

# Bible Class in the Eighties

By David P. Kuske

In a spring 1985 issue of *The Northwestern Lutheran*, there were two letters about Bible class. One said, "Concerning poor attendance at Bible classes: Is it possible that this is a result of our pastors never having learned how to teach a Bible class? I have rarely heard a Bible class presentation that was characterized by first-rate teaching.... Is it possible that the trouble with our Bible class stems from the fact that the only kind of presentation its leaders know how to make is a sermon?"

The second laments similarly: "I wonder if something that I have noticed may be one reason why many choose not to attend Bible class. In the different churches with which I have been associated, Bible class has sometimes seemed like an extension of the morning's sermon. The pastor or leader reads a portion of Scripture or another source and then expounds on that idea for a large part of the class time."

We may set aside for a moment the question whether or not the pastor's method is one reason for poor Bible class attendance and address a more basic question: Is Bible class really all that necessary or important?

Our people seem to be saying that it is. Although it is still only a rather small percentage who attend Bible class, that percentage has been increasing slowly but surely in our synod.

Our pastors also seem to be saying that Bible class is important. A glance at the statistical report of our synod indicates that the percentage of pastors who are conducting regular Bible classes is higher than just a few decades ago. In spite of the rather low percentage of people who turn out for Bible class, pastors keep on holding them and keep on urging their people to attend.

Why? Though a number of reasons might be given, two seem to be worthy of special mention. Given the drift of the society in which we live, the need is greater than ever before that our people be steeped in Scripture. The media bombard our members with overt and covert influences which undermine their faith and their view of a sanctified life. More and more pressures are being brought on them to compromise and even abandon their faith and their Christian values. In Bible class they have a chance to discuss these things thoroughly and openly with their pastor as well as with their fellow Christians. Such discussions provide one of the best opportunities for them to get both the guidance and encouragement they need to cope with questions and problems in their daily lives.

What is equally important to note, this same society is giving our people more opportunities than ever before to confess their faith. Many have daily contact with people who don't know Christ at all or whose religion has left them with only a shell of Christianity but none of its real substance. Bible class gives those who attend a chance to begin to express the truths of Scripture as well as to learn more about them. The more they learn to express the truths of Scripture, the better they will be at sharing these truths with others.

One worship service a week provides our members with a good opportunity to grow in Christian knowledge. But a more frequent and a more informal study is also needed. While daily home devotions provide good learning opportunities, more in-depth study will be helpful. In the 1980s a Bible class which provides a frequent, in-depth, informal study of Scripture is both a welcome and a beneficial addition to the weekly worship service and daily home devotions.

This is not a new development, however. The Apostle Paul saw a need for something similar centuries ago. Paul's description of a good program of Christian education in a congregation is as appropriate in the 1980s as it was in the first century.

In Ephesians 4:12ff Paul urges pastors to prepare their people for a specific task, namely, building up the body of Christ inwardly. In verse 13 he describes the goal of this inward growth as unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son. He indicates that this work cannot stop until all Christians have reached a maturity which equals that of the full measure of Christ himself. In verse 14 he explains why this growth is so important. If Christians are only infants in their knowledge, they can be tossed back and forth like waves which are blown here and there by every wind of teaching which is produced by the cunning of men. Paul's description of crafty unbelievers who constantly devise things to lead Christ's people astray sounds as if it was written in the 1980s, doesn't it?

Note particularly how the apostle directs the church's spiritual leaders to go about this process of promoting inward growth. They are not to do it all by themselves. Rather, they are to prepare God's people to build one another up in faith and knowledge. Every Christian is to be enabled to "speak the truth in love" (v 15) so that "each part does its work" (v 16). People cannot learn to do these things by just sitting and listening. They need to acquire the skill to dig into Scripture themselves. They need to think these things through for themselves and practice expressing what they learn. Bible class is one of the best tools for doing all this. That is why Bible class can be one of the most challenging and exciting parts of a pastor's ministry in the eighties.

Now let's go back to those two quotes with which this article began. Both are laments of people who apparently sat through Bible classes which were "sermons," and twice as long as the regular sermon as well. A Bible class "sermon" is not only less interesting than other kinds of presentations; it also fails to accomplish two of the reasons for having Bible classes in the eighties: giving people a chance *to discuss* the meaning of Scripture for their lives, and giving them a chance *to learn how to express* these truths in order to be able to share them with others.

But methodology does not seem to be the only thing which one needs to consider. Over the past ten years, a portion of the senior education class at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has been devoted to discussions of what makes a Bible class interesting and edifying. The seniors have been encouraged to share with their class members the things they noted in their vicar year which contributed to making a good Bible class. Two things besides methodology were cited quite regularly by these seniors: scheduling and content. The rest of this article will focus briefly on each of these three factors which seem to be keys for planning and teaching a successful Bible class in the eighties.

### **Scheduling**

Some pastors find that it is best to schedule a Bible class every Sunday the year around. Then people develop the good habit of looking on Bible class as a regular part of their Sunday morning at church. Others find that this is not the best idea in their situation because members leave on a weekend every four to eight weeks to visit relatives such as parents and children. In some congregations a Bible class course which runs for a number of weeks and then has a Sunday off before beginning another four to eight week course serves the people better. Still other pastors have a congregation in which a goodly number of people have to work long hours seven days a week during three to four months of the year (eg., the tourist season, the growing season) and then have considerably more time during the rest of the year. For them the Bible class is best concentrated in the eight or nine months of the slack season.

When is the best time for Bible class during the week? Some will say Sunday morning. In some cases this may be the best time, especially if people must travel long distances to get to church. In other cases Sunday morning may be a very poor time. To expect the dairy farmer who has been up since 4:30 a.m. and worked out in the cold air for four hours to sit in a warm church and be alert for two consecutive hours is not realistic. The same is true of people who have to work a night shift in a factory, hospital or service job.

Perhaps the two previous paragraphs are enough to make the point that one cannot schedule Bible class according to what one may have done in another congregation or according to what one might think the schedule ought to be. If the pastor ignores the schedule forced on people by their occupations and family obligations, he himself may be contributing to poor Bible class attendance.

When the schedules of the people in a congregation are considered, it may become evident that in many instances there is no one time in the week which is best for everyone for Bible class. This in turn suggests that the same Bible class might be offered two or three times during the week: Sunday morning, a weekday evening, a weekday morning, a luncheon hour or the afternoon. One spends several hours to prepare a good Bible class. It could be good stewardship of time to offer that Bible class more than once during the week if this would double or even triple the number of people who benefit from it.

In planning the Bible class in the eighties, a pastor and his congregation might do well to consider the busy lives of the members and try to arrange a schedule which provides opportunities for most of them to attend.

### **Content**

But good scheduling will not make a Bible class attractive if the content is not well planned also. The most inviting Bible class curriculum for many people is one which has variety. Even if a Bible class is scheduled for every Sunday of the year, it probably is best to have a complete change every four to eight weeks. There will always be some people—and they often are the most faithful in attending Bible class—who will enjoy a study of a book of the Bible or a doctrine which continues for 20 to 30 weeks in a row. But for many others—and they are often the ones who need more encouragement to attend Bible class regularly—the sameness of the class over a four to six month period may make the Bible class seem stale.

To have variety, the Bible class curriculum might include four to eight week courses which alternate between a number of areas such as these: Bible chapters or books, doctrinal studies, topics of spiritual interest, church history (including current trends in religion) and various fields of the church's work. This does not mean that the study of longer books of the Bible is not possible. Rather, one could take a longer book a portion at a time in four to six week courses which are scheduled a month or two apart. One could intersperse "lighter" courses, including topics, church history or church work, for a refreshing change of pace.

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. One invitation announces that the class will be taking up a 25 week study of Genesis (or Acts or Romans). The other invitation 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 (the end of the world, millennial ideas, the resurrection, the judgment, heaven and hell).

Which of the two will catch your attention more readily? Which of the two will have greater appeal? Which will be more inviting if you enjoy attending Bible class but are not able to attend every week? Which will be less intimidating if you are thinking about attending Bible class for the first time?

If a congregation has two or more Bible class teachers, a Bible class with a varied curriculum like the one indicated above might well be offered alongside a longer course which runs for six months or more. The value of a second longer course is obvious. It enables a congregation to provide its members with a carefully laid out program of instruction in all the books of the Bible or in Christian doctrine. If the members could be led to take such a course over a span of years, the spiritual benefits would be immeasurable.

Some shorter courses are also of the kind which 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.

In planning any course, the question which needs to be asked first is: What purpose will this course or this sequence of courses serve? The congregation may be a young mission, or it may be old and well established. It may be located in a small town or the bustling environment of a large city. The members may be experiencing the economic depression of a dying area or the euphoria of rapid growth. The Bible class, like the sermon, must help the members grow spiritually, not just in a general way, but in a way which enables them to cope with the situation in the environment in which they live and work.

Whether there is to be one Bible class or more, whether the courses run four to eight weeks or longer, the Bible class of the eighties demands that as much attention be given to content as to scheduling.

### **Method**

But a Bible class with good scheduling and content can still fall short of its purpose if the method of teaching is not effective. The letters quoted earlier give ample testimony to this fact.

Which is the best method? There is no one method that is best. Although books on Bible class may suggest various methods, the different kinds can all fit into one of three basic categories: telling, questioning and discussing. Each has its distinct strengths and weaknesses.

Telling enables one to add background or further information which is needed by the class to understand what they cannot discover for themselves. Or one can use telling to add illustrations to clarify the difficult or more obscure truths being studied. But if telling is used exclusively, the Bible class ends up being a "sermon." The failure to use questions and discussion to involve the members of the class in thinking about and expressing the truths of the lesson makes the learning experience much less profitable than it could have been.

Questioning enables the members of the class to discover and think through things for themselves. If this method is used exclusively, however, it may wear the class out mentally. Questioning may also leave the class confused if telling is not used to amplify a point which the class answered inexactly or incompletely. Of if the questions used are only of the most simple type which ask the class merely to repeat something or to put something in different words, then the teacher is not requiring much thinking and is not challenging the class members any more than if the telling method were used exclusively.

Discussion enables one to get the class members to talk about and apply truths to their own lives. But if this method is used exclusively, the instructor is really relying on the class members to provide the class with substance. Since this may or may not happen, the class becomes a hit-or-miss learning experience. And people will soon tire of a Bible class if all they hear is what other class members think.

The teacher could combine the strengths of these three methods by using a pattern of this sort: As he plans for the class, he will determine the places in the lesson where each of the major points he wants to develop occurs. At each of these places, he plans a "climax" in the lesson development. He will use telling to move quickly over "minor" points to get to each "climax." As he comes to each major point, he will plan one or two questions of a more challenging type to get the class to explain this key idea and to think about it. He will also plan an appropriate illustration to highlight the major truth developed by questioning. And, since this is a valuable point for the members of the class to apply to their own lives, he will present a situation from life in the 1980s for the class to discuss. In order to stimulate good discussion, the application will have to be something like an ambiguous statement (eg., one which is partly true and partly false) or a problem to be solved. The discussion should be allowed to continue only until people start repeating themselves or begin to wander off the subject at hand. At that point, the loose ends of the discussion can be tied together with a brief summation of the major point to be learned from this "climax." Then the teacher will move on to the next "climax."

Within this general pattern there is room for a great deal of flexibility. One can have as few as three climaxes and so use more telling. This would be best especially if the material requires quick movement over a lot of background to get to a few key points. Or one could have as many as six or more climaxes in one lesson. This would enable the teacher to minimize the use of telling and allow him to involve the class in more questioning and discussion.

Some kinds of Bible class lessons will call for the use of each of the three basic methods sequentially as three separate parts of a lesson. For example, in carrying out the lessons on church history or church work in the sample curriculum given earlier, one might use a filmstrip from the gold mine of material provided by the synod's audio-visual aids committee. In fact, one might choose to use three filmstrips for a three-week course. Before showing each filmstrip, one could give the class a dozen or more true-false or multiple choice questions on the content of the filmstrip. Though the class members will have to guess at all the answers, these questions

point their attention to the major things they are to note as they view the filmstrip. Then the filmstrip might be shown. This showing of the filmstrip is the major part of the telling in this lesson. After the showing of the filmstrip, one might go through the questions once again to make sure everyone got the major points in the filmstrip. This is the questioning part of the lesson. One might follow this with some points for discussion, including the study of some Scripture passages. The aim of this is to get the class to apply what was learned to their lives. In this way the lesson ends with the discussion part of the lesson.

Many other variations of the telling-questioning-discussing combination in a Bible class lesson are possible. Break-out groups can be used at times for one of the climaxes in a lesson or for the question portion of a lesson if the questions are grouped in one part of it. One might use verse marking techniques or paragraph identification exercises to help in the telling or questioning portions of the lesson. Although these techniques and exercises have been suggested especially for Bible classes for young people, they are just as helpful in classes for other ages.

Because many pastors do not have the time to develop every lesson in a curriculum which has good variety, the use of prepared materials can be a great help. With the aid provided by such materials, one can prepare a handout for each Bible class. This handout will be an adaptation of the subject matter to the people of the class in their unique setting. This handout will also enable the teacher to use telling, questioning and discussing in the way that will make the lesson most meaningful for the members of the class.

### **Conclusion**

The reader of this article may have taken issue from time to time with what was said. Much of what has been presented could easily be debated, depending on the particular circumstances one faces. What has been offered is not intended to be the last word on Bible classes. Rather, the intention was to give some encouragement to strive to make the Bible class the best it can be. The writer hopes a few helpful ideas have been imparted as well.

Bible class is an important part of a pastor's ministry. It is best to schedule so that the maximum number of people can attend with a minimum of inconvenience. It is important that the content of the Bible class have plenty of variety. It is essential that a method be used which is a good mix of interesting telling, challenging questioning and lively, practical discussing. Let the Bible class fulfill people's need to have a chance for some good give and take with their pastor and their fellow Christians about applying the Bible in their lives today. Let the Bible class also fulfill the people's need to begin to express the truths of Scripture in their own words so they can grow in their ability to speak about their faith to others.

Bible class in the eighties! What a challenge! What an opportunity!