

# **Bible Study In The Life Of The Pastor And His Congregation**

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The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has a serious problem with Scripture.

That sentence is not an attention getting device. The Wisconsin Synod does have a serious problem with Scripture. True, it is not a problem with what we believe about Scripture. By God's grace and guidance we still retain the teachings of their "truth and purity".

The problem is in the way we as a Synod, all 400,000 us, handle that Word. The fact is we are not using God's Word as we should. We are not as familiar with it as our Lord wills us to be. Although we as a Synod proclaim God's Word as it was meant to be proclaimed, are not studying that Word, as it was meant to be studied.

A Christian cannot read the Scriptures without being impressed, even overwhelmed, by the great importance that God has placed on the study of his Word. We are told again and again in many different ways that contact with the Scripture is an utter necessity for the Christian. We need the Word if we are to stay alive spiritually and to grow in our faith-life.

Our God points out that frequent and regular Bible study is essential for every one of his children. It is important, first of all because constant contact with Scriptures is one of the ways the child of God expresses his gratitude for the eternal life the Lord has won for him (Jer 15:16; Col 3:16; 2 Ti 1:13). But the believer will also study the Bible to strengthen his faith in Christ (2 Ti 3:14-15; Jn 20:31); to aid him in godly living (2 Ti 3:16-17; Ps 119:9); and spiritual, growth (1 Pe 2:2; 2 Pe 3:18); to teach him, sound doctrine (Eph 4:14); to comfort him (Ro 8:18, 28, 38; Ps 23, 91, 121); to enable him to give an answer (1 Pe 3:15); to enable him to transmit the Word to his children (Dt 6:1-7; Ps 78:5-6); and to mine God's treasure house (Psalm 119:72).

But inspite of these and many other God inspired encouragements and admonitions, what amount of Bible study is being done in our Synod? How much reading and studying of the scriptures are our lay people logging each week? How much Bible study are we pastors doing?

Think about this. Synod-wide in 1978 only 7.59% of our communicant members were enrolled in a congregational group Bible class. That's down from 8.56% in 1973 (five years earlier). Although there is a press run each quarter of about 85,000 copies of *Meditations*, that figure has remained rather constant over the past years. Neither has there been any real increase in the Publishing House's sale of Bible: study materials - inspite of a commendable effort to produce more materials.

The fact that we are weak in Bible study shows itself quite plainly. It's apparent in the budget crunch we are now experiencing. The only way to effectively cure the tight money situation our Synod is struggling with is to keep God's word and promises before our people. If that would have been done up until this time, there would be no budget crunch to overcome now.

Our Bible weakness rears its ugly head in our Synod's arm's length approach to the need for evangelism. What number of our 1100 sister congregations carry on an active evangelism program? How many of our .4 million members are involved in personally witnessing their faith? Why has the position of a full time evangelism

coordinator met such opposition? For a few years the Synod's Evangelism Commission spent a day with the seniors at the Seminary. It then arranged for the seniors to go out on actual calls with a trained evangelist. That doesn't happen any more. There aren't enough evangelism-active congregations in the Milwaukee area to accommodate all the students.

If all of our people and all of our clergy were submerged in the Word as deeply as our God wants us to be, we would not have these kinds of problems. We would know what our God's will is for us as individuals, as congregations, and as a synod. We would know his unbreakable promises, We would trust our God to keep his promises. We would be motivated to act on his promises and carry out his will because of his love for us in Jesus.

We Christians of the Wisconsin Synod have been entrusted with a most precious treasure--the God of the universe's saving Word. By his all-loving power we have been permitted to enjoy doctrinal unity in true teachings of those Scriptures. But what percentage of our 400,000 brothers and sisters in Christ are taking full or even partial advantage of this treasure? Perhaps there are those of you who would not label this lack of contact with the Lord through his Word as "serious". But no one could possibly argue, "Our Lord is pleased with our level of Bible study."

Now this paper is not meant to harangue and harass. It's not intended to scathe or scald. Rather it is written with the prayer that the Lord constructively uses me to stimulate your thinking, to raise your consciousness level, and perhaps even to serve as a catalyst for increasing the amount of Bible study that happens in our district. I trust you will receive my thoughts in that light.

It seems to me that there are a number of factors that encourage a lack of Bible study in our circles. I've tried to group these factors under headings. There will be some overlapping. If that is burdensome to you, I apologize. But I felt it was necessary to outline my thoughts in this way so the points are as clear as possible.

## **I. EXAMINING OUR ATTITUDES TOWARD BIBLE STUDY**

Whenever a problem arises in which we have some involvement it is best to examine ourselves first of all. The question we will want an answer to before all others is: What role have **we** played in creating this situation?

To answer that question we must ask another: What are our attitudes as pastors toward Bible study? (Here's a question which will take some Spirit-worked honesty.) There seems to me to be inconsistencies between what we know the Bible says about Bible study and how we carry out that Word. I believe the following series of questions will reveal some weaknesses in us, both personally and collectively. Lord, help us to truthfully answer.

### **A. Questions about our Personal Devotion Time**

How much time do we spend each day in prayerful, personal Bible study? Do we start each day by allowing the Lord to speak to us? Do we read over and think through a portion of his word in a devotional way? Do we take time to speak with our Father in prayer?

Do we make it a point to lead our family in devotion? Is this a daily practice? Do we strive to make those devotions speak to every member of our family?

Are we providing our congregation members with positive examples for private and family Bible study? When was the last time you spoke with one of your members about your own devotional life? Have you ever visited your members to personally show them how to hold family devotions?

## **B. Questions about our Personal Devotion Priorities**

Do we suffer from the, "Martha syndrome"? Do we excuse ourselves from personal Bible study because we have too many other "more-important" things to do? Instead of "choosing what act is better" like Mary, do we skip over contact with the Word to clang around in the kitchen of the Lord's kingdom? Are there many times that we reason: I just don't have time today for Bible study and prayer. I've got calls to make, meetings to prepare for and attend, a class to get ready for and teach, a counseling session to think about, a bunch of district committee work to finish up. How often do we excuse ourselves with the words, "Lord, getting into your Word has to take second place right now"?

Have we failed to learn the spiritual secret Luther discovered? He tells us that the busier he was, the more time he took for prayer and study.

Do we excuse ourselves from real, personal Bible contact by claiming that our sermon preparation, group Bible study preparation, etc. get us into the Word and meet all our spiritual needs? If so, do we consciously prepare our sermons, our group bible study sessions in our adult information classes in a "personal" frame of mind? Do we actually invite the Lord to speak with us--in our particular situation through this preparation? Do we ask him to help us by our preparation with our concerns, with our problems, toward our goals, or through our weaknesses? Or do we end up making our preparations in a "professional" frame of mind, thinking primarily about what the Lord is telling our congregation or class in these words?

## **C. Questions about our Public Study Priorities**

How much time do we spend in preparation for our Bible classes? As much as for our sermons? If not, does the difference in preparation time reflect thinking that Bible study is somehow not as important as our Sunday sermon? Why is it that, although no pastor would think that Sunday worship is optional, not every pastor's weekly schedule includes leading a Bible class?

In our sermons, newsletters, and other public communications do we emphasize Bible study (both public and private) as much as the Scriptures do? Do we overlook opportunities for applying portions of the Word that encourage contact with the Scriptures? When was the last time used an entire sermon to encourage all forms of Bible study?

Do we express our concern when members aren't doing Bible study? As often as when members don't worship regularly? Do we make our members' frequency of worship the "litmus test" of their spiritual health? Aren't we to be just as alarmed if their frequency of Bible is low or non-existent?

Perhaps I stand alone among you in having to admit there are such inconsistencies between what I know the Bible says about the importance of Bible study and how that is carried out in practice. If I stand alone, I'm glad I'm the only with this deficiency. I ask your prayers and encouragement. But if you stand with me, I pray for Spirit-guided change in us both. If attitudes toward Bible study are going to change in our congregations and throughout the Synod, the change must start with us, the shepherds.

## **II. EXAMINING OUR BIBLE STUDY EMPHASES**

Related to our attitudes toward Bible study is what we perceive as the purpose of Bible study. We summed up those purposes in the introduction (some examples: an expression of our gratitude, means of

strengthening our faith, an aid to godly living, a source of comfort). Once we are straight on the purposes for Bible study, we need to determine which emphases to stress in order to accomplish those purposes. I believe the Wisconsin Synod has a problem with proper Bible study emphases.

It seems to me that the primary Bible study emphasis in our Synod is on teaching theological facts and figures, Bible history, and doctrine. In fact, it is not just an emphasis. Actually it is more of a mindset.

Please understand. I don't find anything wrong with this emphasis, per se. In truth, it is very correct. But the problem in our circles is it's too much of a good thing. There is so much stress laid on teaching the facts and figures that an equally important emphasis has been lost or at least blurred.

The emphasis on imparting facts and figures in our approach to Bible study is so great that **applying** those Scripture truths to one's everyday life is sold short. At times, good application even seems to be non-existent. Mostly application tends to be viewed as something tacked on to study--almost as an after-thought.

Perhaps you are thinking, "What is he talking about? I always try to apply the Word in my Bible, studies and sermons. Everyone else I know does, too." To that I'd reply, "I'm sure you do. I am not saying we don't apply the Word. I am saying we don't stress application as much as it should be stressed."

The process of teaching the Scriptures has been described as a "hook, Book, look, took" process. The "hook" is a good introduction that catches your class attention. The "Book" is the Bible and its use to establish spiritual principles. The "look" is the application. Here is taking the principle and showing how it applies in a number of situations. The "took" is the part of Bible study we often fall down on. "Took" is integration. It is the teaching of the effect a Scripture section will have on a person. It is the bringing out of the specific change or reinforcement in one's life that will result from knowing a particular Word of God. Integration is taking application one step further to teach **in specifics** what a Word of God means. It is making a Scripture section part of a believer. It is leading students to determine how they will respond to God's grace because of his message to us in a particular section.

Integrating spiritual truth into a Scripture student's life might be accomplished in as obvious a way as asking, "How do you see your life changing as a result of the verse?" It could be something like the setting up of a "prayer chain" in response to a study of prayer. It includes asking, "How did last week's lesson effect your life this week?" Integration is taking application one logical, helpful step further.

Our established Bible study emphases, however, do not encourage such application and integration. Some supporting examples, undoubtedly, would be appreciated.

The "catechetical method" of teaching is presented in both our seminary and teacher training college, as "the only way" to teach a Bible lesson. Its use is urged in the teacher's guides of our Sunday school material. Basically the catechetical method of teaching presents facts of the a lesson, drills those facts by means of aims and inferences, and only at the end does it get around to making some kind of application. The catechetical method's very composition establishes the drilling of history and theology as the most significant emphasis in the Bible study and makes application/integration close to peripheral.

Have you looked closely at the teacher's guides in our Sunday school materials? Little stress is placed on helping young souls appreciate what a particular lesson really means to them in day to day terms. Outside of telling the story, orally reviewing it, and working through some rather drab worksheets, no suggestions are made to **show** children what a lesson means, how they are to respond. There are no ideas for bulletin boards, role

playing, creative and directive recreation, learning games and other excellent teaching tools that would not only teach facts but also application and integration. In our materials facts and figures taught well. Good application is sorely slighted.

Our seminary dogmatics course is taught in the same way. The **overwhelming** stress is on what the Word says, not on how it applies. During the course much Scripture is examined, church father's share their wisdom, and one comes in contact with a good number of Latin phrases that describe all kinds of theological orthodoxies and aberrations. But little time is spent with what all of that means in the student's day to day life--or in the lives of the sheep he will some day shepherd. The result is that future pastors are led to believe that real Bible study means emphasizing the facts and neglecting the integration of Scripture.

Our seminary homiletics course shares the same philosophy. Future preachers are taught to logically divide a sermon text so as to bring out the main theological points. This is correct. But they are also taught that application is only a paragraph tacked on at the end of each major section. This is wrong. Application should never be incidental to the exposition of a text. It should be a major part of the presentation, carrying at least as much weight as the exposition.

Perhaps you, too, turned in ideal sermon outlines like this one (one of my homiletical skeleton):

THEME: Let There Be light (2 Co 4:5-6)

- I. To Shine in our Hearts (v.6)
  - A. A comparison by the creation and our spiritual light
    - 1. The darkness before the light
    - 2. The enlightenment came only through God's power
    - 3. The enlightenment came only through God's Word
  - B. A description of that "Light". It comes with:
    - 1. The "knowledge . . ."
    - 2. "Of the glory of God . . ."
    - 3. "As seen in the face of Jesus Christ."

APPLICATION: Because St. Paul was given this light from God he wants to share it. We, too, have this light in our hearts and it's a light that should also shine in our lives.

II. To Shine in our Lives (v. 5) Etc.

Application in our Sermons tends to be glued on to the framework of the scripture facts (like something extra) instead of being made an integral part of the presentation.

This emphasis on facts and figures continues to show itself in most conference papers. Most of the papers we hear are heavy on word study, grammar and doctrine, but are light on application and integration. Last September's paper on James presented to the Florida Conference by Pastor Huebner did a fine job in applying the word. He was rightly thanked for his work.

A final example: The Bible study material that comes out of Northwestern Publishing House. Most of the Bible information manuals, group bible study guides, etc. are written with an over-emphasis on presenting the facts and figures of the Scriptures and slight applying and integrating those truths. Pages are spent on explanation. A few questions are dedicated to general application.

I want to make this as clear as possible: I believe it is proper and important for a Bible study leader to stress the theology of a certain portion of Scripture or to bring out the facts of the lesson. That's all part of the Bible study. But I also believe that Bible study dare not stop at that point. The Christian needs to know not only what God's Word is saying, but what it means--to him--today. The believer needs to know how this word of God is to affect his lifestyle. These questions must be answered: what promise, what encouragement, what admonition is there here? It seems to me that in our current approach to bible study we are assuming that if we present the facts, our students will make their own application and integration will follow naturally. This is not so. We dare not slight application and integration as an important Bible study emphasis. The Word must be taken from the theological to the pragmatic, from the theoretical to the daily employable, from the cerebral to the practical.

Because the emphasis in our Bible study is too heavy on facts and figures, we experience situations like Rev. Mark Braun related in the October issue of *The Lutheran Educator*. Pastor Braun told of a group of girls from his congregation who attended the International Youth Rally with him. On one of the days the entire rally went to "Six Flags Over Mid-America". While there, a stranger who noticed all the young people with rally ("Let Your Light Shine") T-shirts on asked these girls what they believed about God.

Quoting from the article: I never felt so stupid in my whole life!" one of the girls said to me, telling the story later that week. "Man we all just stood there. I was thinking maybe I should recite the Apostles creed or something. We told him to come to our devotion that night. But I don't know. I didn't see him there. Did you Sandy?"

The point of Braun's article: Make your teaching of the Scriptures practical.

Take a moment to think about Jesus sermons. Where does the emphasis fall? Jesus, not to mention the other inspired writers, is very practical. The Savior made sure that his listeners knew what his message meant to them. Those who listened to Jesus came away knowing how God wanted them to respond. Consider Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. There is doctrine, history, and theology there. The bulk of his sermon, however, is application and integration. When Jesus met the woman at the well, the rich young ruler, Jairus, most of what he had to say was for appropriation, application and integration.

Jesus is the master teacher. We are his students. What does that say about the importance of application and integration in our teaching?

An over-emphasis on theology, history, and doctrine has created a synod of intellectually rich, but practically poor Christians. This over-emphasis tends to make our Bible classes uninviting. People are generally interested only in things of practical value. If our Bible studies fill Christians' heads with historical and theological tid-bits, but give little direction for life in 1980, it's no wonder only 7.59% of our people attend group Bible study.

Learning the physics of an internal combustion engine might be very helpful for a car mechanic, but if he is not told how those principles relate to healing a sick V-8, then the course is worthless. So Bible study taught with a lack of emphasis on what the Word means to Christians on Tuesday morning or Thursday evening is a Bible study only half done.

I pray that I've been able to present this point intelligibly. I'd imagine that if there is any point in my paper that you will take issue with, it will be this one. Unfortunately giving application and integration its proper place

is quite foreign in our circles. I trust that before you find fault with my concerns here that you will take time to prayerfully think them through.

### **III. EXAMINING OUR PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES TOWARD BIBLE STUDY**

There also seems to me to be a number of faulty attitudes spooking around among the members of our Synod concerning Bible study. These attitudes find basis and are fostered by the first two points of this paper. I've listed these attitudes as follows:

#### **A. Jesus is Savior, but not really Lord**

Our people know that Jesus is their Savior. That's the basis of our preaching and teaching. But our people are weak on knowing that Jesus is also their Lord, their king to be obeyed. The members of our Synod are generally well aware that they are right with God, but are hazy on the righteous living that is to result from our imputed righteousness. (Confer our present budget crunch and view of evangelism.)

It seems that even those brothers and sisters in Christ who are straight on the Gospel and secure in their forgiveness and eternity view the Savior's encouragements to grow in faith as optional. A frightening number of our Christian family do not feel it's necessary to take Jesus' will for their lives seriously. There seems to be little desire to grow in Christ or to perfect our walk with God.

Many of our fellow Christians act as though, since they are guaranteed heaven in Jesus, they have arrived. There is no more spiritual growth. There is no need for spirit-aided effort to draw closer to the Lord. Striving for the sanctified Christian life really isn't necessary. It seems many are willing to take God's free gift of forgiveness, but have a hard time showing their appreciation for it.

This lack of desire to live for the Lord is apparent at the basic level: contact with the Word. Its only through the Word and the Spirit working in the Word that we Christians receive the power to live sanctified lives. If we shun this Word, we cut ourselves off from any hope of growing in Christ.

That should cause us pastors to wonder what part we've played in creating, establishing, and maintaining this kind of attitude. Are we guilty of giving the impression that real sanctified living ends with occasional worship attendance? Are our expectations of what constitutes a Christian life lower than our Lord's expectations? Are we in the habit of shrugging our shoulders at meager Bible class attendance and thinking, "That's just the way things are. You can't expect more?"

#### **B. Confirmation Equals Graduation**

Our Synod also seems to be under the false impression that confirmation is Bible study graduation. Isn't there a mind-set in our synod's populace that if a person can endure the "tortures" of grade school confirmation he will have learned all that he will ever need to know about God? No more Bible study will ever be necessary. Isn't confirmation viewed as a kind of doctorate in Christianity? It seems to be overwhelming sentiment that after confirmation a person stands on the pinnacle of spiritual erudition. And if anyone suggests that more Bible study is not only beneficial but essential, these spiritual giants will proudly point to the wall and say, "Look at my confirmation certificate and my picture. Can anyone so cherubic and clothed in such radiant white robes need more contact with the Scriptures?"

That's an attitude that crosses all ages, income, and social groupings. It's amazing! Even those intelligent and very responsible individuals in our congregations who realize a need for continuing education in their particular field, have a hard time seeing the same need for their souls. It's the same with our brothers and sisters who see no need for refresher courses in spiritual health matters, but would never go to a doctor who is satisfied to practice medicine solely on the basis of his med-school education.

We might add that our synodical system helps to promote that mentality. For which age groups is our Sunday school material intended? Pre-school through eighth grade. It makes it seem as though school children need Bible study. Added to that is a lack of concentration on encouraging Scripture study among teens by providing a Sunday morning Bible class geared specifically for them. We do our teens a disfavor by not making Bible-study a part of our program for them. What are we teaching them with youth group meetings that center on recreation? We also promote the idea that Bible class is just for children when we pastors make it a point to get our members to send their children to Sunday school, but fail to encourage parents also to attend.

### **C. Compartmentalization of our Faith**

There is a tendency among us to view life as a series of compartments in which we play and sometimes conflicting roles. At home we are one kind of person, at work another, at church another, at play still another. We have learned to act one way in one situation, and another way in another situation in order to be successful or cope with the circumstances.

The way we live our life-roles is often inconsistent with what we profess on a Sunday morning. We break speed laws. We lose our temper with the wife and kids. We don't always watch our language. These things are all part of our growing in faith in Jesus. The stronger our faith, the less the inconsistencies.

But these inconsistencies/compartmentalizations result from other contributing factors. Compartmentalization can result from (1) having found Christianity a nice but impractical way of life; viewing Christianity as excellent insurance for eternity, but unemployable in most situations here. (2) not having discovered how the Word of God applies to one's life, not knowing what our gracious God expects.

Compartmentalization of one's faith has only one cure: Bible study.

### **D. Bible Study is Above and Beyond the Normal**

There is also a feeling in our Christian family that only "super Christians" do Bible study. Whether it is private study, family devotions, or group study, it is felt, only really good Christians will be so committed to the Word. Bible study has come to be viewed as an act of "super-arrogation". It is supposed to be done only by truly saintly people. Did you ever hear a member excuse himself from Bible study with, "I admire these people in the congregation who attend Bible study, but a common Christian like me could never be like them. Bible study? No. You certainly can't expect me, an ordinary believer to be that good of a Christian."

Bible study tends not to be viewed as a natural outgrowth of our faith in Jesus. Rather it is thought of as a fine but abnormal act. Instead of seeing contact with the Scriptures as an avenue of expressing our appreciation for God's grace, to "John WELS" Bible study is considered burdensome. Instead of believing the normal desire of a child of God will be to learn more about his heavenly Father, the average WELS member seems to believe he knows enough and needs no more.

If the level of contact with the Lord through his Word is to increase in our Synod, this and the other attitudes I have mentioned need to be corrected.

It is my opinion that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is not doing the Bible study (in public and private) that our Lord would expect from us. Nor are we promoting or encouraging the level of Bible study that would be God pleasing.

I fear that unless we realize this weakness and actively take steps to remedy the situation, we stand to lose the truth and purity of the Word we now enjoy.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts, reactions, and comments. You'll have the opportunity to offer them after attending one of the break-out groups.

The following break-out groups are available to you. You have your choice. In each break-out group you will first of all, identify the problem areas and then share solutions to those problems.

1. The Pastor and Personal Bible Study

Leader; Doug Hartley

2. The Pastor and Family Devotions (His own and his members)

Leader: Gary Schult

3. The Pastor and Adult Instruction Classes

Leader: John Huebner

4. The Pastor and the Sunday School

Leader: Fred Adrian

5. The Pastor and Congregational Bible study (groups, societies, etc)

Leader: Norm Seeger