

12-1-1937

The Pastor a Bible Student

W. Arndt

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Recommended Citation

Arndt, W. (1937) "The Pastor a Bible Student," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 8 , Article 95.
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol8/iss1/95>

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Concordia Theological Monthly

Vol. VIII

DECEMBER, 1937

No. 12

The Pastor As Bible Student

In the 1937 series of articles of the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY which are intended to view the pastor in the practical ministry, we have come to the final one, taking us to the minister's study and throwing out some hints pertaining to his occupation with the ultimate source of his thinking and preaching as an ambassador of Jesus Christ, the Holy Scriptures.

To make an attempt in this journal or anywhere else to create enthusiasm in ministers for a study of the Holy Scriptures would seem to be about as superfluous as urging a professional concert pianist to keep in practise by frequently playing approved exercises, or a surgeon to continue performing and witnessing operations. Is there a minister who is not convinced that faithful, regular study of the Bible is a necessity for him? Still, human weakness being what it is and hindrances of thorough, consistent Bible-study by the pastor increasing with alarming rapidity, a few words on this subject, introductory to a discussion of methods of Bible-study for a pastor, will not be ruled out of order. Whoever enters the Lutheran ministry is given, and accepts, the solemn charge to preach the teachings of the Scriptures to his congregation. It is evident that he cannot know the contents of this book too well. To him applies what Jesus says, "Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old," Matt. 13, 52. He is to feed the sheep and to feed the lambs; is it, then, not important for him to be well acquainted with the hillsides where they are to browse? And since in all likelihood he will be with his congregation not merely one month or one year but a number of years, in which the Sundays will come with the same regularity as other days, every one demanding a message from that Book; and since, in addition, there will be a liberal sprinkling of special services with their call for addresses based

on texts from the same Book, a thorough acquaintance with it, in order not to become guilty of intolerable repetitions, is simply indispensable. Furthermore, the members of his congregation expect their pastor to be able to answer from the Bible such moral and spiritual questions as agitate their hearts and consciences. They do not demand that he know the mathematical formulae on which Einstein's theory of relativity is based or the latest discoveries in chemistry, but they do expect him to be fairly well acquainted with the Bible. As a Bible-teacher they have called him. How can he refuse to immerse himself more and more in it? But all this, serious and important as it is, has not yet touched the real heart of the matter. A minister, it has been well said, is to speak as a dying man to dying men. For his congregation he has a message of everlasting life, taken from God's holy Word. How sweet that Word must be to his hearers, every one of them a poor and condemned sinner, bringing to them the news of redemption through the blood of Christ! Is it to be less sweet to him, the speaker? Is he to be saved in a different way from his audience? Does he not need the fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins? In one of the most touching sentences of the Bible, Paul says: "The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me," Gal. 2, 20. His message was not merely one of help which others had experienced or might obtain, but one which spoke of his own rescue and hence reflected his own joy and gratitude. To the minister also the Word of God is a means of grace. The precious Gospel, in which Christ comes to him with His grace and His many gifts, must be to him, too, "more to be desired than gold; yea, than much fine gold, sweeter than honey and the honeycomb." Urging the members of his congregation that they read the Scriptures daily, he cannot afford to consider himself exempt. As Dr. Pieper repeatedly related, Dr. Walther used to say to his friends that, if he at any time was compelled for several days to forego reading the Holy Scriptures, he felt that his spiritual life was suffering and some strength was ebbing away. And what hypocrisy if the minister in solemn words informs his church frequently that Bible-study is the duty of every Christian and he himself fails to engage in it! It certainly is likely that there we have a case where a person preaches to others and himself becomes a cast-away (cf. 1 Cor. 9, 27).

Now, having thus reminded ourselves that we are here not indulging in an idle exercise, discussing inconsequential probabilities and possibilities, we are ready to consider methods of Bible-study which a minister should or might follow. We can hardly get a better start than if we hear what Luther has to say on the question

how one can most profitably engage in a study of the Holy Scriptures. In 1518 he wrote a letter to Georg Spalatin which treats this topic: "My dear Spalatin: You have in the past asked things of me in 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 anybody 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 proceed in my Bible-study, I shall not withhold anything 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 (*magister*) 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 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 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 of a disciple of Origen, that is, an allegorist."¹) There are three counsels given in this little excerpt, first, to despair of our ability to understand the Scriptures and hence to begin our study with devout prayer for assistance from above; secondly, to read the Bible from beginning to end, taking the books in the sequence given in the sacred volume, with the purpose of first of all to grasp the historical facts presented; and, thirdly, to use good commentaries. It would be difficult to improve on this advice.

One cannot stress enough that the Bible must be read with the persistent humble prayer in our hearts for understanding from above. Where that is done, good results will follow, let the methods employed be ever so inadequate and faulty. Such prayers are

1) St. L., X, 218 ff.; De Wette, I, 88.

worth more than big car-loads of astounding erudition. Whoever prays to God for light approaches the Scriptures in the right frame of mind, coming as a child to the Father and listening gladly and eagerly to what our great God has to say. In a fascinating, though not throughout satisfactory, brochure, *Vom Auslegen des Neuen Testaments*, Ernst von Dobschuetz, the well-known, recently deceased New Testament scholar, says quite aptly: "Man kann jetzt von kritischen Theologen die Forderung hoeren, dass alle Schriftauslegung erbaulich sein muesse. Und es liegt ein Wahrheitsmoment darin, wenn man es recht versteht. Es ist der Stoff, der den Geist der Auslegung bestimmen muss. Wie ein Abstinient schwerlich der rechte Ausleger fuer die Lieder eines Anakreon oder der Sappho sein wird, so kann ein Mensch, der nicht gewisse Voraussetzungen mitbringt, sagen wir kurz, der nicht innerlich fromm ist, mag er noch so gelehrt sein, das Neue Testament nicht ganz verstehen, nicht kongenial interpretieren."²⁾ But more important than this consideration touching the required receptivity in the reader is the one which Jesus points to, saying, "If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him!" Luke 11, 13. The pastor who beseeches God to give him heavenly wisdom and understanding as he reads his Bible will not pray in vain. The veil will be torn aside for him, and he will be afforded intimate glimpses of the divine mysteries which the unbelieving scholar in spite of his use of the most approved optical instruments fails to obtain. So let us get down on our knees, my brethren! That is the only way of ascending the ladder of the divine Scriptures. "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given unto him," Jas. 1, 5.

That the pastor should assiduously read the Bible to acquaint himself ever better with the sacred history, taking the various books somewhat in the sequence which our editions present, will not be disputed. Here one naturally thinks of the vernacular, be it German or English, or some other tongue. What I have in mind is well illustrated by a few words of the sainted Dr. Wm. Sihler of Fort Wayne, written late in life in his autobiography, describing how he studied the Holy Scriptures after he had found his Savior: "Nun trieb mich aber der Geist Gottes maechtig in die Heilige Schrift, die ich mit heisser Begierde verschlang und von jetzt an unablaessig las und forschte und betrachtete und nicht muede wurde, sooft mein Amt und Beruf mir Zeit liess, mit ihr umzugehen. Da

2) *Drei Reden*, gehalten von Dr. Ernst von Dobschuetz, Halle. Goettingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1927.

kam ich nun aus einer Klarheit in die andere; auch hier zerrissen die Schleier, und die Schuppen fielen von meinen Augen. . . . Aber nicht bloss daheim las ich fleissig in der Bibel, deren goettliche woertliche Eingebung von A bis Z mir gewisser war als Himmel und Erde, sondern in meinen einsamen Fusswanderungen und auf meinen Ferienreisen war sie mein stetiger Begleiter, und all die vielen Sprueche, die ich weiss zugleich mit dem Orte, darin sie stehen, und die mir auch jetzt noch wie angenagelt im Gedaechnis sitzen, sind mir von da her zuerst im Herzen, also inwendig, recht lebendig geworden, ehe sie sich von da aus ins Gedaechnis ueberpflanzen, so dass ich sie denn ohne besondere Muehe und Anstrengung auswendig wusste. Ja, ganze Kapitel, z. B. 1 Kor. 13, behielt ich mit der grossten Leichtigkeit; kurz, ich lebte im Worte Gottes, und dasselbe lebte in mir."³⁾ There are so many historical facts given in the Scriptures, so many names of persons and places, that in all likelihood no one of us could ever retain them all in his memory. Most people, I trust, will forgive the minister if he does not at once recall the names of Moses' parents, Amram and Jochebed, Ex. 6, 20. But he should have some knowledge of characters like Ichabod and Ahithophel, Aristarchus and Demas, and of geographical terms like Heshbon and Bashan, Iconium and Melita, because they are not unimportant in the sacred narrative.

In addition to such reading of the Scriptures in the vernacular there must be cultivated, if at all possible, a more thorough searching for the full meaning of the Scriptures through the study of the Word in the original tongues. The golden words of Professor Kaehler of Halle, written for students of theology many years ago, are as true today as when they were first penned: "Zuletzt die Hauptsache fuer Sie und fuer jeden Theologen. Eine ernste Arbeit koennen Sie heute beginnen, und Sie sollen dann mit eben derselben fortfahren, bis Sie so oder so aufhoeren, ein Theolog zu sein. Eine Arbeit sollen Sie heute oder morgen noch angreifen, die keine blossе Vorarbeit mehr zu sein braucht, die Sie mitten hineinfuehrt in das Heiligtum aller Theologie, wenn Sie vielleicht auch nicht alsbald innerwerden, wo Sie stehen. Das ist die ununterbrochene Lesung der Heiligen Schrift in den Ursprachen, regelmaessig nebeneinander fort das Alte and das Neue Testament."⁴⁾ That we who believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures cannot become indifferent toward a study of the Bible in the original tongues

3) *Lebenslauf von W. Sihler*, auf mehrfaches Begehren von ihm selbst beschrieben. St. Louis, Mo., 1879, I, pp. 83. 87.

4) *Wie studiert man Theologie im ersten Semester? Briefe an einen Anfaenger von Dr. Martin Kaehler*, weiland Professor in Halle, 4. durchgesehene Auflage, besorgt von Dr. Paul Althaus, Erlangen, Leipzig, 1929. P. 16.

does not require a long demonstration. As is universally recognized, versions, even when they are very good, cannot fully take the place of the original. Professor Goodspeed's remark in the brief preface to his so-called *American Translation of the New Testament* may be quoted here: "It has been truly said that any translation of a masterpiece must be a failure." The thought is elaborated by Professor Moffatt, beginning the preface to his version of the New Testament thus: "In his essay on Protestantism, de Quincey has a characteristic paragraph upon the popular delusion that 'every idea and word which exists, or has existed, for any nation, ancient or modern, must have a direct, unchangeable equivalent in all other languages.' No one who attempts to translate any part of the New Testament is likely to remain very long under such a delusion. Thus there is no exact English equivalent for terms like *λόγος* and *μυστήριον* and *δικαιοσύνη*." It simply cannot be gainsaid that to understand a certain author fully we must read him in his own language. Luther's powerful argumentation of 1524 has often been referred to in discussions of this kind: "Denn das koennen wir nicht leugnen, dass, wiewohl das Evangelium allein durch den Heiligen Geist ist gekommen und taeglich kommt, so ist es doch durch Mittel der Sprachen gekommen und hat auch dadurch zugenommen, muss auch dadurch behalten werden. . . . So lieb uns das Evangelium ist, so hart lasst uns ueber den Sprachen halten." ⁵⁾ An anecdote pertaining to Tennyson deserves being given wide currency. Though he had not studied theology, he with eagerness read the Bible and books pertaining to the Bible, and like Coleridge before him, he learned Hebrew, wishing to understand better the spirit of the Old Testament, especially of the Book of Job. When he had come upon a sentence in that book which was obscure to him, he asked Jowett, the renowned translator of Plato, professor of Greek at Oxford, and an Anglican clergyman, to give him a rendering of those words; and when Jowett answered that he did not know Hebrew, Tennyson exclaimed in great surprise, "What! You a priest of a religion and not able to read your own sacred books!" ⁶⁾ It was a rebuke which was not undeserved.

To study the Bible successfully in the original tongues, one naturally has to have certain philological aids. Our generation is far better equipped in this respect than any that preceded it. It is

5) From Luther's essay *An die Ratsherren aller Staedte Deutschlands, dass sie christliche Schulen aufrichten und erhalten sollen*. St. L., X, 461 f.

6) Cf. *The Spiritual Message of Modern English Poetry*. By Arthur S. Hoyt, New York, 1924. P. 73.

impossible, nor would it serve much of a purpose, to list many books here. However, to help one or the other brother who is intending to increase his library in this direction, I shall mention a few titles. For the Old Testament the new editions of the famous *Gesenius-Kautsch Hebrew Grammar* (a smaller edition of which, prepared by Kautsch, is available) and of the *Gesenius-Buhl Hebrew Lexicon* are universally recommended. Those that would like to use smaller works might have recourse to the *Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon* of E. Koenig and a grammar like that of Harper or Green, both American productions, or of Saubertzweig Schmidt or Baltzer if German texts are desired. The commentary of Keil and Delitzsch for the Old Testament, though now about fifty years have passed since the appearance of its last volume, still stands as an unrivaled production, a noble monument of consecrated industry and learning in spite of some regrettable blemishes. In the sphere of archeology the work by Barton⁷⁾, having reference to both the Old and the New Testament, should be mentioned. For the New Testament the number of works which will help the pastor to understand the sacred text better is truly legion; the finding of innumerable Greek papyri in recent times, so interestingly described by Cobern,⁸⁾ has practically revolutionized the whole study of New Testament Greek. The grammar of Blass in its new edition by Debrunner, or the comprehensive and the small grammars of A. T. Robertson, will excellently guide the student as he seeks to understand the language of the apostles and evangelists. The *Wilke-Grimm Lexicon of the New Testament*, in its English edition prepared by Thayer, on account of its sensible, helpful way of quoting commentaries and other works, has not yet been entirely superseded even though the dates of its two editions are 1886 and 1889. Whoever can afford it should endeavor to own beside Thayer's work the Greek lexicon (German) by E. Preuschen, gotten out in new editions by W. Bauer, usually referred to as Preuschen-Bauer, which has been brought up to date and hence lists the results of the latest papyri studies. When Kittel's *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament* is complete, it will be a colossal achievement, too extensive to be called a mere dictionary, combining rather the features of a lexicon with some to be looked for in commentaries. If any reader of these lines should not yet have read Robertson's little book *The Minister and His Greek New*

7) *Archeology and the Bible*, Philadelphia, 1933.

8) *The New Archeological Discoveries and Their Bearing upon the New Testament and upon the Life and Times of the Primitive Church*. By Camden N. Cobern, New York, 1917, since which year a number of new editions have appeared.

Testament, he should not lose any time in buying or borrowing it. Few people lay it aside without having an enthusiasm for the study of the New Testament in Greek either revived in them or kindled for the first time. That Deissmann's book *Licht vom Osten* (*Light from the Ancient East*, to give the title of the English version), a discussion of recent discoveries that throw light on the understanding of the New Testament, is a masterpiece both in its contents and its method of presentation, will be acknowledged by all who have used it. With respect to commentaries for the New Testament the series of Meyer, as revised by Weiss and other scholars, represents in my opinion still the best scientific endeavor in this field. The *International Critical Commentary*, treating both Testaments, and the *Expositor's Greek New Testament* (in five volumes) are valuable, scholarly series. All these works are not reliable doctrinally. Produced in our own circle, the beautiful commentaries of Dr. Stoeckhardt, as yet not translated into English, combine deep learning and unusual insight into the meaning of the sacred text with a warm, kindling fervor for the sacred truth. This excursion into bibliography leaves entirely untouched such important areas of Bible-study and helps as are indicated by the terms concordance, Septuagint, introduction to the books of the Bible (Isagogics), textual criticism, and new translations. The nature of this article forbids any further expatiating on this particular point.

In his Bible-study the pastor should be systematic and regular. Setting aside a special time of the day for this work is very desirable, because without it inertia and sluggishness, the natural enemies of all of us, are likely to gain an easy victory and precious hours will not be utilized to the best advantage. Many ministers dedicate a choice period of the morning, when the mind is fresh and alert, to this endeavor. And not only are movements in our mental chamber at that time still unobstructed by the numerous cobwebs which, owing to strenuous exertion, worry, and disappointments, hardly ever fail to establish themselves there in the course of the day, but through Bible-study the soul is given the nourishment it requires not to falter when, as the hours go on, toils, debates, scenes of wretchedness and misery, and the harrowing experiences at the bedside of sick and dying people are threatening to crush it. If a pastor is so busy that he has time for the scrutiny of merely one or two verses in the original, let him use those few minutes regularly; the reward will come.

Besides the fixing of regular hours one should adopt a definite system or method of work, avoiding the habit of mere desultory, aimless reading. "Desultory reading, except as conscious pastime, hebetates the brain and slackens the bowstring of will," says

Lowell.⁹⁾ Let a certain portion of the time fixed be given over to the reading of the Bible in the vernacular, another portion to the study of the Hebrew Bible, and a third to the perusal of the Greek New Testament. Some may find this tripartite division disadvantageous and prefer to give alternate weeks or months to the Hebrew and the Greek. Whatever plan is resolved on, let it be adhered to as faithfully as possible.

One counsel which must not be omitted here and which should be urged with vigor is that the pastor make diligent use of his pen as he studies the sacred text. It is not necessary that he copy into note-books what the commentaries on his own shelves offer, but he might well jot down pertinent thoughts and note grammatical and other linguistic points which the commentaries do not contain. If this is done consistently for a number of years, there will accumulate a vast amount of valuable notes, which will prove an excellent aid when sermons and addresses or conference papers are to be prepared. I should like to encourage every minister now and then to write an exposition of a Biblical book without recourse to commentaries, using merely the lexica and the grammars; he will find to his pleasant surprise that he is not so helpless and so devoid of exegetical insight as he himself had imagined.

Finally, as has been hinted above, not the method of Bible-study is the important thing, but Bible-study itself, undertaken in a devout, prayerful spirit. Everybody has to find that method which suits his circumstances and individuality. But let there be no trifling; the welfare of the Church largely depends on faithful reading of the Scriptures carried on by its ministers and teachers. "To the Law and to the Testimony! If they speak not according to this Word, it is because there is no light in them." Is. 8, 20.

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9) This is taken from Lowell's essay *Books and Libraries*, which, usually assigned to schoolboys for reading, deserves being perused by them again when fleeting *invida aetas* has taught them many stern lessons and made them more appreciative of true wisdom. I cannot forbear quoting another sentence or two, aimed at all (and who of us is not guilty?) that waste valuable hours over their newspapers: "Instead of communing with the choice thoughts of choice spirits and unconsciously acquiring the grand manner of that supreme society, we diligently inform ourselves, and cover the continent with a cobweb of telegraphs to inform us, of such inspiring facts as that a horse belonging to Mr. Smith ran away on Wednesday, seriously damaging a valuable carryall; that a son of Mr. Brown swallowed a hickory-nut on Thursday; and that a gravel bank caved in and buried Mr. Robinson alive on Friday. Alas, it is we ourselves that are getting buried alive under this avalanche of earthy impertinences!"