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Why Emphasize a Bible Study Program Now?

By **ARTHUR C. REPP**

There is little point in belaboring the question whether the Church needs to further the study of the Bible. It has needed such study in every age, and the present is no exception. Whether the Church of today should emphasize such a study in a Synod-wide effort, giving it precedence over other important endeavors, is another question and may be open to debate. Right now when we are interested in opening missions in new outposts, when we are getting our congregations conscious of their own opportunities with an "Each One Reach One" emphasis, when the present problems of finances and stewardship for the most part still remain unsolved, when the radio is opening "effectual" doors in foreign fields, one may well ask why we should place great emphasis on a Bible study program. After all, our Christians still have the Sunday sermon. They have a growing educational program for their children. Our literature is reaching more homes today than ever before. Isn't all this sufficiently adequate for our present needs? Just how badly are we in need of a program of adult education centered in an intensive study of the Bible?

Conversely, if there is really a need for a Bible study program, then a concerted effort will go a far way in solving our problems in missions, stewardship, quietism, and the many other questions which are vexing us. What is the situation confronting the Church? It might be well to give consideration to some of the factors facing it and thus arrive at an

adequate answer for our own circumstances. Some of these factors may be valid in one parish but not in another. But all of them are valid in a study of the Church as a whole and are presented to show the urgency of the need.

We need a Bible study program in our Church because *this is an adult world*. There is nothing startling in this statement. Of course this is an adult world. Adults run our government, conduct our industries, practice our professions, wrestle with our labor problems, and run our farms. Nor is that all. They are also establishing our Christian homes, running our congregations, teaching in our Sunday schools, leading in our stewardship endeavors, participating in the work of Synod, and taking their place as Christians in the community. Adults govern the Church, and every major movement has been begun by them from Pentecost down to the present. Because adults are running our congregations, it is most necessary that they are guided by principles of Scripture formulated with a mature, adult viewpoint. Adults today need answers to problems never dreamed of in their youth. They need the opportunity to discuss on the basis of the Word these questions facing them.

Furthermore, these same adults are affecting the Christian attitude of the children, creating or shaping their prejudices, developing or destroying their interests and ideals, and usually far more effectively than the religious educator is able to do in the school and from the pulpit. Every pastor has been faced with the problem of seeing his work with the children come to naught because some adults in a particular home were a greater influence for evil than he could counteract in his instruction or in his preaching. The adults so often hold the deciding influence because it is their world.

This fact is of particular importance when we take a look at the home. Scattered studies have presented some startling evidence to the effect that an alarming number of young married adults in our congregations are not reading their Bibles in private study, are not setting up Christian altars, and are not attending the Bible class. At the very time when they are establishing new homes and rearing families, little emphasis is being given to the edification by the Word. Thus practically the entire strain is placed on their past Christian education and the Sunday sermon to carry them through this important

period of home building. Later, as their children reach school age and come more directly under the Church's influence, teachers are faced with the enormous task of building where parents neglected to build, and what is far worse, they must tear down wrong habits, attitudes, ideals, and prejudices of all sorts before they can replace them with a Christian way of thinking. In view of this it is not strange that we are not receiving the benefit of our educational program that we might expect. There is little gained in blaming the home for all this until we have carefully re-examined the Church's program of education and, more particularly, have set up a vital study program for adults.

We need a Bible study program because of *the increased contacts of our Christian adults with the world*. The islands of Lutheranism have long been destroyed. The youth and the adult members are rubbing shoulders with the world in their business, in their shops, social contacts, and their schools, coming in contact with other men and women who are challenging ideals set up in childhood and attacking them on an adult level. When we add to this the influence which the movies are exerting through their subtle standards of expediency and opportunism, the problem is increased. In fact, the adult does not have to leave his home for these attacks. They come directly to him in the daily paper, the radio, the books, and the magazines. Practically every secular magazine brings a monthly "Yea, hath God said?" to some Christian ideal. Our standards in business, in politics, in home life, in sex, in education, yes, our entire philosophy of life, are constantly bombarded by the world with an impact heretofore unknown.

But this same rubbing with the world at large opens a wide door to new opportunities. Christian adults, stable in their beliefs, ready with an answer, clear cut in their thinking, can be an influence for untold good in behalf of Christ and a groping generation. More widely than ever before can Christians scatter their salt and beam their light pointing out the Way of Life.

We need a Bible study program because *ours is a shrinking world*. While we have increased our contacts with the world around us, the world has grown much smaller. The increase in world communications, the giant strides in transportation,

the complicated interplay of world problems, have increased the obligations as well as the opportunities of the individual Christian adult as never before. The *world* is now his community. The adult needs a Christian viewpoint in working out the many complex problems about him. The Christian citizen casting his ballot or writing to his congressman cannot limit himself in his outlook to Madison County or to his State, or even to the nation. He is bound to the rest of the world whether he likes it or not. As a member of his Church he is faced with world missions. World relief brings the neighbor to his very door. I am "my brother's keeper" in a way not even dreamed of only a few decades ago. We no longer sum up our foreign mission programs with "China, India, and South America." We have added a whole string of nations as outposts for Christ. Carrying out this world task, we are using the very forces which caused the world to shrink. All this means an adult program with a world vision, a Bible study program which puts a richer meaning into the obligation and opportunities of a shrinking world. Has the Church caught it? Read Secretary J. E. Herrmann's "Shrinking Horizons?" in the *Lutheran Witness* of October 19, 1948, for his answer.

We need a Bible study program for adults because *many things can't be taught effectively until adulthood*. We have not always followed this principle, which should be obvious to everyone. If our practice is a criterion of our real principle, we have assumed that childhood is the golden opportunity for learning, and everything which our imagination can conjure up must be taught at this time to meet all future needs. With this "last chance" attitude we have stuffed the minds of the children as we stuff a suitcase in preparation for a long journey. As a matter of fact, childhood is not the best time to teach many of the things which adults need. They simply lack the necessary concepts, the experience, the maturity, and hence the interest for such problems. For example, children cannot be expected to prepare for the real responsibility of parenthood while they themselves are still children. Adults face these problems, and they are conscious of the need. They are the ones who can accept the solutions and apply them. The same is true of many other problems which adults face. The question of labor and capital is meaningless to a child. Christian citizenship at the child level is vague, and not until

they meet these problems in adulthood are they ready to think about them.

Even if childhood were the best time to learn about adult problems, the rapid change in our civilization and in our church life makes it impossible to anticipate what might be expected. The world faces problems today which our forefathers never had to meet. The time to meet the problems of the future is in most instances the future.

If we agree that childhood is not the best time to teach many of the problems of maturity, how are we facing this fact in an adult program of education? It is even fair to ask, What are we actually doing for the youth when they are meeting new problems under new circumstances? A few glances at our statistics tell a sad story. In the last four years we have confirmed a little over 112,000 children, or approximately 28,000 per year. On the other hand, we have only slightly more than 24,000 persons enrolled in all our junior Bible classes plus those which might be found in the so-called combined groups, which include the older youth and adults. This means that we have less than the equivalent of one confirmation class in the four-year span of the junior Bible class. Granted that some of these adolescents receive additional education in the young people's organizations and perhaps a limited number in the teacher-training classes, we do realize that the bulk of our children of high school age are outside the influence of any formal type of education besides that of the Sunday service.

When we take a glance at the adult Bible classes, the condition is even more appalling. The latest report tells us that there are 24,777 persons in our adult Bible classes in addition to those which might be found in the combined classes, in which there is an enrollment of 21,000. Now, here again we realize that education takes place in the Church outside the Bible class. So there are 38,317 Sunday school teachers, including the pastors and the day school teachers. These receive additional training in the meeting. But we must remember that these meetings are not conducted with great frequency. Only 400 Sunday schools have weekly meetings; most of them meet biweekly (1,130). As many as 625 have monthly meetings, and almost 200 meet only once every two or three months. We are also aware of the fact that there

are 848 teacher-training classes for these teachers. True enough, education also takes place in the Walther League, the voters' assembly, the men's clubs, and the women's league, the parent-teacher meetings. In spite of all this the fact remains that the vast bulk of our adult membership relies entirely upon the Sunday service for its needs in a changing world.

We need a Bible study program because of *our rapid increase in the number of adult confirmations*. We are grateful to God when we hear how He has awakened our Church to the need of personal mission work and how this has manifested itself in the increase in the number of adult members. Whereas 4,806 persons were received through adult membership instruction in 1925, this figure rose to 23,555 by 1947. If we include the number of adults gained by profession of faith in 1946 and 1947, the emphasis in our mission work has brought in a harvest of over 104,500 adults in the last five years. With the continued blessings of our God we may hope to increase this number as our vision of the opportunities at our very door becomes clearer.

But this very blessing which God has cast before us brings with it a corresponding obligation. These new members for the most part are still novices in Christian understanding. They have been instructed anywhere from ten to thirty hours. There are still many problems unsolved. They must receive a deeper understanding of God's wondrous revelation. A good majority of them are filled with eagerness for this knowledge, and in their zeal they are anxious to participate in the program of the Church. They want to do what good Lutherans do. But when they find that good Lutherans do not go to Bible class, they soon learn to accept this amazingly low standard. As already indicated, the total number of adults in our Bible classes is only 24,777 in addition to those that might be found in the midweek classes which are conducted for all ages. This is equivalent to approximately twenty-five per cent of the total number of persons which have joined us in the last five years. Obviously we are falling down in our obligations to the novice.

It is because we are failing to win our newly won adults for Bible classes and depending almost entirely on the morning service to supplement the meager confirmation instruction

that many are wondering if we are soon facing a real danger of diluting our doctrinal stability. At present ten per cent of the total communicant membership of our Synod consists of such newly confirmed members. We may well repeat what we have written at another occasion: "Mission work is the command of the Lord, but unless it is safeguarded with a broad and thorough plan of education, it can well dig the grave of the Church. History gives us ample evidence to underscore this disconcerting fact."

We need a Bible study program because *ours is a congregational form of church life*. We know and believe that Christianity is a personal thing. Each individual must be a believer. We also believe that each individual is to partake of the work in the congregation and live a Christ-centered life in the home and community. We have placed particular emphasis, at least in theory, upon the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Nevertheless a realistic view of our congregations reveals that for the most part it is run by the ministry. Our laity is quietistic. We have failed to tap the great resources within our membership. True, there is a gradual awakening, and many of us are happy to see it, but an activated laity must also be an informed laity. In order to put into practice the principle of the priesthood of believers, it is vital that our lay membership is well grounded in doctrine and Christian principles and able to apply them with the help of a truly Christ-directed program. The Church that does not want to use its laity and places its emphasis on a hierarchy has little interest in a Bible study program. For the Lutheran Church, with its congregational form of government, this is an absolute necessity.

We need a Bible study program because *religious education is a continuous process*. There is no date line for Christian education. We cannot decide whether people are to have an education or not because education simply keeps on going. "We cannot choose whether or not we shall conduct education in the church, we can only choose what kind we shall have. We may set up special arrangements and call them a 'school,' but education goes on whether or not we have any 'school.' . . . A minister is *practicing* religious education and so is his church, day and night, in season and out. One may fail to accord with certain theories, or content, or methods—well

and good if he can sustain his case. But no church ever does away with education. In the nature of things we cannot. We only substitute some other kind." *

But this education must be Bible-centered. The church does not have a choice in this respect either. Paul prayed to God in behalf of the Colossian Christians that they "might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" and that they "might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." Paul also reminded the Ephesian Christians that God had given the Church pastors and teachers "for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ." In fact, one can hardly read the Epistles without feeling the responsibility and hearing the mandate that God's children are to pursue the study of the Word. There simply is no choice, for where there is no growth, there the decay of death sets in.

Once we are convinced that the times are urgent, the letter of the Centennial Bible Study Resolution for a Synod-wide Bible study program will be transformed into action. We will then apply the exhortation to our day: "Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord, your God, and observe to do all the words of this Law."

* Sherrill and Purcell, *Adult Education in the Church*, p. 96.