

LESSON ONE

What Is This In My Hand?

What do I hold in my hand? There are many ways that it can be described, but we do not fully understand or appreciate what it is until we believe and understand that it is the plenary inspired and matchless Word of God. Our Bible Study must begin with Bibles open and minds engaged. We have settled too long for “Bible Lite,” both as individuals and in the church. We have adopted a Christianity consumed with little devotional thoughts for the day from God, supplemented by teaching in the church filled with entertaining stories and trite opinions on how to be a better person and live a better life in the twenty-first century.

How is that possible when we hold in our hand the most precious book the world has ever seen? It is God’s message that tells of his love, mercy, and grace – the salvation of mankind. It demands a superior position in our lives, our families, our small groups, and our congregations. In the absence of such a reverence for God’s Word, our Bible Study can at best be called a “Sunday School,” a school in which everybody gets an “A” without hardly ever cracking the textbook and never doing any homework. To apply the term “Bible Study” to it is at best a farce.

Do we really realize that there is a battle waging around us? There is a true God over this world who wants all people to bow at the feet of a loving Savior, and there is a false god in this world who wants all people to burn in hell. The battle is intense, and it cannot be fought with little thoughts in a daily devotional or petty ideas from a preacher on Sunday. It certainly can't be fought with minds numbed by the constant drivel of entertainment on television, DVDs, video games, and the Internet. If you and I are going to penetrate our culture and the cultures of the world with the gospel, we desperately need minds saturated with God's Word!

Bible Study is, or ought to be, a boot camp where soldiers are trained and equipped for the battle, putting on the whole armor of God and having in their hand the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. You say, "That's ridiculous! Nobody wants that"! How will we know if that is correct if we do not at least attempt to provide it? Moreover, is what we think people may or may not want to be the standard by which we should determine that which is right? As parents do you determine what your children need by that which they want or do not want? Not likely. Why then should we determine what those who are babes in Biblical knowledge need? Does the scripture not tell us what they need?

¹²For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which *be* the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.

¹³For every one that useth milk *is* unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe.

¹⁴But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, *even* those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Heb. 5:12-14.

What then is the status of Bible Study today?

Way back in 1967, James A. Pike, and Episcopal Bishop, observed that most people felt that their children should be in Sunday School. His reaction was: “I don’t know but it’s pretty dangerous. You’d better study what they are doing there to see if it will be a good or bad influence. Select it carefully like you would a pediatrician.” His advice was: “Don’t. There is grave doubt that Sunday school anywhere is of any benefit.”

Most likely we would consider that the worst advice one could give. But before we get “all up in arms” over the statement, perhaps we would do well to look at the condition of our own Bible Study both here and over the brotherhood. Read the following article by Neil Anderson, Editor of the *Gospel Advocate*:

What Has Happened to Bible Classes?

by Neil W. Anderson, Editor

Your Sunday school may not be a Bible school. Sunday school is not necessarily the same as Bible school. I observe many churches that apparently are getting away from Bible study by slowly drifting away from substantive,

Bible-based teaching in our classes. Bible classes should teach the Bible just as math classes teach math or history classes teach history in school. Biblical illiteracy continues to grow in our nation. The results are that many Christians who lack foundational truths from God's Word are in danger of being "destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6 NKJV). Furthermore, they have not trained their children in the way of the Lord because they cannot teach what they do not know.

Moses commanded the children of Israel to teach their children diligently to love the Lord their God with all their might (Deuteronomy 6:7). Ezra personally prepared his heart to know God's will so that he could live it and teach it to others (Ezra 7:10). History is repeating itself again. After the death of Joshua, the generation that followed did not know the Lord (Judges 2:10). In "The Lost Generation" (Gospel Advocate, March), Don Campbell brought this tragedy home when he said, "When an entire generation arises that does not know God, we parents and grandparents must look to ourselves as having some responsibility for the shame." All Christians have an ongoing responsibility to know, live and teach according to God's truth. These examples should become a way of life for us. It is our choice.

Most of us depend solely on our Sunday schools for our religious teaching. We use a model that was developed more than 200 years ago by Robert Raikes, an evangelist in Great Britain. He was looking for a way to fulfill a need to teach the Word of God on Sundays to poor, uneducated children, many of whom were forced to work in factories six days a week. In his "Sunday school," the Bible was the textbook and religious education a vital part of a child's education. Sunday schools quickly became popular and effective; thus the modern-day "Sunday school" was born and spread to America with evangelistic fervor.

During the next century, as these Bible-based Sunday schools gave way to compulsory weekday state education, many churches retained their Sunday schools to teach religious education. By the early 20th century, going to Sunday school was a part of the lives of most children. My mother never missed asking me every Saturday evening if I had studied my Bible lesson for the next day!

Today, in many Sunday schools the pendulum has swung from an emphasis on textual Bible studies to studies on lifestyle, social and humanitarian needs with just enough Bible verses or Bible stories thrown in to make the subject acceptable. Generic materials used in such classes are teachable anywhere, but they lack biblical distinctiveness such as God's plan of salvation, leadership and worship. Often reliable materials written by brethren are ignored in favor of popular materials written by people we would not allow to teach or preach in our churches. In many cases, such materials overtly teach biblical error!

What we really need is to increase and intensify actual time for teaching and for study both collectively and personally to build our faith. Growth seldom occurs in spurts. It is gradual and progressive.

Respect for the Lord's Day has diminished from just a few years ago. Too many plans, including some church activities, are made for weekends, rooting out Bible study. And now our sporting gods vie for our time and money with team practice and tournaments (see "Today My Faith Was Tested" on p. 36) plus the spectator sports we have come to enjoy. These conflicts with periods of Bible study destroy continuity of learning.

Brethren, let's seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). Let's turn our Sunday schools into Bible schools and study the inspired Word of God to show ourselves approved unto Him (2 Timothy 2:15).

Knowing the Bible and knowing about the Bible are two different things.

This language is not true of our classes up to at least the sixth grade. But what about junior high and high school classes? Do we seek to find the best of teachers to put in these classes? Recent research shows that 80% of all Bible Study “dropouts” occurs at the junior high level. Could it be caused in part by the fact that we put in those classes untrained teachers who feel that, because their students are just “kids,” the teacher can get by without preparation, can “just wing it,” and the “kids” will not know the difference?

What about our adult classes? Do we believe that anybody can teach if they only get a “little book” on the subject assigned. After all, if they read the little book they will have more knowledge on the subject than most, if not all of the class members. Moreover, it is not likely that any class member is going to do any preparation for the class. It makes no difference that the “little book” may be written by those who are not New Testament Christians and will have within them doctrinal error that the untrained teacher may not catch, thus opening the door to the teaching of doctrinal error.

But doctrinal error is not the only problem. A writer who lives in Timbuktu knows absolutely nothing about Christians in Katy, Texas. How

silly would most of us look today if we were all dressed in “one size fits all” clothing? True, the writer may know something about human nature and, assuming that all Katyans (if there is such a word) are possessed of human nature, he is bound to hit a few just as some of us would be built just right for “one size fits all” clothing. Except for those few, all the rest would be missed.

Does this say that we need to be concerned about our number of teachers and our number of classes? Our practice has been that we must have 8 adult classes on Lord’s Day morning with two teachers (each with a little book) in each class. Many have had no teaching experience, have little Bible knowledge of the subject beyond the “little book,” make no effort to either seek other materials or think beyond the “little book.” They may take the time to type out the little book so that they don’t appear to stand before the class and read from it. Because of little preparation, however, they sometimes wind up reading their notes, occasionally looking up at the class. They will usually find very few of the class looking their way because they have failed to get their attention. Should they expect anything more? Probably not. After all, isn’t reading to them the way that we usually put our children to sleep?

But this is Bible Study. They should be interested just because it is the Bible. That is a good thought but it is not a correct thought. That's like saying that everybody should be interested in every dish prepared. After all, every dish contains good ingredients (theoretically). However, we all know that some cooks can take those good ingredients and make them absolutely unpalatable to human taste. Dogs might not even eat it and pigs would have a hard time.

I am not saying this to belittle those who are kind enough to overcome their hesitancy and say "yes" when asked to teach. I am not saying this to criticize those who teach without ever going beyond the content of the "little book." It is not their fault that they have never been exposed to training before being thrown into the fire.

Then why am I saying it? I am saying it because I am convinced that our people deserve better. The "little books" are generally so shallow that one can wade through them without ever getting wet feet. Is it right to insist that people attend Bible Study and then make no effort to provide them with well-trained Biblically knowledgeable teachers. Is it fair to tell them that by this time in their Christian experience they should be able to eat strong meat when we have never fed them anything but pabulum?

Does training help? First, let me suggest that I have some doubt that one class like this every 10+ years will help a great deal. By its very nature it cannot be called a “training program.” At best it can be considered as a baby’s first step. If it stops here it will be as if there was never a baby’s second step.

Having said that, let’s ask and answer a question that, though similar in language is as different from “does training help” as the east is from the west. Can training help if done correctly and consistently? For the answer to that question I want to share some research with you.

Let’s begin by recognizing that from a distance all Bible Study classes look alike to the casual observer. After all, there are far more similarities than differences. They all meet on Sunday usually before worship; they all have a teacher and a class ranging from a few to larger numbers; they meet for about an hour; they claim to study the Bible; they are divided on some basis, ranging from personal choice to age. Given that they all appear to be much the same, why is it that some churches have flourishing Bible Study programs and others in the same neighborhood are barely holding even or even losing members?

A study was done of Sunday schools in the Georgia Baptist Convention to attempt to answer that question. It found some interesting

results. The churches included in the study were in all regions of the state and represented all sizes. They accounted for 1.3 percent of the total Southern Baptist church population in Georgia. Interestingly, at the time of the survey these 1.3 percent of churches accounted for 15 percent of statewide Baptist conversions and 42 percent of the total growth in Sunday school attendance in the state.

How could that be? The same survey found that these churches revealed ten common practices or characteristics that are not necessarily common to every Sunday school. The fastest growing congregations had on average implemented nine of the ten practices. A comparison study of a random group of other Southern Baptist churches in Georgia revealed that other “growing” Sunday schools practice on average eight of them. By contrast, those that were in decline or had plateaued practiced an average of fewer than five of the ten. The ten common practices of the fastest growing Sunday schools were as follows:

- 98 percent of the churches with the fastest growing Sunday schools involved their Sunday school leaders in training.
- 96 percent viewed their preacher’s support of the Sunday school as important to the health of their church.
- 96 percent were overcoming space limitations (or were flexible about the use of space and schedules).
- 91 percent were assertive about expanding their enrollment.
- 85 percent provided personal evangelism training for their members.
- 83 percent were assertive in creating and launching new classes.

- 80 percent conducted organized weekly outreach.
- 78 percent developed and maintained prospect lists.
- 78 percent had high standards for leaders (either written commitments or signed covenants).
- 78 percent intentionally organized their classes with growth in mind multiple leaders in classes and strong emphasis on age affinities).

Why is it that some Sunday schools grow and others do not? This study reveals that, whatever the cause is, many neglect to implement the principles that impact the potential growth. Keep in mind that the fastest growing Sunday schools implement 9 of the 10 practices, but not all the same 9. Why would all not do this? Could it be that implementing and sustaining multiple practices is a sacrifice that many congregations and members of congregations are not willing to make? Most likely it would take a full-time worker. In short, such effort is often abandoned not because it will not work, but because of the work involved in making it work. “They” (could it be “we”) do not want to do what it will take to grow.

Another study of churches (unidentified) in North America concluded:

Churches with ineffective Sunday schools violate the very principles that make Sunday school a viable organization; they dilute biblical teachings, fail to train effective teachers, replace systematic Bible teaching with other types of group activity, and relegate Sunday school to the status of one more church activity.