



**C·B·E**  
CENTER FOR BIBLE ENGAGEMENT

**Reading Plans & Bible Engagement**  
December 2009

## Reading Plans & Bible Engagement

Typing the simple phrase “Bible reading plan” into an online search engine produces a wealth of hits – plans for reading through the Bible in a year, reading through the Bible in 90 days, short-term “jump start” plans, ones for reading the Bible chronologically, etc. Many of these are available instantly and free of charge. In addition to online resources, consider that many Bibles include reading plans as appendices, other Bibles are formatted specifically to facilitate reading through them in a year, and many devotional materials available through various ministries also include reading schedules. These facts together indicate that those who are unsure about where to start reading the Bible or how to proceed can fairly easily obtain the help they need, at least in terms of a reading plan or schedule.

Unfortunately, many today are not taking the time to hear from God's Word regularly. In a recent Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) survey about spiritual beliefs and practices, two-thirds (65.1%) of Americans between the ages of 13 and 70 say that they prayed at least once in the previous week. Only half that number or one-third (35.1%) read the Bible. Reading or listening to the Bible on most days of the week is even rarer, with only 13.9% of Americans doing so on at least four of the past seven days. Among Christ-followers, rates of Bible engagement are higher. However, only one out of four (28.8%) believers reads or listens to the Bible at least four days a week – a level that, according to CBE research, is necessary to impact behavior (Cole & Ovwigho, 2009).

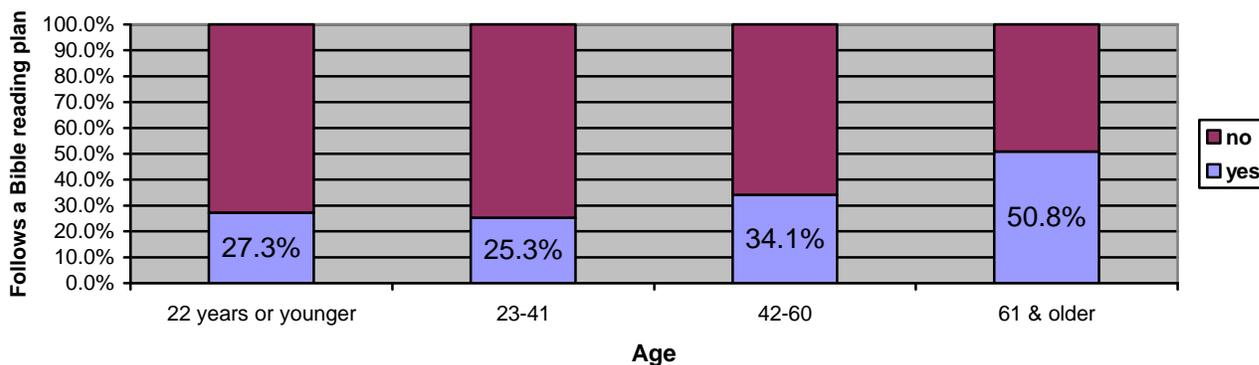
Why do so many people spend time talking to God, but so little time hearing from Him through His Word? The most dominant theme by far among the tens of thousands of survey responses is that people are “too busy”. If we look beyond this common excuse, we find other issues that affect a person's willingness to hear from God and hunger for scripture are often at play. In this paper, we take a closer look at the things that people say help and hinder them in their efforts to read the Bible regularly. We specifically focus on the question of what role the wealth of Bible reading plans may play in helping Christ-followers grow spiritually through Bible engagement.

### Who uses Bible reading plans?

Among mature believers, about one out of three follows a Bible reading plan. Naturally, those who follow a plan report higher levels of Bible engagement. In other words, those who read the Bible irregularly are unlikely to say they are *following* a plan. However, even among those who read or listen to scripture at least four days a week, most (57.3%) do not follow a formal Bible reading plan.

There is a strong correlation between age and following a structured reading plan. As shown in Figure 1 half of believers over the age of 60 use a plan. In contrast, only one-fourth of people under the age of 40 do so.

**Figure 1. Age & Reading Plan Usage**



At least among mature Christ-followers, those who use a reading plan may have a more in-depth knowledge of the Bible. For example, compared to non-users, reading plan users are:

- Significantly more likely to read the entire Bible (63.6% vs. 36.9%)
- Significantly more likely to have memorized at least one verse in the previous year (71.0% vs. 60.3%)
- Score significantly higher on a basic test of Bible knowledge (83.0% vs. 75.6%)

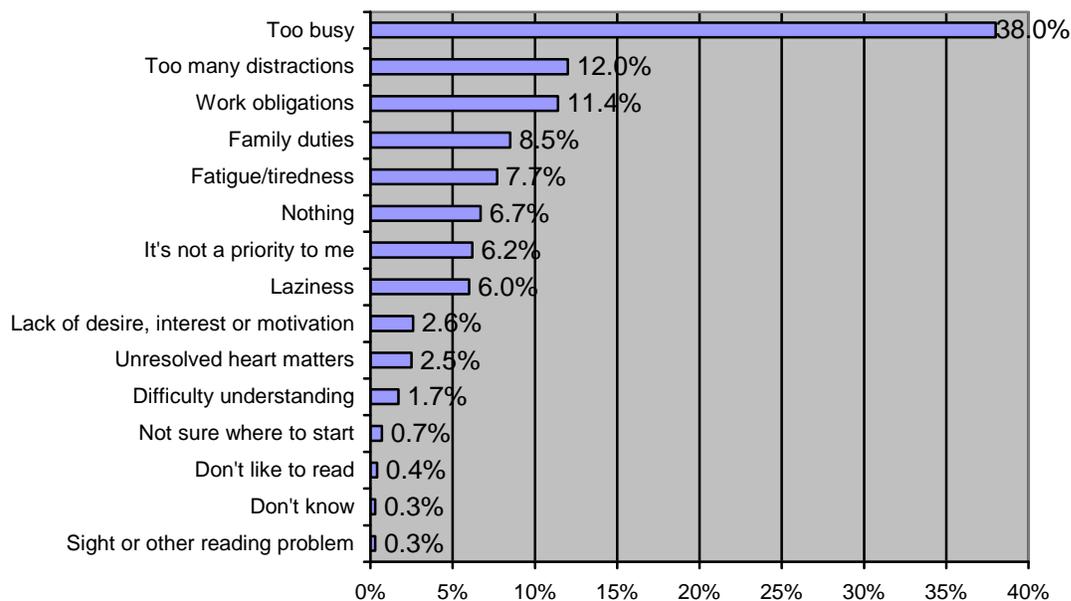
### **What hinders you from reading the Bible regularly?**

As mentioned previously, the most common reason given for not reading or listening to the Bible regularly is that the respondent is “too busy”. Out of the more than 10,000 responses given in CBE surveys, almost 4,000 of them indicated that their hectic lives hindered their scripture engagement. Similarly, distractions such as TV and the internet, work obligations, and family duties were also frequently identified as hindrances.

One could argue that the seventh most common reason: It’s not a priority to me (see Figure 2) is really the underlying cause that explains most of the others. That is, because reading or listening to the Bible is not a priority, people let themselves get too busy, become distracted, be lazy or let work and family obligations hinder them.

Only a small minority of Christ-followers name hindrances which can be directly addressed through the provision of aids such as study guides and Bible reading schedules. For example, very few say that they have difficulty understanding the Bible (1.7%), they are not sure where to start (0.7%), they simply don’t like to read (0.4%) or they have a vision or other problem that limits their ability to engage scripture (0.3%).

**Figure 2. What hinders you from reading the Bible regularly?**



### What helps you read the Bible regularly?

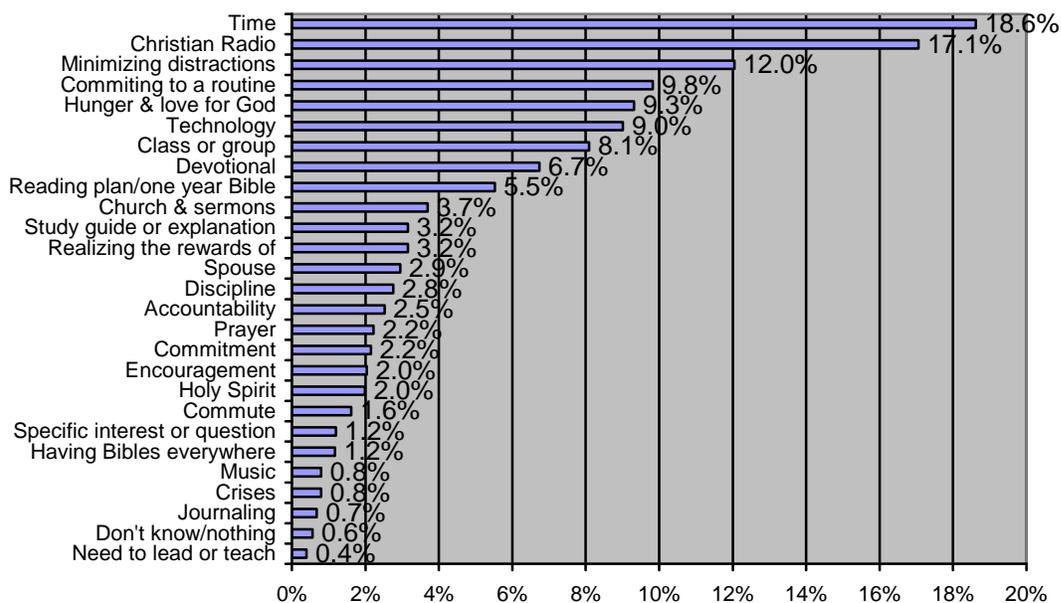
Christ-followers' responses as to what helps them engage scripture regularly in many ways parallel their named hindrances. Having enough time is the most common response (18.6%). Committing to a designated reading time and minimizing distractions were also commonly mentioned.

Among "tools" that help, Christian radio (17.1%) and other types of technology (e.g., IPOD, internet, 9.0%) were the most popular. Nearly one out of ten respondents preferred the structure provided by reading or listening to the Bible with a group of believers or in a structured class. Some seem to thrive on the ability to discuss what they are reading while others desired the natural accountability provided by a class that requires "homework" during the week.

A minority of Christ-followers indicated that a devotional (6.7%), structured reading plan/one-year Bible (5.5%) or study guide (3.2%) was helpful to them. In terms of devotionals, we do not know from the data to what extent people were simply reading a devotional text alone or if in conjunction with actually reading the Bible as well.

Several of the responses displayed in Figure 3, although different on the surface, speak to the issue of desire or motivation. These include: hunger & love for God (9.3%), realizing the rewards of engaging scripture (3.2%), having a particular interest or question (1.2%), and personal crises (0.8%).

**Figure 3. What helps you read the Bible regularly?**



## Conclusions

In sum, CBE's data reveals that only a minority of mature Christ-followers utilize a structured reading plan. Those who do so tend to be older and may have benefited from the plan in terms of a more in-depth knowledge of the Bible.

Reading plans are simply one tool among many that can help people hear from God through His Word. For those who are motivated to read God's Word, a reading plan may provide structure and, for those who desire structure, help them to keep reading. In addition, because reading plans include all books of the Bible, they may increase the likelihood that the believer will read the entire Bible and not skip over the more "difficult" sections.

However, the major theme in the CBE data is that most people feel that they do not have time to read or listen to the Bible regularly and a lack of motivation is a major factor that keeps Christ-followers from reading or listening to the Bible more. In order to build a discipleship model based on Bible engagement, future research may want to focus on identifying where individuals fall along a number of dimensions including 1) motivation to grow spiritually; 2) current Bible engagement level; 3) perceived factors that hinder Bible engagement and spiritual growth; 4) desire for structure in Bible engagement approach; and 5) perceived need for assistance in understanding biblical texts. Taken together information on each of these dimensions can be used to identify the tools that will best fit the individual's needs. Although the specific combination of tools may be tailored to the individual, they have a common desired outcome of helping the Christ-follower to increase their level of Bible engagement and grow spiritually.