

Bible mania

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 15, 2000](#) issue

What motivates people to buy nine or more Bibles? A good question, asked by Kimberly Winston in Publishers Weekly (October 9). A good answer, I suppose, would be “because they each have eight or more friends who need a gift.” Or “because they have targeted eight or more people for conversion.” Or “because they are smugglers who would sneak Bibles into more nations where that book as a document of freedom is still unwelcome.”

But Winston’s article makes clear that these nine Bibles are not to be gifts or tools for conversion. They are targeted for no one but Number One—I, Ego, Narcissus.

We learn about this from research sponsored by the Christian Booksellers Association and Zondervan publishers. Not only have they discovered that the average Bible consumer owns nine Bibles, but that he or she “is looking for more.” Zondervan, the world’s largest Bible publisher, watched sales grow 7 percent in the past year, and the American Booksellers Association market also shows “significant increases.”

This is good news for the market. Who begrudges honest firms the chance to make good money off the Good Book? Most other things on which the “shop till you drop” crowd might max out their credit cards would be less edifying. Still, curiosity reigns and the question of what motivates these Bible buyers remains.

Winston’s first answer is cultural: “Images of school shootings, presidential improprieties, plane crashes and other disasters have sent people looking for something they can take hold of.” So they take hold of physical objects like Bibles. But owning nine Bibles evidently doesn’t satisfy those with “a feeling that there must be more to this life.” Ownership of the tenth might do it. Or, Winston explains, “People are looking for places they can just be quiet and get away from all the hustle and bustle.” So they need more than nine Bibles—to line their walls against intrusive noise made by hustling bustling neighbors, perhaps?

Winston quotes Tom Mockabee of Zondervan to another effect. "Where niched-out devotional Bibles once ruled, the study Bible is now out front." Good news about the Good News, I'd say, until the study Bible and its companions are also niched-out. "Bibles for children are just about the hottest thing going," and that is about the best news for booksellers I can imagine. What child will stop at ownership of nine Bibles if the kid next door has more?

But all is not rosy for the Bible publishers. We read, "The problem facing the Bible industry now is how to keep the old text fresh." Publishers are looking at covers and typefaces in order to come up with just one more that is different. "We have to be innovative and keep it relevant."

I looked around the house and, yes, we have about nine Bibles per person. One in Hebrew that, regrettably, I have not touched since June 1952. One in Greek that I consult when conscience calls and time permits. One in German, printed in Stuttgart in the Nazi era. Two actually used by my spouse and me. Many left behind when sons, who had found better-covered, better-typefaced, innovative and relevant versions, left home.

Baptismal Bibles, confirmation Bibles, bridal Bibles, Bibles to be buried with, Bibles to collect dust, Bibles to dust before the pastor visits. Bibles "dressed to the nines" in fabric covers. Still, I am sure we can find some niche to fill, some acquisitive instinct to pursue, some drive for conspicuous consumption to satisfy, more collector's-edition Bibles to bet on so we can lay up treasures on earth. About which the Bible has something to say.