacko."

The Holy Spirit of God is truly at work if a survey in the Bible Belt shows that the more one reads the word of God, the more liberal one becomes. How can one not? For example, how can one read the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10 and not realize that just as the hated Samaritan helped the injured man, so must we too reach out to whoever the hated are in our society? Is that liberal, to try to insist on justice for the poor, the powerless, the hungry, the jobless? If so, then every believer of any tradition should be in the liberal column.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada Flintridge

Frequent Bible reading can't help but engender a more liberal attitude to social justice. Particular care for the poor is espoused everywhere in both testaments, especially in the Hebrew prophets and the Gospels.

Here, for instance, is the prophet Amos, on God's reaction to the idea of ritual practice as an adequate life of faith: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21, 23-24).

Jesus taught that giving your resources away to help the poor is the necessary prelude to seeking God. "You cannot serve God and wealth," he said (Matthew 6:24). In fact, Jesus talks about giving away money and possessions more than any other topic — more than love, forgiveness, or prayer. You simply can't read the Gospels closely and still think it's OK to keep your money and possessions to yourself and ignore the needs of the poor.

So yes, reading the Bible makes you accountable to the demands of social justice.

The rest of the study makes no sense to me. Frequent Bible reading cannot increase opposition to (or support of, for that matter) abortion and homosexual marriage — the Bible is utterly silent on both topics. Ditto on science and religion, capital punishment and the Patriot Act. Only preexisting biases explain the Bible's so-called influence on these modern issues.

What the study might show is this: The segment of the population most likely to read the Bible frequently consists of evangelicals with higher levels of education who value intelligent study. Their intelligence makes them persuadable in their politics, but their evangelicalism keeps them conservative in their social ethics.

Maybe the most interesting yield of the study is the claim that 89% of Americans own a Bible. In this age of rampant biblical illiteracy, I'd be interested to see where those Bibles came from (grandparents? baptism gifts long forgotten?) and which leg of a table they're currently propping up.

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George's Episcopal Church
La Cañada Flintridge

When we read the Bible, we are exposed to the very heart of God. His word, the Bible, is truth, and his ways taught in it are higher than ours as the heavens are higher than the earth. Many of his ways and commands are labeled ultra-conservative by some, many are labeled liberal by others. The Bible teaches both the holiness and the love of God as attributes and as ways we should follow. I believe how people attempt to merge these, or emphasize one over the other in practical living, earns us the title conservative or liberal.

I believe that the frequent Bible reader will lean more toward mercy in the treatment of the poor and the immigrant. Those principles are clearly promoted in Scripture. Favoritism based on wealth is clearly prohibited. Regarding punishment, we are called to personal forgiveness of those who commit crimes against us, but we also see an upholding of the death penalty carried out by the state (See Romans 13:4). Regarding science, the Bible clearly and repeatedly states that God created heavens and earth, all kinds of creatures, and man in his own image. I really don't know if creationism is considered liberal, but in our culture, I suspect it's not.

However else we may be influenced by the Bible, its ultimate purpose is to lead us to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as our personal savior. Sadly, hell will be populated with both conservatives and liberals. God's desire is that each of us would be born again through faith in Christ (see John 3:3), living in holiness and loving others as we love ourselves.

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

No, I do not think that frequent readings of the Bible would necessarily produce a liberal attitude toward social justice, any more than they would prompt a conservative stance. I find it counterproductive to skew the Bible one way or another in order to pigeonhole the words of scripture into a certain spot on the contemporary political spectrum. Oftentimes, these distorted views — in either direction — about the true meaning of the Bible are a result of ignorance and incorrect interpretation.

Instead, our focus when reading the Bible should be on disseminating a moral code for all of humanity which applies equally to everyone. These principles should be based on universally accepted values: revering human life, showing compassion for all living creatures, cherishing

the family unit, respecting another's property, and establishing courts of law. Of equal importance is the recognition of a supreme deity, which includes not serving other entities or blaspheming. If men and women around the globe dedicated themselves to these ideals, the result would be a world that is kinder, gentler and more peaceful.

Frequent Bible reading is certainly a beneficial practice that should be encouraged for all who share the Judeo-Christian heritage, as well as for people of other backgrounds who want to learn more about this faith tradition. Contemplating the word of God inevitably leads an individual to reflect upon his real purpose in life, and it encourages positive interaction with other people and with the universe as a whole. However, it is important for each of us to realize that God is neither conservative nor liberal, Democrat or Republican. God is the universal deity for all of humankind, and nobody can claim a monopoly on holiness or divine blessing.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

An eye-catching headline recently found in Christianity Today read, "Survey: Frequent Bible Reading Can Turn You Liberal," which describes the findings of a Baylor University doctoral student. Is the headline right and the student's conclusion correct? I have my doubts.

First, the student's analysis is one of first impression and is based on his observations of data drawn from a 2007 Baylor University religious survey.

Second, a February 2008 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey found that the more frequently a person attends church and prays, the more likely that person is to be a conservative. One would assume that such a person would also be a frequent Bible reader.

Third, a particular view on an issue does not, in and of itself, define a person's political persuasion. For example, the Baylor study indicated that those individuals who read the Bible are more likely to oppose the Patriot Act and, accordingly, are more likely to be liberal. An alternative explanation is that some of those individuals may have a libertarian point of view.

Fourth, a common view of a particular issue does not necessarily mean that there is a common view as to its solution. For example, Bible readers may develop more compassion for the poor, but their solutions to this issue may vary and bigger government may not be one of them.

Fifth, I'm reminded of one of Thomas Friedman's observations in his bestselling book, "The World is Flat." He argues that old notions of what is a liberal and what is a conservative are changing in our global environment, and that future political views and positions will be dictated by new factors that will realign and/or redefine liberals and conservatives.

Sixth, and by far the most important, the purpose of the Bible is not to create liberals or conservatives. Rather, as Jesus said, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me." John 5:39.

Perhaps the better and more appropriate headline should be, "Frequent Bible Reading Can Bring You to Jesus Christ Regardless of Your Political Persuasion."

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
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By “liberal,” I assume you mean “faithful,” right? Our Methodist founder, the Reverend Mr. Wesley, advised that to read scripture most effectively, one should set apart a little time every day and read “with a single eye, to know the whole will of God.” I think he knew that too often, we read only when challenged or in crisis, and then we scan quickly for the verse that seems to support whatever argument we want to make, or whatever solution we wish to pursue.

When we sit down for a longer and fuller read, we start to see the sweeping stories and themes that reveal God's intentions for humanity and for creation. The warnings of the prophets against oppressing the poor become grating in their repetition; the command to love and forgive becomes difficult to avoid; praises of creation keep spilling off the page; Jesus' acceptance of all kinds of outsiders starts to make us wonder who we're leaving out; and God's promises of grace and rescue and reconciliation begin to feel like they are directed at us. Reading for “the whole will of God” is a far different experience than mining the Bible for nuggets to prove your points, whether they be anti-gay or pro-dancing (ala Footloose).

It's not simply the reading that changes people. I am certainly not changed every time I read scripture. Much of it has to be studied to be figured out. I think people assume the Bible is full of rules to follow, but in reality, guidance is given not only through law, but also through stories, histories, poems, sayings and letters. If you were to open up the Bible randomly with finger poised to land on a miraculously selected passage just for you, you're just as likely to end up with “Ahaziah fell out of the window of his second-story room” as “turn the other cheek”. Both could turn out to be important, but one requires more research than the other, and both require an awakened heart, open to being moved.

More Bible reading and better faith and politics conversations for everyone! I'm for it!

The Rev. Paige Eaves
Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church
Montrose

It seems to me that reading parts of the Bible could lead to more liberal attitudes toward some aspects of social justice, punishment and science. The New Testament was a great motivator of the Social Gospel moment in the 20th Century. Many Social Gospel believers thought that a reading of the New Testament encouraged people to bring a socially just world into being on this earth. They took words like those in Matthew — “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” — to mean that they should take care of the poor and oppressed,

Many individuals in history have mentioned the words of the New Testament as reasons for offering charity, aid and compassion to others. There are many groups and churches today who perform good works and attempt to heal and serve people. For hundreds of years, Christian groups have sought to help fellow Christians and others who were poor and unjustly treated. Some of these activities resulted in changes in institutional systems, including prisons and mental asylums.

It is possible that certain reforms pushed by Christians helped create the modern political and economic systems we live under today.

Some thinkers have suggested that modern science owes a debt to European Christianity. They say Christianity nurtured economic and scientific ideas. Whether this view is correct, the Bible is an important book that stands alongside the other books that have expanded human knowledge and helped to bring us to where we are today in technology, science, engineering and social understanding.

There is another side to the study conducted by Aaron Franzen. He also found that frequent readers of the Bible demonstrated increased opposition to same-sex marriage and legalized abortion. So not all social issues reflected a liberal bent. I can also believe this result, because parts of the Bible emphasize patriarchy, vengeance and the usefulness of violence in relations. So while it is quite likely that frequent reading of the Bible leads to some good outcomes, the Bible is not the only solution for making our society a better place.

Steven Gibson
South Pasadena Atheist Meetup
Altadena

I did research recently on fatal car accidents in America. There were approximately thirty-five thousand annually. About a third were alcohol-related. That means DUI drivers fared better than the two-thirds sober. Interpretively, we might conclude that people should tinkle before driving to lessen traffic fatalities. That feeling you're having for such logic is how I feel answering this question. Reading the Bible regularly turns Christians liberal? You're kidding! Perhaps the definition of liberal is other than my understanding, and I am one without knowing it. I read the Bible often, and like others, I have several.

As a conservative, my identity is biblically derived. We shouldn't kill human babies. That's politically conservative, since liberals don't mind killing them if they aren't quiet out of the womb just yet, despite the Bible. I oppose homosexuality as biblically proscribed sinfulness of unmentionable acts. I agree with Jesus that we should live to help others (social justice), but is that liberal? Conservatives have always led in feeding, freeing, and helping the needy. Liberals, I think, would be the recipients of conservative charity more than the other way around.

Regarding punishment, how can someone read Genesis 9:6 ("Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed," NIV) and walk away believing it's immoral to execute murderers? What nuance helps reinterpret that passage? I've read it often, and capital punishment rings liberally loud and conservatively clear.

There may be conservatives that believe the Bible but don't read it much, and so they make bad (and unbiblical) decisions. Likewise, liberals who actually spend time reading the Bible cannot possibly walk away saying the exact opposite of its content and be consistently biblical.

So this whole thing is confusing. Conservatives believe in science, that it's a human means of discovering God's creation. Do I agree with its every conclusion? How many times have its theories, hypotheses, and prevailing views changed? The Bible has never been proven unscientific, unless you mean it didn't line up with some new discovery around the time scientist so-and-so needed another research grant.

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