

# Confidence, Conversation and Community: Bible Engagement in Canada, 2013

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## Canadian Bible Engagement Study Executive Summary

Three main factors drive Canadians' Bible reading frequency: confidence, conversation and community.

About one in seven Canadian Christians, or 14%, read the Bible at least once a week. The majority of Canadians, including those who identify themselves as Christians, read the Bible either seldom or never. Weekly Bible reading in Canada has fallen by half since 1996. Surprisingly, the frequency of Bible reading is much the same for older and younger Bible readers, a change since 1996 when older Bible readers were more frequent than younger Bible readers.

## Confidence

- Only 18% of Canadians strongly agree the Bible is the Word of God, down from 35% in 1996. **Canadians who strongly agree that the Bible is the Word of God are ten times as likely to read the Bible frequently (at least a few times a week) and six times as likely to attend religious services weekly as those who just moderately agree.**
- The majority of Canadians (69%) and half of Christians agree that the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions. Among Canadians, **almost no one (2%) who believes the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions reads it frequently.** Very few Canadians with that belief attend religious services weekly (8%). By contrast, Canadians who disagree that the Bible has irreconcilable contradictions are three times as likely to attend services weekly and nine times as likely to read the Bible frequently.
- One in seven Canadians (13%) and about one in four Christians (23%) strongly agree that the Bible is relevant to modern life. **Canadians who strongly agree the Bible is relevant are more than ten times as likely to read the Bible frequently, four times as likely to attend services weekly, five times as likely to reflect frequently on its meaning for their lives and almost ten times as likely to talk to others about it at least weekly as those who just moderately agree.**
- **Almost two-thirds of Canadians (64%) and six in ten Christians agree that the scriptures of all major world religions teach essentially the same things.** Those who do are likely to disregard the teachings of these texts and find a common ethic of social peace behind the texts.



## Conversation

- Only about one in ten Canadians (11%) and two in ten Christians (21%) reflect on the meaning of the Bible for their lives at least a few times a week. Canadians who reflect at least a few times a week are four times as likely to read the Bible frequently and twice as likely to attend services weekly as those who reflect just once a week or once or twice a month.
- Only 6% of Canadians and 11% of Christians talk to others about the Bible outside of religious services at least once a week. **Those who have conversations about the Bible at least once a week have more robust Bible engagement and religious commitment profiles than any other factor we've looked at:** 63% attend religious services weekly compared to 16% of the Canadian population; 57% read the Bible at least a few times a week compared to 9% of the Canadian population; and 81% reflect on the meaning of the Bible at least a few times a week compared to 13% of the population.

## Community

- More frequent church attendance is associated with confidence in the Bible. The more frequently Canadians attend religious services, the more likely they are to strongly agree the Bible is the Word of God. Those who have only moderate confidence in the Bible are less likely to attend services.
- During a time when church attendance was in decline, confidence in the Bible as the Word of God has remained constant for each level of attendance. **This suggests that something happens at church services to instill and nurture confidence in the Bible.**

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- Bible reading is more prevalent in some religious traditions. Evangelicals are a small percentage of this study (7%), but account for almost half (43%) of frequent Bible readers. Comparatively, 13% of frequent Bible readers are Mainline Protestants, 11% are English Catholics, and 4% are French Catholics.
- **The Bible engagement of self-identified Christians as a whole is not very different from Bible engagement of Canadians generally.**

## Conclusions

Conversations about the Bible need to be participatory, not passive. Conversations about the Bible drive other kinds of Bible engagement. To talk about the Bible you have to read the Bible, reflect on the Bible, and be present with others to talk about the Bible.

Given that large swaths of the church lack confidence in the Bible and rarely participate in conversations about the Bible, there is work to do. Our interviews and survey suggest that most Canadians know very little of the content of the Bible. Even when they have access to a Bible they are

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more likely to read in the meaning they assume lies under the text rather than engaging the text itself. This suggests that the Bible is not directly shaping much of the church in Canada. Our study found that it is important for people to believe that the Bible is the Word of God, that it is reliable and trustworthy, and that it has unique teachings. Churches can strengthen Bible engagement by directly teaching these things.

Our study found that **reflection on the meaning of the Bible for people's lives is an important kind of Bible engagement, but that conversation with others about the meaning of the Bible is the key factor in deepening Bible engagement.** It also tends to promote stronger religious communities, because these conversations revolve around Christianity's central text.



Churches should create opportunities for people to talk about the meaning of the Bible for their lives. Implicitly, by talking about the meaning of the Bible, you teach people to have confidence in the Bible because the very conversation communicates that there is meaning to be

found for their lives. If churches prioritize conversations about the meaning of the Bible, it suggests that the Bible is an important document to have conversations about.

This study looks at the confidence that individuals have in the Bible, but if churches are to strengthen the Bible engagement of their congregants, they themselves need to be convinced of the reliability, relevance, trustworthiness and divine origin of the Bible.

**Find resources to help individuals and churches strengthen Bible engagement at [www.bibleengagementstudy.ca](http://www.bibleengagementstudy.ca).**

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