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**On the Verge of Walking Away?
American Teens, Communication with God, &
Temptations**

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On the Verge of Walking Away? American Teens, Communication with God, & Daily Temptations

Recent studies reveal that the majority of teenagers will leave the church when they reach adulthood. Although the exact percentages are hotly debated, the accumulation of evidence from several different sources leaves little room for questioning the final conclusion.

Why are so many teens walking away? Research by Youth for Christ of Great Britain indicates that distractions of life are the main culprit. That is, family pressure, peer pressure, and an unbelieving girlfriend or boyfriend are the most common reasons youth give for leaving the church. Surprisingly, few (15%) leave because they are "bored".

A somewhat separate line of research has also documented that, although most Americans own a Bible, few actually read it.

"Bibles are cheap and plentiful in America. Right now anyone can purchase the entire Bible in paperback for less than the shipping costs on Amazon.com, or walk into any church or hotel and simply get one for free. According to a 2001 Gallup poll, the average American household contains four Bibles." —*Gallup*

"American Christians are biblically illiterate. Although most of them contend that the Bible contains truth and is worth knowing, and most of them argue that they know all of the relevant truths and principles, our research shows otherwise. And the trend line is frightening: the younger a person is, the less they understand about the Christian faith." —*Barna*

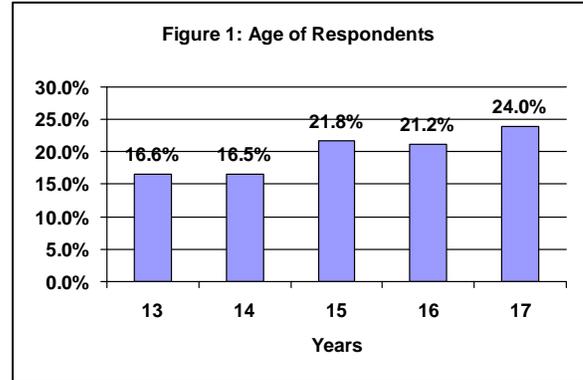
Substantial minorities [of American teenagers] lack even the most basic working knowledge of the Bible. —*The Bible Literacy Report: What do American Teens Need to Know and What do They Know?*

Thus, the data suggest that after many years of active participation in the church and their youth group, Christian teens are not prepared to continue living out their faith as adults. They likely perceive that the faith of the adults around them is not vital. Why is their faith not vital? The answer is quite simple: They are not engaged in God's Word on a regular basis. In essence, they don't know what the Bible is or what it is for and therefore do not see its critical role in their daily spiritual growth.

In this paper, we explore the role of Bible engagement among American teens, both those who identify as "born-again" Christians and those who do not. We present data on their Bible reading habits and other spiritual disciplines and their views about communication with God. In the final section, we explore the daily temptations teens face and how their involvement in spiritual disciplines helps them to deal with these temptations.

Study Sample

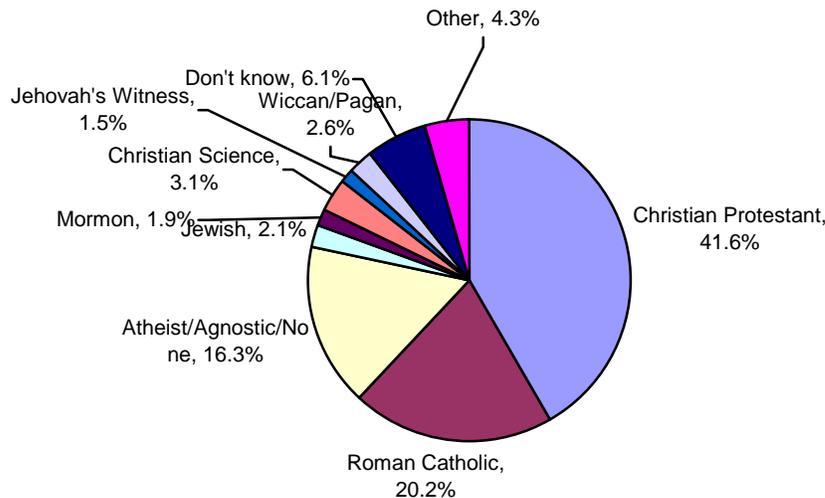
Our data come from a random sample of 808 youth between the ages of 13 and 17. Seven out of ten (n = 574) survey respondents are female and most (78.7%) are Caucasian. On average, sample members were 15 years old at the time of the survey and two-thirds (66.6%) were in high school. Figure 1 shows that our sample was slightly skewed towards older teens.



Religious Preference

In terms of religious preference, two out of five teens identified themselves as Christian Protestants. An additional one-fifth said that they are Roman Catholic. Notably, as shown in Figure 2, 16.3% identified themselves as agnostic, atheist or that they had no religious preference.

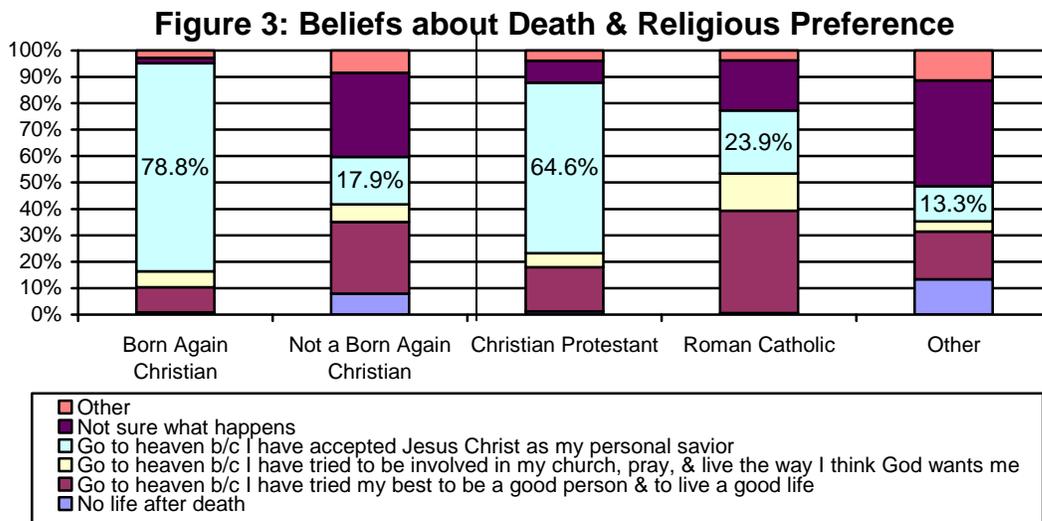
Figure 2: Teens' Religious Preference



When asked if they identified themselves as a "born-again Christian", 30.9% of teens said yes. In terms of their beliefs about what happens when you die, the most common response, chosen by 36.8% of teens, is "When I die, I will go to heaven because I have accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior." The next most common response was that the respondent did not know what would happen when s/he dies; nearly one-quarter (22.6%) of teens chose this response. An additional one-fifth (21.7%) believed that they would go to heaven because they have tried to live a good life.

Not surprisingly, beliefs about what happens after death varies by religious preference and whether the teen identifies as a born-again Christian or not. As shown in Figure 3, most teens who identify as a born again Christian believe that they will go to heaven because they have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. This is also the most common belief among teens who say their religious preference is Christian Protestant.

Among Roman Catholic youth, believing that you will go to heaven because you have tried to be a good person dominated, with 38.7% choosing this response. Uncertainty prevailed among youth who do not identify as born-again Christians and those who espoused other religious preferences. Two-fifths (40.1%) of teens with a religious preference other than Christianity said that they are not sure what happens when we die, as did 31.9% of those who do not identify as a born-again Christian.



Spiritual Practices

Table 1, following this discussion, provides an overview of teens' involvement in various spiritual activities. Not surprisingly, there are large and statistically significant differences between youth who identify as born-again Christians and those who do not. Most teen respondents say that they attend church at least once a month. However, 16.8% attend only on special occasions and one-fourth does not attend at all.

The majority of teens, 73.1%, say that they typically pray at least once a day. Nearly one-half has a close friend or mentor who helps them spiritually, while one out of five teens participates in a Bible study other than Sunday school.

Table 1 shows that only a minority of 13 to 17 year olds read or listen to the Bible in a typical week. More than half (53.6%) of all teens and seven out of ten who do not identify as a born-again Christian did not read or listen to the Bible at all in the previous week. Slightly more than

one-quarter were engaged in scripture for one to three days and 17.7% read or listened to the Bible at least four days.

Across all spiritual disciplines and activities, teens that identify as born-again Christians have higher levels of involvement. On average, born-again teens are engaged in scripture three days a week. Our previous research with adults has demonstrated that scripture engagement at least four times a week is strongly correlated with a variety of positive outcomes (see, Cole & Ovwigho, 2009). Among born-again teens, we find that only a little more than one-third read or listen to the Bible this frequently. Moreover, nearly one-fifth (17.6%) did not hear from God through scripture at all in the previous week.

Table 1. Spiritual Practices.

	Identifies as a Born Again Christian		
	No	Yes	Total
Church Attendance***			
Weekly	24.2%	65.6%	37.0%
A couple of times a month	10.2%	14.4%	11.5%
About once a month	4.3%	3.2%	4.0%
Less than once a month	5.6%	4.4%	5.2%
Only on special occasions	21.5%	6.4%	16.8%
Do not attend	34.2%	6.0%	25.5%
Participates in a group Bible study***	12.4%	43.6%	22.0%
Has a close friend or mentor who helps spiritually***	36.4%	74.4%	48.1%
Prays at least once a day***	61.8%	98.4%	73.1%
Mean number of times a day respondent prays*	3.2	5.4	3.9
Days spent reading or listening to the Bible in the past week***			
None	69.7%	17.6%	53.6%
1 to 3 days	21.3%	45.2%	28.7%
4 to 7 days	9.0%	37.2%	17.7%
Mean number of days engaged in scripture***	0.8	3.0	1.5

Communicating with God

With its focus on a relationship between God and man, Christianity is unique among world religions. For this relationship to grow, it must include regular two-way communication whereby the believer speaks to God through prayer and hears from God through His Word. However, in America today, people hold a variety of beliefs about how one communicates with God. In this section, we explore how teens describe their communication with God.

We asked teens to describe how they communicate with God. By far, the most common response given by two out of three teens was through prayer. Some simply used the word “pray” or “prayer” while others described talking with God just as they would with a friend. For example:

I talk to God in my mind like I'd talk to him if He was standing right there like a friend & father about whatever is going on in my life & stuff like that

Pray when I go to bed at night

I talk to him all the time. He is everywhere, in my mind I speak to Him

Just talk like He is there with me

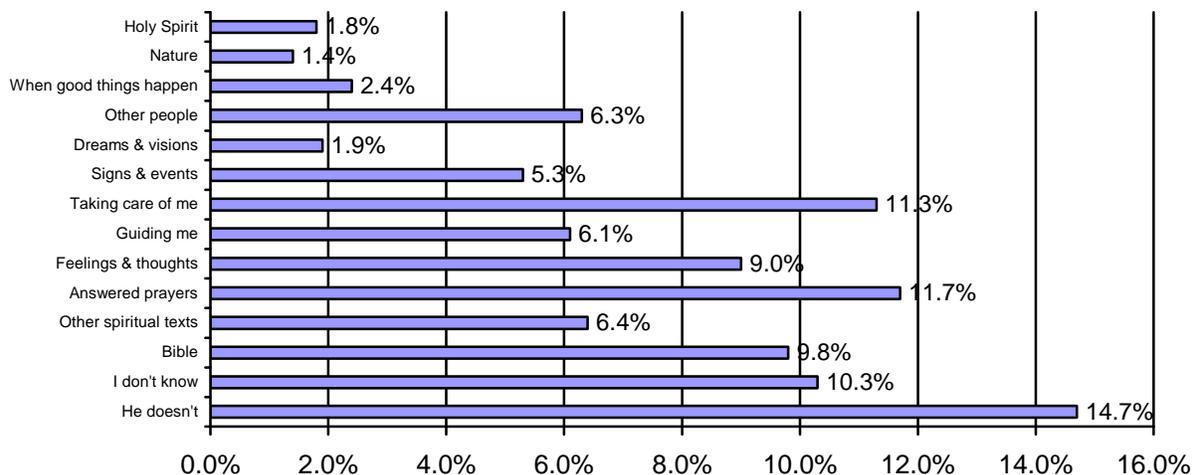
After prayer, the next most common response was that the teen did not communicate at all with God. A little more than one-tenth of teens gave an answer along these lines, some simply saying “I don’t” while others expressed the belief that God does not exist so they could not communicate.

Other methods of communication listed by teens include the Bible, meditation, their thoughts, and through their daily actions. Only a small minority of respondents mentioned each of these.

Communication from God

As shown in Figure 4, teens’ answers to the question “How do you feel God communicates with you?” varied much more than their responses to how they communicate with God. Unfortunately, few teens – about one in ten – listed the Bible, the only book God ever wrote, in their answers.

Figure 4. How Teens Feel God Communicates with Them



Sadly the most common theme, evident in 14.7% of responses, was that God does not communicate with people (or at least, the responding teen). An additional one-tenth said that they do not know. Most answers in this category simply stated “He doesn’t” or “I don’t know”. Others, however, indicate that the teen thought that some communication might occur in the future, such as “*He has not yet personally communicated with me*” and “*So far I haven’t seen it.*”

The next most common responses focused on what the teen viewed as answered prayers (11.7%) or a general statement that God takes care of them. For example:

Prayer & showing me things through people & answering my prayers & taking care of me & my family

By the daily blessings I receive and signs of things unexpected or answered prayers

Through other people and showing me when a prayer is answered

He makes me feel peaceful and answers my prayers. For instance he sent me adoptive parents who brought me to the USA from a Russian orphanage. He let them save my life.

He provides me and my family with jobs and our good health to buy food and pay bills, and have material things so we can live our lives comfortable.

He watches over me

By keeping me healthy and safe

Protects me from harm

He gives me good health, a loving family and friends, and the ability to care for all other Christians

Only one-tenth of teens included the Bible in their answer to how God communicates with them. Most responses with this theme said simply the Bible, scripture or His Word. Some teens included more information about how and why the Bible is important to them:

I believe He shows me the way He wants me to live and the person He wants me to be by the why He talks in the Bible

Through the Bible....this is His written instruction book.

An additional theme reflects teens' sense that God communicates with them by guiding their actions and decisions. Sometimes the word "conscience" was used, perhaps indicating that teens were referring to the moral training they have received through their parents and church. For example:

There is a inner feeling that will lead me and I feel good about it. Sometimes He comes to me in dreams and I can tell the whole story and feel good.

In a still voice--thru my conscience- in the situations that come across my path on a day to day basis

He helps me to decide what is right and wrong and shows me things through others

By my actions and when I am still and listen to a quiet voice inside

Two other themes displayed in Figure 4 are also worthy of note. Almost one in ten teens (nearly the same proportion who talked about the Bible) indicated that God communicates with them through their feelings and/or thoughts.

A quiet heart and peace in my mind and in my heart

Through a feeling

He gives me a good feeling in my heart and lets me know He loves me.

Through thoughts in my head

In my thoughts and heart

In addition, at least some teens reported that God communicated with them through other people. Some specified these other people as parents, friends, pastors, or youth leaders:

Through the Bible, my friends and family, through my pastor and youth leader- He also talks to me all the time in different ways

Through his faithful and discreet slave.

Many ways...prophet, scriptures, Holy Ghost, others

Through the Bible, my parents, my youth leaders and my pastor.

Bible Engagement & Communication from God

Earlier research from the Center for Bible Engagement revealed that adults' beliefs about how God communicates with them correlate with their Bible reading habits. Those who read or listen to the Bible at least four days a week are most likely to say God communicates with them through His Word. In contrast, those who are less engaged in the Bible are more likely to indicate that God communicates with them through feelings or through other people. In this section, we explore how teens' Bible reading habits relate to how they perceive God communicating with them.

Table 2, following this discussion, displays the percentage of teens saying they hear from God through various ways by the number of days a week the teen spends reading or listening to the Bible. Consistent with the findings among adults, we see that teens who are more engaged in God's Word are more likely to say that God communicates with them through Feelings & Thoughts, through guidance on how to act, through the Bible, through answered prayers, and through the Holy Spirit. They are also much less likely to feel that they don't know how God communicates with them or that He does not communicate.

Table 2. Bible Engagement and Communication with God.

How God Communicates with You	Bible Reading			
	0 days	1-3 days	4 or more days	
Feelings & thoughts	4.8%	12.5%	11.2%	**
Guides me on how to act	3.2%	8.6%	7.7%	**
Bible	2.3%	12.9%	22.4%	***
Answered prayers	7.2%	12.5%	18.2%	**
Takes care of me	10.4%	12.5%	6.3%	
Other people	2.8%	8.6%	9.8%	**
Holy Spirit	0.7%	1.7%	4.2%	*
He doesn't	22.4%	4.3%	0.7%	***
Don't know	13.9%	5.6%	2.1%	***

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Distinguishing Right and Wrong

Previous research suggests that the distractions and temptations of life greatly contribute to youth walking away from the Christian faith in adulthood. As our data show, few are engaged in God's word and thus are not prepared to live life as God intends. As they enter adulthood, how are teens distinguishing between what is right and what is wrong? Our data reveal a wide variety of methods ranging from reliance on their feelings to comparing the situation to the standards their parents taught to considering the possible consequences of doing something.

Teens most commonly reported relying on their feelings to determine if something is right or wrong. For example:

I just know...if it doesn't feel good then I am not on the right path

I usually have a kinda gut feeling that what I am about to do is wrong or I don't and I know that what I am gonna do is right.

You know these things in your heart and your gut - then in your brain

By either praying, or thinking about how it would make me feel. If I would feel guilty afterwards, it is wrong.

Teens also frequently referred to their parents. Some responses said explicitly that the youth would ask his/her parents or would think about whether or not Mom or Dad would approve. Others wrote of using the standards and values that their parents had instilled in them.

Spiritual themes are also evident in how teens distinguish between right and wrong. In fact, almost one-fourth said that they would pray about the situation, think about what Jesus would do or if God would approve, ask a spiritual leader for advice, or refer to the Bible or Ten Commandments. However, only one out of ten respondents mentioned the Bible specifically.

Does a youth's level of Bible engagement relate to how she or he distinguishes between right and wrong? Our data suggest that there is such a relationship. Teens who read the Bible are significantly more likely to refer to the Bible, to their church or its teachings, or what they

believe God or Jesus would want them to do when deciding if something is right or wrong. Of those who read the Bible at least four days a week, more than half (51.7%) gave a spiritual response and one-fifth (21.7%) referred to the Bible.

Temptations

The ability to distinguish between right and wrong is one important aspect of growing spiritually. Another important dimension is overcoming temptations or the desire to do something you know you should not do. As teens navigate their adolescent years and move into adulthood, they face a variety of temptations from the opportunity to cheat on a test to the pressure to gossip about others to sexual activity and alcohol. In this section, we explore what teens say are their greatest temptations, how they deal with them, and what would help them to resist temptation better.

When asked how many times they were tempted to do something wrong yesterday, one out of two (50.2%) teens said they were tempted between one and ten times. Two-fifths (43.9%) indicated that they were not tempted at all. This contrasts sharply with our earlier study which showed that 80% of adults say they were tempted between one and two times.

This difference between adults and teens could indicate either a real difference in the daily temptations they face or a difference in the things they perceive as wrong. A comparison of those who identify as a born-again Christian and those who do not suggests that an individual's own perception of what is wrong does play into how they answered our temptation question. For example, among teens, only 31.6% of born-again Christians said that they were not tempted at all to do something wrong the previous day, compared to half (49.5%) of teens who do not identify as a born-again believer. Similarly, one-fifth of young adults who did not list drinking as a temptation say that they get drunk at least a few times a month (CBE, 2009).

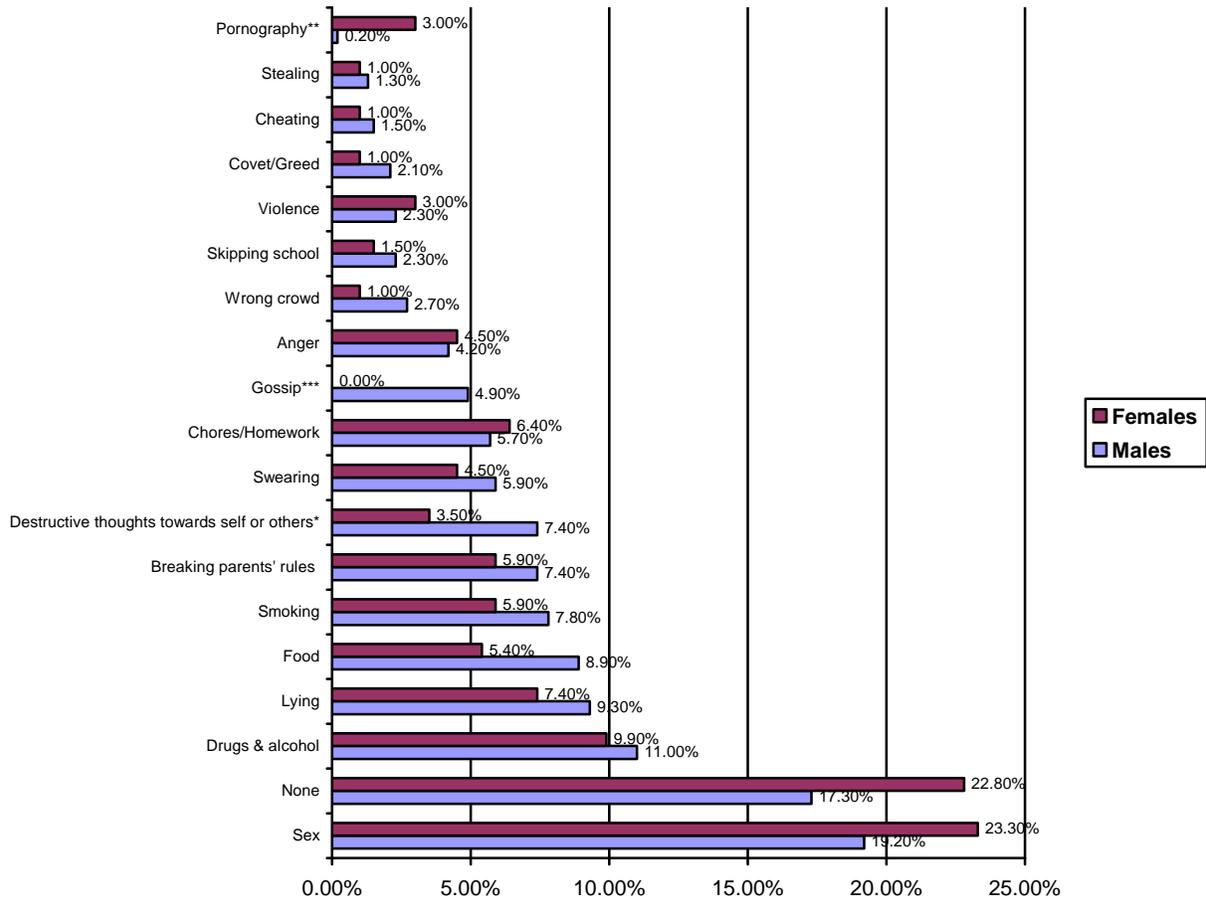
Figure 5 illustrates the most common temptations reported by teens. Because earlier research with adults indicated differences between men and women, we present the results for teens separately for males and females.

The most frequent temptations indicated by teens related to sexuality, accounting for one-fifth (19.2%) of girls and one-fourth (23.3%) of boys. Curiously, the difference between males and females is not statistically significant among teens, as it was among adults.

The second most common response to our question about your most frequent temptation was "None". About one out of five teens stated that they do not feel tempted to do something wrong.

The temptation to use drugs or alcohol was the third most common named by teens, accounting for one in ten youth. Male and female youth differ significantly on only three temptations. Young women are more likely than young men to indicate gossiping or destructive thoughts about themselves or others as a frequent temptation. For young men, pornography is a more common temptation than it is for their female peers.

Figure 5. Teens' Most Frequent Temptations



Risk Behaviors

Temptation simply reflects the desire to do something that you know you should not do. It does not necessarily translate into behavior. In order to understand the relationship between various aspects of spirituality, including Bible engagement, and risky behaviors, our surveys asked a series of questions about how frequently the respondent engages in smoking, getting drunk, gambling, pornography, sex outside marriage, and destructive thoughts. When we examine spiritual disciplines and risky behavior among teenagers, we find that teens who read or listen to the Bible are significantly less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Moreover, those who do so at least four times a week have the lowest rates of involvement in all behaviors except pornography.

In contrast to what we and several other researchers have found with adults, prayer and church attendance are not as strongly correlated with risk behaviors among teens. Those who attend church at least once a month are less likely to engage in any of the risk behaviors examined, except for destructive thoughts. Prayer is only predictive of a lower likelihood of getting drunk

and of having destructive thoughts about oneself or others. However, given the current epidemic of violence among teens, it is sobering to find that even among those teens who pray at least once a day, nearly a quarter also say that they have destructive thoughts at least once every few months.

Table 4. Spiritual Disciplines & Risk Behaviors Among American Teens.

General Population Data – 13-17 year olds							
Engages in this habit at least every few months	Attend Church		Prays at Least Once a Day		Days Reading or Listening to the Bible		
	Less than once a month	At least once a month	No	Yes	0-1	2-3	4 or more
Smoking	14.1%***	6.1%	12.0%	9.1%	12.0%**	8.5%	2.8%
Getting Drunk	14.3%***	5.2%	13.8%*	8.0%	12.7%***	2.8%	2.1%
Sex Outside Marriage	15.1%***	7.1%	12.9%	10.2%	13.1%*	6.6%	5.6%
Pornography	8.6%*	5.2%	9.2%	5.9%	8.8%**	1.9%	2.8%
Gambling	7.0%**	2.4%	6.0%	4.1%	6.3%**	1.9%	0.0%
Destructive Thoughts	14.8%	15.6%	17.1%	14.6%	16.5%*	17.0%	9.1%
Any	35.4%**	25.7%	33.2%	29.3%	34.7%***	27.4%	15.4%

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

In order to test if Bible engagement is related to a lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, beyond other more traditional measures of spirituality, we constructed logistic regression models for each risk behavior. Table 5 shows that, for all models, the Model Chi Square is statistically significant, indicating that the model including the predictors fits the data significantly better than an intercept-only model. In addition, for all models, the probability for the Pearson Goodness of Fit Chi Square was greater than the conventional 0.05 level. This indicates that the models fit the data well.

Age is a significant predictor for all risk behaviors. For each year older a teen is, the odds of engaging in a risk behavior increases. Surprisingly, gender predicts only pornography use. Compared to males, the odds that a teen girl will engage in pornography are 78% lower.

Also surprising is that most of the religious preference and spiritual disciplines predictors are not significant. We find no effects for church attendance and prayer among teens. Identifying as a born-again Christian is only significant for lowering the odds of getting drunk.

Scripture engagement is a statistically significant predictor in three of the five models for teens. Those who read or listen to the Bible at least four days a week have lower odds of smoking, getting drunk or engaging in any of the risk behaviors examined than their peers who do not read the Bible at all. Similarly, teens who engage scripture one to three days are less likely to smoke, get drunk, or participate in a risk behavior than those who do not engage scripture at all.

Table 5. Odds Ratios from Logit Models Predicting Odds of Engaging in Risk Behaviors - Teens.

	Smoking	Getting Drunk	Sex	Pornography	Any Habit
Age	1.28**	1.28**	1.56***	1.34*	1.30***
Female	0.76	0.64	0.70	0.22***	0.87
Identifies as a born again Christian	1.27	0.39*	0.62	1.00	1.06
Attends church at least once a month	0.61	0.76	0.62	0.89	0.86
Prays at least once a day	1.54	1.40	1.66	1.12	1.33
Reads/listens to the Bible 4 or more days/week	0.18**	0.20*	0.51	0.34	0.31***
Reads/listens to the Bible 1 to 3 days/week	0.45*	0.38*	0.66	0.65	0.76
-2 Log Likelihood	195.02	175.51	197.56	160.01	329.95
Model Chi Square	34.44***	50.92***	46.80***	41.68***	46.20***

N = 808 *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Conclusions

In this paper, we have approached the question of American teens' spirituality and behavior from a Bible engagement perspective. Consistent with what we observe among adults, most American teens identify themselves as Christian, with nearly one-third stating that they are born-again believers. However, few read or listen to the Bible each week. More than half of youth are not engaged in the Bible at all. Even among those who say they are born-again, three-fifths read or listen to the Bible less than four days a week.

Teens almost universally report talking to God through prayer. In contrast, they give a variety of answers to the question of how God talks to them. Unfortunately, only one-tenth says that God communicates with them through the Bible.

In terms of actual behaviors, we find no effects for church attendance and prayer on risk behaviors among teens. Identifying as a born-again Christian predicts lower odds only for getting drunk. Our models show that Bible engagement was the best spiritually-based predictor among 13 to 17 year olds, significantly predicting three out of the five risk behaviors examined.

In sum, our data confirm that few American teens read or listen to the Bible regularly. This is unfortunate because reading or listening to the Bible provides a measure of protection against the temptation of risky behaviors. If we do not do something to turn the tide of disengagement among today's teens, it is likely that the high rates of teens leaving the faith in young adulthood will only continue.

References

Cole, A. & Ovwigho, P.C. (April 2009). *Bible engagement & social behavior: How familiarity & frequency of contact with the Bible affects one's behavior*. Invited presentation at Tel Aviv University.