



How can the church in Britain help Millennials engage with the Bible?



David Ford

David was part of a team of researchers from the CODEC research centre (St John's College, Durham University) who over the past few years have been exploring the impact of digital culture upon Bible engagement.

A digital revolution is taking place and its effects can be seen in the lives of many in Britain. For instance, where computers were once limited to industry and academic centres, by the 1980s they had reduced in size and PCs were commonly available. The shift continued and in the 2000s smartphone technology became popular. Thus, computers moved from warehouses, into homes and then into our pockets. Those who were born into these changes are called 'Millennials'. They are young adults who were born between 1981 and 2000, many of whom will not remember life before computers or smart phones.

As a Christian, one of the questions I have asked is: how can the church in Britain help these digitally savvy Millennials to engage meaningfully with the Bible? What follows begins to provide an initial answer. I will draw upon data from a large project commissioned by Bible Society and undertaken by the CODEC research centre in 2017. As part of that, the polling company ComRes surveyed 1,943 British digital Millennials. That is, young adults living in Britain who were aged 18–35, owned at least one digital device and made use of social media at least weekly. The survey asked over a dozen questions exploring their stance towards, use of, and social media engagement with, the Bible. I am going to concentrate on four questions and their related responses because they begin to answer the question above.

I have purposely cherry-picked data from this survey and in doing so am in danger of over-simplifying a complex phenomenon. Moreover, I go on to discuss four main categories of digital Millennials:

the non-religious; those from a religion other than Christianity; non-churchgoing Christians; and churchgoers. Each of these groups represents a wide spectrum of affiliation and practice that is not captured by the survey. The discussion that follows focuses on the data produced and they provide one lens through which Millennials' engagement with the Bible can be considered. There are other factors that have not been taken into account. For instance, Millennials are said to be highly relational, therefore what follows should be considered along with insights from others. Finally, all surveys have an inherent weakness of people providing more socially acceptable answers and that is also the case in this instance. Bearing in mind these qualifications, what is presented is nonetheless robust enough to provide a clear, if tentative, indication as to how digital Millennials can be encouraged to engage more with the Bible.¹

Non-religious

Non-religious people made up about half (48%, $n = 931$) of the total sample of digital Millennials. When asked how often they had engaged with the Bible, in any setting, over the last year about two-thirds (69%, $n = 647$) indicated they had never encountered the Bible. A fifth (22%, $n = 204$) engaged with it one to four times in the last year and 9% ($n = 81$) engaged with it on a regular basis (i.e. monthly or more often).

When those who did engage with the Bible yearly or more often (31% of the sample) were asked the

reason for their engagement, the top responses were:

- 31% I was at a special church service,
- 21% I don't know
- 6% for comfort
- 6% for guidance
- 6% for studies
- 6% attending a regular church service

When asked the location of their Bible engagement, the top responses were (don't know was not available as a response):

- 34% at a special church service
- 18% at home
- 9% at school, college or university
- 8% in hospital
- 8% whilst sightseeing at a church or cathedral

A minority of non-religious people engage with the Bible. When they do it is more likely to be infrequently and because they are attending church for a special service such as a funeral or Easter service. The significance of this will be raised later. For the moment I will focus on the majority (69%) of the non-religious cohort who do not come across the Bible at all.

How do you engage these people with Scripture? Well, I would suggest that non-religious people are more likely to bump into Christians in their day-to-day lives than they are the Bible. The recent *Talking Jesus* research concluded that two thirds (67%) of non-Christians know a practising Christian (someone who prays, reads the Bible and attends church regularly).² There are, of course, differences between the percentage of non-Christians in the population and levels of non-religiosity amongst Millennials. Nonetheless, allowing for a degree of disparity, non-religious young adults are more likely to know a practicing Christian than they are to engage with the Bible in the course of a year. Therefore, it is not the physical Bible that a non-

religious person is likely to read but the life that is being lived by their Christian friend or relative. The values, attitudes and lifestyle adopted by the Christian all communicate something of God. One of the challenges for the Church is to communicate the Bible's story by faithfully living it out.

Other religions

Those young people belonging to a religion other than Christianity made up 14% (n= 267) of the Millennial sample. Just over one third (38%, n= 101) did not encounter the Bible at any point in the last year, 15% (n= 41) engaged with it one to four times in the last year and just under half (47%, n= 125) did so on a regular basis.

Those who had engaged with the Bible at least once in the last year were asked why they had done so, the top responses were:

- 13% I don't know
- 11% for comfort
- 10% for inspiration
- 10% I enjoyed reading it

When asked where they usually engaged with the Bible, the top responses were:

- 21% at home
- 15% in hospital
- 12% at a special church service
- 12% sightseeing in a church/cathedral

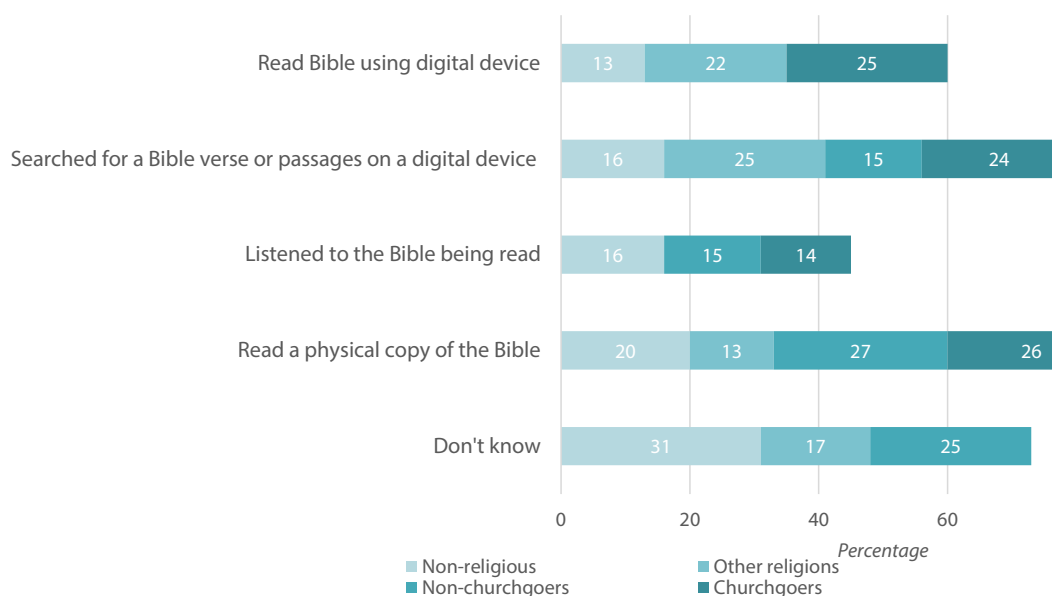
The majority (62%) of young adults from a religion other than Christianity are engaging with the Bible, just under half (47%) doing so regularly. When they do, it can be for personal reasons (like seeking comfort or inspiration), and they are more likely to read it in a private setting (such as at home and in hospital) using a digital device.

NOTES

1. If any reader would like to know more about this research and its findings, a short booklet is available from Bible Society (www.biblesociety.org.uk) and CODEC (www.dur.ac.uk/codec), and a more extensive book is being published as well (Ford, Mann and Phillips, *The Bible and Digital Millennials*, Routledge, forthcoming).

2. *Talking Jesus*, p. 17, available to download at <https://talkingjesus.org/research/>

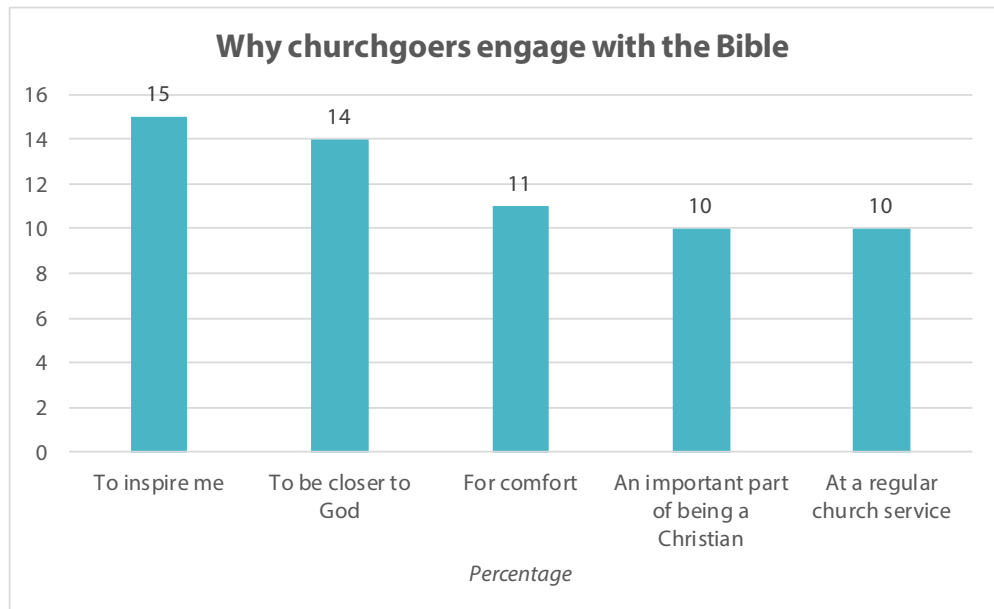
The type of Bible format used



How can they be further encouraged to engage with Scripture? Well perhaps there is a need for digital Bible formats that are specifically designed for those of other faiths. Bible agencies, churches and missionary organisations have been eager to translate the Bible into the heart languages of many around the globe. What may be lacking is a similar drive to provide easy access to a digital Bible that is culturally and religiously framed to facilitate its meaningful engagement by those of other religions.

- 32% at a special church service
- 28% at home
- 10% at a regular church service
- 8% sightseeing in a church or cathedral

Of the three groups considered so far, the majority (50%) of this one engage with the Bible a few times a year, typically at a special church service. This could be a baptism, wedding or Christmas carol service. The church should therefore make the most of these opportunities to engage these people with the Bible. The Scriptures



The survey also indicated that churchgoing Christians were particularly positive about the sacred texts of other faiths. In Britain there may therefore be a common respect and valuing of each other's religious texts and this could be used as a platform for inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. Much as Scriptural Reasoning groups already bring Jews, Muslims and Christians together to read sacred texts, this could be expanded and diversified.

Non-churchgoers

Whilst 35% of the sample identified as Christian, just over half of those (53%, $n=362$) did not go to church on a regular basis and so were labelled non-churchgoers. Over one third (39%, $n=141$) did not interact with the Bible at any point in the last year. Half of them (50%, $n=182$) did so between one and four times in the last year and a smaller proportion did so on a regular basis (11%, $n=40$).

When asked why they had engaged with the Bible, the top responses were:

- 26% they were at a special church service
- 13% for comfort
- 11% don't know
- 9% to inspire me

When asked where they had engaged with it, the top responses were:

should be at the heart of these services, with thoughtful consideration given to how the reading is undertaken and the passage preached (if appropriate). For example, setting the scene of the text (i.e. highlighting its wider literary and historical contexts, or how it fits into the Bible's grand-narrative) would help an audience that is unfamiliar with it. As too would using a modern version and addressing questions which non-churchgoers might ask of the passage. This is an opportunity for the Bible's message to be communicated in a relevant way to those who are not regularly encountering it. Additionally, it is not only this group whose main Bible interaction takes place in these settings, but it is also the case for some of the non-religious young adults as well, as was highlighted earlier.

Churchgoers

Of the entire sample 16% were churchgoers, which is just under half of the Christian group (47%, $n=319$). A very small minority (2%, $n=6$) had never engaged with the Bible in the last year, a slightly larger percentage engaged with it one to four times in the last year (7%, $n=22$) but most did so on a regular basis (92%, $n=293$).

When asked where they had engaged with the Bible, the top responses were:

- 34% at home
- 23% at a regular church service

- 8% in hospital
- 8% on a journey

Churchgoers engage with the Bible on a regular basis (92%) and seem to value it, in that they do it for inspiration or to be closer to God. Home and church are the two places where they are most likely to engage with the Bible and they use both digital and paper technology.

The data presented so far concerns the main reason, location or format through which Scripture was engaged. However, the survey allowed people to indicate not just their top responses (which I have presented) but they could choose two others as well, ranking them second and third. Taking these other responses into account, churchgoers' Bible engagement is seen to be multimodal: 63% said they interacted with the Bible at home and 57% indicated at a regular church service; 53% made use of a paper Bible and at least 60% made use of a digital format. This may mean that some people predominantly engage with the Bible at home and others in a church setting, and similarly that some are paper Bible users and others digital. However, it is also possible that people are engaging with the Bible in various contexts through different formats, and factors such as ease, convenience, purpose and habit play a part in where and how the Bible is engaged.

In order to be contemporary some churches have digitised a lot of their service. For churchgoing

digital Millennials however, there has not been an overwhelming swing towards digital Bible engagement. These tech savvy young adults are perhaps aware of the limitations of the digital technology they use and whilst digital Bibles are certainly popular, they continue to value the paper one as well. Churches should not rush to get rid of their pew Bibles and leaders should not necessarily assume that reading the Bible off their smartphone will make their reading more relevant. A multimodal approach that is sensitive to the place and function of different Bible formats is perhaps the best way forward.

Conclusion

Therefore when thinking about what ways the Church can help digital Millennials engage with the Bible, the data from this survey demonstrates that: for non-religious young adults the main 'Bible' they will read is in the words and actions of those Christians they know; for those of a religion other than Christianity, digital Bible formats may be the most appropriate; for non-churchgoers those special occasions which draw them to church are their key opportunity; and churchgoers are probably using different Bibles in different contexts, and this needs to be appreciated. There is therefore no blanket solution that applies to everyone in this generation, but sensitivity, love and wisdom are required in order to enable Millennials to meaningfully engage with the Bible.



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