

The Evolution of *Bible Engagement*: A Research Journey (2004–2023)

Founding the Center for Bible Engagement (2004) and Early Questions

In 2004, Back to the Bible launched the Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) as a dedicated research division to investigate spiritual growth and Bible reading habits. At the outset, our team – which I had the privilege to lead – was driven by two foundational questions: “Why do so many people own Bibles but so few read them?” and “What difference does engaging the Bible make in a person’s life?”

These questions arose from a pressing observation in the Christian community: despite widespread Bible ownership, meaningful interaction with Scripture was remarkably low. In fact, surveys showed that while 93% of Americans owned a Bible, very few read it regularly. This gap between ownership and actual use pointed to a deeper issue of *engagement*, not merely access. Our mission crystallized around this problem – we wanted to empirically understand what true *Bible engagement* looks like and how it influences a person’s life.

It is worth noting that we coined the term “Bible engagement” itself which became our guiding concept during these early years. The CBE was originally founded as the “Bible Literacy Center,” but we soon embraced the term *Bible engagement* to emphasize not just biblical knowledge, but an active, heartfelt involvement with Scripture. This shift was inspired by the vision of our early benefactors, such as Clarence W. Hottel, Sr., who had a passion to see men and women enter “a meaningful relationship with God” through reading His Word.

Thus, from day one, we saw Bible reading not as an end in itself, but as a means to a transformative relationship with God. In my own experience as a behavioral researcher, I was intrigued by the prospect of measuring this transformation. Could regular interaction with the Bible tangibly change people’s attitudes, behaviors, and sense of purpose? This personal motivation set the tone for CBE’s research trajectory.

Defining “Bible Engagement” – Toward an Empirical Definition

As our research progressed, we realized we needed a clear definition of “*Bible engagement*.” Early on, “engagement” was more of a concept than a quantified term. Through iterative studies, we developed a formal operational definition: Bible engagement means consistently interacting with Scripture – reading (or listening), reflecting on its meaning, and responding to it – at least four times per week. In practice, *engaging* involved not just skimming a verse, but *receiving* God’s Word, *reflecting* on it deeply, and *responding* in obedience or life application. We chose the threshold of “four or more days a week” based on a striking pattern in the data: beyond three days of engagement in a week, the

impact on personal life outcomes grew dramatically. If someone engaged the Bible only once or twice a week, the effect was negligible – akin to someone who seldom reads at all. But at four or more days per week, scripture engagement became statistically correlated with profound life change, a phenomenon we eventually labeled the “Power of 4.” This data-driven insight allowed us to coin *Bible engagement* in measurable terms and distinguish it from occasional Bible reading.

To arrive at this definition, we spent years refining our survey instruments and analyzing results. Over the past two decades, our researchers have surveyed more than 150,000 people around the world about their spiritual lives. These respondents ranged widely in age (from about 8 to over 80) and cultural background. We deployed internet-based surveys in over 20 countries – including the United States, Brazil, India, the UK, Japan, and others – capturing both random samples of the general population and targeted samples of churchgoers and ministry constituents.

Partnering with organizations like the American Bible Society and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, among others, enabled us to broaden our reach and validate findings across diverse groups. For example, in 2010 we collaborated with the American Bible Society to assess Scripture engagement among dozens of New York City congregations, leveraging their networks to gather data from thousands of participants.

Such partnerships not only provided access to larger and varied samples, but also helped refine our questions and methods with input from other scholars and ministry leaders. By the 2010s, “*Bible engagement*” was not just an abstract idea, but a rigorously defined variable in our studies – essentially *daily Scripture interaction* (≥ 4 days a week) involving *reading, reflection, and response*.

Research Methodology: Behavioral and Self-Assessment Measures

From the beginning, we adopted a two-pronged research approach to capture the full impact of Bible engagement: one prong examined *behavioral outcomes* in believers’ lives, and the other prong gauged *self-reported spiritual health* and attitudes (i.e. self-assessment). In other words, we wanted to measure both the “outside” changes and the “inside” changes associated with regular Scripture engagement. To do this, our surveys combined objective questions about behavior with subjective questions about spiritual perception.

On the behavioral side, respondents reported the frequency of various activities or struggles in their life – for example, how often they drank alcohol to excess, used pornography, gambled, lied, gossiped, fought with family, neglected prayer, volunteered,

gave to charity, and so forth. We compiled these into indices of “behavioral risks” (negative or sinful behaviors) and “behavioral strengths” (positive, proactive practices). Simultaneously, we asked participants to self-evaluate aspects of their spiritual well-being: Did they feel close to God or spiritually stagnant? Were they confident in their ability to please God, or did they feel guilty and discouraged? Did they sense growth in Christlikeness over time?

By combining these two prongs, we could correlate people’s *Bible engagement habits* with both their observable life choices and their internal sense of growth. This holistic strategy was guided by a simple principle: *people are the experts on their own lives*, so we valued their honest self-assessment, but we also sought concrete indicators of life change. In my view, this two-dimensional approach was crucial – it allowed us to demonstrate that Bible engagement not only *changes what people do*, but also *changes how they see themselves and their relationship with God*.

Indeed, our analyses showed that Scripture engagement impacts both the behavioral aspects of spiritual growth (living a life that looks more like Jesus) *and* people’s self-perception of their spiritual progress. This held true even after statistically controlling for other factors like church attendance, prayer, or small group involvement, underscoring that the Bible-engagement effect was uniquely robust.

Methodologically, our surveys combined quantitative scaled questions (Likert-style frequency and agreement items) with open-ended questions for qualitative insight. This mixed-methods design let us measure specific outcomes and also hear people’s personal stories. Over the years, as we gathered tens of thousands of responses, we employed rigorous statistical analyses – from simple correlations and cross-tabs to multivariate regression models and factor analyses – to test our hypotheses. We would repeatedly find and then verify the same core result in study after study: engaging Scripture at least four times a week is the strongest predictor of a person’s spiritual growth (by “spiritual growth” we mean becoming “less of the person I was before I committed my life to Jesus, and more like Christ in thoughts, words, and deeds”). As a researcher, I found it gratifying that the data consistently pointed to Scripture as the critical ingredient in spiritual maturity, confirming empirically what many pastors and theologians have long asserted in principle.

Key Empirical Findings: Life Impact of Bible Engagement

After years of research, our team began to publish a series of eye-opening findings that highlighted the effects of regular Bible engagement on various facets of life. We synthesized these results in what became known as the “*Bible Engagement as the Key to Spiritual Growth*” report, and later in numerous white papers and journal articles. The

evidence painted a clear and compelling picture: People who engage the Bible at least four days a week experience statistically significant, and often profound, differences in their lives compared to those who engage the Bible rarely or never.

1. Reduction in Destructive Behaviors: Individuals with a four-or-more-times per week Bible engagement habit show dramatically lower odds of participating in a range of self-destructive or sinful behaviors. Our surveys found that such individuals were far less likely to abuse substances or engage in addictive behaviors. For example, someone engaging Scripture most days of the week had *62% lower odds of drinking to excess* (i.e. binge drinking or getting drunk). Likewise, the likelihood of viewing pornography dropped by about 59% for regular Bible engagers. We observed similar declines in other temptations: the probability of lashing out in anger went down by roughly 31%, and tendencies to lie or gossip dropped by nearly 28% on average. Even neglect of responsibilities like one's family decreased (e.g. *neglecting family needs fell by ~26%*) among those consistently grounded in Scripture. These findings held across different demographics. It was astonishing to see empirical confirmation that *the Bible's influence reaches into even the "mundane" choices of daily life*. As I often explain it: engaging God's Word regularly does not make one perfect, but it *tilts the odds* strongly in favor of healthier, holier behavior. Our peer-reviewed analyses confirmed that these differences were statistically significant and not explained by other factors. In short, regular Scripture engagement functions as a powerful safeguard or antidote against the common vices that plague people's lives.

2. Improved Emotional Health: In tandem with behavioral changes, we documented marked improvements in emotional and mental well-being among frequent Bible engagers. Those who "receive, reflect on, and respond" to Scripture four+ times weekly are considerably less likely to struggle with negative emotions such as bitterness, unforgiveness, and discouragement.

For instance, engaging the Bible most days correlates with a *40% drop in feelings of bitterness* and a similar reduction in destructive thoughts (whether toward oneself or others). Feelings of spiritual discouragement or feeling like "I can't overcome my flaws" also diminish substantially – one measure showed a *31% decrease in feeling discouraged* among high-frequency Bible readers. Perhaps most striking to me was the impact on one's sense of stagnation or spiritual inertia: we found that those who immerse in Scripture four or more days a week are 60% less likely to feel spiritually stagnant (stuck in a rut spiritually). In other words, regular engagement injects a sense of growth, hope, and forward momentum into one's faith life. These emotional

health benefits make sense – as people align their minds with God’s truth and promises, they experience more peace and joy. Our data indeed showed that Bible-engaged individuals reported higher levels of peace, optimism, and *resilience* in the face of life’s challenges, compared to their peers who engage scripture sporadically. This aspect of spiritual resiliency – the ability to bounce back, resist despair, and persevere – emerged as a notable byproduct of frequent Bible intake. It appears that hearing God’s voice in Scripture regularly has a stabilizing, anchoring effect on the soul.

3. A More Proactive and Vibrant Faith: Bible engagement doesn’t just curb negative outcomes; it also propels positive, proactive behaviors in believers. We saw clear evidence that those who engage the Bible most days develop what might be called a “proactive faith” – they don’t just *avoid* sin, they actively *live out* their faith. Even after controlling for demographics and church involvement, people regularly in Scripture were far more likely to pursue acts of love and service. For example, compared to those who read Scripture infrequently, a person who engages four+ times a week is significantly more likely to share their faith with others – in fact, one large analysis found that the Bible-engaged were *228% more likely to evangelize or tell others about Jesus*. This is an enormous difference (over a three-fold increase) in evangelistic activity linked simply to Bible reading frequency.

Additionally, consistent engagers had dramatically higher rates of generosity: they were *416% more likely to give financially to their church* (i.e. over four times more likely to be tithers or regular donors), and *218% more likely to donate to causes other than their church* (charities, missions, etc.). In practical terms, engaged believers become markedly more open-handed with their resources – a finding that underscores how Scripture shapes one’s values and compassion. We also discovered that disciplines like scripture memorization and discipling others flourish among Bible engagers. The odds of a person memorizing Bible verses or *actively mentoring someone in their faith* jump by 200–400% with regular engagement. All these metrics point to a transformed lifestyle: engaging the Bible most days produces believers who pray more, give more, serve more, and boldly live out their faith in tangible ways. This “proactive faith” dimension was especially encouraging to us as researchers, because it indicated that Bible engagement doesn’t lead to mere head knowledge – it mobilizes people for Kingdom work. In summary, the data confirmed a causal pathway that many suspected: *the more consistently you engage with God’s Word, the more your attitudes and behaviors align with Christ, and the more your life looks like active discipleship.*

Importantly, these findings have been replicated and corroborated by independent studies. Our conclusions resonated with the groundbreaking *Reveal* study by Willow Creek Association (Hawkins & Parkinson, 2007), which likewise found that activities like small groups or volunteer programs do not by themselves catalyze spiritual growth as much as personal Bible practices do.

Lifeway Research in 2012 similarly reported that of all spiritual disciplines, daily Bible reading was the best predictor of maturity. This convergence of evidence – from CBE and others – has solidified the concept that “*Bible engagement*” (as we defined it) is central to a healthy, growing Christian life. It was rewarding to see the broader Christian research community arrive at the same simple truth we were finding: engaging Scripture “most days of the week” is absolutely critical for spiritual growth. As we summarized in one report, *hearing from God through His Word is the single most powerful predictor of spiritual growth for Christ-followers*. This is not a slogan but an empirically demonstrated fact.

The “Power of 4” – A Breakthrough Discovery

By around 2006–2009, our accumulating research gave rise to what we coined the “Power of 4” concept – a term that captured the startling gap between engaging Scripture three days a week versus four days. We observed that at *three or fewer days* of engagement per week, the statistical correlations between Bible reading and life change were modest or inconsistent. But once people hit *four or more days*, the correlations skyrocketed in strength. It was as if a threshold was crossed: engaging the Bible four+ times a week led to markedly higher odds of victory over sin and growth in godliness, whereas three times or less had minimal effect. We likened this to a dose-response relationship in medicine – a small dose has little impact, but a regular sustained dose produces a healing effect.

We formally documented the *Power of 4* in a 2009 empirical brief and later expanded it in a comprehensive 2012 report titled “*Understanding the Bible Engagement Challenge: Scientific Evidence for the Power of 4*”. This became a breakthrough not only for our team but for many ministries we partnered with.

I often summarize the Power of 4 in talks by saying: “*If you want to grow spiritually, engaging God’s Word most days (four or more) is far more influential than any other spiritual activity we’ve measured.*” In an interview, I described it this way: “*We found there was one spiritual practice that truly made a difference in people’s lives. We call it the **Power of 4**. In short, it’s the astounding difference that engaging God’s Word – reading what the Bible says, reflecting on it, and responding to it in your life – makes on a person’s life.*”. The numbers speak loudly: for instance, a Bible-engaged person is 59% less likely to view pornography

and 238% more likely to share their faith, compared to someone who engages scripture infrequently. They are also significantly less likely to abuse alcohol or feel spiritually stagnant. We had never seen such a singular variable with this level of predictive power in social-behavioral research. This discovery was *personally exhilarating* – it confirmed to me, as a Christian and a scientist, that regular Scripture intake is literally life-changing. It gave our team a unifying theme to communicate to churches: *the Bible isn't just a book to own; it's a catalyst for transformation when opened consistently.*

The impact of the Power of 4 finding has been far-reaching. As word spread, many churches, ministries, and even denominational programs began re-evaluating their discipleship strategies. Pastors told us that our research changed their emphasis – for example, shifting from programmatic busyness to ensuring congregants develop a daily Bible reading habit. Ministries like the American Bible Society and Scripture Union integrated the “4+ days” insight into their materials, encouraging believers toward that frequency. At Back to the Bible, this research prompted what I call a “*ministry pivot*” within our organization: historically a radio teaching ministry, we began investing heavily in digital tools (like daily Bible engagement apps and personalized devotional platforms) to help individuals engage Scripture on a daily basis. We realized that traditional once-a-week sermons or broadcasts, while helpful, were not enough on their own. The Power of 4 data urged us – and others – to explore new methods to get Scripture into people’s hands and hearts *daily*. This led to innovations such as the goTandem app, which delivered tailored Bible content to users’ phones every day, aiming to establish a 4+ day rhythm in their lives.

The results were very encouraging, with many previously sporadic Bible readers becoming regular engagers and then exhibiting the kind of life changes our surveys predicted. In short, the Power of 4 finding revolutionized how we and our partners approach discipleship and spiritual formation: it underscored that encouraging frequent personal scripture encounters should be a top priority, perhaps even above many church programs.

As one summary of our eight-year research synthesis concluded, “*Engaging the Bible most days of the week is critical to grow in the Christian faith... Those serious about helping people grow in relationship with Jesus Christ need to carefully consider where they are investing their energies – are they producing lifelong impact by getting people engaged in the Word?*” This statement became a guiding challenge for many ministry leaders in the 2010s.

(At this point in our journey, the Center for Bible Engagement had become globally recognized for its empirical approach to spiritual growth. We had presented our findings at conferences, published them in journals, and even integrated them into discipleship

curricula. Personally, I found great fulfillment in seeing how data could illuminate timeless biblical truths and help the Church make more informed decisions in nurturing believers.)

June 2023: A New Chapter – Transition to the Center for Scripture Absorption

After two decades of pioneering research, CBE reached a turning point in mid-2023. In June of that year, Back to the Bible made a strategic decision to sell the Center for Bible Engagement’s intellectual property to Our Daily Bread Ministries (ODB). This transfer included our accumulated research archives, survey instruments, and the “Bible engagement” research models that we had developed under CBE. *“(The ‘Power of 4’ research, originally conducted by Back to the Bible’s CBE, is now part of Our Daily Bread Ministries’ resources.)*

Importantly, however, the original CBE team (myself and my research colleagues) remained at Back to the Bible, and with our organization’s blessing we embarked on a *new vision and initiative* in the aftermath of the sale. We launched the **Center for Scripture Absorption** – a new research and ministry center that draws on our decades of experience but reimagines the task for a new era. Whereas *Bible engagement* focused on frequent interaction with Scripture, *Scripture absorption* emphasizes an even deeper process: helping people not only read the Word, but truly *absorb* it so that it permeates every aspect of their daily lives which includes sharing with others.

Despite the change in branding, our core passion remains the same. The new Center for Scripture Absorption, led by the same veteran team, is building on the rich foundation of empirical research we established at CBE. We carry forward the lessons learned, yet we deliberately started fresh with new research, new tools, and new frameworks – all developed from scratch to address the spiritual challenges of today. One reason for this fresh start was to ensure all our work is ethically sourced and independent. We don’t simply reuse old CBE surveys or data; instead, we’ve re-tooled our approach, informed by past insights but free from any prior obligations.

This was done out of an abundance of caution to respect the integrity of the intellectual property sale and to foster innovation unencumbered by older paradigms. In practical terms, *everything we produce at the new center is newly created and wholly owned by Back to the Bible*, giving us freedom to adapt and scale globally.

Our guiding vision has also been refined: *to help people absorb Scripture deeply and live it out daily to the point of sharing with someone else*. In the voice of our new mission, “we believe lasting spiritual growth happens when Scripture moves from something you **read...** to something you **live and share with others**.” Scripture absorption is about internalizing

God's Word to the point that it transforms attitudes and behavior – echoing the original goal of Bible engagement, but aiming even more at holistic life integration.

One of the first major undertakings of the Center for Scripture Absorption was developing new metrics for spiritual health and growth. Recognizing that counting Bible reading frequency, while useful, is not the sole indicator of spiritual fitness, we designed the **SALT Index** – a comprehensive assessment tool that measures “what matters” in real-life discipleship. (*SALT* stands for Scripture Absorption and Life Transformation.)

The SALT Index is a next-generation instrument built entirely in-house in the months after CBE's transition, reflecting our commitment to fresh research. It deliberately does not rely on the old “frequency-only” metrics or self-reported sentiment alone. Instead, SALT focuses on *observable outcomes of spiritual maturity* – the kind of growth that manifests in how people think, choose, love, and serve on a daily basis. In practice, the SALT Index evaluates key dimensions such as: (1) Scripture Absorption – is the person internalizing Scripture and acting on it? (2) Life Transformation – are the individual's attitudes and behaviors aligning more closely with biblical values? and (3) Discipleship Multiplication – is the person actively influencing others and passing on their faith?

These categories arose from our desire to capture *deeper spiritual fitness, long-term transformation, and outward impact*, rather than just counting how many times someone opens a Bible app. We have developed tailored versions of the SALT assessment for different contexts – from pastors and church congregations to international ministry cohorts – ensuring it's culturally adaptable and scalable to diverse settings. Our goal with these tools is to help churches and ministries around the world diagnose and strengthen discipleship in a measurable way, much like how one might use health indices to track physical fitness.

It's important to emphasize that our new center remains committed to real-life discipleship rooted in Scripture, just as CBE was – but with an expanded vision. We often talk about promoting “*spiritual fitness*,” by which we mean cultivating habitual patterns of reflection on Scripture, obedience to God's prompts, and investing in others (multiplication). We want to help believers move from merely *hearing* the Word to *living it daily which includes mentoring and discipling others*. In practical terms, that means developing daily rhythms of engaging God's Word (in context, in community, and in prayerful meditation) and then translating that into daily actions – in one's relationships, work, and outreach. Everything we do – from new survey panels to digital engagement platforms – is oriented toward that end: seeing genuine life transformation and helping Christians become “doers of the Word,

not hearers only.” With the ultimate goal of becoming and helping others become Biblically engaged disciple makers.

In this new season, I feel a renewal of the same personal motivation that launched our journey back in 2003. We are, in a sense, starting again – armed with decades of knowledge but approaching the task with fresh eyes and dependence on God. The Center for Scripture Absorption is already developing innovative resources and collaborating with global partners to scale up what works. For example, we’ve constructed a “Spiritual Fitness Panel” of mature believers who help us test and refine our assessments, ensuring that what we measure truly reflects deep spiritual change and not superficial activity. Early feedback from this panel has reinforced the importance of integrity and authenticity in reporting spiritual outcomes – values we hold dear as researchers committed to truth and transparency. We see ourselves as stewards of an ongoing research journey that must always remain *ethically sound* and *ministry-focused*.

Conclusion

Looking back over this chronological journey, I am struck by how the Lord has led us step by step – from the initial question of why people neglect their Bibles, to coining and defining “*Bible engagement*,” to uncovering the revolutionary *Power of 4*, to now advancing the concept of *Scripture absorption* for a new generation. Throughout, our approach has been scholarly and data-driven, yet deeply personal.

As a researcher in the role of a disciple, I have always remembered that behind every data point is a person with a story. The history of Bible engagement research is ultimately about people encountering God in His Word and being changed. Our empirical findings gave credence to what believers have long experienced anecdotally: *engaging Scripture consistently is life-changing*. This journey has transformed how many churches and ministries approach discipleship – shifting emphasis toward daily Bible interaction as the centerpiece of spiritual growth. And now, with the transition to the Center for Scripture Absorption, we carry that legacy forward, with new tools like the SALT Index and a sharpened focus on helping believers *absorb and live out Scripture*. All our work – past, present, and future – aims to serve one grand purpose: to help men and women everywhere move from simply owning or hearing the Word to living the Word out, every single day. In the words of our team’s new motto, we want to see people “*Receive, Reflect, Respond, and Reveal Christ*” through engagement with Scripture, so that the Bible’s transforming power can continue to be evidenced in countless lives around the world.

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