



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

## **Bible Engagement as the Key to Spiritual Growth A Research Synthesis**

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## Executive Summary

For more than eight years, the Center for Bible Engagement has researched the spiritual lives of more than 100,000 people from around the world. The findings consistently show that engaging the Bible four or more days a week is the single most powerful predictor of spiritual growth.

Our conceptual definition of spiritual growth focuses on “becoming less of the person I was before I committed my life to following Jesus and more like Christ in my thoughts, words, and deeds”. We use multiple measures of spiritual growth including moral behavior, emotional struggles, proactively living out the Christian faith, and self-perceived growth.

Key findings include:

- If a person engages the Bible four or more times a week, their odds of giving in to temptations such as drinking to excess, viewing pornography, lashing out in anger, gossiping, and lying significantly decrease.
- Receiving, reflecting on, and responding to God’s Word four or more times a week decreases a person’s odds of struggling with issues such as feeling bitter, thinking destructively about self or others, having difficulty forgiving others, and feeling discouraged.
- Engaging scripture produces a more proactive faith among Christians. Controlling for age, gender, church attendance, and prayer practices, the individual engaged in the Bible has significantly higher odds of giving financially, memorizing scripture, and sharing their faith with others.
- People’s perceptions of their own spiritual growth are also impacted by how often they hear from God through the Bible. Those who engage scripture most days of the week are less likely to feel spiritually stagnant and to feel that they can’t please God.

In sum, the powerful effects of Bible engagement on spiritual growth have been reliably demonstrated across many studies. In addition, organizations such as the Willow Creek Association and Lifeway Research have reporting similar findings as well.

Together these independent lines of research lead to one simple conclusion: Engaging the Bible most days of the week is critical to grow in the Christian faith. The implications of this conclusion are wide-reaching and profound for Christian pastors and leaders, churches, schools, and evangelistic ministries. Those serious about helping people grow in a relationship with Jesus Christ need to carefully consider where they are investing their energies and if those activities are producing lifelong impacts by getting people engaged in the Word.

## Bible Engagement as the Key to Spiritual Growth A Research Synthesis

Eight years ago the Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) set out to answer two questions:

*Why do so many people own Bibles, yet so few read them?  
What difference does engaging the Bible make in a person's life?*

Over the years we have surveyed more than 100,000 people from around the world about their spiritual lives. Consistently, we have found that engaging the Bible four or more days a week has a profound impact on the individual's life. In fact, for Christ-followers, regularly hearing from God through His Word is the single most powerful predictor of spiritual growth. This research synthesis summarizes the massive data we've collected and makes the case for why Bible engagement is the key to spiritual growth.

### Research Methods

The principle that people are experts on their own lives guides much of our research. For this synthesis, we draw on data from internet-based surveys of more than 108,196 individuals ranging in age from eight years to more than 80. Some of our surveys were of random samples of the general population in the United States and 20 other countries.<sup>1</sup> Other surveys were of non-random samples of self-identified Christ-followers in settings such as churches and parachurch ministries.

To get the most complete picture possible, we include a mix of both close-ended and open-ended questions, covering topics such as:

- Religious preference & beliefs
- Beliefs about communicating with God
- Beliefs about spiritual growth and maturity
- Religious service attendance
- Engagement in prayer & with the Bible
- Involvement in other spiritual disciplines and religious activities
- Daily temptations, struggles, and moral behavior

Measuring spiritual growth presents a daunting challenge. Theologians disagree on how to define spiritual growth or formation, much more how to measure it.

Conceptually, our definition of spiritual growth is quite simple:

*Spiritual growth is "becoming less of the person I was before I committed my life to following Jesus" and "more like Christ in my thoughts, words and deeds."*



<sup>1</sup> Algeria, Brazil, China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam.

As researchers, we took a two-prong approach to measuring spiritual growth. First, we considered moral behavior and emotional struggles. The question here is: To what extent does a Christ-follower struggle with behavior or emotions that conflict with Jesus' life, as documented in the Bible?

Although we believe behavior is important, ultimately only the individual knows his/her true spiritual condition. Thus, we also include a self-assessment component in our measure of spiritual growth. This addresses not only how you would describe your spiritual life right now, but also how often you feel spiritually stalled.

### **Bible Engagement, Moral Behavior, & Personal Struggles**

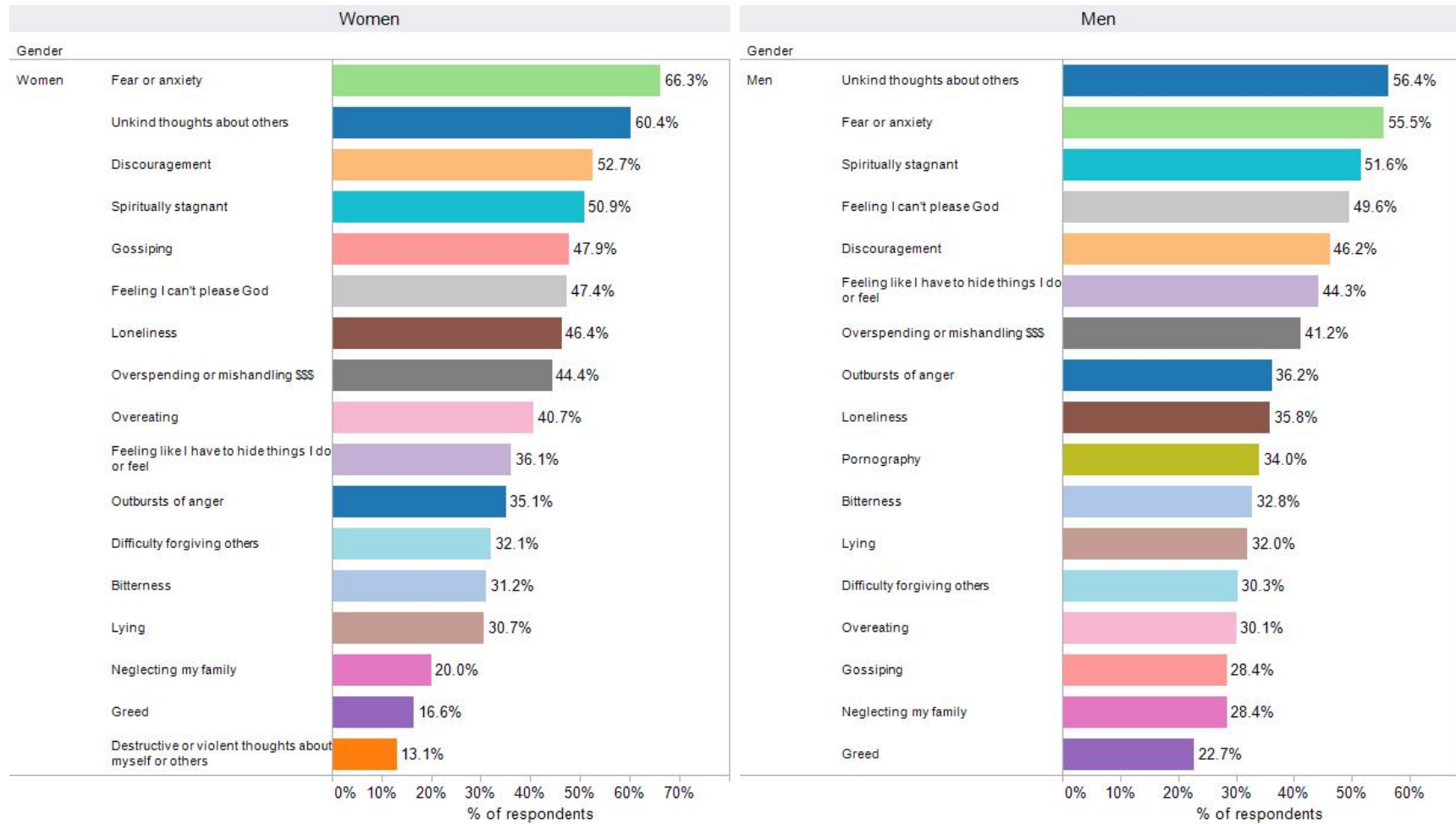
In Romans 7:15, Paul writes:

*I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.*

This verse attests to the reality that each day we face temptations. For some of us it's worry. Others may feel constantly pulled by the lure of pornography. Each day Satan works to move us away from Jesus. And each day we have a choice to move closer to Jesus instead.

Figure 1 displays data on how often people who attend church regularly struggle with various behaviors, attitudes, and emotions. For the majority of men and women, fear or anxiety, unkind thoughts about others, and feeling spiritually stagnant are something they struggle with at least monthly.

Figure 1. Monthly Struggles among Christians Who Attend Church Monthly.



We expect to give in to temptation less as we grow spiritually. The assumption is that participating in spiritual practices such as attending church, praying, participating in small groups, and engaging the Bible foster spiritual growth. Thus, we should expect to see that those who engage in these practices give into temptations less frequently and struggle less with emotions and attitudes that conflict with the mind of Christ.

Many of these spiritual practices are correlated with each other. For example, those who attend church are more likely to pray and engage the Bible than those who don't. Statistical models that separate out the effects of each are needed in order to understand how each spiritual practice is uniquely related to spiritual growth.

Across our thousands of surveys, we've repeatedly examined the relationship between spiritual practices, moral behavior, and struggles. Logistic regression analyses controlling for factors such as age, gender, church attendance, and prayer practices have consistently shown that Bible engagement uniquely predicts how often people give into temptations and struggles.<sup>2</sup> Summarizing across all of the studies, we find that if a person who engages the Bible four or more times a week their odds of giving in to these temptations decreases:

- ↓ Drinking to excess -62%
- ↓ Viewing pornography -59%
- ↓ Having sex outside marriage -59%
- ↓ Gambling -45%
- ↓ Lashing out in anger -31%
- ↓ Gossiping - 28%
- ↓ Lying -28%
- ↓ Neglecting family -26%
- ↓ Overeating or mishandling food -20%
- ↓ Overeating or mishandling money -20%

Bible engagement also produces more peace and joy in a person's life, by reducing the frequency of various emotional struggles. Receiving, reflecting on, and responding to God's Word four or more times a week decreases a person's odds of struggling with these issues:

- ↓ Feeling bitter -40%
- ↓ Thinking destructively about self or others -32%
- ↓ Feeling like they have to hide what they do or feel -32%

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<sup>2</sup> Detailed examples of these models are given in the appendix. Cole & Ovwigho (2009) and Ovwigho & Cole (2010) provide more details for specific age groups.

### *Which Spiritual Practices are most effective?*

*Over the years, we've asked about virtually every spiritual practice common in Christianity. None has been able to predict spiritual growth the way Bible engagement does. The practices we've considered include...*

*Prayer*

*Bible engagement*

*Meditation*

*Fasting*

*Church attendance*

*Sunday school/Bible study*

*Small groups*

*Reading non-fiction books*

*Reading fiction books*

*Listening to Christian music*

*Mission trips*

*Christian school*



- ↓ Having difficulty forgiving others -31%
- ↓ Feeling discouraged -31%
- ↓ Experiencing loneliness – 30%
- ↓ Overeating or mishandling food -20%
- ↓ Having difficulty forgiving oneself -26%
- ↓ Thinking unkindly about others -18%
- ↓ Experiencing fear or anxiety -14%

### **Bible Engagement & Proactive Faith**

Our definition of spiritual growth as becoming more like Jesus includes more than just refraining from certain behaviors and attitudes. It also includes proactively living out that faith. With Jesus as our example, it means showing love & concern for others and their spiritual growth.

Across surveys we've found that, among Christians, engaging scripture most days of the week strongly predicts a more proactive faith. Specifically, controlling for age, gender, church attendance, and prayer practices, the person engaged in the Bible has significantly higher odds of...

- ↑ Giving financially to a church +416%
- ↑ Memorizing scripture +407%
- ↑ Discipling others +231%
- ↑ Sharing their faith with others +228%
- ↑ Giving financially to causes other than their church +218%

### **Bible Engagement & Self-Perceived Spiritual Growth**

The previous sections focused on the relationship between Bible engagement and behavior. We now consider the second part of our spiritual growth measure, whether the individual feels like he or she is growing spiritually.

Our surveys of church congregations across the country reveal that most people frequently feel that they are not growing spiritually. In fact, nine out of ten regular church attenders feel like they are not growing spiritually at least once a year. They spend an average of 3 to 4 months of the year spiritually "stuck".

Receiving, reflecting on, and responding to what God says in the Bible emerges again as the most powerful determinant of spiritual growth. Those who engage scripture four or more days a week have significantly lower odds of...

- ↓ Feeling spiritually stagnant -60%
- ↓ Feeling like they can't please God -44%

## Conclusions

The science of research requires patience and diligence. One study demonstrating a certain effect or relationship is not enough. Instead the goal is to verify the reliability of the finding through multiple studies over time.

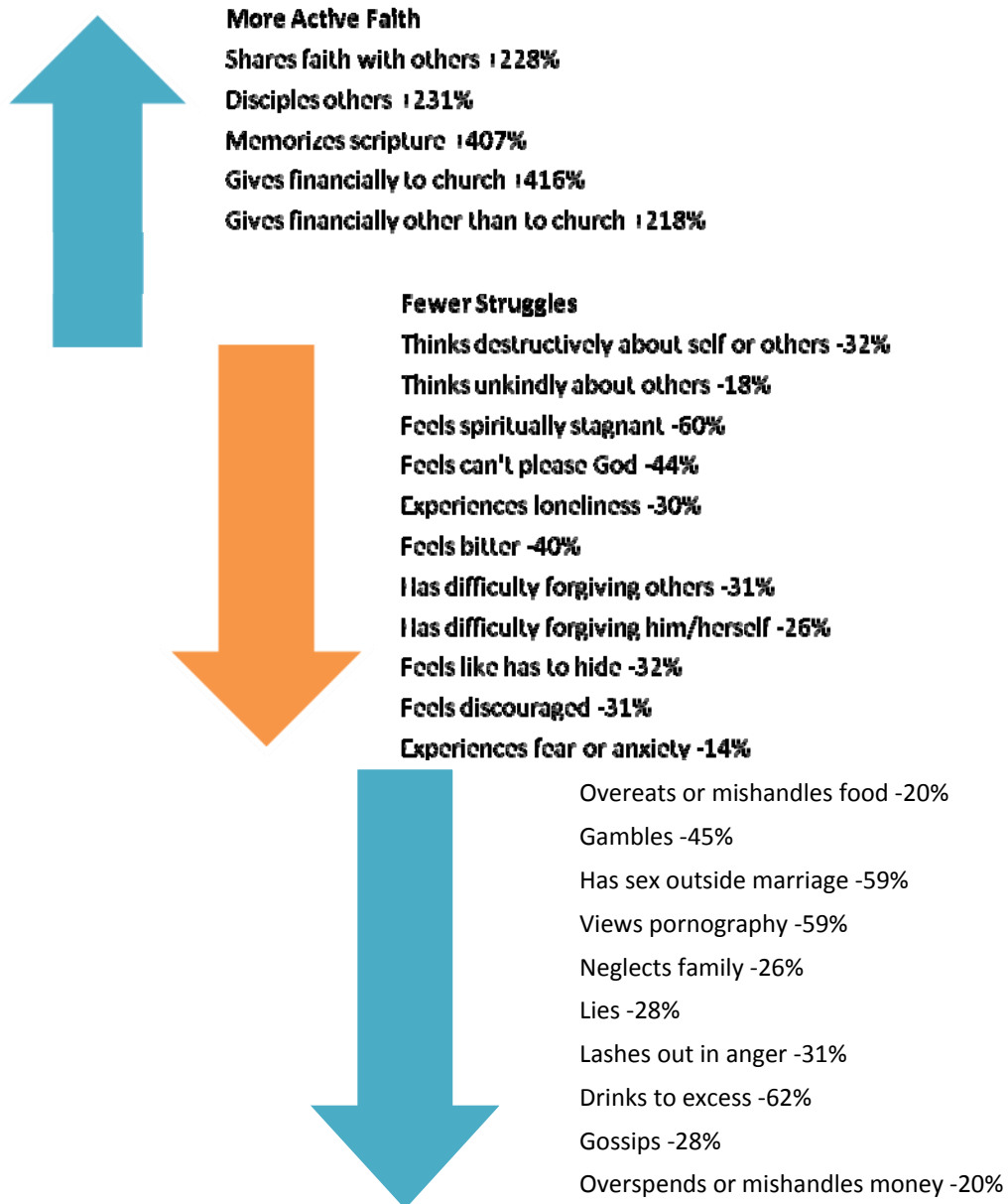
In this document, we've summarized eight years of research into the spiritual lives of more than 100,000 people. Consistent across all of these individual studies is the finding that engaging the Bible four or more times a week is the strongest and most reliable predictor of spiritual growth. Figure 2 on the next page summarizes these effects. Bible engagement impacts both the behavioral aspects of spiritual growth (i.e. a life that looks more like Jesus') and self-perception. The relationship also holds when we control for other spiritual practices such as church attendance and prayer.

Although we approached the topic of spiritual growth from different directions, our findings are remarkably similar to those of the Willow Creek Association (Hawkins & Parkinson, 2007). They also concluded from their multi-year, multi-church study that there is little relationship between involvement in church activities and spiritual growth. Moreover, they concluded that engaging the Bible is the most powerful predictor of growth. Recently, Lifeway Research reached similar conclusions (Geiger, Kelley, & Nation, 2012).

Together these independent lines of research lead to one simple conclusion: Engaging the Bible most days of the week is critical to grow in the Christian faith. The implications of this conclusion are wide-reaching and profound for Christian pastors and leaders, churches, schools, and evangelistic ministries. Those serious about helping people grow in a relationship with Jesus Christ need to carefully consider where they are investing their energies and if those activities are producing lifelong impacts by getting people engaged in the Word.



Figure 2. Summary of Bible Engagement Effects.



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### **About the authors:**



#### **Dr. Arnie Cole**

As a pioneer in the field of research, Dr. Arnie Cole has spent most of his professional life tracking trends of human behavior & developing programs that can actually help change negative behaviors. He received a BA & MA in Psychology, as well as a EdD in Institutional Management from Pepperdine University. Dr. Cole has served as CEO of MegaVoice LLC, as well as Vice president of Development for Mission Aviation Fellowship. Today he is responsible for the operation of both domestic & international Bible teaching media ministries at Back to the Bible. Dr. Cole is the co-author of *Unstuck: Your Life, God's Design, Real Change* (Bethany House). Based on the analysis of more than 70,000 surveys, *Unstuck* reveals a spiritual growth plan that gives readers practical, proven ways to encounter Scripture daily, connect with God, & revitalize an otherwise listless faith. Dr. Cole & his wife Char are the parents of adult children & operate Still Waters Ranch, an equestrian center that serves as a community outreach. The Coles live near Lincoln, Nebraska.



#### **Dr. Pamela Ovwigho**

Using data to answer important questions & solve vexing problems fuels Dr. Ovwigho's professional life. With a B.A. in Psychology (Penn State University) & a Ph.D. in Human Services Psychology (University of Maryland), Pam has used her research, measurement, & analytic skills to tackle a wide variety of issues from public welfare policy to family violence to spiritual growth. A frequent conference speaker, Pam has authored dozens of academic journal articles & white papers. Her work has appeared in the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, *Families in Society*, and *Social Services Review*, among others. As CBE's executive director, Pam conducts studies on scripture engagement, spiritual growth, & church health. Pam lives in Lincoln, Nebraska with her husband, Ramsome & their four children.

## Appendix A. Examples of Detailed Logistic Regression Results.

### Odds Ratios from Logit Models Predicting Odds of Engaging in Risk Behaviors – U.S. Adults

	Getting Drunk	Pornography	Gambling
Age	0.95***	0.96***	1.00
Female	0.81*	0.23***	0.63***
Identifies as a born again Christian	0.63**	0.72*	0.70**
Attends church at least once a month	0.62**	0.70*	0.74*
Prays at least once a day	0.89	0.75*	1.49
Reads/listens to the Bible 4 or more days/week	0.51**	0.49**	0.57**
Reads/listens to the Bible 1 to 3 days/week	0.82	0.76	0.76
-2 Log Likelihood	1189.69	1135.8	1375.33
Model Chi Square	363.79***	470.74***	82.17***

N = 2,159 \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

### Odds Ratios from Logit Models Predicting Odds of Struggling with Spiritual Issues – Regular Church Attenders

	Feeling Spiritually Stagnant	Angry Outbursts	Difficulty Forgiving Others
Age	0.98***	0.97***	0.98***
Female	0.96	0.90	1.08
Reads/listens to the Bible 4 or more days/week	0.40**	0.69***	0.69**

N = 3,462 \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001