



# Bible Literacy Report

What do American teens **need** to know and what **do** they know?

Commissioned by Bible Literacy Project, Inc. under a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

## ***Bible Literacy Report:***

### ***What do American teens need to know and what do they know?***

#### **Executive Summary**

##### **What do American students know about the Bible, and what do they need to know in order to get a good education?**

This research project consists of two parts:

- (I) a qualitative research study of what the best high-school English teachers think their students need to know about the Bible and
- (II) the only recent nationally representative survey of American teens' religious knowledge to uncover what American students currently know about the Bible (and other religious texts).

#### **Qualitative Research Findings**

In a diverse sample of high school English teachers in 10 states, 40 out of 41 teachers said Bible knowledge gives students a distinct educational advantage. Ninety percent of high-school English teachers said it was important for *both* college-bound and “regular” students to be biblically literate. An Illinois teacher stated, “I think from the standpoint of academic success, it is imperative that college-bound students be literate. For the others, I think it’s important for them to understand their own culture, just to be well-grounded citizens of the United States—to know where the institutions and ideas come from.”

Conversely, many teachers reported that students in their English classes who were *not* familiar with the Bible were disadvantaged. One California teacher said: “Students who don’t know the Bible are certainly at a disadvantage. It’s harder for them. They’re not as familiar with it, and it takes more time for them to understand what it is.” Teachers reported students without Bible knowledge take more time to teach, appearing “confused,” “stumped,” “clueless.”

These English teachers reported that among their students, Bible illiteracy is common. The majority of high-school English teachers in this sample estimated that fewer than a fourth of their current students were Bible literate. Only 4 of the 30 public schools in the study (compared to all four private schools) offered a unit or course about the Bible. Economically advantaged school districts in this sample were far more likely to offer academic study of the Bible than less advantaged school districts.

#### **Nationally Representative Gallup Survey: Bible Literacy Project Analysis**

This Gallup Survey is based on a nationally representative sample of 1,002 teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18, who were interviewed between May 20 and June 27, 2004. It represents the first extensive, nationally representative survey of the Bible and religious knowledge among American teens in recent years.

The good news is that strong majorities of American teens recognize the basic meaning of widely used Judeo-Christian terms such as “Easter,” “Adam and Eve,” “Moses,” “The Golden Rule,” and “The Good Samaritan.”

# BIBLE LITERACY PROJECT

*An educated person knows the Bible*

However, substantial minorities lack even the most basic working knowledge of the Bible. Almost one out of ten teens believes that Moses is one of the twelve Apostles. About the same proportion, when asked what Easter commemorates, or to identify Adam and Eve, respond “don’t know.”

However, only a minority of American teens appear to be “Bible literate,” reaching the level of knowledge similar to that defined by high school English teachers as necessary to a good education.

- Fewer than half of teens (49 percent) knew what happened at the wedding at Cana (Jesus turned water into wine). Nearly one out of four refused even to guess.
- Given a choice of four quotations from the Bible, almost two-thirds of teens could not correctly identify a quotation from the Sermon on the Mount.
- Similarly, fewer than a third of teens could correctly identify which statement about David was true. (David tried to kill King Saul.) One-quarter of teens believed that the statement “David was king of the Jews” was false.
- Only 8 percent of teens in public schools in this sample reported that their school offered an elective course on the Bible, and just one out of four public-school students (26 percent) said that a unit or section on the Bible was offered in an English or social-studies class.

The Bible Literacy Project analysis of the Gallup data concludes “No controversy among adults, however heated, should be considered an excuse for leaving the next generation ignorant about a body of knowledge crucial to understanding American art, literature, history, language, and culture.”

This document is a brief summary of the *Bible Literacy Report*. For the complete report, downloadable as a PDF, please visit <http://www.bibleliteracy.org>. Copyright © 2005, Bible Literacy Project. All Rights Reserved.

## Biblical Terms Students Should Know

(Source: *Bible Literacy Report*, 2005)

- |  |                                |   |
|--|--------------------------------|---|
| ▪ Ten Commandments                                 | ▪ Eye for an eye               | ▪ Sodom and Gomorrah                                  |
| ▪ Cain and Abel                                    | ▪ Let there be light           | ▪ Armageddon  |
| ▪ Garden of Eden                                   | ▪ Exodus                       | ▪ Twenty-third Psalm                                  |
| ▪ Genesis  | ▪ Apocalypse                   | ▪ Promised Land                                       |
| ▪ Moses  | ▪ Prodigal Son                 | ▪ Abraham and Isaac                                   |
| ▪ Adam and Eve                                     | ▪ Olive branch                 | ▪ Serpent   |
| ▪ David and Goliath                                | ▪ Noah’s ark                   | ▪ Lord’s Prayer                                       |
| ▪ Last Supper                                      | ▪ Am I my brother’s<br>keeper? | ▪ Magi  |
| ▪ Noah and the flood                               | ▪ Fall of Man                  | ▪ Jonah and the whale                                 |
| ▪ Old Testament                                    | ▪ Pontius Pilate               | ▪ Apostles, The Twelve                                |
| ▪ Crucifixion                                      | ▪ Walking on water             | ▪ Render unto Caesar the<br>things which are Caesar’s |
| ▪ Job  | ▪ Original sin                 | ▪ Resurrection  |
| ▪ Do to others as you would<br>have them do to you | ▪ Tower of Babel               | ▪ Jacob and Esau                                      |
| ▪ Judas Iscariot                                   | ▪ Judgment Day                 | ▪ Root of all evil                                    |
| ▪ Good Samaritan                                   | ▪ Messiah                      | ▪ In the beginning                                    |
|  | ▪ Cast the first stone         |   |