

## The Bible Challenge and Why It Matters

MAREK P. ZABRISKIE\*

The Bible Challenge offers individuals, churches, cathedrals, schools, and dioceses an easy way to read through the entire Bible in a year. Participants read three chapters of the Old Testament, one psalm, and a chapter of the New Testament each day. On Sundays, there are no assigned lessons, as it is hoped that those who participate will hear the scriptures read aloud in church. Smaller challenges within The Bible Challenge allow participants to read the entire New Testament, Proverbs, and Psalms in a year or to read one of the Gospels over a fifty-day period. All of the readings can be read along with meditations, questions, and prayers written by leaders from throughout the Anglican Communion and Episcopal Church.

We began The Bible Challenge in 2011 at St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, and later created the online Center for Biblical Studies to share and promote The Bible Challenge. All of our materials are free to use, and the project has now spread to over twenty-five hundred churches in more than fifty countries. Over five hundred thousand Anglicans and Episcopalians have participated, as well as many Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, other Christians, and seekers.

In this essay I will reflect on some of the reasons why The Bible Challenge has caught on so quickly, and why it matters to the church today.

### *Well Educated but Biblically Illiterate*

Each year, my wife joins thirteen of her closest sorority sisters from Vanderbilt University who gather somewhere across the country

---

\* Marek P. Zabriskie is rector of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania. He is the founder of The Bible Challenge and director of the Center for Biblical Studies. His books include *The Bible Challenge: Read the Bible in a Year* (Forward Movement, 2012) and *Doing the Bible Better: The Bible Challenge and the Transformation of the Episcopal Church* (Morehouse Publishing, 2014).

to enjoy one another's fellowship, catch up, and share stories. In a recent visit, many of them shared that they had to return home in time to participate in their Sunday Bible study. They noted that they rarely missed their Bible study, as this is where friendships were developed and wisdom was gleaned. Almost all of them were attending churches outside the Episcopal tradition.

In most Episcopal churches less than 5 percent of the membership attend a weekly Bible study, and perhaps even fewer read the Bible on a daily basis. The Episcopal Church measures worship attendance, annual giving, baptisms, weddings, and funerals, but we do not record the number of Bible studies held or how many people attended. We measure what we value, and Bible study evidently is not significant enough to measure.

Church historian Diana Butler Bass notes that there are almost twenty-two thousand different Christian groups and denominations within the United States. Of these, Episcopalians are the best educated, but when it comes to biblical literacy, Episcopalians fall to nearly dead last. Most of us have never read the Bible straight through; at best, we have read through one of the Gospels or a few psalms. We have assumed that it is sufficient to hear the scriptures read aloud in church, or possibly to attend an occasional Bible study class. But with the average Episcopalian now attending church only once a month, those assumptions no longer hold true.

In most Episcopal churches you will not find a Bible in the pews. No one is ever asked to open one and turn to a given chapter and verse. We are known for attracting good speakers in our educational hours and sometimes these speakers teach about the Bible, but rarely are Bibles actually used. Hence, we do not equip and train our members how to benefit from daily Bible reading.

One difficulty many Episcopalians and Anglicans encounter when attempting to study the Bible is our focus on the lectionary as the normal framework for reading scripture, either in church on Sunday or within the context of the Daily Office. While the lectionary has many strengths, it jumps around significantly and omits large sections of the Bible, including some of the most difficult and troubling passages, which are also quite interesting and challenging.

It was not always this way. When Archbishop Thomas Cranmer introduced the first *Book of Common Prayer* on Whitsunday (Pentecost) of 1549, shop windows were smashed in parts of England by those who thought this prayer book was far too radical, while others

thought that it was not radical enough. Astonishingly, the 1549 Prayer Book provided a Daily Lectionary calling Christians, both clergy and laity, to read through the entire New Testament three times and almost all of the Old Testament in the course of a year. Nothing was omitted. Today, we have moved far away from this challenging discipline.

Reading the Daily Lectionary or listening to the lessons appointed for each Sunday does not give Episcopalians a sense of having read the Bible, of understanding the various books and where they are located, and of knowing their context and place within the overall biblical narrative. When we sit in the pew and listen to the lessons being read from the middle of a book of the Bible, it is like arriving at a movie theater thirty minutes late. The action has already started, and the plot has begun to unfold. If we lack an understanding of the biblical narrative, we struggle to make sense of what is taking place. Who are the characters, and what significance does each of them have to the overall story? Hearing the Bible in this way can be confusing.

### *Developing a Practice of Reading the Bible*

The key to engaging with the scriptures in meaningful ways is to develop a regular practice of prayerful Bible reading. It is clear that Bible study is an important foundation for building strong Christian lives. Faithful churchgoing alone will not sustain spiritual growth, but must be accompanied by daily spiritual practice. Of all the spiritual resources available to Christians—spiritual direction, walking the labyrinth, praying each day, reciting the rosary, reading devotional writers, fasting, and so on—engaging the Bible has been shown to be by far the most effective spiritual tool. And yet for Episcopalians and many Anglicans, engaging regularly with scripture is our weakest suit. We are good at producing what I call “low-wattage Christians,” but perhaps less successful at producing highly committed Christians who have an articulate, contagious faith. We excel in liturgical worship and are often strong with outreach and pastoral care, but we do not fare as well when it comes to reading the Bible on a daily basis. Beautiful liturgy by itself will not lead us into a future with strong communities of faithful, committed Christians. We need to encourage daily spiritual practices that allow Episcopalians and others to develop confidence in reading the Bible on their own.

Our current practice tends to revolve around the well-informed leader. We can open and read the Bible in a room where a leader is

explaining the text to us. We can ask questions. We can share our thoughts. We can listen and learn from one another. Then we put the Bible away until we gather the following week. What we do not excel at doing is helping our members learn how to read the Bible in a prayerful manner in order to transform their lives spiritually.

The Bible Challenge allows church members and friends scattered throughout the world to join in reading the Bible on their own at a time that is convenient for them and using a method that works well for them. Many will choose to read a print Bible, and we recommend the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and the Common English Bible. Many others choose to download and read or listen to the Bible on the various electronic mobile devices widely available today.

In order to make a real difference The Bible Challenge must be *the* ministry of the church, not just one of many. If the church promotes polishing silver, handing out worship leaflets, raking leaves for the church's fall cleanup, and The Bible Challenge as all of equal importance, The Bible Challenge will never transform many lives. Clergy and lay leaders must recognize that leaf raking or silver polishing does not equip and create strong Christians at the same level that prayerful, daily Bible reading does. The key is to read a little bit of the Bible each day in a prayerful manner and let the living Word of God examine us.

One of the interesting things about The Bible Challenge is that many churches have noted that their annual giving, worship attendance, and overall parish satisfaction have greatly increased as a result of participating in The Bible Challenge. In my own parish, we embarked on the largest capital campaign in our church's history after our parish had participated in The Bible Challenge for the second year in a row. We exceeded our goal by over \$750,000 in giving. People who are spiritually fed respond with joy and generosity.

#### *Accessible and Available to All*

Another reason why The Bible Challenge has caught on so quickly is that The Bible Challenge is fairly easy to organize and virtually everyone in a church, school, cathedral, or diocese can participate. We have created The Parent/Child Bible Challenge for parents to lead their children in reading age-appropriate Bibles. The Teen Bible Challenge recommends that teenagers begin by reading the entire

New Testament in a year, which calls for reading one chapter each day—a manageable reading load. Teenagers are invited to reflect upon what this reading teaches them about God, about themselves, and about how to treat others. Adults are encouraged to read the entire Bible or to tackle the New Testament, Proverbs, and Psalms, or one of the Gospels.

In most ministries only a segment of parishioners participate. Often, it is a very small group. The Bible Challenge, however, offers the opportunity for the entire parish to unite and do something that will enhance the spiritual life of each participant. It therefore unifies the parish around a single task to grow spiritually and generates excitement, questioning, and learning.

For clergy, leading The Bible Challenge is an efficient use of time. A rector can lead his or her entire parish in The Bible Challenge in the same amount of time required to prepare a weekly Bible study for a handful of participants. Most Episcopal Bible studies actually are composed of people aged fifty or older, whereas The Bible Challenge allows people of all ages to participate. The key is for the rector, cathedral dean, school head, chaplain, or bishop to participate and take an active leadership role.

There is no requirement that participants must come to the church or attend a class to participate in The Bible Challenge, but we encourage churches to offer opportunities to gather in groups to discuss where they are in the Bible, what they are learning, and how it is transforming their lives. These gatherings offer an ideal opportunity to ask basic as well as deep questions and to learn from one another. Some churches call their small groups “The Good Book Club.” We called ours “Intelligent Talk about the Bible.” It is vital to offer help and support to participants during the first two months, as studies show that if people read the Bible for twenty-one days in a row there is an 80 percent chance they will read the Bible throughout the rest of their lives.

The Bible Challenge is about ongoing transformation. Indeed, the Center for Biblical Studies encourages churches, cathedrals, schools, and dioceses to think of The Bible Challenge as a five-year ministry, not a once-and-done experience. We cannot change a culture in one year’s time. We are more likely to create lasting change over a period of five years. If a church, cathedral, school, or diocese has a low level of biblical literacy, it would be wise to start The Bible Challenge and re-launch it every year for five years, until almost everyone has

participated in it and some have been reading through the Bible daily for five years.

In “Next Steps in The Bible Challenge” we encourage participants to reread the Bible in a different translation or read the Bible using *lectio divina*—reading smaller portions of the Bible each day but in a slow, meditative fashion. Other options include dusting off your high school French or Spanish and reading the Bible in a foreign language, taking a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, joining an Education for Ministry program, and creating or participating in an ongoing Bible study in your church. There are many other options.

### *Rave Reviews for an Ancient Practice*

Time and again, we hear of parishes being excited about something as old-fashioned as Bible reading. Paige Blair, rector of St. Peter’s Church in Del Mar, California, told us, “The Bible Challenge is enriching every aspect of our parish’s life, from worship to fellowship to formation to mission. Those who are participating are discovering new aspects of scripture by reading ‘the whole,’ so that when a text comes up in the lectionary, there is a deepened sense of connection and context.”

She added, “We’re talking about this experience in every corner of the parish, making associations with the biblical stories and our daily lives. A wonderful sense of community has developed among those who are engaging The Bible Challenge, a community full of spirit and joy. Most of all, the daily reading of scripture is undergirding all that we do, deepening our sense of God’s presence, our gratitude for God’s love for us, and our part in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, and ergo, God’s mission.”

One normally thinks of the southern part of the United States as “the Bible belt,” but The Bible Challenge seems to have been well received across the United States and in more than fifty countries. The materials are now available in Spanish, French, and Swahili. Urban, suburban, and rural churches, large, medium-sized, and small churches have successfully used it.

Marjorie Brown, who leads St. Mary’s Church, Primrose Hill in London, wrote, “About a year ago, two members of St Mary’s congregation suggested that we take part in The Bible Challenge, a project they had heard about from an American relative. I had been looking

for a way to encourage our church members to engage more deeply with the scriptures and this seemed to fit the bill perfectly. When the invitation went out, over sixty people signed up to take part, beginning on Advent Sunday 2013.”

She explained that at St. Mary’s Primrose Hill “the couple who made the original suggestion hosted an introductory social evening, and we have continued to hold monthly after-church discussions to support one another as we continue with the Challenge. Sunday sermons and Advent and Lent groups have focused on how we engage with the Bible. Some of us went to the Holy Land this year and had the wonderful experience of the Bible stories coming alive for us in their original setting. We are now thinking about how we take The Bible Challenge forward from next Advent, providing resources to help people continue to read and pray the scriptures on a daily basis.” Other churches in her London deanery are now participating in The Bible Challenge.

David Anderson, rector of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Darien, Connecticut, told us, “The Bible Challenge is going incredibly well. We have at last count two hundred fifty-five people signed on—and more that are sort of reading along with their spouse but haven’t exactly signed up. It’s been pretty remarkable to hear people that have been going to church for fifty or sixty years and never read Genesis. I just did the Bible Book Club this morning, and I continue to have a wonderful time engaging people in the scriptures.” For many parishes the key for success seems to be organizational work and marketing. Churches where the rector or leader has jumped in wholeheartedly with careful planning and good promotion have had the best experience with The Bible Challenge.

Entire Episcopal and Anglican dioceses are benefiting from The Bible Challenge as well. In the Diocese of Upper South Carolina, Kellie Wilson, coordinator for diocesan participation in The Bible Challenge, wrote, “We are excited to say that in the Diocese of Upper South Carolina 52 percent of our congregations have accepted Bishop Andrew Waldo’s challenge to read the Bible in one year. To support our participants, we have created a closed Facebook group which has activity on it every day. We also send out any posts by the Bishop to our email list of participants. Everywhere that I go in our diocese, someone talks to me about The Bible Challenge. We have youth, children, and adults participating. It has been exciting to read

the posts on Facebook and to hear our members engaging scripture at a deep level.” Over fifty Anglican dioceses are currently active or have participated in The Bible Challenge.

Canon Gene Manning, sub-dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Nashville, Tennessee, enlisted over one hundred forty parishioners to participate in The Bible Challenge. She wrote, “Many voiced their enthusiasm in taking on such an arduous task while others spoke honestly of their hesitancy in the midst of their desire and longing to be a part of this spiritual practice. The Bible Challenge is more than a program or a Bible study. It truly has become a profound and defining part of our life together as a community of faith. Our weekly conversation groups produce honest discussions as we seek to ask the difficult questions and to struggle with the text. Community is formed simply through the knowledge that fellow parishioners are engaged together in reading the Bible.”

She noted that “many hallway conversations on Sunday mornings revolve around the prior week’s readings and the challenges they produced. These conversations are not confined within the church walls but occur in the community as well—the grocery store, the coffee shop, the local YMCA. One parishioner said, ‘I travel a great deal for work and this keeps me tied to my church and to my faith. I know I am not alone in this discipline. It is empowering to be connected to fellow Christians through the scripture.’”

Of course, the most powerful witness is to watch the impact that daily Bible reading can have in one person’s life. It is transformational. One participant named Jan told us, “My own Bible reading has been nothing short of profound. I am humbled and amazed at just how much this is speaking to me. Each day if I accomplish nothing else, I manage to get my reading done. It has become as vital to me as drinking water. And I am continually amazed at the grace that intercedes each and every time. Alright, I confess that parts of the Old Testament have been wrought with sacrifice that does not resonate with me! But still the word speaks into my living day and the glory is everywhere! If my enthusiasm continues (which I hope and pray it will) I cannot wait to get to the end and do it again. Why oh why did I not do this earlier!”

When I was creating The Bible Challenge I was inspired by two people in particular. The first was President John Adams, who read through the entire Bible each year of his adult life. He faithfully read the Bible every Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Over time, the Bible shaped his character, and his character shaped our



nation. The second was Greg Jones, who was the caregiver for my father-in-law when he was battling Parkinson's. Greg would sit and read the Bible silently for hours while watching over and supporting my in-laws. Greg never attended college, but he was able to read through the Bible comfortably on his own. His Bible reading deepened his sense of faith and vocation and enabled him to do what he did with compassion and care.

Perhaps the time has come for Episcopalians and Anglicans to reengage the Bible on a daily basis and to put this practice at the center of our common life as we strive to build strong Christian lives and grow our churches. Without committed, articulate, and contagious Christians, our ability to lead beautiful worship, offer compassionate pastoral care, and carry out life-changing outreach ministries will diminish with each passing year. What the world needs is Christians who have come to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the Word of God so that the Holy Spirit may guide them, and their lives may transform those around them.

