



## Bible Study in the Congregation

NANCY KOESTER

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Unlike the merits of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the worth of Bible study in the congregation is not self-evident. In one denomination, a modest 20.7 percent of laity rated “studying the Bible with other Christians” as “very important.”<sup>1</sup> Compare this with a vigorous 67 percent for whom participating in holy communion was “very important.” No doubt there are many reasons for the disparity, not least among them pragmatic. Participating in holy communion typically requires no extra time above and beyond attending the worship service. Bible study, however, does take time. People will invest that time only if they think something important might result from studying the Bible together.

### I. WHY STUDY THE BIBLE?

Over the past twelve years, writing Bible studies has brought me into contact with those persistent folk who do think that studying the Bible with other Christians is “very important.” Among the rewards they reap are intellectual challenge, friendship, and a sense of belonging that comes with church involvement. Yet none of these benefits can really explain why people study the Bible together. After all, support groups and bowling leagues can offer intimacy and camaraderie; university extension classes can provide intellectual stimulation. Nor does the desire for church involvement explain the practice of Bible study in the congregation. Many churches offer such an array of program options and committee meet-

<sup>1</sup>See the sidebar “How important is...” in *The Lutheran* 6 (February 1993) 32.

ings that people have more reasons *not* to engage in group Bible study than to do so; it may be that nothing has been so detrimental to Bible study in the congregation as the church committee meeting. The wonder is that up to thirty-four percent of church members in mainline denominations say that they devote time to Bible study.<sup>2</sup> A significant minority are willing to expend the time and energy it takes to listen to Scripture, to grapple with it, draw strength from it, and even be changed by it. They do this because they want to hear God speak through the word.

Based on their long experience with professionally prepared Bible studies, people in congregations around the country do freely give their advice and comments to writers and editors of Bible studies and indeed to anyone who will listen. Most people who engage in group Bible study do not want consciousness-raising sessions which use a few carefully selected Bible verses to support some politically correct agenda. Nor do they want sensitivity training in which they are solemnly asked: “When have *you* felt most like Job?” Even less do they want to engage in

redaction, demythologization, or deconstruction, if such exercises serve no higher purpose than keeping up with scholarly trends. To be sure, Bible studies often spark discussion (and sometimes action) on social issues. Bible studies can provide a place for sharing personal experiences and for group prayer. And Bible studies often employ the methods and insights of biblical scholarship. All these things can enhance a Bible study but they are not indispensable. Most people who study the Scriptures in groups do so because they are interested in the Bible *for its own sake*, not as a means to some other end.

Robin Maas, faculty member of Wesley Theological Seminary, asks, “Does the power to convert, to change, to transform wasted lives reside in what the church calls the Word of God and can this power be appropriated through a sustained and disciplined encounter with biblical texts?”<sup>2</sup> If the answer to Maas’ question is yes, then congregational Bible study is a matter of great importance. Not just one among many optional activities that the church offers, group Bible study is vital to living and active faith and witness.

Those who study the Bible in groups tend to be among the most faithful church members, yet group study offers them something that sermons and lectionary texts usually do not. Years of faithful church attendance will not expose people to the whole Bible, and the worship service affords no opportunity for active exploration of texts by anyone but the pastor. Solitary Bible reading is important but it provides no means for discussing difficult questions raised by texts, nor does it invite people to call upon a pastor’s knowledge and guidance. Philip Jacob Spener made these observations long ago and they still hold true.

Believing that “the Word of God must be the chief means for reforming something” and that “the Word of God remains the seed from which all that is good in us must grow,” Spener called for “*a more extensive use of the Word of God*”

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<sup>2</sup>Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Elkin, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990) 11.

<sup>3</sup>Robin Maas, *Church Bible Study Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982) 159.

*among us.*”<sup>4</sup> Toward that end he devised a method which is the direct ancestor of congregational group Bible studies today. He suggested that small groups of people read portions of Scripture together to discover the “meaning and usefulness” of each passage. Such group study, Spener knew, must be more flexible and open than a sermon or lecture. Therefore he encouraged people to express their doubts and ask for further explanation, while those who had made “more progress” could freely state how they understood each passage. The text and the resulting group discussion would be considered “insofar as it accords with the sense of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures,” and then applied by the pastor to the edification of all present. Spener gave pastors special responsibility for guiding the discussion and even offered some seventeenth-century advice on group dynamics: leaders should “tactfully cut off” meddlesomeness, quarrelsomeness, and self-seeking.<sup>5</sup> (Fortunately Spener had no leader’s guide admonishing him to “affirm” each and every remark.)

Spener hoped that this “more extensive use of the Word of God among us” would build confidence between pastors and laity. Preachers would learn to know the concerns of their own congregations, especially in matters of doctrine and piety. People would have a chance to get questions answered or at least addressed. Members of the congregation would be better prepared

to live the Christian life and to teach others, particularly their own children. But Spener claimed even more: “If we succeed in getting the people to seek eagerly and diligently in the book of life for their joy, their spiritual life will be wonderfully strengthened and they will become altogether different people.”<sup>6</sup>

Spener’s call for more extensive use of the word, written in 1675, seems far removed from us, particularly because of the rise of modern exegetical methods. Yet Spener too wanted texts to be interpreted with care and read with the broader biblical and theological context in mind. More important, the desire to hear God speak through the Scriptures persists today among many Christians. My experience has been that people in congregational Bible studies are willing and eager to use methods and insights of biblical scholarship; indeed one important objective of a well-prepared bible study is to make biblical scholarship accessible to non-specialists.

The problem is that commentaries, exegetical methods, and the curriculum materials that employ them often become the focus of study rather than the Scriptures. Whether it comes from a publishing house or from the laptop computer of a parish pastor, a prepared Bible study succeeds only insofar as it engages people with a biblical text. If the teaching materials become the center of attention, the group is no longer engaged in Bible study. Robin Maas is right when she says that pastors and other Christian educators can generate biblical study at the congregational level rather than simply consuming it. She declares that the “worst

<sup>4</sup>Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 87, 91.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 91.

fallacy the church has perpetrated in respect to biblical education is the notion that the laity can learn to understand the Bible only by reading books about the Bible instead of wrestling with actual biblical texts themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Bible study leaders—pastors included—have been known to scurry about in search of resource materials to help them lead Bible studies. As one who has prepared many such materials, I have no small investment in Bible study curricula. Yet the best preparation for a Bible study is to read the biblical text over several times, letting it rise slowly like yeast, allowing it to penetrate gradually like salt strewn over ice. Prepared materials are meant to supplement, not replace, reading and living with the biblical texts.

## II. THE CASE FOR WHOLE-BOOK STUDIES

The “more extensive use of the Word of God among us” that Spener called for and the persistent desire of many Christians to hear God speak through the Scriptures are best served by studies which take on an entire book of the Bible. Of the various types of Bible study—lectionary, topical, or whole-book studies—whole-book studies have the most to offer. Lectionary studies work well for pastors who meet to discuss the appointed texts with preaching in mind. Lectionary studies also have some value for people who want to cultivate a deeper appreciation for worship life and the rhythms of the church year. But lectionary studies are limited by their selectivity. The lectionary tends to filter out unpleasant, odd, and obscure texts—not to mention some of the most entertaining ones. As Spener pointed out, all the texts to which a congregation is exposed over the course of many years will still only comprise a very small part of the Scriptures which have been given us. The rest is not heard by the congregation

at all, or is heard only if some verse is quoted or alluded to in sermons, “without, however, offering any understanding of the entire context, which is nevertheless of the greatest importance.”<sup>8</sup>

A second approach to group Bible study is to choose a topic and then select verses that have some bearing upon it. Topical studies can work well in groups which have a particular task, such as calling a pastor, or a special concern, such as faith and healing, stewardship, or evangelism. But topical studies are also selective: they will play only a few notes on the biblical keyboard. Topical studies are easily used to reinforce a particular point of view, as anyone who has read the biblical sections generated by denominational task forces can testify. To be sure, there is selection involved in a whole-book study; it makes a difference whether a group decides to read Amos or Genesis, John or Ephesians. And in the course of reading and discussion, some parts will receive more attention than other parts. Nevertheless a whole book study is not as easy to stack as a topical study; it is more likely that those engaged in a whole-book study will find the Scripture working on them even as they work on Scripture.

<sup>7</sup>Maas, *Handbook*, 27.

<sup>8</sup>Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 88.

Whole-book studies by no means exclude lectionary texts or topics. Lectionary texts come up within the format of a whole-book study, but they appear in their natural context as part of a moving picture rather than as one of three framed pictures on a wall. If a group within a congregation has been studying an entire book—Luke, for instance, or Romans—the members of that group are better prepared and more eager to preach or to hear preaching on pericopes from those books. The lectionary works best and makes most sense when people have a broader acquaintance with biblical books taken whole.

Similarly, whole-book studies are not so much a rejection of topical studies as a decision to let the book itself serve up the topics. It is the difference between fishing with a lure for a particular kind of fish and fishing with a net. A net or whole-book study will yield an astonishing variety of life, including some things a group may not have thought about discussing at all.

Take for example, the book of Hebrews, which will be widely studied by many women’s groups in 1994.<sup>9</sup> Hebrews’ central message of Christ’s work on our behalf is a potent exhortation to Christian perseverance. But along with this “main catch” come angels, apostasy, heaven, homelessness, hospitality, the meaning of religious rites and rituals, dealing with inactive or lapsed church members, pilgrimage, faith, holy places, the wrath of God, and the stories of saints. Hebrews prompts several forays into the Old Testament, resting with God on the seventh day of creation, meeting the mysterious Melchizedek, or sojourning with Abraham in the land of promise. Some parts of Hebrews fairly beg to be sung as well as read, and then the hymnal becomes as important for group Bible study as the commentary or concordance. For example, the hymn “At the Lamb’s High Feast We Sing” conveys Hebrews’ message that Jesus is both priest and sacrifice (7:26-27). The symbolic language of Hebrews 6:13-20 (anchor and veil, oath and covenant) comes vividly to life in the famous hymn “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less.”

The biggest draws to the book of Hebrews are chapters eleven and twelve: the heroic sagas of faith and the cloud of witnesses surrounding Christians exhort us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. The entire book moves toward this summit. Of course,

the majestic view offered in these two chapters can be reached by car and hastily glimpsed through the windshield. But those hardy souls who have trekked through the entire book, steep grades and all, will find the view at the top much more compelling than the casual tourist ever can.

Part of the adventure of whole-book Bible study comes with entering worlds beyond our immediate experience—social and geographical worlds as well as theological and even celestial worlds. People who cannot afford a plane ticket to Hawaii in the winter time may find respite in a trip to the local conservatory (not the shopping mall, for that only offers more of same). What people see and feel in the conservatory *is* real, but it is a different slice of reality. So, too, the hope of

<sup>9</sup>Craig and Nancy Koester, “The Unshakable Kingdom: A Study of Hebrews,” forthcoming in *Lutheran Women Today* (January-December 1994).

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extending, deepening, or even transcending our normal experience is part of what draws people to study the Bible. If professional religionists such as pastors, writers, and denominational program planners try too hard to make the Bible relevant, they may lose one of the very things that makes the Bible so interesting—its unabashed and provoking otherness. To study a complete book of the Bible together in the congregation is to declare independence from the tyranny of relevance.

An article from the world of secular marketing makes the point well. According to John Sedgwick, technology should serve the people who will actually use it, not the people who design it. It is a mistake for customized newspapers to limit their coverage only to topics of direct interest to their readers. Such a strategy is not user-centered because “it overlooks one reason that most people read newspapers—for those odd bits of information that are interesting precisely because they are outside one’s experience.”<sup>10</sup> So, too, there can be quite a difference between what the users of prepared Bibles studies want and what writers, editors, and other professional church people try to give them. Bible studies that work faithfully with whole books rather than with texts pre-selected for their relevance will bring people to places they would not see otherwise. In a whole-book study there is a pretty good chance of hearing something that they never told you in church.

This past year I belonged to a Bible study group that worked its way through the Gospel of Matthew, taking one chapter per week. No special materials were used, and no advance preparation was required. The group included a computer systems analyst, a business manager, a mechanic, a homemaker, and a retired delivery truck driver. The study was led by a pastor who knew the Bible well and had a sense of adventure in exploring the Bible with people. Each person took turns reading a verse until a major chapter or segment was finished. Then we would discuss things that had caught our attention. The method was simple, but often the effect was like taking a snow globe and turning it upside down—the snow flew, and the world seemed to change.

The verses that generated the most excitement and discussion turned out to be the unfamiliar or disturbing things in Matthew’s gospel, such as the slaughter of the innocents, the dishonest steward, the threat of being cast into outer darkness, the barren fig tree, the foolish maidens who found the door to the wedding feast closed against them. These are things which

denominational agents of inclusivity would be the most tempted either to spin-doctor or discreetly ignore. But as it was the people in our group were drawn into animated conversation about what was happening in the text, why the Gospel writer said it, and whether we wanted to hear it. The group recognized Matthew as a Gospel of keen urgency, an evangel which was exclusive as well as inclusive. God's love in Christ is for all people, but not everyone gets into the kingdom. The stakes are high and time runs out. Our earnestness was sometimes relieved by comic remarks and free-wheeling digres-

<sup>10</sup>John Sedgwick, "The Complexity Problem," *The Atlantic Monthly* 271 (March 1993) 103.

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sions, prompting one of the regular members to confide that he wasn't sure we should laugh when studying the Bible; yet he thought God would not mind as long as we kept on reading. We did keep on.

Bible study in the congregation is a humble medium, simple and flexible. It is more like cloth than like wood or steel, because it bears much experimental stitching and accepts many patterns. The needle which carries the conversation back and forth between text and life is none other than the Spirit, whose sharpness does pierce, but whose product, ever new, is the garment of faith. Spener did well to call for a more extensive use of the word of God among us, and we do well to heed that call.

NANCY KOESTER is a doctoral candidate at Luther Northwestern Seminary. She has helped to prepare many Bible studies for use in congregations, working as writer, co-writer, and editor.