

Personal Bible Study

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[Prepared for the Michigan District Teachers' Conference
at Immanuel Lutheran School, Flint, Michigan, on October 7, 1965]

If some person, neither of our faith nor of our profession, had picked up one of the last issues of the *Northwestern Lutheran* and read there that the Lutheran Christian Day School Teachers of the Michigan District were importing someone from Wisconsin to read an essay on "Personal Bible Study" at their conference, he might have had a lot of questions to ask of you, had you become the first one of the teachers whom he met after reading the announcement. His questions might have sounded a little like this: Don't Lutheran teachers in Christian Day Schools teach the Bible? Are they not in most cases people who have grown up in Christian homes where the Bible was accepted, cherished, and diligently studied? Have they not in most cases graduated from high schools and colleges at which ambitious courses have been given in the study of Scriptures, both exegetically and isagogically? Are they not trained as teachers to regard the thought that that which they aim to teach is at once the thing in which they want to be completely at home? Why, pray, do you need an essay at your conference concerning personal Bible study?

No doubt, you would have replied to each of the first four questions with an affirmative of which you would have been completely convinced. But when he came to his last question, you would, no doubt, have begun to look around a bit desperately to see whether you could not spy some member of the program committee, hoping that such a person might have the answer to that question formulated.

Now why do I begin my essay with such a line of thought? Certainly not because it is my wish or purpose to criticize your program committee for suggesting a theme such as this. It is my wish rather to underscore the fact that while considering this theme we meet in an area in which we are reminded somewhat of Moses of old, removing his sandals before the burning bush, because he felt he was standing on sacred ground. When one is asked to discuss personal Bible study among a group of teachers of the Scriptures, he is being asked to treat a subject which seems doubly sacred—sacred because of the Holy Scriptures, the object of the study, and sacred because of the way a Christian feels about his personal relationship to the Lord and His Word.

And yet, the essay has been assigned, a fact which bespeaks the realization that here we find ourselves in an area where we need one another's encouragement, an area in which we encounter some of Satan's cleverest efforts toward thwarting our spiritual growth, an area in which he tries to throw one of the subtlest blocks into the path of the success of our work, an area in which he manages through the use of our old adam to win many a victory for himself. It was, no doubt, in the hope that this essay, treating a subject that is sacred to us all, might become an occasion for mutual strengthening and encouragement for meeting such temptations, that it was assigned. It is, of course, my sincerest prayer that my efforts here this morning might with the Lord's help serve you to that end.

Ours is a tremendous responsibility as Christian Day School teachers, teachers of God's Word. And who of us is not aware of that responsibility? Our work places us ever so often throughout whole school-years as the link between young lives, young hearts and young souls on the one side and their God and Savior on the other. Congregations ask us to become the Lord's servants in their midst through the divine call. Parents within these congregations through sending their children to our classrooms give to us the responsibility of taking their place in the matter of teaching these children the "one thing needful" for the salvation of their souls.

Yes, who of us is not quite aware of that responsibility? For that reason, I am sure, the largest number of us would want it said that we approach our responsibility with greatest diligence and consecration. Out of concern for that responsibility we prepare our lessons diligently, especially, of course, our lessons in Religion. We are very concerned about using all of the proper steps in presenting a Bible story, and we mean to find no fault with that. We are very concerned that the children leave our room with mastery of a portion of the Catechism—they should show up well when they reach the pastor's Confirmation class. We want to have the

devotions carefully and thoughtfully worked out—they should be presented on the child’s level for the young souls entrusted to our care. We concern ourselves with church attendance on the part of our children. Even while we are at the services ourselves we haven’t quite forgotten the matter of concern for who of the children are present and how they are conducting themselves. We take time to urge private Bible-reading on the part of the children. We try to give them Bible selections with which at their respective age level they might best begin. We find tactful ways of helping the child bring about family devotions in his home, and we frequently speak deplorably of the dust-covered Bible on the library table. We show our pupils the beauty of a great number of hymns and supervise careful memory-work where they are concerned, to say nothing of correct and expressive singing of the same. We correct the papers our children hand in in Religion with special care and hasten to do our best to correct any spiritual errors which we might find our young charges making.

And so our work goes on. Weeks, months, school-years pass. All the while we are busy and diligent, very concerned with our high calling as teachers of the Word, very concerned that we would fulfill our duty to others correctly and well. And that is as it should be. And yet, how about ourselves? While we literally grow old fast amidst the rush of our duties, many of them bent in the direction of the spiritual welfare of others, how about our own Bible study, our own soul’s experience? I have seen a little, old book in the libraries of several pastors bearing the title which, to the best of my knowledge, is a quotation from Luther: “*Kann auch ein Pastor selig werden?*” (Can a pastor also be saved?) That title reminds one rather forcefully St. Paul’s statement in a first Letter to the Corinthians: “Lest by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway.” Could what both of these expressions suggest be said of us as teachers of God’s Word? We would prefer to think of such thoughts as pertaining only to such who go about their work in a mechanical, mercenary way and allow themselves sinful and offensive lives during their time away from their work as an evidence of their insincerity. But is that the only time such thoughts apply? Could it be that after all of our activity and diligence in an effort to fulfill our calling, we let our own hearts and souls go un nourished through *personal* Bible study? If we will but analyze our own cases frankly and honestly, I fear that each of us will want to admit that that danger lurks very close to us all too frequently. We are very concerned about imparting that which we know with our mind. We do not remember as consistently as we ought that it wants to be a case of sharing that which we hold in our heart.

Then what is the answer? What is the remedy for such a situation? We believe that the answer to such questions lies to a great extent with the concept and experience of our theme. Whoever suggested this theme did not realize perhaps how rich it is in inference and directive. The remedy lies in personalizing our Bible Study.

To illustrate my point, let me speak first for a time of that Bible study which we teachers go about as a part of our preparation for our daily work in the classroom. Certainly that study should be made personal. I am thinking of that study as being of two kinds.

For one thing, notice how much Bible study is directly involved in our work. Surely you must have noticed in the long list of activities of the Christian teacher, rehearsed above, that all of them were involved in one way or another, in one measure or another with Scriptures, either with passages from the same, stories from the same, or thoughts drawn from the same. And that is what should make our work the rarest of privileges. It wants to be the most reflexive activity we can be about. If we use the word with our heart in it as we prepare and teach, how could it be otherwise than that our own hearts would grow in faith and joy at the same time. In fact, as some of you may have heard me say in my essay at the convention of our synod last August, concerning the Call to the Public Ministry, that, I believe, is why the Lord confined Himself to the efforts and accomplishments of men where the preaching and teaching of his Word are concerned. He might have used angels, you know. He would have had a great plenty of them to staff all of our classrooms. There would have been no shortage, nor would there have been any sleepy reaction to their teaching. He might have spoken directly, as He did on occasion. Think of the occasion of the Savior’s Baptism, or of that of His Transfiguration. He might even have moved men’s hearts without means through His Spirit directly. But he didn’t do any of these things. He gave that work to sinners such as you and I are. No doubt, He did that so that we would come into direct contact with His grace in Christ Jesus—that we might grow through our sharing from the heart the

precious truths of salvation we teach. Indeed, our preparation for the classes in which we have an opportunity to do that wants to be personal Bible study.

But how can we achieve that blessing? For one thing, let us never forget that there is no place where the prayers of God's children can avail more than where the spiritual blessings which the Lord is pleased to give are involved. Let us begin our preparations for teaching the Word to others with the prayer that the Lord might bless both the learner and the teacher. I am very sure that our Lord's own Words, spoken on the occasion when He taught his disciples to pray, fit beautifully here: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"

Another art we ought keep in mind at the point is that of speaking to ourselves through those whom we teach. After all, the problems, the needs, the temptations, the desires, the joys and the blessings which we want to help the children with as we train them in this truth today and that truth tomorrow are basically no different than those which we also experience in slightly different contexts of life and on slightly different levels and in slightly different measures. If we can succeed to put ourselves into the child's position we will not only have benefited ourselves, but we will in greatest likelihood have rendered our lessons in a much more living and effective manner for the children.

There is still another point at which the study of the Word which is directly involved in our work wants to be personal. I refer to the fact that we do not only work in the Word for daily preparation and in daily teaching. Without their even realizing it, and more often without our realizing it, our pupils and their parents expect of us that we would be something of experts in the matter of knowing the Scriptures beyond the scope of our daily lessons. They expect us to be able to interpret new theories and evaluate tendencies in the light of the Scriptures. They want us to be ready with answers to questions concerning Bible History, earliest Church History, and in general God's whole plan of salvation.

That means knowing one's whole Bible. When we listen to the concert of an artist at the piano, for instance, we expect that person to be at home with his instrument, we expect him to have found it possible to please us with a concert drawn from a wide repertoire, and we expect him to give evidence in his performance of the fact that he is a master in his field.

That is, whether we realize it or not, what our people expect of us where the Bible is concerned, because we have come to them as teachers of the Scriptures. That means that we will not only prepare our lessons from day to day. It means that we will do as Luther once advised his good friend Spalatin, who had asked him for advice as to how he might study his Bible in order to be able to teach it well. Let us hear Luther's reply:

My dear Spalatin: You have in the past asked things of me which I either could, or was audacious enough to attempt, to serve you. But now when you ask me to instruct you how to study the Holy Scriptures, you request something which far surpasses my ability; for I, too, cannot find anyone to act as my guide in this important matter. For here one holds this, another that view among the most prudent and learned...But since you are insistent to hear from me how I study the Scriptures, I shall, of course, hide nothing from you because you are my dear friend; I warn you, however, not to follow me blindly but to weigh my counsel. To begin with, this is altogether certain, that the Holy Scriptures cannot be comprehended either through study or natural gifts. Hence the first duty is to begin with prayer, namely, a prayer in which you petition God, if it should please Him to let something be done by you for His, not your or any other human being's, glory, to grant you most mercifully the true understanding of His words. For no one is a teacher of the divine words save the Author Himself, as He says, "They shall all be taught of God." Therefore you must entirely despair with respect to your efforts and your gifts and trust to God alone and to the influence of the Spirit. Believe one who has experienced it. Next, when humble despair has been resolved on by you, read the Bible in its regular order from beginning to end to make yourself acquainted first of all with the simple narrative (a thing which I believe you have done long ago). In this matter St. Jerome will help you remarkably, both through his letters and through his commentaries. But for the understanding of Christ and the

grace of God, that is, for the more hidden understanding of the Spirit, St. Augustine and Ambrose seem to me far more useful, especially since St. Jerome appears to be too much a disciple of Origen, that is, an allegorist. (*Luther's Works*, St. Louis edition, vol. X, p. 218 ff.)

So then, in addition to the prayer, of which we have already spoken, there is the matter of reading through the Bible, acquainting oneself with the books, the way the plan of salvation and the cardinal doctrines weave their way through the Scriptures, and then, with the help of good aids, find the deeper meaning in individual passages or sets of passages.

There should be more interest in that kind of study of Scriptures among us. Your essayist has gained the impression to some extent in recent years—he hopes that it is a wrong impression—that some of our teachers are more concerned about improving themselves in many other ways as teachers. They are very concerned about earning that next degree in their program or in gaining extra credits in this branch or in that. But their time and interest for taking additional courses in the study of the Scriptures or simply dedicating a summer now and then to extensive digging in the Bible is lacking.

Let us hasten to grant that much of the advanced study which our teachers are pursuing nowadays is done out of respect for the demands brought to bear on them from the outside. Perhaps we may hope then that when that has been completed, the rather full array of courses at our summer school in Bible study will enjoy overflow enrollments.

Some years ago, if you will permit a personal experience, in a Romans course, which it was my privilege to teach, I was surprised to find two young women enrolled who came from public universities, one from Michigan and one from Wisconsin. Their enrollment cards showed that neither was preparing to be a Christian Day School Teacher. When asked why they were taking a full load of courses in Religion, it was interesting to find their replies very much alike, though they did not know each other. They explained that they were advancing so fast and so far in secular knowledge at their respective universities that they hoped that their spiritual training might keep apace. They did most diligent work in the course in which it was my privilege to know of their welfare, as though their future success depended on it. I am sure they went home much enriched spiritually at the end of the summer.

There could be more of that sort of thing in our circles. At any rate, where there is such personal interest in advancing where knowledge of our Bible is concerned, there the children and their parents will soon discover that their teacher not only knows his Bible, but he is motivated as well in his life and work by a strong and happy faith.

But there is one more area of Bible study of which we want to speak, although when doing so I find a mixture of fears coming over me. One is the feeling that I might be intruding. The other is the fear that that I may be laying open too much my own shortcomings. But if it be true that confession is good for the soul, then let my soul speak while each of you examines his own honestly.

This last area of Bible study of which we want to speak at this point is that study which we make just for ourselves in the secrecy of our closet—a study which has nothing to do necessarily with being prepared for class on the morrow or with becoming known as one who knows his Bible. It is that study through which each of us seeks his God for himself and through which God speaks to only the individual Christian, to you and to me. And that study, of course, is personal in the first place, or it is not at all. No doubt, the people who assigned this essay were thinking of that area in the first place. Could it be that they were thinking of it exclusively?

Here let us remember at the outset that we are sinful mortals who need daily to overpower the old adam. The closer you come to an adversary, the harder he struggles to overpower you. Satan may not wrestle too stubbornly where preparation for tomorrow's lesson is concerned. He may find it easier to undermine you in spite of your success there with personal pride over the fact that you are considered an especially successful Religion teacher. Perhaps you have been invited to give a model lesson at some conference and he finds the door of pride standing ajar. Nor will he put up the worst fight necessarily where becoming known as one who knows his Bible is concerned. He finds the matter of getting people to glory in a reputation old fare. But when it comes to going into one's chamber (not the study which smacks of the profession), closing the door (that is,

communing with God alone through his precious Word), that is another thing. Such study Satan strives to thwart and deter. And does he manage? Let us ask ourselves, “How much of that kind of Bible study is each of us accomplishing?” And yet, that is where personal Bible study begins and ends.

If ever in this matter of personal Bible study prayer is in place, it is at this point. We know the story very well; we have often taught it, the story of the Lord’s great pleasure with a young Solomon who placed spiritual wisdom and understanding first on his list of desires, so pleased, in fact that He added many other blessings in richest measure. Let us emulate his example.

And when we have done that, let us take nothing for granted. Let us proceed in a most basic manner, recognizing the fact that human nature dare be allowed no encouragement. Let us set aside a regular time—an hour, half hour, fifteen minutes, whatever amount of time to which we see our way clear to hold ourselves with some rigidity. One simply must have some time for himself to be alone with his God in the beautiful garden of His Word.

And let us not allow ourselves to be too easily convinced that our schedule is too heavy and that we are rushed for that sort of thing. That is the excuse one hears rather frequently nowadays. Have you used it? True, demands on our time are many nowadays. Our schedules may justly be described as hectic. But let us try to remember the example of Luther, whose hours of prayer are known to most of us, no doubt. When one thinks of his busy life one is completely amazed. Between the years of his 95 Theses and his death, a little less than thirty years, he translated the Bible, gave us exhaustive commentaries on all of the books of the Bible, preached and wrote volumes and volumes of sermons, assembled great variety of other vital volumes, produced documents with utmost care and scrutiny, containing articles of confession, which are included today among our chief confessions, fulfilled a busy ministry, taught at the university, attended to controversy, traveled widely in its interest, led a busy and happy family life, and all of that without our modern conveniences of everyday life, which stream-line things so much for us, and yet he had time for daily hours of prayer, Bible study, and Catechism review.

Do we really mean to say that we are too busy? Shouldn’t we put forth a little more effort to find time for the Savior’s bidding: “Search the Scriptures!”? It seems quite likely that Timothy was a very busy man in his ministry in the large city of Ephesus, but listen to St. Paul’s admonition for him: “Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.” Surely we are all very familiar with the words which busy Martha heard from Savior after her complaint concerning Mary’s not helping her with the duties which kept her from hearing the Word: “But one thing is needful; and Mary hath chosen that good part.”

We have heard other feeble excuses for not managing personal Bible study. People complain that if they study the familiar parts of Scripture when alone, so that their study becomes personal devotion at once, their reading become repetitious of the same portions. And if they branch out into other portions, they claim that the difficulty of the Scriptures defeats the purpose of their trying to make their study personal.

People who excuse themselves that readily are wrong on both counts. For one thing it is impossible to restudy any portion of Scripture to the point where it has no more to offer one. It is God’s book. We believe that, do we not? If we approach it with a hunger and thirst for righteousness, the Holy Spirit will indeed lead us into new joys each time we restudy a portion. If you permit me one more personal experience, I might relate that it has been my privilege to teach St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans eight different times within the last six years, either on one level or another. One might think that, after such an experience, that letter of only sixteen chapters would have little more to offer for challenging preparation and rewarding teaching. Exactly the opposite, however, is the case. Only the other day again a portion which we happened to be discussing in the classroom so thrilled me with something which I had never found there before that the period seemed to rush past while expounding it. Each time I have been asked to teach the Letter to the Romans, the request becomes an increased pleasure.

And how about venturing into new and difficult areas? If there is ever a time and place where we need not fear failure, it is when in the presence of our Savior we are working at exactly that for which He has promised to join, help, and bless us. Then let us with whatever helps we can bring to our side undertake a new

portion, and before we shall even realize it, the Lord will have blessed us with a new joy. Too often, let's be honest., we give up before we try.

It takes courage in our day to say the next thing which I have in mind. It is a warning concerning something which to my way of thinking is not helping the Bible study of many who should have advanced much farther. I refer to the use of devotional booklets.

Devotional booklets certainly have their place. They are surely a help to the novice in the Scriptures in finding cardinal or specially helpful thoughts already applied to his life with its problems. But just as the child reaches the time when aids to eating, drinking, or walking are needed no more, just so with the use of such booklets. Devotional booklets are a wonderful thing for the ages, the ill, whose situation is one of discomfort and weakness, or whose attention span is brief. But that is not the area of Christian society which we have in mind with this essay. They even serve well in given gatherings to direct brief, collective appreciation of some portion of Scripture and its application as a devotion or brief service. But even those who have opportunity for such devotions will surely want and need that personal visit with the Savior in His Word.

As one who has helped rear a family of four to young adulthood where they are fast nearing the time when they will take their place among you as teachers or as a pastor, I find myself wishing that I might do it all over again as far as the family devotions were concerned. I would definitely lengthen those seasons in which we simply read and discussed the Scriptures and shorten by much those seasons, in turn, in which we read prepared devotions. Perhaps the first people to want to agree with me in this matter are the people engaged in producing such booklets. I am sure that they are very clear on the purpose their product is to serve.

At this point I should like to bring this essay to a close. I fear as I do that you might want to remind me that I have not really told you anything new. It is my sincerest hope, however, that there may have been some value for all of us in simply finding how mutual our experiences have been in the matter of personal Bible study. Perhaps even only our freedom from the discouragement of thinking that we are abnormal among Christians in our slow approach to such study will serve as an encouragement to take a new hold of the old established remedies. And of them we have heard too together here on this occasion: prayerful approach, diligent reading, and honest wrestling with difficult portions with the help of trusted aids. Such was Luther's advice to Spalatin. There really is no better advice to be given.

In closing, however, do let us underscore the fact that personal Bible study is a behavior which all of us in the new man want to accomplish in fuller measure. It is an effort for the accomplishment of which we must battle the old man. To both those ends let us pray our dear Lord to give us strength. It is furthermore a privilege through which we certainly become happier and more effective teachers of the "one thing needful." It is at the same time the way in which that precious jewel which we share with others will brighten the path for us ourselves on our journey toward the heavenly mansions, which await us.

Many of you, no doubt, read about or perhaps even viewed some of the pictures showing the travesty on church life which took place earlier this week at St. Patrick's Cathedral, the UN, and Yankee Stadium. When one views such a display of what can happen to a church which has ceased using the Scriptures as the only source of salvation, and when one is forced to hear that people in high places regard an occasion like that one of the great days in American History, then how concerned we must become about our study of the Scriptures in every sense, certainly in the area of personal study. And how grateful we ought to be for the grace whereby we still possess the precious Bread of Life and the Water of Life. How grateful we must be for the privilege of being teachers in its service.

May our dear Lord continue to bless us with such gratitude, a fruit of faith, that we would be moved to diligent personal Bible study and then joyful, consecrated service in sharing it with our pupils, so that when one day by that same grace we stand at the Savior's right, our eternal joys might be all the greater because of the number of those eternally blessed who will point us out as the teachers who one came to them with hearts and lives enriched by personal Bible study, happy to share with them the precious truths of salvation.