

Being ‘most Bible-minded city’ has some benefit, but not much

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Leading a church in a city recently described as the most “Bible-minded” in America does have its advantages, said Thomas Quisenberry, pastor of [First Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tenn.](#) Mainly, it means not having to explain the backstory during sermons and Scripture discussions.



Thomas Quisenberry “What I have found is the congregation is very Bible-aware, so it’s definitely fun to go into Bible studies,” he said. “They know the stories, they know the texts and they know the rich layers of Scripture.”

An [American Bible Society survey](#) recognized Chattanooga’s high biblical literacy rate. The same survey declared Providence, R.I., to be the least “Bible-minded.”

Baptist ministers in both towns said they weren’t really surprised by the society’s findings. They also confirmed a region’s familiarity and devotion to Scripture can make it easier and more rewarding for pastors when preaching and teaching from the Bible.

But those ministers—plus another who has served cities inside and out of

the Bible Belt—say the crucial issue isn't a city's attitude or reading habits around Scripture but whether lives are lived based on biblical principles.

The new survey didn't shock many in Chattanooga, although it made some people proud to be recognized, Quisenberry said.



(American Bible Society image)The local newspaper recently published a story about the rankings, which have provided little more than fodder for discussions around water coolers and in church halls.

The ranking reflects the practice of many Chattanoogaans who view the Bible as a blueprint for life, Quisenberry said.

At First Baptist, it drives a variety of ministries to the homeless, stressed communities and schools and feeding programs for children from low-income families. The church also sponsors tutoring and art and music education for students who lack that kind of schooling.

“Religion and faith is still really important to people, and it's still a big part of everybody's lives—whether it's measured by the American Bible Society's scales or not,” Quisenberry said.

The society surveyed more than 47,000 people on attitudes and reading habits around the Bible over a seven-year period concluding in August 2013. It found the South and Midwest consistently rank strongest.

The No. 2 city in the rankings was Birmingham, Ala., followed by Virginia cities Roanoke and Lynchburg, Springfield, Mo. and Shreveport, La., to round out the top five.

“Not surprisingly, many cities in the East Coast continued to rank as the least Bible-minded in 2013,” the study added. The least Bible-minded areas after Providence, R.I., were Albany, N.Y., and Boston.



Jabulani McCalister, senior pastor at [Calvary Baptist Church in Providence](#), was not surprised.

“I see that in New England in general, and specifically in Providence, the vast majority of the population is unchurched and have no interest” in the Bible, said McCalister, whose American Baptist congregation is multiracial and multigenerational and has many members who grew up with no biblical education at all.

“There is a lot of retraining that I have to do,” he said.

Part of that includes communicating to members the Bible is the basis for Christian living and that in order to grow spiritually, it must be read and studied regularly.

But that’s often a hard sell in a city and in a larger culture where the Bible is viewed as just one book among others, McCalister said.

“There is no hunger for it overall,” he said. “There are pockets that are, but

as a city, there's just not importance placed on it."

No doubt, the South can boast being tops in biblical literacy, said Alan Sherouse, who left Metro Baptist Church in New York City for [First Baptist Church in Greensboro, N.C.](#), six months ago.



Alan Sherouse "There is definitely more of an acceptance of the Bible as a source for reflection and on life and ethics here in the Southeast and in the traditional Bible Belt," Sherouse said.

While many read Scripture that way in the Northeast, they usually do so with much more of a challenge from roommates, family members and co-workers, he said, "because there's less of a broad acceptance of it."

But Sherouse said he's seen just as much of the living out of Scripture back East as he's seen down South. It doesn't mean one region does a better job than another at reflecting the principles of the Bible.

"In both regions, I've seen Christians who seek to practice the love that we see in Jesus and the appeal to justice that we see in the prophets," Sherouse said. "And to me, that's ultimately the most important way I would measure the biblical influence in a person's life."