



Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators

Volume 2 Issue 2 (December 2025)

ISSN (Online): 3082-3501 | ISSN (Print): 3028-2691

doi: <https://doi.org/10.63130/hijcre.v2i2.190> | Pages: 13-26

Received: June 26, 2025

Revised: October 20, 2025

Accepted: October 23, 2025

Published: December 31, 2025

Original Article

Unveiling the Relevance of Reading the Bible among Generation Z College Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the perceptions, barriers, and motivations surrounding Bible reading among Generation Z college students at Holy Angel University, a Catholic institution in Angeles City, Pampanga. Using a narrative research approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten Catholic students aged 18 and above. Findings revealed that while students recognize the Bible as a meaningful source of inspiration, guidance, and spiritual growth, consistent engagement remains limited. Academic demands, poor time management, and the Bible's complex language were identified as primary barriers to regular reading. Despite these challenges, students still turn to the Bible during personal struggles or when invited through academic or religious settings. Their engagement with Scripture positively influences personal values, emotional comfort, and decision-making. The study underscores the need for more accessible and relatable Bible reading strategies for youth and highlights the importance of supporting spiritual development alongside academic growth. These findings can inform educators, pastoral workers, and campus ministries in designing relevant faith-based programs.

Keywords: Bible Reading, Catholic University, College Students, Gen Z, Spiritual Engagement

Suggested citation:

De Leon, J., Adriano, A., Culala, D.C., Manalang, M., & Samia, C. (2025). Unveiling the Relevance of Reading the Bible among Generation Z College Students. *Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators*, 2(2), 13-26. <https://doi.org/10.63130/hijcre.v2i2.190>

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Introduction

The Bible holds significant influence over personal, cultural, and religious life, particularly among Filipinos, where over 80% of the population identifies as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2015). Beyond being a religious text, the Bible shapes beliefs about morality, life's meaning, and God's nature (Parrott, 2001; DeYoung, 2016). Pope Francis (2022, 2024) emphasized that Scripture revives paralyzed faith, calling it central to a believer's life and prayer. For Filipino Christians, the Bible is not merely a doctrinal guide but a living source of wisdom that informs their worldview, moral choices, and social relationships.

In the Philippine context, Bible reading contributes to moral formation and communal worship, reinforcing values such as familial loyalty, humility, and communal unity (Fegarido, 2002; Combinido et al., 2018). These values are deeply embedded in Filipino social life and spirituality, where Scripture often serves as a moral compass and a means of strengthening collective identity. Historical and cultural factors, such as Spanish colonization, local religiosity, and the need for contextual theology, shape how Filipinos interpret and apply the Bible (Agoncillo, 1990; Del Castillo, 2022). Localized interpretations, including those reflecting Filipino concepts like *utang na loob* and *bayanihan*, help make biblical teachings more relatable and meaningful (Bowe, 1998).

Understanding how younger generations engage with Scripture is vital, particularly Generation Z, who are emerging as a dominant demographic in the Philippines. Generation Z, commonly defined as those born from 1997 to 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2019), are digital natives who value diversity, mental health, and purpose-driven living (Feinstein & Coats, 2020; Róbert & Gubik, 2022; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). However, while these generational categories originate in Western discourse, their characteristics may not fully capture the Filipino Gen Z experience. Filipino Gen Zs, shaped by local family structures, religiosity, and community-based values, navigate global digital culture while maintaining connections to traditional spirituality. Thus, defining Filipino Gen Z requires nuance, acknowledging their exposure to global trends yet recognizing their distinct moral and cultural formation within the Philippine context (Ortiz, 2022).

The Bible, derived from the Greek word meaning “the books”, is a collection of sacred writings encompassing the Old Testament, which preserves ancient Israel's traditions, and the New Testament, which recounts the life of Jesus Christ and the beginnings of the early Church (McKenzie, 1965; Evans, 2012). For Filipino Gen Z, encountering this ancient text within a digital and pluralistic environment demands accessible and meaningful approaches to interpretation.

Despite its enduring importance, engagement with Scripture among Filipino youth remains inconsistent. The Philippine Bible Society (n.d.) notes that language barriers, limited interpretive tools, and reduced interest in traditional study methods hinder accessibility. To maintain relevance, Scripture should be taught using digital media, vernacular translations, and culturally grounded approaches that speak to Filipino experiences. Interactive and reflective Bible engagement, integrating technology, local idioms, and communal learning, can deepen faith and foster lifelong transformation.

Thus, Bible reading among Filipino Gen Z not only nurtures spirituality but also strengthens cultural identity and supports personal growth. Recognizing the influence of social change and digital culture on this generation, it is essential to understand how Scripture continues to shape their beliefs, values, and relationships within contemporary life. This study, therefore, examines the relevance of Bible

reading in the lives of Generation Z college students, focusing on how engagement with Scripture informs their faith, moral development, and sense of community in Catholic higher education. It also investigates the factors that facilitate or hinder Bible reading, such as academic demands, accessibility, and comprehension of biblical language. Through this exploration, the research aims to provide insights that can guide Catholic Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and theology educators in designing programs that integrate faith formation with academic life. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the development of contextualized and transformative approaches to Scripture engagement, enabling young Filipinos to encounter the Word of God in ways that are meaningful, relevant, and sustaining in both their spiritual and personal journeys.

Reading the Bible

People consult the Bible for various reasons. A primary motivation is spiritual development, as the Bible deepens faith and one's relationship with God (Plante, 2008). It also provides historical and cultural insights into ancient customs and traditions (Evans, 2012). The Bible offers ethical guidance through narratives and characters whose choices offer lessons for modern life (Alter, 1981; Plante, 2008). Beyond its sacred role, it is valued for its literary richness, filled with symbolism and diverse narrative forms (Alter, 1981). Challenges in reading include understanding the historical context (Evans, 2012), translation variations affecting meaning (Newman, 2017), and navigating multiple literary genres (Alter, 1981). Despite this, tools like academic commentaries (Newman, 2017), study guides (American Bible Society, n.d.), and digital platforms like Bible Gateway make Scripture more accessible. Reading the Bible combines spiritual, intellectual, and literary engagement. With the right mindset and resources, it provides insights into religion, culture, and personal values.

Reaffirming the Relevance of Scripture in Contemporary Life

In today's fast-paced world, where technological advances and cultural shifts dominate, traditional religious practices often lose prominence. Amid this change, Christians may question the Bible's relevance and authority. Modern society increasingly portrays Scripture as outdated or fictional, and without realizing it, some believers may internalize this skepticism (Wright, 2013). This trend highlights the need to reaffirm the Bible's foundational role in Christian life. As N.T. Wright (2011) asserts, the Bible is not merely historical but a living text shaping identity, community, and purpose.

Understanding Scripture is essential, as it reveals God's nature, will, and redemptive plan (Fee & Stuart, 2014). Romans 10:17 underscores its spiritual necessity: "Faith comes by hearing the message... through the word about Christ." The Bible also offers moral guidance, enabling believers to navigate life's challenges with divine wisdom (Longman & Dillard, 2006).

Spiritual maturity includes both personal transformation and responsibility toward others. Scripture reveals humanity's need for God, which often begins the process of healing and renewal. Goldstein (2015) notes that self-awareness, facilitated by spiritual texts, fosters growth, compassion, and divine connection. Bible engagement, then, remains crucial for deepening faith and cultivating resilient communities.

Theological Framework: God's Healing, Promise, and Hope

The biblical narrative presents a unified vision of God's relationship with humanity, one grounded in healing, promise, and hope. Scripture reveals God's desire to restore creation and to guide human life toward meaning and wholeness. As Psalm 57:2 declares, "I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me" (Wright, 2011). This purpose is manifested throughout salvation history, culminating in Jesus Christ, whose ministry embodies divine restoration. Known to the Church Fathers as the "Divine Physician," Christ's works of healing demonstrate that redemption encompasses both physical and spiritual renewal (Miller, 2020; Keener, 2009). His death and resurrection invite believers to trust in God's greater redemptive plan (Ladd, 1993), which continues through the Church's mission of pastoral care, justice, and accompaniment.

Closely linked to this healing mission is the biblical theme of divine promise. Scripture repeatedly portrays God as faithful to His covenant with humanity, offering "rivers of living water" to those who believe (John 7:38, NIV; Fee & Stuart, 2014). The word *promise*, appearing more than a hundred times in the Bible, emphasizes the universal scope of salvation (Towner, 2007). The Gospel's "good news... for all people" (Luke 2:10) and Paul's vision of unity in Christ, breaking down divisions (Ephesians 2:14, NRSV; Galatians 3:28), reveal that divine promises extend beyond cultural and social boundaries (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2014). This inclusive vision establishes the foundation for Christian education: God's Word is not only to be believed but to be lived, forming communities shaped by reconciliation and service.

The third dimension of this theological framework is hope, which sustains believers amid uncertainty and suffering. The Psalms express human vulnerability while affirming God's enduring faithfulness (Brueggemann, 2014). Romans 15:13 (NIV) declares, "May the God of hope fill you... so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Theologically, hope orients Christian life toward God's promised future, as Jürgen Moltmann's *theology of hope* affirms (Moltmann, 1965, 1970). Psychologically, research shows that hope strengthens mental well-being and reduces despair, particularly among youth (Beck et al., 1979; Huen et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2021). Thus, the experience of divine promise and hope is not only spiritual but educational, nurturing moral resilience and meaning in learners' lives.

Together, these biblical themes form a theological framework for exploring how Scripture informs moral and spiritual formation within education. Healing reflects restoration of identity, promise expresses divine faithfulness within community, and hope inspires perseverance and purpose.

The Bible in the lives of the young people

The Bible has long served as a foundational source for moral principles, spiritual growth, and community cohesion. However, in the 21st century, its influence among youth appears to be diminishing due to increasing secularization and a decline in traditional religious practices (Pew Research Center, 2018). Additionally, the Bible's historical context and complex language can pose challenges for younger readers, making it seem less relevant or harder to understand (Evans, 2012). Research highlights the importance of accessible, relational approaches. Hutson (2018) emphasizes the power of biblical storytelling and community-based engagement to foster lasting connections with Scripture. A recent longitudinal study by Dougherty et al. (2024) found that frequent Bible reading among college students positively predicted prosocial behavior and civic involvement. Broader literature supports these

findings, showing that adolescent religious engagement is linked to empathy, resilience, and mental health (Hardy et al., 2019; King & Boyatzis, 2015).

To address these challenges, promoting digital and interactive methods, such as apps, videos, and guided reading plans, can modernize Scripture engagement (American Bible Society, 2022). Creating spaces where youth feel safe expressing doubt and asking questions is essential. Role models who embody Christian values also inspire deeper faith integration. Ultimately, the Bible remains a vital tool for shaping values like compassion, humility, and integrity, principles that offer enduring relevance for personal and communal life.

The Bible in the lives of College students

The college experience marks a critical stage of identity exploration and cognitive development, during which many students reevaluate their core beliefs and values. In this context, the Bible continues to hold significance, offering direction, solace, and a framework for personal growth. A 2024 study among Filipino Gen Z students found that spiritual growth is significantly associated with their personal values, suggesting a strong link between religious engagement and ethical identity (Villanueva, 2024). Another recent study involving Filipino college students validated a Bible reading attitude scale, revealing that students generally view the Bible as deeply connected to their personal experiences (Baring, 2006).

However, academic pressures and limited time remain key barriers. A 2020 study among Manila college students found that while prayer was seen as helpful to academic performance, time constraints often hinder spiritual practices like Bible reading (Fabula, 2020). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, students turned to prayer and Scripture for comfort amid stress and isolation (Cleofas et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, where Catholic tradition is deeply rooted, college offers a unique opportunity for communal faith formation (Baring, 2018). Filipino values of social connection encourage group scripture study and shared reflection, supporting sustained engagement. Despite digital distractions, Gen Z students still seek God's Word during personal challenges, showing the Bible's enduring relevance in uncertain times (Park & Eusebio, 2024).

The Bible in the lives of Filipino Gen Z

The Philippines, a predominantly Catholic nation, offers a unique setting to study Generation Z's (born 1997–2012) engagement with the Bible. Technology, family, and culture significantly shape this relationship. Social media can challenge traditional beliefs (Atienza, 2022) but also fosters faith-based dialogue (Pineda Nuncio et al., 2021). Family and church remain key in transmitting values (Santos & Cruz, 2020), while a shift toward personal, critical engagement with Scripture is emerging (Cruz & Manalo, 2022).

However, academic pressures hinder spiritual practices. Time constraints and poor time management affect Bible reading (Guzman et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2021). Research gaps include Gen Z's preferences for Bible format, translation, reading habits, and the link between Scripture and mental well-being. Despite distractions, many still find the Bible meaningful (Pineda Nuncio et al., 2021; Park & Eusebio, 2024). Further research can inform programs that support youth spirituality in a fast-paced, digital world.

Educational Institutions' Bible Reading Practices

The inclusion of Bible reading in education remains debated globally and in the Philippines. While the Philippine Constitution upholds the separation of church and state, the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 allows values formation that may include religious education. However, research on Bible use in classrooms is limited. Del Castillo and Cacho (2023) advocate dialogic, participatory religious instruction in Catholic higher education. Internationally, Dutch schools adopt community-driven Bible engagement (Sonnenberg, de Kock, & Vogel, 2023), while German reforms show that removing compulsory religious education reduces long-term religiosity (Arold et al., 2022). Supporters view Bible reading as fostering virtues and cultural literacy (Sophy & Rylie, 2021), while critics raise concerns about religious coercion (Freedom from Religion Foundation, 2023). Modern approaches encourage inclusive, reflective practices rather than forced recitations (Del Castillo & Cacho, 2023; Sonnenberg et al., 2023). As Catholic educators, we must investigate this issue to uphold faith and benefit student development.

Methodology

This qualitative study explores Generation Z college students' personal experiences with Bible reading at HAU. Using a narrative research approach (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2015), the researchers gathered participant stories to understand perspectives, emotions, and behaviors. Data collection involved collaborative storytelling and review to ensure accurate interpretation and meaning.

This study involved ten (10) Holy Angel University college students selected through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: (1) Generation Z (born 1997–2012), (2) at least 18 years old, (3) enrolled for the 2024–2025 school year, and (4) self-identified as Catholic. Non-Christian and non-religious individuals were excluded.

The researchers, serving as the primary instrument of this study, conducted personal interviews with college students using a semi-structured questionnaire containing both closed- and open-ended questions, often followed by supplementary “why” or “how” inquiries (Adams, 2015). The tool was grounded in a specific philosophical framework (Thomas, n.d.) and was validated with a certificate of validation.

For the interview process, both face-to-face and online formats were considered. A letter of request to conduct the study was submitted to the OIC-President. Letters and informed consent forms were provided to participants in advance to ensure they were fully informed prior to the interviews. Moreover, the study adhered to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and followed Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) health protocols to safeguard participants' safety and confidentiality. For face-to-face interviews, a voice recorder was used to capture responses, while online interviews were conducted and documented via Zoom using cyber-ethnographic methods.

The collected data were analyzed using coding, categorizing, and thematic analysis. Coding involved examining transcripts to identify key patterns. Similar codes were grouped into categories. Thematic analysis then identified overarching themes by reviewing categories, continuously refining them to ensure accurate representation of the participants' narratives and insights.

This study strictly adhered to research ethics, operating under study protocol code 2024-103-JCDELEON-BibleReadingRelevanceGenZStuds. Prior to data collection, IRB approval was secured. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring

voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. Data was handled following the Data Privacy Act of 2012, securely stored, and will be deleted within two years. No compensation was given; participants may request a summary of findings or decline future data use.

Results and Findings

This chapter presents the data gathered from ten participants, structured around the study's key objectives: (1) to explore Generation Z college students' perceptions of reading the Bible, (2) to identify perceived barriers to Bible engagement among Generation Z college students, and (3) to understand their reasons for reading the Bible.

Significance of the Bible in Life

Most participants described the Bible as a source of inspiration, motivation, and guidance in their daily lives. They view it as a moral and spiritual reference that helps them navigate life's challenges. Statements such as *"it's a source of inspiration and kindness"* (Spb1), *"the Bible gives people hope and faith during difficult times"* (Sp1), and *"it serves as a symbolism of solace"* (SPf1) illustrate this perspective.

Several participants also emphasized that the Bible serves as their "guide" or "moral compass." For example, *"The Bible acts as a guide on how to connect to God and how to live my life properly and doing good all the time"* (SPd1). This recurring idea of the Bible as a life guide suggests that participants see Scripture not only as a sacred text but also as a practical tool for moral decision-making and spiritual reflection.

Meaning of Reading the Bible

When asked about what reading the Bible means to them, participants expressed that it provides opportunities for growth and personal change. For instance, one student said, *"I see it as an opportunity to reflect and for growth"* (Spa4), while another shared, *"Bible has changed me, and it helps me to know God better"* (SPh3).

A few participants emphasized relational and spiritual connection, describing Bible reading as *"a way to learn about wisdom, history, and life lessons"* (SPg4) or *"a guidebook where if life gets tough, I look into it to change my perspective"* (SPd2). These responses reveal that students experience Bible reading as both reflective and relational, an activity that connects them with divine wisdom and with themselves.

Frequency and Factors Affecting Bible Reading

Findings show that most participants do not read the Bible regularly. Typical responses include *"I read the Bible once in a while"* (SPc5), *"I rarely read the Bible"* (SPd4), and *"To be honest, I read the Bible when I have free time"* (SPc3). Only two participants reported reading weekly: *"I read the Bible twice a week"* (Spb4) and *"every week, after praying the rosary"* (Spi3).

Many admitted that they turn to the Bible mainly during times of distress or need: *"What pushes me to read are difficult situations and wanting something to believe in"* (SPc6). Others mentioned situational factors such as academic requirements, family practices, or group invitations that encouraged them to read.

Challenges in Reading the Bible

Time management and academic workload emerged as the most common challenges. Several participants admitted difficulty in balancing Bible reading with their school responsibilities: *“One challenge I face when it comes to reading the Bible is balancing my academic workload with my personal time”* (Spa8). Another wrote, *“Probably time management and academic workloads”* (Spb6).

A few participants identified linguistic barriers: *“The primary challenge that I face that makes it difficult to read the Bible is the deep vocabulary that the earlier versions have”* (SPf4). Others mentioned distractions and a lack of interest due to the modern lifestyle and digital engagement.

Comfort, Guidance, and Inspiration from the Bible

All participants reported that the Bible provided them with comfort or inspiration during personal trials. Examples include: *“When I hit the lowest part of my life, it comforted me through it”* (SPf5), *“When I was being outcasted and bullied, the Bible guided me and inspired me to do good”* (SPc6), and *“When I am feeling down, I will simply read a Bible because it helps me release the pain”* (SPh6).

These experiences highlight that Scripture serves as a source of reassurance and spiritual strength, particularly in moments of emotional or psychological distress.

Influence on Personal Growth and Decision-Making

Participants shared that reading the Bible helps them develop moral values and virtues such as forgiveness, patience, and discipline. *“It taught me how to be more forgiving, not only to others but also to myself”* (SPc7), and *“Reading the Bible shaped my values—compassion, patience, and understanding”* (Spa10).

Some noted that Scripture helps them resist temptation or avoid negative influences: *“It helps me to avoid temptations and stay committed”* (Spb9). Others emphasized perspective: *“Reading the Bible made me look at things holistically in every situation”* (Spi7). These responses show how engagement with the Bible contributes to moral formation and decision-making.

Discussion

The results show that Filipino Generation Z college students regard Bible reading as a significant and transformative spiritual activity. Numerous individuals regard the Bible as a wellspring of inspiration, ethical direction, and optimism, especially in times of emotional or academic adversity. They described it as a compass for ethical living and a means of encountering God in daily life. This echoes Bartholomew and Goheen’s (2014) claim that Scripture provides a narrative shaping one’s moral identity and worldview, and Fee and Stuart’s (2014) view of the Bible as practical instruction for living faithfully. Similarly, Baring (2018) observed that students who find the Bible personally relevant are more likely to integrate its teachings into decision-making. Villanueva (2024) likewise affirmed that Filipino Gen Z students link Bible engagement to moral development and ethical self-understanding.

Participants’ reflections indicate that reading Scripture functions as both reflection and relationship, an encounter with God that gives meaning to their experiences. Wright (2008) describes this as finding one’s place in God’s ongoing story, while Bowe (1998) emphasizes that contextual reading allows Scripture to become transformative within one’s cultural reality. This dialogical approach

resonates with Pope Francis's (2024) reminder that the Bible is a "living word" meant to sustain prayer and guide daily life. For these students, reading the Bible is not primarily academic but relational and experiential, a practice of growth and meaning-making.

Despite these insights, several barriers hinder consistent engagement. Academic demands and time constraints were the most common, echoing Fabula's (2020) and Britton and Tesser's (1991) findings that students' time pressures often limit spiritual activities. Guzman, Santos, and Reyes (2024) reported that academic stress among Filipino students leads to neglecting religious practices. Participants also cited difficulty understanding biblical language, paralleling Atienza's (2022) and the Philippine Bible Society's (2021) observations that traditional translations can alienate young readers. These challenges highlight how intellectual and cultural distance can affect spiritual engagement.

Even with such barriers, the study reveals that the Bible remains a significant source of comfort, wisdom, and renewal. Students shared that Scripture offered guidance in hardship, aligning with Cleofas, Albao, and Dayrit (2022), who found that spiritual practices helped students cope during stressful times. These experiences reflect Moltmann's (1965) "theology of hope," where faith sustains individuals amid struggle. The Bible also fosters moral growth, encouraging forgiveness, patience, and compassion, echoing Del Castillo and Cacho's (2023) findings that Scripture engagement supports ethical maturity, and Santos and Cruz's (2020) conclusion that biblical values shape moral reasoning in faith-based contexts.

Overall, Bible reading among Gen Z students is infrequent but spiritually impactful. Catholic higher education institutions should integrate pedagogies that unite spirituality and learning to deepen engagement. Strategies such as *lectio divina*, digital theology, and service-learning can connect faith with lived experience. These approaches align with *Gravissimum Educationis* (Second Vatican Council, 1965) and *Dei Verbum* (Vatican II, 1965), which call for Scripture to be at the heart of Christian education and formation. As Del Castillo (2022) argues, when theology is contextualized and participatory, students encounter the Bible not merely as text but as transformative experience, shaping reflective, value-oriented individuals who integrate faith into academic and personal life.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the Bible remains profoundly significant for Generation Z college students, providing inspiration, moral guidance, and spiritual direction. It continues to shape their values and strengthen their faith identity, even amid a rapidly changing cultural landscape. However, despite recognizing its importance, consistent engagement with Scripture is often disrupted by the pressures of academic life and time constraints. Many students struggle to balance intellectual pursuits with spiritual formation, leading to the marginalization of Bible reading in their daily routines.

These findings underscore the need for Catholic higher education institutions to reexamine how faith formation is integrated into academic life. In light of *Gravissimum Educationis* (Vatican II, 1965), which calls for holistic formation that unites faith and reason, schools should create spaces where Scripture informs not only theology classes but also the broader learning experience. Likewise, *Dei Verbum* (Vatican II, 1965) emphasizes that the Word of God must "inspire all the faithful to a more active participation in the life of the Church," urging educators to make Bible reading a living encounter rather than a mere academic exercise.

To nurture enduring spiritual practices, Catholic HEIs can adopt initiatives such as guided *Lectio Divina* sessions, Scripture-based reflection courses, and faith-sharing communities. By embedding Scripture into the institutional mission, education becomes both intellectually formative and spiritually transformative, preparing students to live out the Gospel in personal and professional life.

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