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The Crisis of Theological Historicism and
How It May Be Overcome

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Bible Study in the Life of the Church

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AT its 44th regular convention (1959) our church resolved "that the Synod reemphasize to its congregations the central place which the Bible has in Lutheran theology and the importance of Bible study in parish life and work." While in its theology our Synod has always emphasized the doctrine of Holy Scripture, the corresponding practice in the life of the church (as also in other ages) has left much to be desired. Bible use has not always reflected the church's teaching on Holy Scripture. It is for this reason that in every generation the church needs to ask itself: Is the church giving lay Bible study the place and the status which it deserves if the church is to have the vitality it needs for its mission?

Let us approach our subject through a series of questions.

1. *Are we putting a premium on nominal church membership?*

In a conference of Lutheran seminary professors Dr. Granger E. Westberg, Lutheran professor at the theological and medical schools of the University of Chicago, said Lutheran churches are losing the top 10 per cent of their most competent people because "nothing much goes on in our church above the confirmation age level." He might have gone on to say that the Biblical literacy of many of our adults hardly exceeds that of the 13-year-old confirmand, and largely because the standard of what the church expects of its people has been too low. The church has not al-

ways challenged its people to grow up into Christ in all things through a program of Christian adult education that gives them an adult's concept of God and of the Christian's mission in life.

Speaking to a conference of priests and nuns, a Roman Catholic layman, J. C. Willke, a Cincinnati physician, said that the Catholic layman has inherited an outmoded "clerical dependence" from the past. Catholic immigrants coming from many countries with diverse languages were poor and uneducated. It was the task of the church to offer shelter, provide a social life nucleus, and bind people close to the church. "But laymen," said Willke, "then rarely read the Bible. His was a static role in religion. He memorized his catechism, tried to do good and avoid evil, and then left religion up to the priest." As time passed, the layman sought no fuller role in religion and was given none. He remained purely a follower.

He then added this significant observation, "I feel that most priests appallingly underestimate the religious ignorance of most of their people, just as they equally underestimate their desire to learn if they are properly motivated." Laymen, he said, should learn that their true place was as "working members of Christ, co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord, in parish life," and that it was up to the clergy to ignite this potential in the laity.¹

This raises the question: Are not many Protestants and many Lutherans removed

¹ Alicia Armstrong, *Stronger Role Urged for Catholic Laymen* (Milwaukee, Wis.: The Milwaukee Journal, Aug. 23, 1961).

only by degree from this same state of affairs? Has not our Lutheran practice followed this Roman precedent rather than a Reformation precedent?

To be satisfied with a mere nominal church membership is not the New Testament ideal and need not be the accepted norm. Nominal church membership is the result of a low expectancy on the part of the church's leadership, and this evil can best be defeated with a well-motivated program of learning-for-living Bible study. Tyndale's words are still true that it is impossible to give clear convictions of the Christian faith to the layman unless the Scriptures are openly laid before him.

James D. Smart calls the church back to a new emphasis on discipleship and growth through Bible study.

The preaching of the Gospel merely brings men to the threshold of discipleship. If they are to cross the threshold to become, in the true sense, disciples, that is, learners or students, they must have a teacher. The two terms are correlative, disciple and teacher, and where there is no teacher but only a preacher, one need not expect to find disciples.²

In so far as we let the Scriptures be silenced, we are a blind church at the mercy of our own unconscious self-deceptions. . . . There is no safeguard against tragic self-betrayal for the church except an open Scripture from which Jesus Christ will speak the word that is a sharp, two-edged sword.³

2. *Is the sermon enough to equip God's people for their work of ministry?*

Essentially the ministry of the New Testament is confronting people with the

steadfast love of God in Christ. Our task is always, as Francis Pieper put it, "das Evangelium an den Mann bringen." Whatever method does this successfully is fundamental in the fulfillment of the ministry of the church. This can be by teaching as well as preaching. In any event the Word must be put forth because it is the faith-producing, faith-sustaining Word (Rom. 17:10). However, it creates and sustains saving faith only as it is understood and received. This Word also comes to us in the sacraments, as the Lutheran Confessions so clearly state. The Gospel and the sacraments are the vehicles of God's love in Jesus Christ.

The sermon has won a time-honored place, though the form and nature of today's preaching may not be identical with that of Jesus' conversations and parables or with the proclamation and discussions of the apostles, which followed the informal synagog pattern. The pastor's sermon takes us from where we are, leads us by the bridge of the introduction to the message of the text, finds the text's central truths and lays them before us, and finally gives us a handle to take the message home and apply it to life.

Not all preaching is of the same quality. Today many sermons lack sufficient doctrinal strength, are more inspirational than didactic, and frequently are not interpretive of the text in the best sense. There is a tendency to get at applications too quickly without laying the foundations that come from sound exposition of text and context.

Although the pulpit is the chief educational medium for the pastor with regard to most of his people, there nevertheless is a difference between preaching

² James D. Smart, *The Rebirth of Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 93.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

and teaching. In other words, the sermon can't "do it all," as some erroneously think. Dr. Albert G. Merkens points out: "Much more needs to be taught than can be taught from the pulpit. Some learning calls for methods that cannot be used in the pulpit. The pastor who relies almost exclusively on the pulpit as a channel of religious teaching fails to understand and to perform adequately his ministry of teaching. Furthermore, without teaching, even preaching becomes wearying and deadening. Giving proper recognition to the place of 'teaching' does not minimize the place of 'witnessing' or 'preaching' in the pastoral ministry."⁴

Good teaching and good preaching go together. In any case the essential task is getting the Word out so that it can do its work on the human heart, for only in this Word do we have the authentic image of Christ and the real source and norm of Christian doctrine.

We might add that the church has never been satisfied with preaching only. It demanded that Bible reading and Bible study take its place as an additional response to God's grace and as a part of worship. The Scriptures can yield their rich treasures only to those who will open them by personal study. Only this will help remove the widespread Biblical illiteracy of our day. John Bright says, "It is unnecessary to furnish proof that there exists even among Christians a widespread Biblical illiteracy, and gratuitous to deplore the

fact as disastrous."⁵ He also observes that alongside a total neglect of the Bible a dangerous partial use of the Bible has grown up in the church.

Luther's saying about the holding qualities of the good sermon is still true. But it should not be pressed to say more. For the development of faith, for giving deeper convictions, for equipping the people of God for their ministry of teaching, witnessing, parenthood, and churchmanship, for all these reading, study, and the discussion of the teacher-disciple relationship are necessary. Learning needs dialog. It is only too easy for the old Adam to take the easy way out and make of listening to a sermon a mere formality.

The goal of Christian education is best spelled out for us in Paul's charter of Christian education, the Letter to the Ephesians, and chiefly in chaps. 3 and 4, where the objective of Christian growth is presented in such phrases as "being strengthened with might through His spirit in the inner man," "Christ dwelling in your hearts through faith," so that people are "rooted and grounded in love" and may "grasp the breadth, and length, and height, and depth of the love of Christ," and be "filled with the fullness of God." Paul here suggests that the special gift of apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers has been bestowed not merely to *bold* people with the church but to *equip* the saints for their work of ministry, namely, building up the body of Christ among men. Eph. 4 gives us such goals as maturity, inward growth, the measure of

⁴ Albert G. Merkens, "The Place of Teaching in the Pastoral Ministry," *Parish Education* (May 1951), p. 76. Also see "Kerygma and Didache" by Richard R. Caemmerer, *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXII (April 1961), 197—208.

⁵ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (New York—Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), pp. 7, 8 of Preface.

the stature of the fullness of Christ, and pictures the congregation as a mutually edifying, teaching, learning, worshipping, witnessing, and working fellowship.

Actually the ministry of the church is not to be identified with the pastoral or teaching office but with the entire congregation. Almost all recent studies of seminary curricula and of the purpose of the church and its ministry indicate what has been well summarized by Henry Sloane Coffin in the statement: "The minister is nothing apart from the church. It is not his ministry that is of first importance, but the church's ministry in which he leads."⁶

Ben L. Rose views the task of the ordained minister as "pastoral enabler" in the following words: "By proclamation, by administration, by every worthy means at his command, to enable his church to become a prophetic community, a teaching group, a priestly congregation, a pastoral company, and an evangelistic brotherhood."⁷

This is significant also for the accomplishment of the mission of the church. T. A. Kantonen makes the important observation that Luther made two great rediscoveries, (1) the doctrine of justification by faith, and (2) the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.⁸ These are related to each other because only as the whole priesthood is activated will the

church have an adequate force to get the Gospel out into the world.

Franklin H. Littell writes,

To put the practical point succinctly, a church which proclaims the priesthood of all believers but does not, in fact, provide any known ways for that general priesthood to express itself, will teach not initiative but docile obedience as the Christian stance.

In the great century of the Christian movement, those church bodies which stressed the ministry of the whole church became the carrying power of the faith in America and also in the younger churches of Africa, Asia, and the islands of the sea.⁹

Few churchmen have said this more clearly than Richard C. Halverson:

Paralleling the misconception of the "work of the church" is a corresponding notion that the real influence of the church in the world is institutional. . . . Neither the influence of the council or clergy, nor the influence of church boards or administrators, is her power index. The authentic impact of the Church of Jesus Christ in the world is the collective influence of individual Christians right where they are, day in, day out. Doctors, lawyers, merchants, farmers, teachers, accountants, laborers, students, politicians, athletes, clerks, executives—by the tens of thousands, by the millions—quietly, steadily, continually, consistently infecting the world where they live with a contagious witness of the contemporary Christ and His relevance to life.

God's method is men, not machinery. . . . They are there every day, quietly in-

⁶ Quoted in Robert S. Michaelsen, "The Protestant Ministry in America: 1850 to the Present," *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives*, ed. H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel D. Williams (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. 287.

⁷ Ben L. Rose, *The Minister as Pastoral Director* (Richmond, Va.: Union Theological Seminary, 1957).

⁸ T. A. Kantonen, *Resurgence of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1948).

⁹ Franklin H. Littell, "A New View of the Laity," part of a symposium on "Religious Education of Adults," in *Religious Education* (1961), pp. 39, 42.

vading their worlds for Christ—beach-heads of the Kingdom in business, education, government, labor, and the professions established by regenerate men doing their job daily to the glory of God as servants of Jesus Christ. This is the work of the Church!¹⁰

The Bible gives us many time-honored symbols for the church. One is that of the shepherd and his flock. But sometimes a symbol of this nature, if pressed too far, leaves a false impression upon the church. This is pointed out in a stimulating article as follows: "To call clergymen shepherds and laymen sheep represents a perverted idea of what the church is. This exalts the minister too much, directs all eyes toward him, makes him intermediary or priest for all the others. It makes the layman passive, with no ministry of his own."¹¹

3. *Does learning need dialog or is listening enough?*

Educators agree that listening isn't necessarily learning and that telling isn't necessarily teaching. Jesus constantly challenged His people with questions: How thinkest thou? What saith the Scripture? He did His teaching largely by means of conversation. Has the church perhaps failed to recognize that dialog must be used strongly beside monolog? Does it need to reexamine the terms preaching (*κηρύσσειν*) and teaching (*διδάσκειν*), as we find them used almost interchangeably in the Book of Acts?

Actually, teaching the Bible is building

a bridge between two worlds. It finds people where they are, leads them into the Scriptures to discover ever new truths and insights in the Word of God, and then directs them back into everyday life with what God has said to them. Perhaps so much of the Bible is written in biographical form because it is to be translated back into our own lives. Therefore a good Bible teacher will not leave his class to live in ancient history. The Word of God must be related to the contemporary world. It is a Word not merely to be stored in the mind but also to make us altogether new creatures and living witnesses to our Christian faith today.

Reuel L. Howe of the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies, Bloomfield Hills, Mich., says very forcefully, "The Word of God and the word of man have to be kept in dialog. To read the secular press thoughtfully and not read the Bible meditatively is a sin. And to read the Bible meditatively and not read the secular press and participate responsibly in contemporary life is a sin. Unfortunately many people who have studied the history of the church have no perspective to bring the life of the church to our own time."¹²

Dr. Howe made a good case for the need of dialog in learning. The gist of what he had to say was condensed for the *Bible Class Builder* (October 1961), under the title "Learning Needs Dialogue."

Ministers and teachers follow the fallacy that they need only to tell people what they ought to know and the message will

¹⁰ Richard C. Halverson, "The Tragedy of the Unemployed," in *Christianity Today*, IV, No. 25 (Sept. 12, 1960), pp. 9, 10.

¹¹ Frederick K. Wentz, "Let's take a fresh look at some old symbols—Are laymen sheep?" in *The Lutheran* (Oct. 18, 1961), p. 19.

¹² Reuel L. Howe. Condensed from "Dialogic Foundations of Christian Education for Adults," presented at a workshop on "Curriculum of Christian Education for Adults," University of Pittsburgh (June 1961).

be heard and accepted. The monologue is the result. They are so anxious about getting content across that they forget that the meanings of student and teacher must meet if learning is to take place. A lecturer honors the dialogical principle when he speaks to the meaning people bring to him. Methods should be chosen either to bring out questions or to give needed answers. Meaning barriers must be recognized and broken. The teacher is as responsible for student meanings as he is for his own meanings. Only by dialogue can the questions that emerge out of life be correlated with the answers implicit in the Gospel and can the message of the Gospel, in the process of education, escape from the classroom and find its destination in the affairs of the world. The proclamation of the Gospel must be faithful to the meaning of the Gospel, but the hearing of the Gospel has to be faithful to the meaning of life. The word of man must be in dialogue with the Word of God. The dialogical purpose is illustrated best in the parables of Jesus, where correlative thinking is demanded by their very nature. This process removes the gap between teacher and learner; teaching must be in terms of the learner.¹³

Many of our people have not learned to use their Bible, do not understand the marginal references, and no one has pointed out to them sound rules of interpretation. If we are to have a Bible-studying people, then they need to be introduced to devotional Bible reading, reading by paragraphs, finding units of thought, getting the chief message of whole books. This needs to be done somewhere in their basic training before, during, and after confirmation. This demands learning-by-doing activity. It asks for teacher-learner interaction.

¹³ Ibid.

4. *Is inward growth keeping pace with outward growth?*

The emphasis on missions and the contribution of the preaching-teaching-reaching mission of the last decade have been most significant in the life and growth of our Synod.

Our church has handed on the Gospel to more and more people in the last 30 years. In North America we have grown from —

3,653 congregations in 1930 to 5,532 in 1960
1,145,635 baptized members in 1930 to 2,469,036 in 1960
717,380 communicant members in 1930 to 1,571,641 in 1960

Each year we receive over 40,000 juniors through confirmation into full communicant membership, and some 35,000 adults by confirmation or Baptism. In 10 years this is a total of 646,737, and the increase for 30 years has been from a total (for both) of 31,076 in 1929 to 75,772 in 1959.

But we may well ask if in this missionary emphasis we have not to a degree lost sight of the Great Commission's phrase "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," or the closing words of 2 Tim. 3:17 NEB, "So that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind." This splendid outward growth which our Lord has showered upon us gives us a responsibility to nurture and develop these Christians for the full exercise of their royal priesthood and Christian mission (1 Peter 2:9). Our outward growth should be matched with a corresponding inward growth. These thousands must be assimilated into the church, conserved for Christ, developed for every

good work. They have received basic doctrine, but they have not been led into the wider pasture of God's Word. Their faith needs to be deepened. It can remain static. It can recede. It can increase. It will not stand still.¹⁴

5. *Are we preparing our people without Bible study for the world of today?*

Joseph Sittler, addressing the World Council of Churches Assembly at New Delhi last November, pointed out that communism is challenging youth today with a philosophy that embraces every area of life and demands total commitment. It embraces, so they assert, one's whole present and future. Whatever we may think of these claims, communism is dedicated to the kind of total commitment which Jesus calls for in His followers. What's more, communism has utilized, as many students agree, the study and activity group which was found at least in part in the practice of the early church, which "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." Some observers have put it this way: Communism in using the Christian cell idea has outstripped Christianity in the use of one of its own devices for anti-Christian purposes.

When the Premier of Communist Russia threatened America with the statement "We will bury you," he unwittingly proposed to leaders of the Christian church another question: "Who will bury whom?" We are living in an age which has witnessed a new estrangement between the church and the world and the decline of

Christianity due to population pressures, non-Christian ideologies, and the upsurge of nationalism and pagan religion. To meet this new situation the church needs a renewed power to accompany its ministry. This power is to be found in the Gospel applied and activated in the life of all of God's people.

When Bethel Lutheran Church of Madison, Wis., under the leadership of the Rev. Harley Swiggum, entered into a Bible study program which involved the sum of \$200,000, it made a most important decision. The congregation might have spent the money for an educational plant which was needed, and is still needed, but it decided to begin by putting the first investment of money into people rather than buildings.

To prepare its unique survey of the whole Scriptures it designed its own course and had it illustrated by an artist to get the great concepts of the Old Testament and the New Testament across to its people. This course provides the sweep of the whole Biblical revelation as a background for further study.

More than 1,000 of the members have taken this course within a three-year period. This was possible because two years were spent in training 28 lay teachers to give the course. It is now being followed up by the study of individual books of Scripture.¹⁵

Such concern will develop a new stance in the Lutheran Church of today. To a degree many of our churches have poured money into buildings which more properly should have been poured into people.

¹⁴ Oscar E. Feucht, "Inward Growth Too," in *Train Two Congregational Manual* (Saint Louis: Board of Parish Education, 1961), p. 4.

¹⁵ *The Bethel Series*. New Format for Bible Study in American Protestantism (312 Wisconsin Ave., Madison, Wis.).

6. *To what extent is the Lutheran pastor of today an educator as well as a preacher?*

The now famous study by Samuel Blizzard of Union Theological Seminary, showing the average Protestant minister's image of his roles, revealed this sequence. Ideally the pastors selected their priorities as follows: (1) preacher, (2) pastor, (3) leader of worship, (4) organizer, (5) administrator, (6) teacher. They were then asked to rank the use of their time and the outcome was the following: (1) administrator, (2) pastor, (3) preacher, (4) leader of worship, (5) organizer, (6) teacher.¹⁶

This discovery has properly startled church leaders and persons responsible for seminary curricula. Other studies indicate that while the pastor today must be in a much larger sense than formerly "an enabler," he ought not to lose his teaching function. His ministry of the Word is much greater than can possibly be accomplished through a single medium, such as the sermon, which, while having notable strengths, also has serious limitations with regard to methodology, time allowed for preaching, and coverage of the whole counsel of God. As it is, the modern minister's time is often dissipated with secondary and trivial matters; he is prevented from giving attention to Word and doctrine to the extent that his people need Word and doctrine applied to life in the world of today. The pastor of today needs to multiply himself with a teaching team, not only of professionals but also of laymen and women. This teaching program

will not minimize the place of witnessing or preaching. It will only intensify it and enlarge it. In fact, the whole church in all of its activities is to be a school of Christian learning. "The didactic use of Scripture is foundational to all other uses and gives to them their character. . . . Whatever the church does takes on basic and eternal value only as it is tied up with teaching."¹⁷

At a conference of Christian educators one of the spokesmen said: "Educationally minded Bible teachers are the great need of the hour. Many there are who will lecture on the Bible; few are there who can enlist adult learners in the joyous and rewarding pursuit of guided learning in the firsthand reading of the Book of books itself."

V. D. Malconian of the School of Christian Education, Chicago, said: "If Christian educators are to succeed in helping adults return to their source of faith and life, they must not consider themselves, nor seek to be, scholars primarily, nor even preachers of the Word. Rather are they teachers who lead growing persons to the Book itself to read it for themselves. This is the genius of Protestant Christianity."

All of this is in harmony with the Reformation tradition set forth by Christian educators today in such works as David Ernsberger's *A Philosophy of Adult Christian Education*.

As Dr. Price Gwynn puts it, "A virile Protestant faith calls for intelligence and understanding. One of the basic assumptions is that those who embrace its teachings will be able to read and interpret the Bible for themselves."

¹⁶ David J. Ernsberger, *A Philosophy of Adult Christian Education* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 21, 22.

¹⁷ Merksen, p. 76.

7. *Are we giving the proper status to Bible study?*

"If the record of revelation is taken lightly by the church . . . the Bible will be taken lightly by the pupil. The effectiveness of the teaching method will be undercut by the ethos because they are in contradiction. Such a church is not . . . the context for Christian education. What is needed in such a situation is a major emphasis on adult education and leadership education alongside the curriculum to make the local congregation conscious of ways in which it may become the community of faith."¹⁸

The challenge of the current Bible Study Advance in Synod, inaugurated by the San Francisco resolution, is largely one which asks the church to give proper status to Bible study by the people.

Where pastor, church boards, and officers seldom think of Bible study or plan for it, where the whole church program revolves around outward observances and the holding of formal services, the climate for Bible study is unfavorable. But where discipleship with Jesus Christ is the center of a congregation's ministry, where

building people up in the faith and serving them in every need is the goal, where equipping believers for an active ministry as priests of God is the committed task of a parish—there Bible study will find a favorable climate. The entire life and program of the local church must support its doctrinal claims and the sermonic exhortations to *use* the Word. The deed must go with the creed.

Where Bible study is merely tolerated and not actively espoused as part of Christian discipleship Bible study has no status. In many churches generation after generation has grown up without Bible study. There especially much work with prayer is necessary if Bible study is to have status.

Bible study begins in the thinking of the minister, in his conception of the church as a learning and working fellowship, in the attention he gives to Bible study and teacher training in his schedule, in his estimate of how learning takes place, in his own rich experience with the Word of God as food for his own soul, and in his acceptance of the pastorate as a teaching ministry. Where Bible study has status with the pastor it will soon have status in the church.¹⁹

St. Louis, Mo.

¹⁸ D. Campbell Wyckoff, *Theory and Design of Christian Education Curriculum* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), p. 117.

¹⁹ Oscar E. Feucht, "Give Status to Bible Study," in *Forward in Bible Study* (St. Louis: Board of Parish Education, 1960), p. 30.