

To Preach the Word

David Yount: Quoting the Bible in public

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President Bush's tribute to the lost Columbia astronauts, delivered in Houston, was measured but poignant. A born-again Christian, Bush prayed confidently that "all are safely home" and calmly quoted the Bible:

"Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created all these? He who brings out the starry hosts one by one and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing."

We learned afterwards that Karen Hughes, the president's former top assistant, had called Michael Gerson suggesting the verse from Isaiah. Gerson, the lead White House speechwriter, studied theology at Illinois' evangelical Wheaton College, which counts Billy Graham among its graduates.

It is increasingly rare to hear Scripture quoted in public, partly because of legal constraints, but largely because the Bible has become unfamiliar territory. Pollster George Gallup Jr. refers to us as a "nation of biblical illiterates." Although 95 percent of Americans profess a belief in God, only 4 in 10 know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Only 3 in 10 teenagers know why Easter is celebrated. Only 3 in 10 Americans admit they look to Scripture for truth.

In the decade following World War II, 10 million copies of the Bible were distributed every year, a record. Still, in the churchgoing 1950s, although 4 of every 5 adults acknowledged the Bible as the "revealed word of God," a majority could not recall the name of even one of the four Gospels.

Today, two-thirds of Americans profess to believe that the Bible answers all or most of the basic questions of life. Nevertheless, the percentage of Americans who admit to never or only rarely reading the Bible actually doubled during the decade of the 1990s, to 41 percent.

Paradoxically, early in the same decade, the percentage of Americans who say they would like to experience spiritual growth actually increased by one-third — to 8 of every 10 citizens.

We are no longer a nation of readers. The American Booksellers Association reveals that 8 of 10 Americans neither bought nor read a book in 2002. Indeed, nearly 3 out of 5 Americans haven't opened a book since high school, and 42 percent of college graduates haven't read any book since they graduated.

Ironically, the Bible has never been so accessible. If you will go to www.gospelcom.net/bible, you will find 15 online versions of the Bible in 28 languages — including Haitian and Maori. There's even a facility for looking up chapter and verse as well as individual words, all in an instant.

After 9/11, the president did not hesitate to quote St. Paul to reassure the nation: *"Neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth can separate us from God's love."*

We could have read it for ourselves.

Notice the key piece of scripture the President left out for "political correctness":

Romans 8:38-39 (KJV)

38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, **which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

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Acts 17:22-31 (KJV)

- 22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.
- 23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, **TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.**
- 24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;
- 25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;
- 26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;
- 27 **That they should seek the Lord**, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:
- 28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.
- 29 Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.
- 30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:
- 31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

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Faith in America

It's as important as ever, no matter what you believe

By Jeffery L. Sheler

(**bolding** added for emphasis)

Since the arrival of the first Christian pilgrims in colonial times, Americans have defined themselves as a "nation under God." In times of peace and prosperity as well as in war and tragedy, the nation and its leaders have paid homage to the God many believe is the author and sustainer of life and liberty. And they have ordered their lives and laws according to widely shared principles informed by a rich tapestry of religious traditions.

Today, the nation's historic reservoir of faith faces new and daunting challenges in a world shaken by terrorism, ethnic strife, and economic uncertainty—and by the stinging disappointment of clergy scandals. Yet there are few signs of a concomitant waning of the profound religious character that has defined the United States from the beginning. A new *U.S. News/PBS's Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* poll suggests that the wealthiest, most powerful, and best-educated nation on Earth still is one of the most religious—but in some intriguing new ways. Nearly two thirds of Americans say religion is very important in their lives, and close to half say they attend worship services at least once a week—the highest percentages since at least the 1960s. Other surveys continue to show belief in God and devotion to prayer at historic highs. And voluntary giving to religious institutions—estimated at more than \$55 billion annually—exceeds the gross national product of many countries. From a storefront tabernacle in South Central Los Angeles to a Gothic cathedral in upper Manhattan, there are more churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques per capita in the United States than in any other nation on Earth: one for about every 865 people.

Meanwhile, many Americans seek spiritual sustenance beyond organized religion, in personal experiences and meditative practices. More than 4 of 5 Americans say they have "experienced God's presence or a

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spiritual force" close to them, and 46 percent say it has happened many times. "People are reaching out in all directions in their attempt to escape from the *seen* world to the *unseen* world," explains pollster George Gallup Jr. "There is a deep desire for spiritual moorings—a hunger for God."

Yet while the United States may well be, as many experts claim, the most religious of the Western democracies, it also is becoming the most religiously diverse—and tolerant. Since the Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated quotas linked to national origin, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians, and others have arrived in increasing numbers, dramatically altering the religious landscape of many communities. As Harvard Divinity School Prof. Diana Eck points out in *A New Religious America*, members of religions now live "not just on the other side of the world, but in our neighborhoods; Hindu children go to school with Jewish children; Muslims, Buddhists, and Sikhs work side by side with Protestants and Catholics." Though the numbers of non-Christians are relatively small—about 6.5 percent of the U.S. population—their visibility and influence are growing. Nationwide, there are now more Buddhists than Presbyterians and nearly as many Muslims as Jews.

"The kind of pluralism we're seeing today is unheard of," says Gary Laderman, a religion professor at Emory University in Atlanta, "and we don't know what the response is going to be." Yet it already is becoming clear, say Laderman, Eck, and others, that Americans of the 21st century can no longer appeal to a shared "Judeo-Christian heritage" in navigating the contentious issues that arise in a free and democratic society. **"When you begin to think of yourself as a Judeo-Christian-Islamic-Hindu-Buddhist culture," says Laderman, "how do you strike a balance in civic religion that's going to accommodate everyone?"**

The changing complexion of American religion already has worked its way into the public discourse. From President Bush on down, elected officials accustomed to lauding America's churches and synagogues now routinely include "mosques." At the White House and in some governors' mansions, ceremonies honoring Islam's holy month of Ramadan are increasingly commonplace. And Muslim and Hindu clerics have joined ministers, priests, and rabbis in offering opening prayers at legislative sessions and city council meetings—although not always without controversy.

Still, despite sporadic assaults directed at religious minorities, experts say extreme xenophobia is generally rare and mild in comparison with the violence common in some parts of the world. Indeed, the *U.S. News/PBS* survey—conducted last month by Mitofsky International and Edison Media Research—found a high degree of acceptance toward people of different faiths. **More than three fourths of Americans call the nation's religious diversity a source of strength; fewer than a third think it makes it harder to keep the country united.** (There is, however, a new suspicion of Islam: 37 percent say they have an unfavorable view of that religion, while nearly 40 percent think Islam harbors more violent extremists than do other religions.)

Tolerance. Meanwhile, more than 3 in 4 Americans believe all religions have at least some elements of truth—even though few say they know much about religions other than their own. And nearly 70 percent think spiritual experiences are the most important part of religion. "If one's religion is more about individual identity than doctrine or creed, it's a lot easier to be tolerant," says Egon Mayer, a sociologist at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Gallup says that the high degree of religious tolerance reflects, in part, "not only a lack of knowledge of other religions but an ignorance of one's own faith." In some polls, he says, **"you have Christians saying, 'Yes, Jesus is the only way' and also, 'Yes, there are many paths to God.' It's not that Americans don't believe anything; they believe everything."**

In some denominations, the growing diversity already has spawned internal debate over basic doctrines. Recently, both Roman Catholics and Presbyterians have wrestled publicly with the question: Is Jesus—and Christianity—the only way of salvation? The Vatican reprimanded a Belgian theologian last year for suggesting in a book on religious pluralism that salvation might be achieved other than through the Catholic Church. And after a passionate debate, leaders of the 2.5 million-member Presbyterian Church

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(USA) rejected a statement declaring, "Jesus is the only savior and Lord" and affirmed instead that "for us, the assurance of salvation is found only in confessing Christ and trusting him alone."

The growing diversity also has raised pressure on some groups to halt aggressive proselytizing. Southern Baptists, for example, have been widely criticized in recent years for targeting Hindus, Jews, and others for conversion during those religions' holy days. "That doesn't sit well with many people who want to celebrate American religious freedom," says Laderman of Emory University. **In the U.S. News/PBS poll, 71 percent, including 70 percent of Christians, say Christians should be tolerant of people of other faiths and leave them alone.** Just 22 percent (24 percent of Christians) think it's a Christian's duty to convert members of other faiths. "I certainly believe we ought to be tolerant in terms of respecting other people's faiths," says James Merritt, president of the 15.9 million-member Southern Baptist Convention. But for a Christian, he says, proselytizing "is not an option. I'm as obligated to share my faith in Christ as I am to pay taxes. All we ask is that you be tolerant of our right and responsibility to share what we believe to be the real truth of salvation."

Whatever effect the nation's religious newcomers may have in shaping American culture, experts say, is likely to pale in comparison to the strong cultural influences the new religious communities will face as they adapt to their new surroundings. In their 1990 book, *One Nation Under God*, sociologists Barry Kosmin and Seymour Lachman described a "process of Americanization" at work on minority religions in the United States. Catholics, Jews, and other groups "have become more individualistic," reflecting attributes of the majority Protestant culture. Like Protestants, said Kosmin and Lachman, "they are less reliant on authority and less submissive to a hierarchical structure than their forebears were." Thus, polls consistently show that American Catholics, for example, are far more inclined to follow their own consciences rather than church teachings on matters like birth control and divorce.

In the long run, learning to live together peacefully and productively, experts say, will require greater personal engagement with people of other faiths. **"Tolerance is a good beginning, but it's not enough," says Eck, who heads Harvard's Pluralism Project, aimed at mapping religious diversity and promoting interfaith relations.** "You can tolerate people you know nothing about and basically maintain religious ghettos." Even so, some are leery of participating in interfaith activities that suggest that one path to God is as good as another. "We want it understood that Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims are not praying to the same god," says Richard Cizik, vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals, whose 51 denominations represent 10 million Christians. "Allah," he says, "is not Jehovah."

With such widely divergent views, not only on basic religious beliefs but on the value and necessity of forging strong interfaith ties, navigating the new religious landscape may be perilous. "It was easy to do when we thought of ourselves as a nation of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews," says Emory's Laderman. Now, he says, "it's going to be difficult to find the glue that holds it all together." **The real challenge, says Eck, will be "to create a multi-religious and democratic state"—something that has never been done before.** Still, it is a task that the world's most religiously diverse nation may not be able to ignore for long.

Ps 119:9-11 (KJV)

9 Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy **word**.
10 With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.
11 Thy **word** have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.

Ps 119:50 (KJV)

50 This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy **word** hath quickened me.

Ps 119:104-105 (KJV)

104 Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way.
105 Thy **word** is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.

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Ps 119:133 (KJV)

133 Order my steps in thy **word**: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me.

Ps 119:160 (KJV)

160 Thy **word** is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever.

John 17:5-6 (KJV)

5 And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.

6 I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy **word**.

John 17:14-17 (KJV)

14 I have given them thy **word**; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

15 I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.

16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

17 Sanctify them through thy truth: thy **word** is truth.

1 Tim 4:12-13 (KJV)

12 Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

13 Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.

2 Tim 1:1-14 (KJV)

1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus,

2 To Timothy, my dearly beloved son: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

3 I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day;

4 Greatly desiring to see thee, being mindful of thy tears, that I may be filled with joy;

5 When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also.

6 Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands.

7 For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

8 Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God;

9 Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began,

10 But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel:

11 Whereunto I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles.

12 For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.

13 Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

14 That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us.

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2 Tim 2:15 (KJV)

15 Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the **word** of truth.

2 Tim 3:14-17 (KJV)

14 But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them;

15 And that from a child thou hast **known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.**

16 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

2 Tim 4:1-5 (KJV)

1 I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom;

2 Preach the **word**; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

4 And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.

5 But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.