

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

February 26, 2019

I've missed most of Black History Month during my "surgical adventure," but I want to offer a few thoughts on this last week of the month, at least.

Our program tomorrow night will be about "Undesign the Red Line," and while "looking forward" to that is not the right terminology, the program should be quite instructive as we try to be "well-informed, responsible followers of Christ" in our day.¹ For this column, though, I want to invite your attention in a somewhat different direction.



In celebration of Black History Month, I want to share with you an encouraging article from the December 28 issue of *Christianity Today*. The title of the article by Kate Shellnut is "Building on the Black Church's Bible Legacy: How African Americans outpaced the country in Scripture-savvy—and why ministry leaders expect even more from them." Enjoy

African Americans have held tight to their Bibles over the years. Amid cultural shifts in beliefs and reading habits, their demographic consistently outranks other racial groups for their reliance on the Word. Last year, the American Bible Society (ABS) once again named African Americans "the most Bible engaged in the US."

They are more likely to own a Bible—93 percent of African Americans do, versus 82 percent of Americans overall—and more than twice as likely to say Bible reading is crucial to their daily routine, according to the society's 2018 State of the Bible report.

"Generally, African Americans are deeply spiritual people. In my generation, many of those that were not church attendees, or even Christian, still had a great respect for the Bible," said Mark Croston, national director of black church partnerships for LifeWay Christian Resources. "Black people love to quote and tote the Bible."

Their tight relationship with Scripture grows out of a rich spiritual tradition and can carry on even when other markers of faith fade away. African Americans know biblical narratives on suffering and deliverance because they have lived them and experienced God's fulfilled promises for themselves, African American church leaders say.

The latest statistics touting African Americans' engagement with the Good Book present an opportunity to build on the legacy of the black church and bring deeper understanding.

"The results of the survey are encouraging, but they also serve as a core motivation to continue the great legacy of orthodoxy and orthopraxy," said Earon James, lead pastor at Relevant Life Church in Pace, Florida, and pastor-in-residence at The Witness—A Black Christian Collective.



¹ Some of you old timers may recognize that phrase as part of the "Royal Ambassador Pledge."

“Traditional black preaching embraces the great narrative of Scripture,” he said. “African American believers have historically not had the luxury of holding biblical propositions divorced from actual practice. We see this clearly in the abolition and civil rights movements.”

Passages that addressed suffering and injustice became familiar refrains throughout African American history, like Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous line from Amos 5:24: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

African Americans are the only racial group in the US that sees the Bible as more important for the moral fabric of the country than the Constitution (56% of black Americans do, according to ABS).

“Historically we had to turn to our Bibles as the only source of hope, even as Scripture was being twisted to buttress our subjugation,” said Kim Cash Tate, an author and Bible teacher. “By the grace of God, the transcendent truths of the Bible shone brighter. It’s a powerful aspect of our cultural narrative, one that I count as immense grace and mercy from God.”

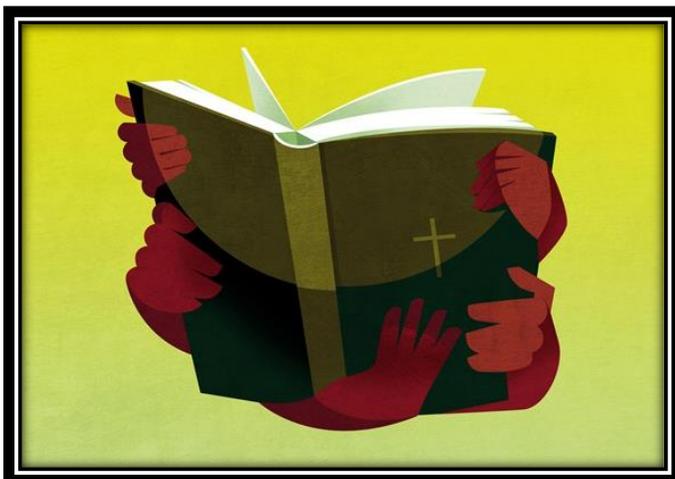
The King James Version—the top-selling translation in the US overall—remains by far the most common Bible used by black churches, with 42 percent of African Americans preferring it and just 11 percent preferring the second-most-popular choice, the New International Version, according to ABS. (The KJV is also the top pick for whites and Hispanics, but by smaller margins.)

That means African Americans often quote the “thous and shalls” in go-to passages like “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1, KJV), or “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isa. 40:31, KJV).

The Pew Research Center has also found that a majority of all black Americans say they read Scripture on their own at least once a week, compared to fewer than a third of white Americans. Additionally, they outpace other racial groups in believing Scripture should be interpreted literally—a conviction shared by half of black Americans but just 26 percent of whites and 38 percent of Hispanics, Pew reported.

This familiarity with biblical texts serves as a starting point for the kind of deeper understanding that today’s Christians need for effective evangelism and discipleship.

“When I think of biblical literacy, it’s not just reading the verse of the day,” said Lisa Fields, founder of the Jude 3 Project, an apologetics ministry focused on black Christians. “It’s knowing Scripture in context.”



The same passages that have resonated with African Americans throughout generations—such as the Exodus narrative and the Old Testament prophets—get exploited by sects like Black Hebrew Israelites, she noted. So Christians need to be able to relate favorite verses to their context and to the greater story of Scripture.

Tate, who teaches the Bible through *YouTube* video series and at women’s events, said most of her followers already have a regular Bible reading habit but want an even deeper devotional life or more confidence with their knowledge of Scripture.

“In my experience, African American believers want the straight, unadulterated Word,” she said. “Often in evangelical circles, Bible study consists of lots of stories, with the Bible sprinkled in... but we don’t need apologies because something God has said sounds hard. Just give us the Word; there’s much grace to go with it.”

African Americans, according to the ABS report, are more likely to say they don’t have any frustrations when reading the Bible (31%) than whites (23%) or Hispanics (20%).

“When it relates to biblical literacy, I always think of Ezekiel, when God commands him to eat the whole scroll, and it will be sweet and then bitter,” said Fields, referencing the start of Ezekiel 3. “It just reminds me that in Scripture there will be some bitter portions and some sweet portions. There are some difficult things that I have to wrestle with, but because I believe God has called me to this work, I have to take all of it.”

The call to rely on the Word, to live on it as our daily bread, applies to all. And in many ways, the needs and motivations of African American Christians are the same as believers of other races. They turn to the Bible looking for hope and help, Croston of LifeWay said.

“People living in the midst of trouble and oppression recognize their need for God more,” he said. “To reach out for God, and in this case the Bible, is what gives many African Americans the strength to endure and keep moving forward.”

