

How you read the Bible is tied to fellow worshippers' education, researcher finds

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Regardless of a person's educational background, he or she is less likely to approach the Bible in a literal word-for-word fashion when surrounded by a greater number of church members who went to college, according to a Baylor University sociology researcher.

"When you go to Sunday school and everyone is talking about the cultural and historical background of a passage and its literary genre — a way of reading often learned in college — it's likely to rub off on you," said Samuel Stroope, a Baylor University doctoral student, in an award-winning research paper.

Using national data from 387 congregations and more than 100,000 worshippers, he explored the interplay between church members' educational backgrounds. His paper will appear in an upcoming issue of the journal *Social Science Research*.

The Association for the Sociology of Religion selected Stroope for the Robert J. McNamara Award for Outstanding Student Paper for his article, titled "[Education](#) and Religion: Individual, Congregational, and Cross-Level Interaction Effects on Biblical Literalism."

Stroope said his research illustrates the power of the social influences inside congregations in shaping how people read Scripture. His motivation to explore the topic came from research literature showing a strong relationship between how much education people complete and how they view the [Bible](#). But no one had explored whether fellow

worshippers' education might also play an important role, he said.

The data Stroope used came from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, a large and uniquely structured survey of churches and their members fielded in 2001.

Stroope will present the paper on Aug. 20 at the Association for the Sociology of Religion's 73rd annual conference in Las Vegas.

The chair of the committee reviewing student research praised the "strong social structural component to the analysis." The paper "moves beyond description in an attempt to explain social phenomena," said Dr. Rachel Kraus, associate professor of sociology at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind.

Provided by Baylor University

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