

# Stemming Biblical Illiteracy

by Pastor Robert M. Reid

The good news is that our nation has a strong belief in God.

In a March 30 Newsweek poll, 91% of American adults said they believe in God, and 87% said they are identified with a specific religion—predominantly Christianity. About half of those surveyed (48%) rejected the theory of evolution, with 34% of college graduates embracing the Biblical account of creation. Evangelical Christians ranked even higher in that belief; 73% said that God “created humans in their present form within the last 10,000 years.” Those who don’t believe in God at all (just 6%) are definitely in the minority.

Before you applaud too loudly, consider these words from a sermon by well known and respected pastor and author, Dr. John Piper, this past January: “The collapse of our culture into debauchery and barbarism and anarchy is probably not far away.” Piper went on to say that the world we live in is one “...where the main idol is self, and its main doctrine is autonomy, and its central act of worship is being entertained, and its two main shrines are the television and the cinema.” Evidently there is a great divide between what people believe about God and how their faith in God is lived out.

How could such a divide come about?

Stephen Prothero is head of the department of religion of Boston University and author of a recent book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't*. He has put his finger on a major problem contributing to this deplorable condition. In a recent interview in *U.S. News & World Report* (April 9), Dr. Prothero noted that, while we are “...the most religious of the modern industrialized nations,” as a nation we rank “among the most ill-informed.” The article reported, “Two-thirds of all Americans regard the Bible as a source of answers to life’s questions,” yet “only half can name even one of the New Testament Gospels.” Surprisingly, “...only 10 percent of U.S. teenagers can name the world’s five major religions,” according to the report.

Prothero suggested that there used to be six “links in the chain” of religious education: churches, schools, house-

holds, Sunday Schools, colleges, and Bible and tract societies. While diminished exposure to religious instruction in schools was harmful, what was most damaging was what occurred in other links. According to Dr. Prothero, Christians in the 19th century began “...[debating] which Bible to read” rather than reading and teaching it. Churches, he noted, “...started focusing on loving Jesus rather than on listening to him. The Bible slowly became a kind of ornament and a source of authority rather than a book you actually read. Sermons became more about ordinary life and less about biblical narratives, while Sunday Schools focused more on morality than on learning” about Biblical doctrine. Somehow the Puritan thrust of understanding God “through the head and the heart” was replaced by an evangelical influence that too often “focus[ed] on experience and emotion.” As a result, “...they slowly turned Americans away from religious learning.”

Christians abandoned the family as another key link in religious instruction. Too often families have relegated spiritual instruction to society and churches. That is not where God designed the instruction to take place. Godless societies are poor instructors. Church instruction alone is too limited in time and practical application. Churches were established by God to “equip saints to do the work of the ministry” (Ephesians 4:12-14). They should prepare and support families in their task of religious instruction, not replace them. In the Old Testament parents were tasked with teaching Biblical truth to their children and grandchildren (Deuteronomy 4:9), instructing then intentionally in the course of daily life (6:4-9).

Sunday School is only about 230 years old; who do you suppose was the primary source of religious instruction of children before that?

As Mother’s Day and Father’s Day come up in May and June, would this be a good time for parents to dedicate themselves to instructing their children in Biblical truth? Dad and Mom, as a church we want to aid you in this awesome responsibility, not replace you. We need to stem the tide of biblical illiteracy in our nation. God has provided two major institutions to do that—the home and church. Let’s be partners in this important task!