

# How to Encourage Bible Study in the Parish

[Metro-North Pastoral Conference Pioneer Inn Oshkosh, Wisconsin, January 16-17, 1989]

by Mark E. Braun

In October 1982 I attended a seminar in Chicago to see Harry Wendt, a pastor of the Lutheran Church of Australia, present a method of Bible study called *Doctrine in Diagram*. In September 1985 I saw Harry again in Minneapolis as he presented a revised *Doctrine in Diagram* renamed *The Divine Drama*, as well as a more intensive two-year course of study through the entire Scriptures called *Crossways!* In January 1986 I joined Harry and his wife Clovis and 30 other ministers and wives on a ten day tour through Jordan, Israel and Egypt. In October 1986 I attended a week long review seminar in Brookfield, featuring the same *Crossways!* material.

On these four occasions, Harry has said some things that are disturbing and some things one might find difficulty agreeing with. He has offered useful and exciting ideas for teaching Christian doctrine and the biblical narrative. In my opinion, however, the most thought-provoking thing he's said—and he says it frequently—is: “Jesus played with children and taught adults. Why does the Christian church insist on doing the opposite?”

Do we teach children and play with adults? Few observers would question our commitment to Christian *elementary* education elementary; it is extensive and expensive. Are we equally pleased with the kind of Christian education we offer after our children are confirmed?

The topic assigned for this paper is:

## How To Encourage Adult Bible Study In The Parish

I hope to:

- ...provide an *assessment* of our adult education;
- ...explore our *attitudes* toward adult Bible classes; and
- ...suggest several *approaches* to adult Bible study

### I

#### How Are We Doing?

Let's look at statistics. According to *A Profile of WELS Lutherans*, published in 1981, 94% of all Wisconsin Synod Lutherans surveyed said they were offered the opportunity in their congregations to participate in some form of adult Bible study. But how many go? The 1987 *Statistical Report* of the Wisconsin Synod says there are 318,037 confirmed members in our Synod; of that number, pastors report that 29,847 adults and 3,988 teenagers attend Bible class. In other words, 33,835 people, 10.6% of our confirmed congregational members go to a Bible class of some description in our churches.

This is a substantial increase over the statistics reported only two years ago. In 1985, before the *Statistical Report* made a distinction between teenage and adult Bible classes, totals were 28,886 out of 316,297 communicant members, 9.1%.

The *Statistical Report* offers no clue how often Bible classes for teenagers and adults are offered in our congregations. Once a week? Twice a week? More than that? Less than that? Every other week? One week per month? Every Sunday, year round? Every Sunday, during the

school year? In six week blocks? In ten week blocks? In sixteen week blocks? We don't know.

It may come as no surprise to you that a far higher percentage of confirmed WELS members go to Bible classes *in the outlying districts of our Synod*. The *Arizona-California District* has an average Bible class attendance of 3,463 teenagers and adults out of 16,078 communicant members, 21.5%. The *North Atlantic District* has 834 attenders out of 3,070, 27.2%. The *South Atlantic District*, 1,330 out of 5,173, 25.7%. The *South Central District*, 947 out of 3322, 28.5%. Such numbers come as no surprise when viewed in relation to other statistics of WELS congregations in these areas of the United States. The percentage of members in church on an average Sunday, the ratio of adult confirmands to total church membership, and per-communicant stewardship are almost all consistently higher in these outlying areas of our Synod.

By contrast, it may also come as no surprise that the lowest percentage of WELS adult members attend Bible classes *in those three districts which are the heartland of the Wisconsin Synod*. The three districts which carry the very, name "Wisconsin" in their names *display the poorest statistics on adult Bible study*. The *Southeastern Wisconsin District*, with 58,726 communicants, has an average Bible class attendance of 5,279, 9.0%. The *Western Wisconsin District*, with 60,950 communicants, has 4,484 attending Bible study, 7.4%. The *Northern Wisconsin District*, with 62,799 communicant members, has an average of 4,599 in Bible study, 7.3%.

As you page through the 1987 *WELS Statistical Report* and look at any of the pages of the three "Wisconsin" districts, it is not at all uncommon to see numbers such as 1,038 communicants, 65 in Bible class; 290 communicants, 8 in Bible class; 1,469 communicants, 50 in Bible class; 331 communicants, 10 in Bible class; 61 communicants, 1 in Bible class. Again, average Sunday worship attendance, the ratio of adult confirmands to total congregational membership, and per-communicant stewardship are almost all uniformly lower in these three namesake districts of our Synod.

Some will argue that WELS people who go to church receive regular instruction in the Word through edifying sermons. If that's true, our statistics could be revised somewhat. On an average Sunday, 46.9% of our baptized members attend worship.

But is that a fair contention? Was the sermon ever intended to be the primary—and for almost 90% of WELS members the *only*—method of continuing instruction in the Word? When one considers the time limitations imposed on the average sermon (25 minutes if we're lucky!), when one takes into account the vast portions of Scripture never exposed from the pulpit (and, it could be argued, never intended to be exposed from the pulpit!), when one concedes that the Sunday sermon, even when preached in the very best dialogical style imaginable, is still a one-way, passive-receptor form of communication (when was the last time you raised your hand and asked a question in church?), when one realizes that almost all sermons preached among us are presented without handouts, graphics or video clips (and, in many churches, without pew Bibles in which to follow the text), when one allows for crying babies and fidgety preschoolers and bored-out-of-their-brain teenagers and snoozing elderlies and snoozing not-so-elderlies (it's a sobering view one enjoys from the pulpit, isn't it?), can we safely conclude that our people receive the best possible instruction in the Word from Sunday sermons alone?

Oscar Feucht said it better than I can, longer ago:

We have too long depended on the sermon alone to do what it cannot fully do. It is indeed a central and vital part of our worship, because it is our shepherd communicating God's Word to us and

making it relevant to our needs, times, people, circumstances. The purpose of the sermon is to instruct and inspire...

This author does not wish to downgrade preaching or disregard the importance of truly Biblical and evangelical teaching of the fundamental truths of the Gospel and an adequate understanding of the sacraments. He is saying that real teaching-learning is best achieved in the small study discussion group, not in a worship assembly, not very effectively in any lecture-type presentation. With that most Christian educators will agree. Personal study is *vital*. Participation and discussion are *necessary*. But the goal is greater than knowledge and belief. The aim is *belief that leads to action*—a whole life directed to mission and ministry to people [*Everyone a Minister*, pp. 100, 101).

Some will also argue that people do in fact read the Bible at home—many more than statistics for *organized* congregational Bible study might indicate. That may be true for some people. Do we have any way of knowing?

Prof. John Bright in his book *The Kingdom of God* wrote:

It is unnecessary to furnish proof that there exists even among Christians a widespread biblical illiteracy, and gratuitous to deplore that fact as disastrous. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that Protestantism will not survive if steps cannot be taken to remedy it...

There has grown up in the Church, alongside a total neglect of the Bible, a dangerous partial use of it. As a church we declare that the Bible is the Word of God, and we draw no distinction between its parts. But in practice we confine our use of it almost entirely to selected portions—the Gospels and the Psalms, portions of Paul and the Prophets—and ignore the rest as completely as if it had never been written. The result is that we not only neglect much that is valuable but, what is worse, miss the deepest meaning of the very parts we use because we lift them from their larger context (pp. 7, 8).

James D. Smart in his book *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, goes still farther:

Even when such a class [comparable in quality to secular classes in adult education] is made available, not more than 5 percent of the members of the church are likely to make use of it. Ninety five percent feel no need of it. Their version of the Christian faith and life is of a character that they can dispense with any serious delving into the Scriptures. They are content with a church in which all is done decently and in order, which makes minimal demands upon them and provides a maximum of moral stability and spiritual security for them and for the immediate community in which they live. It is significant that most of the office bearers who provide the leadership and determine the policy of the congregation are usually among the 95 percent... They are too

confident of their ability to remain faithful to Jesus Christ while ignorant of the scriptures that give witness to Him (pp. 168, 169).

Would anyone care to argue that the comments of Prof. Bright and Mr. Smart are inappropriately applied to the Wisconsin Synod?

How else shall we assess? Let's try staff. In a typical large WELS parish, there may be four full-time called workers who offer a highly specialized form of Christian education to 93 grade-school aged souls of the church family. At the same, that typical large WELS parish may have one full-time called worker and a part-time secretary to serve 1,083 souls in a far broader pastoral ministry. I'd venture that the Wisconsin Synod has loaded more eggs into one basket—the Christian Day School program—and yet employs more general practitioners in the parish ministry wearing two dozen different hats than any other church body in America.

What does such staff distribution tell us? It tells me that we obviously consider Christian education an extremely important commodity *for children*, but it must contain relatively less importance *for adults*. We all know what Christian Day School teachers are called to do. What does a pastor do all day? He preaches on Sunday, he goes to the hospital, he marries, he buries, he runs the church, he counsels (often in crisis). In addition, he is entrusted with the sizable, mysterious assignment of “getting people active in the church” (whatever that means). Do we expect the average parish pastor to do much adult education? To look at staffing, we have to answer “No.”

Or look at scheduling. Ask a pastor how much time he'd like to spend carrying out the various duties of his parish. Many pastors would love to spend more time studying and proclaiming Scripture. Then ask a pastor how much time he actually spends in the various duties of studying, preaching, counseling, going to the hospital, doing administration, educating. My guess is that administration lies at or near the top while education ends up at or near the bottom.

More than thirty years ago Prof. Samuel Blizzard made a survey of the Protestant minister's image of his roles. He wanted to learn how pastors ranked their tasks, first in regard to significance in their scale of values, then in respect to the amount of time they devoted to these ministerial tasks. Here's what he found:

**Rank by “importance”:**

- (1) preacher
- (2) pastor
- (3) organizer
- (4) administrator
- (5) teacher

**Rank in “time given”:**

- (1) administrator
- (2) pastor
- (3) preacher
- (4) organizer
- (5) teacher

One's first reaction, I suppose, is to lament that while the minister would like to rank preaching as of primary importance and administration fourth, harsh realities elevate administration to number one and push the next three duties down a slot. Closer inspection reveals that *teaching* occupies last place in *both* lists. Not only does the Protestant minister acknowledge that teaching comes in dead last; he figures that's where it belongs. David Ernsberger, in commenting on this study, wrote, “The present hierarchy of ministerial preferences, with preaching at the top and teaching at the bottom, would become simply untenable for everyone who came to espouse Protestantism's traditional conception of the ministry” [Blizzard's study and Ernsberger's comments are cited by Feucht, *Everyone a Minister*, pp. 96, 97]. What Ernsberger is saying is that if our ministries are indeed to become equipping the saints for *their* ministries, teaching simply can't be relegated to last place.

Lutheran dogmatician Johann Bengel said, “As a rule, the way in which Scripture is

being treated is in exact correspondence with the condition of the church.” What condition is our church in?

## II

To a great extent, we’ve been dealing with measurable externals. What lies behind the externals of statistics and staffing and scheduling? Let’s explore our attitudes toward adult Bible study.

Here’s one: *You’re confirmed. You have now learned all the major teachings of the Christian faith. Now you know everything you need to know to go to heaven, to go to the Lord’s Supper, and to be a good Lutheran.*

Obviously, we don’t say that. We may think we’re saying the opposite. We may quite regularly say things like, “Don’t think of your confirmation instructions as the *end* of your study of God’s Word. Think of it as the beginning. Keep coming to teen Bible studies. Come to Bible class.”

But you and I both know that lots of people (including, some of our *best* people) in fact have an attitude toward Bible study quite similar to the one expressed above. Have we been responsible, unknowingly, unintentionally, indirectly, for giving them the impression that now that they know everything they need to know, their only major task from now till the day they die is to *stay faithful*?

Most of our congregations have organized effective ways to see to it that all the children under our care are duly channeled into Sunday School or Christian Day School. Attendance is recorded. Absences are noted. Prolonged absences are dealt with. Homework is assigned. Memory work is required. At about age 12, children are forwarded to the pastor’s instruction class. In some congregations it becomes the concern of the Board of Christian education or the Board of Elders if parents do not present their children for catechism instruction. There are few threats I know of more potent for a belligerent 14-year-old or his indifferent parents than the warning, “If things don’t change, you won’t be confirmed!” Catechism parts are learned by heart (if not taken to heart!). The awesome, frightening experience of examination Sunday is survived.

And then they’re confirmed.

And then what?

How hard do we labor, in an organized, effective way, to get post confirmation *teenagers* to study the Bible? A half-hearted plea? “*Please* come to young people’s meetings.” And how do we entice them to come? Softball? Volleyball? Swimming? Lock-ins? Retreats? The prospect of meeting someone of the opposite sex? All of the above? Bible study? Get real!

How do we measure faithful *adult* involvement in congregational life? Is our measuring stick really attendance at Bible class? If you made regular Bible study a prerequisite for service on your Church Council, I’ll bet half your men would be ineligible to serve. In most people’s minds, I’m afraid, being “active church members” means coming to worship most of the time, going to potluck dinners, being willing to help in the kitchen, and singing in the church choir, and showing up for arbor day.

The Lutheran Church, I’m afraid, has sold people a bill of goods that if you’re fourteen, and if you’ve been confirmed, you’re in. And, if you’re in, why still study the Bible?

A second attitude: *We have the word of God in its truth and purity.*

Now, that’s all well and good, and maybe even true, but do you see how an attitude like that could remove all impetus for studying the Scriptures? *We have the truth already; it’s our*

private possession. Why go digging for it? We know we're right and other churches are wrong, right? Do we know *why* we're right? Do we know *why* they're wrong? Why is it we aren't in fellowship with other Christian churches? With other Lutheran churches? Alexander Pope said once, "Some people will never learn anything because they understand everything too soon."

An article in *Christian News* three years ago expressed just this concern. In "Lutherans Comment on the Wisconsin Synod and Other Issues," David Becker listed a wide range of opinions about the Wisconsin Synod, gathered both inside and outside our fellowship. The following comment, from a WELS layman, seemed, exceptionally perceptive:

At this point, I am convinced WELS is correct in its teachings concerning the Bible...

The WELS clergy and teachers have done an inadequate job of educating its lay people in Biblical doctrine. I often hear comments such as "The Synod says we can't..."; or "The Wisconsin Synod doesn't believe that..."

There is a strong apathetic attitude among the majority of the laymen toward the things of God. I have observed the following: a) little Bible reading in the home; b) poor attendance in Bible classes; c) little intelligent conversation about the sermon preached for the day, making me wonder whether it was seriously and carefully listened to; d) church meetings dealing with the "secular" business of the church with what seems only token acknowledgment to the presence of God in the planning process, via a book prayer before and the quick recitation of the Lord's Prayer following...(*Christian News*, March 17, 1986, p. 8).

Why has it come to this? We've told ourselves so often that "we have the Word of God in its truth and purity." Have we come to take much of that Word for granted?

A third attitude: *The Bible is too hard for the average person to understand. Your pastor will have to explain to you what it means.*

Again, there's some truth to that. Peter said Paul's letters "contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). But has the Bible become so incomprehensible, not only to "ignorant and unstable people," but even to our best and brightest, that we must interpret it for them—even in this age of numerous contemporary translations?

Maybe we're explaining too much what it means instead of providing people with the tools to understand it for themselves. Maybe our methods, in educational jargon, have overemphasized the *product* at the expense of the *process*. Gerald S. Hanna and William E. Cashen, in an idea paper entitled "Matching Instructional Objectives, Subject Matter, Tests, and Score Interpretations," suggest that in one kind of teaching situation track the entire content of the subject is completely specifiable and masterable. They point out that this kind of teaching "consists of drill or practice until the student masters each element in the domain." In this track "it is appropriate to have only one form of the test... Usually it is expected that the students will get virtually all of the test items correct; if not, practice is continued until mastery is achieved. The amount of practice required will vary from student to student. The purpose of the test is to determine if each student has mastered the domain." The authors point out that this "concept of mastery is severely limiting; it seems to imply that one can get to the end of what is desirable to learn."

This seems to describe our elementary educational religion methodology, doesn't it? Reciting Bible passages, drill and repetition, getting all the answers correct. Maybe the overemphasis on this method during childhood has led to the kind of attitude toward religion I see so often in college, an attitude that in effect says, "I know everything I want to know about religion already. Why do I need to learn any more?" And maybe it has made adults afraid to come to Bible classes because they're afraid they'll "say the wrong thing."

By contrast, Hanna and Cashen describe another kind of teaching track which is primarily interested in broad, general goals... We hope that the course is just the beginning of a journey for students, that they will continue to apply and expand what they learn for the rest of their lives... Our true goal is student life-long application of the learning to unpredictable arrays of relevant situations... We desire transfer or generalization [of course subject matter] throughout the domain. This means we must provide students with opportunities to use the knowledge or skills we want them to learn; they must be active. Simply sitting and listening or memorizing is not sufficient" [*Idea Paper No. 18*, Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development, Kansas State University, September 1987].

### III

This paper, however, was meant to be a "How to." Providing an adequate "How to" on encouraging adult Bible study in the parish may be similar to the story of the five blind men trying to describe an elephant. Whatever part of the elephant we happen to have our hands on is liable to be offered as our definitive description of the elephant. Whatever handle we may have on Bible study may not be the answer, but it could be *part* of the answer. Let's consider some approaches to Bible study that have worked well for some and may be useful for others.

*Make the Bible Information Class central to congregational renewal.* Whatever adult instruction course you use—Riess, Eickmann, Diener, Vallesky-Bivens, Westendorf, or a hybrid—why limit it to prospective members? Why not offer it to those already in the church? Why not use it as the primary tool to renew those who've fallen away from Word and Sacrament?

If you're going to get present members into the Bible Information class, you'll have to advertise it. You'll have to convince them it's worth attending. How about an announcement like this?

I'll bet a lot of things have changed for you since you were 14. We've all done a lot of growing up since then, right? Do you think the same way today that you did at 14 about money? Or about marriage? or sex? or work?  
A lot's changed since then.  
And yet, for many of us, age 14 was the last time we studied the major teachings of the Bible and the Lutheran church—in confirmation class. You're older and wiser now. Maybe you've been through some tough times since then. Maybe you've even questioned some of the most basic things you were taught back when you were 14.  
Come and ask your questions, and learn again what you learned before. On September 5 I am beginning a new session of the *Adult Inquirers' Class*. It is a sixteen week review of the basic teachings

of the Word of God. Maybe it'll look a little different this time around. Or maybe you'll look at it a little differently. Bring a Bible. Bring a pencil. Bring your questions. Bring a friend. Let's grow together.

Or how about this?

Puzzled about the Christian faith?

Many people are! They have all kinds of questions about it.

Unfortunately, they often keep these questions to themselves—questions like:

What's the Bible all about? Can an ordinary person learn to read it?

Why are there so many churches? How do I choose a church?

What's going to happen to me after I die? I hate talking about death. Why do preachers talk about death so much?

Why give money to the church? Who gets it? What is it used for?

What's the best way to serve God? By becoming a minister, or a priest, or a rabbi?

Or by joining the church choir?

To a lot of people, Christianity looks like one big jigsaw puzzle.

Or how about this?

What are people saying about the Adult Inquirers' Class?

Ask *them!*

From there, you can simply list all the names of all the people in the church who have attended. Over 350 people completed the Bible Information Class in four years in the last parish I served. That's a lot of publicity.

Promote it shamelessly. Mention it regularly in the weeks before to the class. Ask for names (see Appendix I). Send letters to your prospects (see Appendix II and III). Encourage your congregational leaders (Appendix IV). Invite non-member spouses (Appendix V). Put an ad in the paper (Appendix VI). Print a brochure (Appendix VII). In every possible way make it clear that any member who doesn't get into this class sooner or later is really missing something!

You may find you'll have a mixed group attending your Bible Information classes—faithful churchgoers, prospects, returning delinquents, the curious but uncommitted. Encourage fellowship within the group. Be approachable. Invite questions. Don't make people feel stupid. Vary your approach for class discussions. One week try ambiguous true-false questions; another week let people react to quotes; a third week, discuss an item from the newspaper. As you raise the trust level, you can divide the class into small groups for discussion.

After people complete the Bible Information Class, then what?

*Offer a graduated program of Bible studies.* Those of you familiar with Donald Abdon and Parish Leadership Seminars know that Abdon made his 16-week Adult Inquirers' Class the cornerstone for parish renewal. He followed that with a course on the Gospel of Matthew, then a course on I Corinthians, then a course on Revelation. In time, he and Dr. Walter Stuenkel developed about a dozen short-term Bible classes on individual Bible books, as well as a more advanced level doctrine course.

Some of you are also familiar with Harry Wendt's two-year course through the entire Scripture, *Crossways!* There are statements in *Crossways!* with which we would disagree; Wendt is at best unclear about the historicity of Genesis 1-11, he fails to find messianic predictions in



the Psalms, he posits the multiple authorship of Isaiah, he agrees with a late date for Daniel, and others. But out of a two-year study manual, containing more than 800 pages, a relatively small number of pages provoke disagreement. Those particular lessons could be rewritten and substituted, or companion lessons could be provided to let readers see how an issue is treated from both sides. In any case, *Crossways!* remains one of the most ambitious and exciting study tools on the entire Bible. It leads people to do intelligent Bible reading at home and see the “big picture” of all of Scripture.

Other courses which could be included in a graduated program of Bible study in the parish would be courses on church history, the Lutheran Confessions, and more in-depth courses on Old Testament books.

In any such graduated program of Bible classes, people will be encouraged to attend the first level before moving on to Level II or Level III classes. An Adult Education File Card could be maintained for each communicant member (see Appendix VIII). As years go by it will be easy to know whom to concentrate on for invitations to future sessions of various level classes. Obviously, such a graduated Bible study program could be abused. It should never be used to pressure people or to make them feel they aren't true Christians unless they complete the program and receive a “diploma.” But if we think it's all right to take attendance and maintain a graduated program of Christian education in Sunday School and confirmation classes, why not in adult education?

Even with its potential for abuse, Dwight Moody's comment about soul-winning might be in place for discussing a graduated Bible study program: “I still like my way of doing it better than someone's way of *not* doing it.”

*Offer a wide range of courses.* Prof. David Kuske, in an article in the Spring 1986 *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, “Bible Class in the Eighties,” pointed to the value of a wide variety of course offerings:

Imagine for a moment that you are a member of the congregation reading a bulletin announcement or a mailing which is an invitation to attend Bible class...[It] announces that the schedule for the next 25 weeks includes: a six-week study of the book of Galatians (or of Romans 1-8, or Genesis 1-12), a three-week study of several topics (charismatic gifts, religion on TV, religious oriented charities), a four-week study of the development of the Christian church during the first 600 years after Christ, a six week study of Mark (or of Romans 9-16, or of Genesis 13-25), a three-week study of our synod's world missions, and a three-week study of eschatology...

If a congregation has two or more Bible class teachers, a Bible class with a varied curriculum...might well be offered alongside a longer course which runs for six months or more...Some shorter courses are also of a kind that might be repeated at regular intervals. When one has worked up a course which might interest and edify most of the members of the congregation, repetition of the course makes good sense.

When one intends to repeat a course, members could register for it as for a course at school. Because the course will be repeated, enrollment can also be limited to a size which gives each

individual an opportunity to become actively involved in the learning process. Those who take the course can be encouraged to help recruit other members when the course is offered again.

Trinity Lutheran Church in Waukesha offers a Winter Enrichment at the beginning of the calendar year. Members are invited to register for a variety of smaller group classes. Among the topics offered this year, for example, are: “The Battle for the Bible,” “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? (the Book of Job),” “Where Does Christian Contemporary Music Fit In?” “Marriage Enrichment,” “Sons and Daughters—Drugs and Booze—a Family Legacy,” “Evangelism Awareness,” “Lay Visitation Classes,” and “Pre-Marriage Classes.”

Part of the initial attraction for a Bible class must lie in whether or not it “hits people where they’re at.” Maybe we short circuit our own efforts by putting out dull, uninteresting, or even guilt-inducing announcements. How about this for an exciting announcement for a Bible class?

Starting this Wednesday we’re going to go through the book of Habakkuk. Do you know much about Habakkuk? You should! And I do hope more people will come to Bible class this time. Really, it’s terrible how few of us study God’s Word. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. I work so hard to prepare for these classes, and then nobody comes. I want to see a good turnout for Bible class this time!

What’s wrong with that announcement? For one thing, it lays an immense amount of guilt on people for not studying the Bible. They might deserve it, but there’s a big difference between making people feel guilty for not studying the Bible and convincing them they *can* read the Bible for fun and profit. It takes more than getting them to feel bad to get them to come. For a second thing, such an announcement offers no clue why this Bible class will do anyone any good, other than the pregnant promise that they’ll understand Habakkuk. Were it not for an already high view of Scripture, they might well reply, “So what? What does Habakkuk have to do with me, and my problems, and my life?” If you can’t answer that, why are you studying Habakkuk?

At the same time, Prof. John Brug’s observations and warnings in a recently *Quarterly* news and comments are in place:

We in the Wisconsin Synod think of ourselves as a doctrinal church, but we are not immune to the tendency [of publishing and studying about self-life issues]. In seminars offered for our laypeople or in congregational Bible classes (and perhaps even in pastoral conferences) which topics are the most popular—those which are doctrinal or those which are “practical,” “personal,” and “revelant”? We need to help our people deal with their personal problems in a biblical way, and we need to make initial contact with the unchurched at the point of their personal concerns.

We also need to beware, however, that we are not merely tapping into the deep currents of self-interest and self-realization which are flowing through our culture which are not even religious, let alone Christian. We should not mistake self-interest and efforts at self-improvement for piety and devotion to God’s Word.

A Christianity which no longer sees its doctrinal foundation as its

chief concern and its doctrinal message its chief “drawing card” is a Christianity which is no longer God’s truth [*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Summer 1988, p. 232].

Much of what has been written here comes with the assumption that Bible classes will be taught at church, usually by the pastor or a Christian Day School teacher, who are viewed as Biblical experts. They possess a level of Scriptural, doctrinal and historical understanding which class members do not have. In whatever format classes are taught, the leader is viewed as an authority figure and discussion is often directed, controlled, and at times limited by the leader.

There is much to be said that is good about this kind of teaching, and it should always enjoy a high priority in congregational life. At the same time, however, there are other dimensions in learning which such formats do not address. The most frequent complaint I hear about congregational Bible classes is that people don’t have much opportunity for discussion. Even when discussion is invited, not much occurs. Bible class is another “sermon.” People feel they’re being “preached at.” The teacher often comes to class armed with far more information than he can hope to cover in the allotted time, and it’s clear he wants to “get through the material.” People say, “I think Pastor feels uncomfortable having me in Bible class. He doesn’t seem to want to hear my questions.”

Educational experts suggest that greater learning occurs when students are active participants in the process. A textbook for college teaching, *Group Processes in the Classroom*, by Richard A. and Patricia A. Schmuck, says:

A positive classroom climate is one where the students support one another; where the students share high amounts of potential influence—both with one another and with the teacher; where high levels of attraction exist for the group as a whole and between classmates; where norms are supportive for getting academic work done, as well as for maximizing individual differences; where communication is open and featured by dialogue; where conflict is dealt with openly and constructively; and where the processes of working and developing together as a group are considered relevant in themselves for study (p. 34).

“Adult learning is more effectively accomplished when the learner is an active participant, involved in something which has significance for his experience” [Warren Wilbert, *Teaching Christian Adults*, p. 75].

An article from the *Association of Leaders in Christian Ministry Newsletter*, reproduced in *Teach*, November-December 1986, reported:

Noted church growth researcher Flavil Yeakely recently reported these findings about church growth. These observations are based on member interviews and samples from diagnostic studies of some 300 churches, including some that were growing and some that were declining.

Generally speaking, *growing* churches reflect a balanced program which includes a strong emphasis on good adult Bible study classes, along with strong programs for children and youth.

Churches in *decline* spend more money, time and resources on their non-adult programs than they do on adults.

In *growing* churches, he observed smaller class sizes and smaller

groups in adult classes. In *declining* churches he found that the trend was toward larger, lecture-oriented classes.

In the area of curriculum studies, Flavil noted a real emphasis on serious 'meaty' Bible study in *growing* churches. In *declining* churches the emphasis was on rehearsing doctrine.

While we might disagree with some of Yeakely's terminology, is he correct about group sizes and group interaction?

What's the solution?

D. *Provide the opportunity for lay-led, small group Bible discussions.* I plead lamentable ignorance to most materials and methodology for small group Bible classes, although I have recently become familiar with the *Serendipity* approach. The *Serendipity New Testament for Groups*, edited by Lyman Coleman, is an NIV New Testament with suggestions for group discussion printed in the side margins. Each New Testament story and section contains three divisions: open, dig, and reflect (See Appendix IX). One might say, in a general way, that the questions provided, particularly in the "open" and "reflect" sections, do a good job of bringing the biblical stories into our life-patterns and provide good application thoughts. One might also say, in a general way, that the *Serendipity Bible's* question formats often lack reference to the specific Gospel and have too many allusions to a "decision of faith," and the wise pastor would supplement or adjust some of the lessons accordingly.

Coleman has also authored a *Training Manual for Small Group Leaders*. In it he provides rationale and methodology for his system. He says there is a need for small groups in the church "because the traditional support systems are gone," "because it is the model that Jesus used," and "because it is the model that the early church used" (p. 3). "In 1940," Coleman writes, "the neighborhood church was also the center of the life of the average member...from the cradle to the grave. Scouts, athletic teams, Sunday school, men's and women's societies provided natural habitats for the social, recreational, spiritual and support systems for the member. Today, the average church member is involved only on Sunday, only at a large worship experience, and only for an average of five years" (p. 5).

"A Christian small group," Coleman writes, quoting Roberta Hestenes, "is an intentional, face-to-face gathering of 3 to 12 people on a regular time schedule with a common purpose of discovering and growing in the possibilities of the abundant life in Christ" (p. 12). In discussing how to choose the right program, Coleman says, "Many times a church will try to implement a small groups program that is out of character with the style of leadership of the pastor...Allow the pastor and the small group to choose the particular program for groups that they feel most comfortable with, and continue to modify the small group as the pastor/council feels the necessity for change" (p. 45). In this *Training Manual* and in an accompanying booklet called *Church Models*, Coleman offers more than a dozen models of group approaches, some of which might be very adaptable to WELS congregations. Among them: "STUDY GROUP MODEL...1. Self study: Everyone studies the Scripture passage on their own. 2. Group study: Everyone meets with their group to share their study and to care for one another. 3. Expository teaching: The pastor or teacher goes over the same Scripture passage at the Sunday school hour or in the worship service sermon" (*Models*, p. 35). "MCDONALD'S FAST FOOD...The Executive Pastor initiates new small groups four times a year and gives the groups a highly structured program to follow for the first year and a leader who has had experience with a previous group" (*Manual*, p. 45). "DISCIPLESHIP GROUP MODEL:...Our church program has three levels of ministry. 1. Sunday morning services...2. On Wednesday night we have a gathering for those

who are more serious about Christ, which we call “New Community”; Expository teaching, worship and prayer...3. Discipleship Groups for those who want to grow deeper in their faith and desire to develop very meaningful relationships with other Christians” (*Models*, p. 60).

I for one am convinced that a pastor can never be a true member of a small group Bible class. His very presence will change the character of the group. Either he will be unable to resist the urge to be the group’s “teacher,” or else other members of the group will be afraid to speak up too much for fear because they might say something incorrect. Pastors can provide study material, serve as reference persons, answer tricky questions at small group “checkpoints” and iron out group difficulties. As long as lay-led, small group Bible studies function within the ministry of the pastor and the congregation, they can be fine opportunities for believers to deepen their knowledge of the Word and strengthen their relationships with Christ and with other Christians. If lay-led, small groups operate apart from, and even in opposition to, the ministry of the pastor and the congregation, they can become destructive elements in congregational life and will have to be dealt with accordingly.

Centuries ago, the church father Athanasius said, “If you wish your children shall be obedient...give them the words of God. But you shall not say that it belongs only to religious men to study Scriptures; but rather it belongs to every Christian man, and especially to him that is wrapped [up] in the business of this world” [quoted in *Luther’s English Connection*, pp. 62,63]. Elton Trueblood said, “Education is too big to limit to the young...Adult education is the big thing in the church. It is not a decoration. It is the center piece” [quoted in *Christianity Today*, May 23, 1980, p. 20].

Let’s do everything we can so that Christian education will never be “just kids’ stuff” in our congregations. Let’s do everything we can to make Bible classes “for mature audiences.”