

## THE BLESSINGS OF THE BEST-SELLER BOOK CLUB

Are you in a book club? Ask estimated 5 million Americans would answer, "yes." That is quite a climb from the early days of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which at its outset in 1926 had 4,000 members awaiting their monthly book box in the mail. Today's Book-of-the-Month Club also offers online discussions, as do many other book clubs. But for most people, the draw of a book club -- especially after the dreadful isolation of COVID -- is as much the companionship as it is the book discussion.

Book club meetings typically include lively discussion, differing opinions, refreshments, and a lot of fun. Someone characterized them as, "Conversations inspiring community."

But book clubs are nothing new, perhaps tracing back to ancient Socratic discussions. According to Wordsalive.org, the evolution of American book clubs began in the 17th century, "when religious renegade Anne Hutchinson organized a female discussion group pertaining to sermons, all while being on a ship that was headed to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1634." Simultaneously, people in both the Old and New Worlds were meeting to discuss one, magnificent book: the Holy Bible.

That tradition continues today, using the same divinely-inspired text that has informed, transformed, and fascinated people for thousands of years. Members of this ultimate book club meet all

over the world to share "conversations inspiring community" as they delve into the best-selling book of all time.

And yet, the number of Americans who engage with the Bible is reportedly decreasing, which violates the first rule of most book clubs: You have to read the book. The American Bible Society's 12th annual State of the Bible report revealed that American readership of the Bible, even a few times a year, is at an historic low of 19 percent. Yet the same survey reported real blessings for those who do read it.

John Plake, director of Ministry Intelligence at the American Bible Society, commented, "We're hearing Americans say, 'When I open up God's word, I find that that message is transformational in my life today. It's not old, it's not out of date...it's really relevant for me today'."

Plake said that their annual survey consistently finds that as people engage with the Bible, "they just do better in so many ways. They're better in overall measures of what Harvard calls, 'human flourishing.' ... They cope better with the stresses that they encounter day in and day out. So there is this very deep and robust correlation between people who go to God's word, seeking his wisdom, seeking to hear his voice, and those who are doing well in life."

So, while other book endorsement may claim, "This book will change your life", the Bible actually does. "What's fascinating is that we find that when people have a competent guide to get them to what they're looking for, they do find hope and help in

God's word", said Plake. "That's where the journey begins, digging into God's word and beginning to learn its shape, its structure, and its message for all of humankind."

We have good models of those essential, competent guides in the Bible itself, where we see Jesus, Peter, Philip, and others open up the Scriptures to those who do not understand them (e.g., Luke 24:13–27; Acts 2:14–37; Acts 8:25–35). As one man said candidly to deacon Philip, while trying to understand a passage from the Old Testament, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

That is where Bible study -- the ultimate book club -- comes in. A Bible study with a competent guide brings all the benefits of any book club: expanded horizons, intellectual challenge, lively discussion, growing friendships, and fun. In addition, and above all, this incomparable book truly can change your life, for God's written word is "living and active", "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Hebrews 4:12; Psalm 119:105).

So I earnestly urge you, if you are not already in a Bible study, to look for one near you. And if you are a competent guide, pray about leading one, as God wills.

With love in the Lord,  
The Rev. Christine Maddux