

The Bible Class

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As I approached the writing of this paper, I was reminded of the saying regarding the weather, namely “everybody is talking about it, but nobody does anything about it.” This, in a sense, is often the case with a Bible Class. Oh, our pastors do something about it, but our people too often only talk about it. And it seems the talk is most frequent when a pastor is not conducting a Bible Class at a given time; and when he is conducting one, the talk consists of excuses for not attending. Attendance at Bible Classes is often like joining a choir: everyone thinks we ought to have a choir, but lets hope someone else does the singing in it; so too most members feel we ought to have a Bible Class, and freely admit they could learn much from it, but are happy to let someone else attend, such as the pastor’s family, the Sunday School teachers, the elders and so on.

It is difficult to find a reason for this general indifference to the blessing of a Bible Class. Yet we might think of Paul’s words, “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” as the main reason. Our fast moving daily lives seem to be crowded with so many secular activities that spiritual matters are often brushed aside, being satisfied to hear the Word in the formal services alone. Our superabundant society has evolved to the point of filling almost all of our time with some type of activity—either for earning or for spending, thereby seemingly giving man a full and well-rounded living.

In spite of this attitude—or perhaps we should say, “for this very reason”—we as leaders of our congregations, and as men responsible for the eternal welfare of those over whom we have been placed by God, dare never lose sight of the blessings that are to be gained from a Bible Class. We dare not let numbers be our guide, but rather nourish the souls of those who come to us for spiritual food with the only food God has provided—namely His Word. While we all love to see a large group, the Holy Spirit works in the heart of man just as well when he is alone as when he is one among many. Therefore we establish and conduct Bible Classes in our various congregations and teach whosoever will avail themselves of this agency for strengthening their faith.

I. Purpose of a Bible Class

The final purpose of all teaching in the church must be to work faith, preserve faith and to strengthen faith in the heart of man. The Holy Spirit accomplishes this through the Word of God, or more specifically, through the Gospel. This Gospel is used in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, thereby giving the gift of faith in the work of Jesus to the one being baptized. This new-born faith is then to be fed and nourished as the child grows. It is fed as his mother teaches him the simple truths regarding Jesus; again it is fed when the child hears the Word in formal worship services with his parents; again it continues to be nourished as the child is enrolled in Sunday School; and after a few more years, he concentrates on the blessings which are his when he attends confirmation instructions. Then, after about 14 years of a rather constant diet of God’s Word, His mercy, and His comforting Gospel, most of the nourishment is suddenly cut off as the child “graduates” from Sunday School by coming to the end of the 8th grade, by the rite of confirmation which means the end of confirmation instructions, and by reaching the age when his parents no longer teach him the simple Christian truths as they did when he was a small child.

All this is now suddenly cut off. He has only the worship service left to attend where he hears an Epistle and a Gospel lesson read and about a 20 minute sermon preached, reminding him of his sin and of God's mercy in forgiving that sin. This, suddenly, is now the extent of the nourishment offered to him by his church.

It is to fill this need that we conduct Bible Classes and encourage our members to avail themselves of the blessings offered therein. We are interested only in the preservation and the strengthening of the faith which the Holy Spirit has given us. This can also be done through faithful attendance at services and through regular use of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper; yet a Bible Class offers certain advantages. I am thinking of the advantage of being able to speak and question informally. If I hear a thought expressed in a sermon with which I am not familiar, I do not raise my hand and say, "please explain this more fully." This very thing can be done in a Bible Class. Questions and answers can be given back and forth between instructor and hearers.

As we study the Scriptures, both Old Testament and New Testament, it is evident that there was much informal study of the Word in Biblical times. This was not limited to the worship in the Temple of the Old Testament nor to the synagogues of the New Testament. The Word was to be kept before the people as a guide for life and as an assurance of God's mercy. We read for example in Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verses 6 through 9:

6. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: 7, and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. 8, And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. 9, And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

Here God reminds the Israelites, not only that His Word is to be with them, but also how to make it possible that they retain that Word. Moses directs that the children should be taught God's Word constantly; that they should wear reminders of that Word on their bodies, and that the Word should be found even on the door posts of their houses and on the gates leading to the houses. In these words Moses is not advocating a Bible Class taught by a member of the Levitical priesthood, yet the purpose and results are the same. It is to be a constant teaching of the Word to keep the Israelites firm in their faith in God and in His promises; to give them the strength to withstand the many temptations to go after other gods, "the gods of the people which are round about you." Deut. 6,14. These people took part in the formal worship of the Israelites, but God would remind us that the flesh needs all the strength it can gain from the Word to withstand the temptations to which it will be subjected. To help give this strength, we today conduct Bible Classes.

And who of us can forget the admonition of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 6, verses one to four:

1. Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. 2. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; 3, that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. 4, And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Here God lays the responsibility upon the fathers for training the child in the Christian faith; the children are to honor their parents as God's representatives in this as well as in all things. To aid the parents in this work, the church establishes Bible Classes where those who are more qualified to teach aid the parents. This, however, is not only a need for the children; our flesh continues to tempt us throughout life. Therefore we urge not only children, but adults as well to avail

themselves of the blessings offered in the Bible Class. We need the “nurture and admonition of the Lord” all the days of our life so that we might remain faithful unto the end of our days.

The thought of an informal Bible Class is not something that the church has started in recent years only. Fritz, in his book “Pastoral Theology” reports that a Bible Class was a common practice among Lutherans in the early years of their history in this nation. Only the Bible Class he speaks of was conducted immediately after the service or on Sunday afternoons with all worshippers present. The pastor would go up and down the church aisle instructing in various doctrines and calling upon members at random for answers. This practice finally gave way to Bible Classes conducted at different times, seemingly because of the time involved, additional services, and the “hurried-up” pace of life to which our people have become subject.

We can also go way back to the early Christian Church for examples of informal Bible Classes. One need only review the work of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts to find many instances of what we today would call Bible Classes. We cite just a few examples. Acts 16, 13. Paul had come to the city of Philippi and he records “we were in that city abiding certain days. And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither.” This brings back recollections of our first missionaries among the Apache Indians, gathering under a large tree; or likewise our men in Africa meeting in the open air, under some shade tree for the teaching of the Word. Here we had no formal service, but rather an informal Bible Class, talking about and discussing the blessed truths revealed by God in His Word and through His Apostles.

We can go on in this 16th chapter of the book of Acts to the 32nd verse. This is part of the story of the Jailor at Philippi. He had already asked Paul what he should do to be saved and Paul gave that well known answer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” But this was only the beginning of his knowledge of the Word. Verse 32 goes on to tell us “they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house.” And with what results? He and “all his” were baptized before morning, and they “rejoiced, believing in God, with all his house” v. 34. We would be inclined to call this an instruction period, yet it was instruction in God’s Word, making it a Bible Class conducted in the house of the jailor.

Occasionally Paul, even as we today in our Bible Classes, sensed the need to stress some certain doctrine of the Word to a certain group of people rather than giving an over-all look at the Word. Such was the case in Acts, chapter 17. Paul arrived at Thessalonica. In verses 2 and 3 we read: “And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, 3, Opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ”. Here were people (Jews) who did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah, the one who fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. This was the doctrine in which instruction was needed and this is the doctrine in which the instruction was given. The statement that Paul “reasoned with them” indicates that there was discussion on this matter, of the type that we like to encourage in our present day Bible Classes.

Much the same could be said of the example (Acts 17, 16-17) of Paul in the city of Athens. There we are told in verse 17, “Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him”. Here again it was informal discussion, based on the Word of God, with those who were of a “city wholly given to idolatry” v. 16. The purpose of Paul’s discussion was to open the hearts of the Athenians to the Savior and the work He had done for them. Since many of these were idolaters, we can well imagine that they took no part in the temple worship, where they would have had the

opportunity of at least hearing prophecies regarding the coming Son of God. Today we would likely say that Paul tried to instruct these people in the fundamental Christian doctrines, or we might well say Paul had Bible Classes with these people.

In the 18th chapter of the book of Acts we come upon a Bible Class of somewhat different nature. We read in verses 24 to 26:

And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. 25, This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. 26, And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue; whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.

Here was a man, Apollos by name, who already knew something of the Christian faith, but his knowledge was not yet complete. Two faithful Christians, Aquila and Priscilla “took him unto them, and expounded the way of God more perfectly.” This was a class of one student and two teachers, yet a Bible Class. The Holy Spirit worked through the Word taught in that class so that Apollos “mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, showing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ” verse 28.

The afore mentioned examples are but a few showing that Bible Classes are really as old as the Christian Church itself. The purpose of these has always been the working of, preserving of, or strengthening of faith in those who take part in the class. This is still the purpose for which our Bible Classes are conducted today.

II. Time, Materials, and Methods

As we proceed now to fulfill this purpose with our Bible Classes, we want to hear of various methods and materials that might be used to conduct the classes and also some suggestions regarding the time classes might behold. The time for conducting the Bible Class may well depend upon those who would like to attend. If the group consists mainly of parents of Sunday School children, the class might well meet during the Sunday School hour. This time does have its disadvantages, however. One of these is the fact that the time is rather short. Our Sunday School usually runs about 50 to 60 minutes. If we deduct time from this for devotions, both opening and closing, plus perhaps some more for memorizing hymns, we come up with 30 to 40 minutes for a Bible Class, which is rather short. (Our Sunday School teachers also find this to be true). Certainly this is better than not conducting a class, yet it would seem that a Bible Class might well be of an hour and a half or two hour duration. This length of time would allow for thorough discussion of the material one is covering.

Another obstacle we will certainly run into with Sunday morning Bible Classes in our district is the fact that usually the pastor cannot be present for the Sunday School hour due to serving more than one congregation. In these cases this hour could not even be considered, unless the pastor entrusts the Bible Class to one of his laymen. I, personally, have never followed this practice. It might well be considered and work out well both doctrinally and practically in those congregations which have one or more men teaching in their Christian Day schools, asking one of these teachers to conduct the Bible Class. My reasons for not enlisting a layman to teach an adult Bible Class are various. First, I would want him thoroughly trained theologically, since it is in a Bible Class that questions are often raised about points of doctrine not heard regularly from the pulpit. I would want to be sure that the Bible Class teacher would not give some misleading answers simply because he tried to answer a question to which he thought he knew

the answer, yet did not answer properly. I also would want a layman teaching an adult Bible Class to have a call to do this. Since this is a form of the public ministry, such a man ought then be asked by the congregation to perform this part of the work of the ministry in this particular congregation. He would then be performing a legitimate function given to him by the congregation. Such a man, too, would certainly be required to meet the standard set up by Paul in I Timothy 3, verse 2 that he “be apt to teach”.

An alternative to the Sunday morning Bible Class is naturally an evening class, either on Sunday evening or some other suitable evening. The Old Adam gives us many reasons why this does not work out: baby-sitting problems; TV shows; bowling nights; too few nights at home as it is; and so on and so on. Yet members who are sincerely interested in a Bible Class will recognize the Old Adam speaking and will sincerely try to attend. Some of the disadvantages mentioned for Sunday morning classes are removed with the evening class. The length of time for an evening class is not guided as strictly by the clock. We might set the time as an hour and a half as a general rule, but if it is 15 minutes longer or shorter it doesn't really make too much difference. The evening class is able to be taught by the pastor, too. Certainly this influences members' desire to attend and can instill them with confidence in the soundness of the teachings in the class.

Now we are ready to begin a Bible Class at a set date and time. What are we going to use for instructional material. Without a second thought we say, “the Bible”. This is right, but are we going to begin with Genesis and continue through Revelation in an isagogical study of the entire Bible? This might be done. But there are so many possibilities! A pastor will want to consider the need of his class when he determines what he will present in Bible Class. Is the group spiritually weak on some certain doctrine? Then he might want to begin by reviewing that doctrine. Has he heard frequent questions regarding the Lord's Supper? If so, he might want to review this Sacrament with his class. And so on. As a guide he might consider the Catechism; an adult instruction manual; our Synod's booklet, “This We Believe”; an individual book of the Bible; a study of a Biblical character, such as Abraham or Sarah, Paul or Peter; he might study the Epistle or Gospel lesson of the previous or next Sunday. The source material from the Bible is almost limitless. He might also ask the group for suggestions about topics, either oral, or perhaps through a question box arrangement.

Briefly, we want to discuss the use of some of these materials. Again, this might well depend upon the needs of the people attending the Bible Class. For instance if the Class is made up mainly of Sunday School teachers who are rather well acquainted with the stories they teach, we might want to take a summary course in Bible History with them. The purpose of this would be to help them place the stories in their proper historical settings and sequence. It would serve as an over-all review of the truths they each teach their classes and in that way enable them to be more effective teachers. Or we might want to stress certain doctrines with such a class. I think, for example, of the doctrine of sanctification. We are all aware of the danger of an inexperienced teacher using expressions such as “Jesus wouldn't want you to...” or “Jesus would want you to...” A Bible Class could well be used to train the teacher to guard against such unscriptural expressions by training them soundly in sanctification.

On the other hand, let us say we have a class made up primarily of members who have had little training in Biblical History. I am thinking of adult converts, for example, who had no Sunday School training, were not raised in Christian homes, but who were brought to faith, instructed in the main doctrines of Christianity, and have now become members of our church.

With such, we might also well consider a course in Biblical History, either of the Old Testament or of the New Testament, or of both as the conditions might warrant.

Another example we might well consider would be middle-aged Christians; people who perhaps have children in the confirmation class; people who have been faithful in church attendance, but have not studied their Catechisms since confirmation days. Some of these may even have been confirmed in German and never possessed an English Catechism. Now they have children in confirmation class who want their parents help at home. With such a group, we might well use the Catechism as the basis for our instructions, thereby reacquainting them with the basic truths they themselves learned many years ago, and at the same time enabling them to better aid their own children in their confirmation work.

One area that we have not yet touched upon in this regard is the material we might use to refute false doctrines. Certainly the Bible does this by simply setting forth God's truth. Yet we think of present day trends in Christendom and the wide acceptance of the indifferent teachings of the ecumenical churches, and we realize that materials dealing with these specific aberrations of the truth will be most effective. Paul reminds us in II Timothy, 3,16 that the Scriptures are to be used for the purpose of correcting and reproofing the erring by setting forth the truth. So we will want to set forth the truth, yet also point out the error that must be guarded against in connection with that doctrine. Here I think specifically of some of the materials our own Synod has published. Foremost along that line is the booklet, "This We Believe". In a brief simple way, this booklet sets forth the true doctrines of the Word and at the same time points out the errors refuted by these doctrines. As materials such as these are used, we must be on guard, however, to make sure our people understand the positive side of our teachings. We want them to know and realize that we stand for something and are concerned about the truth of God's Word because our eternal welfare depends on that truth. We want them to see the dangers inherent in the false teachings and practices which the truth points out and condemns. Let us make sure our people are clear on this so they are able to give an account of their faith, rather than being able to say only, "our church doesn't approve of this or that." A Bible Class is an excellent place to acquaint our people with materials that deal with these topics and also a place for discussion of the practices of our church and the reason for these practices. "This We Believe" and other similar publications can serve as a guide for conducting a Bible Class of this nature.

We might mention conditions under which various other materials could well be used. Yet, as the pastor surveys the Bible Class he will have, he will use the materials that will best meet the needs of that group. He will always be mindful of Paul's command to Timothy, II Timothy 4, 1-2:

I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; 2, preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.

"Preach the Word" is Paul's command to us. Our faith in our Lord, Jesus Christ, stands upon that Word. It is through that Word that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts. It is for this reason that we establish Bible Classes and encourage our members to attend the Bible Class, thereby presenting to them another opportunity for strengthening their faith in their Savior.