

The Crisis of Bible Illiteracy

June 18, 2014 | [Kenneth Berding](#)

Stacey Irvine ate almost nothing but chicken nuggets for 15 years. She never tasted fruits or vegetables. She occasionally supplemented her diet with French fries. One day her tongue started to swell and she couldn't catch her breath. She was rushed to the hospital, her airway was forced open, and they stuck an IV in her arm to start pumping in the nutrients she needed. After saving her life, the medical staff sent her home, but not before they warned her that she needed to change her diet or prepare herself for an early death.

I've heard people call it a famine. A famine of knowing the Bible. During a famine people waste away for lack of sustenance. Some people die. Those who remain need nourishment; they need to be revived. And if they have any hope of remaining alive over time, their life situation has to change in conspicuous ways.

During normal famines people don't have access to the food they need. But Stacey Irvine could have eaten anything she wanted. She had resources, opportunity and presumably all the encouragement she needed to eat well. Can you imagine what would happen if all of us decided to follow her example and discontinued eating all but non-nutritious foodstuff? If we happened to beat the odds and live, we undoubtedly would suffer in the long run from nutrition-related chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease.

Like Stacey Irvine, we're killing ourselves. It's surely not for lack of resources; nevertheless, we are in fact starving ourselves to death.

Christians used to be known as "people of one book." Sure, they read, studied and shared other books. But the book they cared about more than all others combined was the Bible. They memorized it, meditated on it, talked about it and taught it to others. We don't do that anymore, and in a very real sense we're starving ourselves to death.

A Famine of Bible Knowledge

Does this sound overly alarmist to you? People who have studied the trends don't think so.

Wheaton College professor Timothy Larsen comments that "it has been demonstrated that biblical literacy has continued to decline. ... Gallup polls have tracked this descent to a current 'record low.'"

In "The 9 Most Important Issues Facing the Evangelical Church," theologian Michael Vlach cites "Biblical Illiteracy in the Church" as his final concern. He agrees with George Barna's assessment that "the Christian body in America is immersed in a crisis of biblical illiteracy."

New Testament scholar David Nienhuis summarizes his understanding of the situation in an article titled "The Problem of Evangelical Biblical Illiteracy: A View from the Classroom":

For well over twenty years now, Christian leaders have been lamenting the loss of general biblical literacy in America. ... Some among us may be tempted to seek odd solace in the recognition that our culture is increasingly post-Christian. ... Much to our embarrassment, however, it has become increasingly clear that the situation is really no better among confessing Christians, even those who claim to hold the Bible in high regard.

If I sound alarmist, I'm not alone.

These days...

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