

# Ideas and Planning for a Pastor's Personal Bible Study

## Filling the Clay Jar and Water for the Tree

[Paper presented to the Red Wing Pastoral Conference of the Minnesota District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bremen Township, Minnesota, February 10, 2004]

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What kind of people have gone through a Bible Instruction Class you have taught? Christians who needed a refresher? Lost individuals searching for hope and joy? Were they people fleeing life's problems and seeking shelter and stability in their Refuge and Strength? People who had never really peered on the pages of Holy Scripture, or possibly had never really heard about Jesus before? Farmers? Doctors? ...

In a way, it doesn't matter too much what the students in those classes do for work, or what their spiritual condition is before they begin the course. To a large degree, it doesn't matter too much what course you use. There are so many options. Everyone has their own personal favorite(s). What we all agree is important are the answers to these questions: Why should they be in the BIC? Why should they come and sit with you and listen to you? What happens when they are connected to the Word? Why should they invest their time and effort in studying the Word when they could be spending it on fixing their house or lounging on their couch? What will be happening during those students' weeks of study with you in class and with their studying at home?

They may have ungodly or earthly reasons for tolerating the classes – a lower tuition rate at the school, an effort to appease their fiancé, or just because they feel like they should maybe do something spiritual for a good image. Even if their or our motives are misplaced, God gives us incredible reasons for reading, studying, loving and living his Word.

**I like to talk through a quick section of Scripture with prospective students for the Bible Instruction Class. Ephesians 4:11-16 presently ranks as my favorite section for that preliminary study. There God reminds us that he uses his Church and his Word to: join us to him, join us to fellow Christians, mature us, equip us and prepare us for lives of service, increase the unity with other believers, and help us to face daily challenges, huge problems and false teachings. It's a great opportunity to talk about the great blessings God gives to individuals through his Word. And, none of these are even the greatest blessing that God gives through his Word – salvation! What great blessings! Those prospective students can look forward to long hours of study because the LORD grows their love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control through the study of his Word.**

And, it's not just the people contemplating joining a BIC that we tell this to. It's an introduction to the Bible History class we teach to the grade-schoolers. It's the encouragement we hand to parents of baptized children of God because they are presented with the daunting task of "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you". We exhort our members to dig into the Scriptures at corporate Bible Studies, in devotions with families and spouses, and in private, personal study of God's Word. Christians need, want, crave, love, study and do God's Word. We encourage them to study God's Word because God offers and gives so many blessing through his Word.

Pastor, you are a person. You, too, are a Christian. You need and want the same things from God's Word. You, pastor, are a sinner. God uses Scripture to do his alien work of convicting sinners. You know your need for a Savior from your sins. God's Word is packed with God's promises that he has forgiven sinners, and even makes them his saints. Pastor, you also, are one of God's holy ones. The Holy Spirit points hungry souls to the Bread of Life who gives new life and eternal life. God uses Scripture to grow relationships with Jesus and teach knowledge about Christ. You need the Words that testify about Jesus so the Holy Spirit can

continue to grow your knowledge and relationship with Jesus. Jesus gives ability, power and motivation for Christian living through the Bible. You, pastor, need Jesus' words to remain in you as you remain connected to the Vine and as you bear abundant fruit. You need the Light for your path – for direction and guidance. You, pastor, are running a race. You need power and motivation for your race. You need the Holy Spirit to keep your eyes on what Jesus has won and given to you – your victory now and your sure inheritance in heaven. You, pastor, are a Christian who needs, wants, craves, loves, studies and does God's Word.

You are an ordinary Christian who needs his faith fed, sustained and strengthened in the ordinary way, God's way - by faithful study of God's Word and regular use of the sacraments. You, pastor, are called by God to be a Christian. And, Christians have called you be their pastor. Your call by your church and by your Lord calls you to a special role and duties. You are more than an ordinary Christian. Not because your status before God is different or better than other Christians, but because your role in Christ's body is different.

God has called you to be a Christian in a very public way. It's important to be a Christian in a very private way. Run back to the Word to get for yourself what you give to your people. God throws you back into the steady flow of the Word like thrusting a pitcher under the water tumbling out of an open tap. You know God's law better than most. God uses his Word to fill your head and heart with the good news of the forgiveness of all your sins. You have peace with God. God has bought you out of the enemy camp. You have been rescued from death as a drowning man yanked out of the swirling and angry sea into the lifeboat. God knows you need this message for you, before you can hustle off to share it with others. “[God, our Father] comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” (II Corinthians 1:4)

**God fills your spiritual pitcher with the comfort of the good news. He uses your private time with him to heal, and empower you. Then God sends out his jars of clay, filled with the life-giving gospel, to quench the thirst of his sons and daughters. God fills you as you study his Word, so that the Spirit may give you strength to live, do and preach in the public way that your call directs you. Study of God's Word is vitally important in your call as pastor. Study of God's Word is absolutely necessary in your personal, Christian life – for your new life and eternal life.**

As part of my research for my paper, I sent out a 20-Question Survey (and my questions violated the rules for the “20-Questions game – most of them were not “Yes/No” questions). The survey went to about 40 different pastors whom I grew to know at some point in my life – classmates (2000 and 2002 Seminary graduates), pastors in our conference, professors, my bishop from vicar year, and pastors I've seen present seminars.

For a few reasons, I was a little apprehensive as I sent out the surveys. I know how much I struggle to remember to allot the time to respond to things like this. If those pastors were anything like me, I could optimistically hope for about 2 or 3 responses. Thankfully, you all are better men than I. About half of the pastors were able to return the survey in the relatively short period of time between when I sent out the questions, and when I wrote this.

My second, and bigger “fear”, was that I would be receiving about 20 carbon copies. I was afraid that I would receive 20 questionnaires that read: “I use Brug's study schedule at 6 am. I miss one day a week. And, I regularly do Little Visits with God with my children.” The responses that I received were a refreshing variety of ways our brothers in the public pastoral ministry spend important, quiet, contemplative moments in God's Word. Pastors had wide variety of personal programs, times in life through Scripture (a few times to 50+), and helpful insights. To get a better sampling of their insights, I will be quoting some of the surveys in this paper. As I do that, the quotations will remain anonymous. I promised that to those answering the survey, and several of the surveys requested that.

You know how valuable and important personal Bible study is – Great! Why do we need a paper from a young whippersnapper like me on a pastor's personal Bible study? Well, a couple of the questions on the survey revealed why we need reminders and helps in our personal Bible study. As zealously as pastors were

studying, teaching, preaching and enjoying Scripture, they also identified some shortcomings and a deep desire to improve in this part of their life of faith. More than just identifying the obstacles to our personal study of Scripture, we will also explore some ideas and plans for personal study.

### **What stops/ hinders pastors from full and faithful personal Bible study?**

Is it just one thing that gets in your way of studying? This week, it might be one particular diversion that attacks your zeal and diligence in applying yourself to personal study. But, your enemy, the Devil, roams around and schemes to get your sinful nature to chase a wide variety of distractions that change from year to year, and day to day. Below are some the problems and diversions that viciously attempt to rip us away from God's Word.

“Oops, I missed a day (or week, or worse) of personal Bible study!” Are all days without personal Bible study bad? The obvious, Biblical answer is: “No. God has not established a law as to how often or long our personal study of his Word should be.” Some of the answers on the survey revealed this. Pastors planned breaks – for conferences, days of worship (to more sharply focus on the Word in worship) and for a periodic break (once a month, or one day every two weeks). Those planned breaks seem good, pious and God-pleasing.

Many of the surveyed pastors admitted that they took non-planned breaks quite a bit more often than they wished, and for reasons they wished and knew they should avoid. Some of the hindrances were: they got “off-schedule” during the day (if they schedule personal Bible study for first thing in the morning, they rushed past it and had trouble remembering or finding time for it later in the day); they didn't have a scheduled time for Bible study so it often slipped through the cracks during the day; they became too busy; and the pressure to “produce” at church. Here are a few comments from pastors as they answered: “How often do you miss a day of personal Bible study?” Many were kind enough to answer the question and supply the vital, and sometimes painful, answer to the obvious follow-up question: “Why do you miss days of personal Bible study?”

- “Too often. When I'm up to preach it happens more often. I'm trying to discipline myself, but it happens probably a couple times a week; but I try to make up for it by reading extra on another day.”
- “Depends how busy things are. Sometimes I've missed several days in a row. The days when I most often miss are when I have a class or something else first thing in the morning and did not get a chance to read at home before coming to church. If it doesn't get done early in the day, it usually doesn't get done.”
- “If I allow myself to begin any other task after breakfast, it is very rare that I will be disciplined enough to come back to my personal study later in the day. I try to do personal study every day Monday through Friday, but there are all too many weeks when a day or two are missed (sadly, once and awhile even more than that!)”
- “My goal is daily, more realistic – it ends up M-F and not as many weekend.”
- “One or two days a week. I usually make up the reading on following days, but that's not really “daily” devotion then, is it.”

So, you missed a day or two of personal Bible study. Does that mean you need to submit to some act of penance? Missing yesterday does not mean you need to be “punished” today. A pastor's personal Bible study is not intended to be some sort of religious or intellectual masochism. God does not promise you a raise or a better spot in heaven if you make-up all the days that you miss. It is an opportunity for personal growth in the saving Word. One pastor commented well when he said:

1. “[I miss] one or two days a week. I usually make up the reading on following days, but that’s not really “daily” devotion then, is it.”

That said, missing today is not a good excuse for missing tomorrow. We recognize our “missed study days” because they don’t look pretty in the mirror of God’s law. Are we gladly hearing and learning his Word when our Bibles sit unopened? When we rise on the morrow and recognize we missed yesterday, we also know that’s good news. God gives you and me a new day! He didn’t take your Bible away or suddenly strike you with illiteracy. No! He gives you yet another day to dive into his Word and grow in your relationship with him! What good news will God tell you today? What great promises are neatly nestled on those onion-skinned pages of your favorite copy of Scripture? Rise. Read. Rejoice.

**Christians and Christian pastors want to read God’s Word, but time often becomes an issue. Time, time, time. Everyone wants your time. You only have 168 hours a week. You can’t manufacture more time with time travel or by other innovations in interrupting the space-time continuum. And so, Bible study time often gets gobbled up by the other “time-demanders.” Those “time demanders” seem important during those fleeting moments and inside of that stress filled day. But, all those good blessings we listed on page one are not promised by God through busy, cluttered and productive days. He promises to send those awesome blessings by the power and work of his Spirit through the means of the Word. Below are some suggestions pastors gave on the survey to help maintain a faithful, daily personal Bible study.**

- † “Being more organized and prioritizing better”
- † “Reading more of the Bible longer each day”
- † “Being more faithful / regular and taking notes”
- † “I would improve my personal Bible study by doing it at a set time in the morning and evening.”
- † “Taking a set time each day for it and following a program. (I think I've made this statement scores of times... and have followed through several times, only to fall off the wagon) Next October I could be answering these questions differently, and in 2007 I might again be answering them as I am now.”
- † “Ignoring all the other things to do and make it at least an hour each day”
- † “...by using a scheduled curriculum...by thinking more about what I’m reading, applying it to myself, my relationship with God, and my life...by taking notes...by studying with others from time to time. (I could really use some help in all of these things. It’s hard to be disciplined)”
- † “Allowing myself to be drawn to the Word by the beauty of the gospel rather than – too often – seeing this as a “task to complete” and...by taking more time in the Word and also in prayer and refusing to be rushed. The longer I ponder my reading with Luther’s questions the more I gain from my time in the Word.”
- † “Being much more consistent and allowing that to be as important as “producing” at church.”
- † “Committing more time to it”
- † “Spending more time reading the Bible, praying and applying its truths to myself”

As a pastor, even if you do not set apart special time for personal Bible study, you are forced to be in the Word. You need to study it for sermons, classes and counseling. Your career brings you into constant contact with Scripture.

Somewhat tangent to the personal Bible study question is: Does “professional study” count? The answers to this question varied greatly. Some gave a flat “Yes” or “No” answer. Others seemed to rely heavily on sermon studies, preparation for classes, seminars, summer quarter and reading Christian literature to supplement or replace direct, personal Bible study. Here are a few of the various responses to: Do you “count” sermon preparation, Bible class preparation, etc. as personal Bible study time?

## Yes – 2 times

### Somewhat – 2 times

- † I “count” sermon preparation. I “count” some Bible class preparation (e.g., Revelation class for the faculty – yes, catechism – no, Adult Christ Light Sunday morning class – no, BIC makeup classes – no)

### No – 14 times

2. “I don’t like do that , but I do – yet it is a way to be nourished.”
3. “No, but I wouldn’t say it’s not personal study.”
4. “Not for this survey, but I do value it as important, devotional time with God.”
5. “No, I don’t. But I’ll usually use a verse from my personal study time in that day’s shut-in, hospital, or meeting devotions.”
6. “No, anything related to work does not count as personal devotion. They are still beneficial, but not the same. There is little doubt that often the best personal spiritual growth takes place in the more in-depth study that takes place for a Bible class and especially a sermon. When we take time to apply its law and gospel to ourselves first, we will be edified before we ever open our mouths to edify others. In fact, *genuine* enthusiasm in pulpit or classroom is in direct proportion to how much I make every Bible class and sermon preparation a personal Bible study. However, there is still something about opening up the Bible for no one else’s spiritual growth than my own. The two kinds of study are not in competition with each other but complement each other. I try not to think of one “replacing” the other.”

A couple of questions that I ask myself as I ponder whether “professional study” should count as “personal study” are: *Is this a “have-to” or “get-to”?* and *For whom is this study first and foremost intended?* You have to study your sermon text. You have to look at material you will be presenting in Catechism class and that new Bible class you developed on life issues. You have to crack open your Bible for Christian counseling. All of these tasks can personally benefit you. You know that the best sermons you have heard were first applied by the preacher to himself. You know that as you strengthen your 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Catechism students in the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as cornerstone that they and you are blocks in the building of Christ. But, is searching and using Scripture for the good of other in those “have-to” tasks the same as private meditation on the Word for the good of you?

This is obviously a matter of our Christian freedom. I personally do not look at “professional study” as a replacement for personal study. Sermon studies and class preparations do deepen my understanding of Scripture and my love for God. Professional study is personally applied. But, in *my* mind it doesn’t replace that special, daily time allotted to personal and meditative study of God’s Word.

No one always perfectly studies and reads Scripture. When we recognize a few of the obstacles that hinder our Bible study, we are actually acknowledging what truly hurts us, our faith and our relationship to God. God does not give up on you because you’ve had bad days, weeks or years of personal Bible study. Instead, God silences our self-pitying and self-deprecating excuses. He hears our confessions. God forgives our sins. He blesses you with the opportunity today, tomorrow and all your days this side of eternity to revel and rejoice in his revealed will. God points you to blessings he holds for you as you grow in his Word. The Holy Spirit promises to strengthen our faith and increase our wisdom and knowledge. God reminds you that faithful, personal study is a good work, a fruit of faith, that he works in you the ability and desire to do.

## Personal Bible Study Conclusions

It's obvious, isn't it? Personal Bible Study Is Important! It's important for those newborn Christians who need to drink the milk. It's important for mature Christians who need and get the full meal – milk and meat. Do you want to know Jesus better? “These are the Words that testify about me!” (John 5:39) Do you want to know where you are going after death? “these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31) Do you want to be connected to Holy Spirit's dynamite? “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” (Romans 1:16) Do you want the doctor of souls operating on you? “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12) Do you want to know how and why and when you should say thank you to God for all the great things he has done for you? “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.” (Romans 12:1) Do you want to know why you need to study Bible history and need God's help every single day? “<sup>11</sup> These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. <sup>12</sup> So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! <sup>13</sup> No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” (I Corinthians 10:11-13) Why would you want to always have God's Word on your mind and tongue? “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup> and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. “ (II Timothy 3:14-17) *Therefore...*

**...A pastor's personal Bible study is invaluable and necessary.**

It was interesting to see each person's personality in their personal Bible study. I often felt like: “Yep, that's exactly like \_\_\_\_\_ to study and pray like that.” I thank them for their many and insightful responses. Their answers on the survey reminded me that we are not Christian clones. The perfect Bible study regimen and time of day is not necessarily what Pastor Joe or Professor Smith is doing. You are the one studying the Bible. You are a saint in God's eyes. God has entrusted you with his Word and gives you godly wisdom. You have been blessed with a mind and intelligence. God has given you a creative and powerful brain to think and act for yourself.

When you sit down to figure out what you will be doing for your own Bible study, use those gifts. Don't just blindly and thoughtlessly imitate someone else. Your good and godly reason may lead you to adopt as your own or adapt to your liking someone else's study routine and style. God connected you to himself and his body, the Church. You lean on the other parts of the body for help and encouragement. Use them as you look to establish your personal Bible study plan. Or, you may reason with yourself and decide that it's best if you develop your very own Bible study program and routine. God created you as a unique individual and made you a unique part of his body. You should feel free to develop a unique personal Bible study program and routine that fits you and your needs. *Therefore...*

**...A pastor's personal Bible study is personal.**

*Everyone's program and routine is slightly different.*

What God says in Scripture is for you. When you do personal Bible study, you might be led to start thinking about how you can wedge this section into the Sunday sermon, develop a really cool Bible study, or counsel that troubled couple who have filled your schedule and office. In your personal Bible study you might be tempted to only venture into the abstract world of esoteric theological semantics, or some other variant strain of that which helps you elevate yourself in your self-perceived world of Biblical and Lutheran intelligentsia.

But, remember – God’s Word is first and foremost a message for YOU. Scripture is God’s love letter to you. It is intended to be applied to personal lives, not used just to explain antiquated, lovely Latin dogmatics terms. God’s Word is for YOU! Because it is personal, God intends it to be a message that is for your head, your heart and your hands (your heels, too, if you want to follow through on the habitus practicus of your Middler Dogmatics days).

Use Luther’s four strands. Look intently for how each section applies Law and Gospel to your life. Ponder and meditate on how this leads you to a deeper understanding of who you are, who your God is, what has been done for your salvation, and what you should be doing in your life. What truths about God does this show me? How does it show me my sin? How does it show me my Savior, or great things my Saving God has done for me? What does it lead me to do? For what does it lead me to pray? *Therefore...*

**...A pastor’s personal Bible study is personal.**

*It is and needs to be applied to your personal life.*

God wants you to know him better. He uses his Word to grow you up in your knowledge of Jesus, the Triune God, your sinful nature, your sainthood, God’s salvation of all – of you, etc. You have a lot more room in your brain. You do not yet know and understand Scripture perfectly. God works through his Word to grow the knowledge in your head. The Holy Spirit does not stop his work. Like a tree planted by streams of water, he nourishes and strengthens your knowledge, wisdom, understanding and love of Scripture.

Numerous older professors, pastors and faithful lay members remark how much they love to read Scripture. One thing they usually comment on is that they rarely walk away from a session of reading Scripture without discovering something new (or, at least, dusting off a lost or latent memory of a truth long ago learned). God’s Word contains nugget after nugget of gold. Our working of panning the Word is never done. The Holy Spirit continues to reveal those truths and increase our knowledge. Thanks be to God that he gives us the endless joy-filled chore of reading and learning his Word, and blesses our work with Spirit-wrought wisdom and understanding. *Therefore...*

**...A pastor’s personal Bible study is for the head.**

God does not want our knowledge to stay tightly wrapped and trapped in our heads. That’s why his Spirit uses it to affect our hearts. The better we know God and his loving, saving work for us, the more our love of God grows. The more we know what God has done for us and all people, the more our love for others grows. Knowledge of God’s grace grows God-given peace in our hearts. Knowledge of God’s peace, patience, kindness, goodness, joy, mercy and gentleness, grows those same attitudes in our hearts, too. God’s Word is for far more than your gray matter. The message that enters through the eyes and ears goes into the brain and flows down to move the heart. Regular study of the Word is important because the Holy Spirit uses the Word to move and mold the heart. *Therefore...*

**...A pastor’s personal Bible study is for the heart.**

As Jesus’ words remain in us, it bears abundant fruit in our lives. As our heads and hearts are fed and filled, our hands cannot sit still. God’s works through his Spirit and Word to give us the power for Christian living. Often this means that our personal Bible study leads us to changed or improved attitudes and actions. ”Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.<sup>23</sup> Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror<sup>24</sup> and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.<sup>25</sup> But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it-- he will be blessed in what he does.” (James 1:22-25)

The Spirit leads you to see, apply and do in your life what you read in his Word. Personal Bible study directs changes and foci in personal and professional ways. How does this lead me to treat my friends, neighbors, family, members, and co-workers? What attitude is God working in my heart through these words? How can I display that attitude in my daily living? The Holy Spirit directs us to the answers for these and many other good questions. God, in his abundant blessing, not only points you in the correct direction, but also gives you the power and motivation to put them into practice. *Therefore...*

**...A pastor's personal Bible study is for the hands.**

How many hours a week do you spend in personal Bible Study? How many should you be spending in Bible study? Do you and I ever shake off the importance and time we should devote to study because of our present bevy of Biblical knowledge, and/or our freedom as Christians who are not constrained by laws or a need to follow a program of Bible study? Or, does that little Pharisee in our hearts stand up and proudly coerce us into a completely self-aggrandizing program that we can boast about to others or ourselves? Does our rigorous study become our pious hope that replaces the sure hope which we are studying – God's salvation of us?

How much personal Bible study should you be doing? There's no one magic number that is right for all pastors at all times. Your personal Bible study is a part of your Christian life and freedom. When we weigh what we should do for personal study, it's a struggle to walk the narrow, middle Lutheran road. It's tough to find what is best and right for you and your life, right with God, best for your call, and right for all the other relationships and work with which God has surrounded you.

Many pastors commented that they would really like to be spending more time in personal study. They wished they could devote more time each day, or make sure to get to it everyday. In a sense, it was refreshing to read those responses. Those pastors were doing some good reading and meditating, but craved more. We realize that too little personal time in the Word is very dangerous for a pastor's life, work and faith. Busy daily schedules need to be balanced by busying ourselves with peaceful and thoughtful time in the Word. We will club our old Adam with the Law when he foolishly leads us away from the faithful study of the Word. For our new man, God flips open his treasure chest of blessings that he promises to deposit in our spiritual banks through faithful study of his Word.

Is it possible to spend too much time studying and reading and meditating on the Word? What if I spent 1 hour everyday in personal, intense study and meditation on the Word? What if it was 2 hours? 4 hours? 5 hours? 10 hours of personal study? Would I grow in faith, knowledge and love? The Holy Spirit could use all those extra hours to feed and grow my Biblical understanding and my trust in every promise of my Savior God. But, would that be the best and most God-pleasing use of my time? Eventually, what is stored in the head needs to flow out of our mouths and lives in all the work we have as pastors, and the various others duties our positions in life dictate. 10 hours of Bible Study a day might be very beneficial to my personal knowledge and faith, but could be very destructive to the many other "jobs" you have – teaching, reaching the lost, administration, counseling, visiting members, enjoying all of life, being a citizen, being a good husband to your wife, being a helpful neighbor, being a solid and active father, et cetera.

Life needs balance. Bible study needs to be part of that balance in life. We can fall into the trap of forgetting its importance as we let the busyness of our pastoral business to squeeze study time out of our schedule. We can also fall into the pious or Pharisaical temptation of too much study – thinking that doing this Godly study excuses us from the other important duties of our pastoral call and our position in life. And, no – I will not now be giving you the perfect allotment of time per day for personal Bible study. I will entrust that delightful duty to your prayer-filled thoughts and lives. Besides, there isn't such a number - Christian freedom, ya know! *Therefore...*

**...A pastor's personal Bible study is part of a balanced life.**



**God blesses us with a powerful privilege: prayer. Use it as you study his Word. Pray for insight and wisdom. Pray that the Word work powerfully on your heart. Pray that you would be guided and directed in your life and ministry. Pray for your family, friends, co-workers and members. Pray through the Word that you are studying. Scripture speaks well of prayer when the Holy Spirit points us to these examples, blessings and exhortations:**

**Mark 1:35** Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

**Hebrews 7:25** Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

**Acts 6:4** and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

**I Thessalonians 5:17** pray continually;

**I Timothy 2:1** I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—

**John 17:20** "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,

**Ephesians 6:18** And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

**James 5:16** Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

**Colossians 4:2** Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.<sup>3</sup> And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.<sup>4</sup> Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.<sup>5</sup> Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.<sup>6</sup> Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

**Therefore...**

**... A pastor's personal Bible study is coupled with prayer.**

Have you ever thought about how much time people spend trying to get or maintain control of things? Our hand is constantly on the steering wheel to maintain control of the car. People spend endless hours manipulating, pleasing, appeasing, and attempting to domineer, all in an effort to control others. They watch their diet, exercise, watch their portfolio, mow their lawn and recycle – often in an attempt to influence and control different parts of their life and environment. Many people, naturally and compulsively attempt to be the sheriff of everything in their life.

We read, study and meditate on God's Word, but we need to understand that Scripture is the Holy Spirit's bailiwick. He's the sheriff in that town. He's the one who wrote the book and understands it perfectly. The Holy Spirit is the one that controls its spread – as the Word grows in our hearts and goes to new hearts every day. He's the one in control of blessing us with wisdom, insight, understanding, love and peace. The Holy Spirit is our all-powerful God who gave us faith and continues to grow that faith. No magic program, routine or plan is the ultimate key. The Spirit and his work is essential. *Therefore...*

**...The Holy Spirit blesses, grows, motivates, and empowers a pastor's personal Bible study.**

How many times did Paul urge his fellow co-workers and members of congregations he served to follow his example? Paul obviously wasn't trying to turn all of God's people into tent-makers. He wanted them to follow his example in spiritual matters. How would they know what his example was except if they had seen it and Paul had personally shared it with them?

As a pastor, you stand before God's people as a leader and example for God's people. You are not perfect, but you do have the hefty privilege and duty of guiding the flock with words and actions. The sheep entrusted to your care can obviously see and hear your words as you stand in the pulpit or in the front of classrooms. But, how do they know how to follow your example? For the purpose of this paper – how do they know what your personal Bible study habits are? What's their model to follow as they look to grow in their relationship with God?

You can probably easily come up with outlandish ideas – like your own reality TV show where they could watch sit and read the Word each day (it would be a good way to put your example in front of others, but probably wouldn't garner too high of ratings). Practically though, how can you share with your flock what your study habits are? Outline them during your lesson in the Bible Instruction Class on the Means of Grace? Mention what you read from time to time in a sermon or Bible class? Use a passage or two from your daily reading for shut-in and hospital calls and for devotions for meetings? You are creative and know yourself and your people. You will be able to find ways to modestly, sincerely and encouragingly share how you study. *Therefore...*

### **...A pastor's personal Bible study is shared with the flock.**

Have you ever seen those charts on when you should start investing in an IRA or mutual funds? If you want to be a millionaire, how do you need to invest every year if you start at 18? How much if you start at 30? At 55? The number rises exponentially. By the time you get to the 55 year-old age bracket, most of us would be investing a majority of our salaries to come close to something in the 6 or 7 figure area. It pays to start young.

Personal Bible study is no different. The more years devoted to personal Bible study, the more time a student has at the feet of the Teacher. If you are presently not doing personal Bible study, start now. If you are looking to those young souls that will someday be the leaders of our congregations and synod, how young should they start? Continued and constant encouragement to do personal Bible study is needed for pastors, for the young people attending Catechism and youth group. It's important to keep that in front of students contemplating study for the full-time ministry (at Luther Prep School, Michigan Lutheran Seminary, area Lutheran high schools, interested youth at public high schools). It's important to encourage students at Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to start young, even while they are publicly surrounded by the Word at daily chapel services and in the classroom. *Therefore...*

### **...A pastor encourages Bible study for all of his flock.**

And, we have not touched on another somewhat tangent area. Since we are not rocks and islands alone and isolated unto ourselves, we join in Bible study with those God has been pleased to surround us with in our lives. You know that as you and your spouse, you and your children, and/ or your fellow faculty and co-workers together grow closer and closer to Christ, you will also be growing closer to one another. God blesses you with the strength, insight and encouragement of other Christians in your private and public life. Gather with them at the feet of Jesus. Don't get too busy with the work at the cost of losing the Word. God will surely bless you as you join to study his Word.

Okay, so we are nearly at the end of the paper. What has been written is nice and all well and good, but the question remains: What should I be doing for personal Bible study?!? Are there one or two programs that most pastor follow, that you should be following? Are there "magical" or faddish personal Bible study programs (like a pastors' Scriptural version of the Atkins diet – "Just do this... and suddenly these incredible results will occur!")?

I don't have any magical formulas, but I do have some suggestions for developing, improving, or revamping your personal Bible study.

- ✓ Make your own personal Bible study program and routine
- ✓ Look at what others are doing.
- ✓ Sit down and establish what your goals and purposes in Bible study are.
- ✓ Look at your interests, strengths, weakness (in knowledge and practice), and personal needs.
- ✓ Develop your own plan for the next year or two. Remember to evaluate and change (or keep the same) as you see best.
  
- ✓ Pray:
  - ❖ For God's blessings as you study
  - ❖ For growth in faith and your relationship with God
  - ❖ For a deeper understanding and love of God and his work
  - ❖ For insight, understanding, awe, love, fruits of the spirit, application to your daily life, etc.
  - ❖ For all the good blessings God promises to you through the study of his Word
  - ❖ For others – members, prospects, friends, family, co-workers, government, synod, etc.
  
- ✓ Determine what extra reading you would like to be doing/ should be doing.
  
- ✓ Establish a set time when you'll be reading, meditating, and praying.
  
- ✓ Grow in study with other Christians, too (faculty, children, wife, other Christians).

It's refreshing to hear the older pastors (and by older, I mean those over 30 – I can still say that for another year) still marvel at finding new treasures in God's Word. Keep digging – there's more gold!!!

“[My personal Bible study] is quiet time to let the Lord speak to me and redirect my thinking, my priorities, my sense of identity, etc. [My goals are] nothing real exact; I want to listen to the voice of the Lord and go mining in his heart and mind. It is always a delight, and when I'm done, I know both him and me better. It makes my day!” *A pastor responding to the survey*

“In truth, you cannot read too much in Scripture; and what you read, you cannot read too carefully; and what you read carefully, you cannot understand too well; and what you understand well, you cannot teach too well; and what you teach well, you cannot live too well.” *Dr. Martin Luther – What Luther Says, Plass number 3547, p. 1110*

“If someone can understand it (God's Word), then he should thank God; if he cannot understand it, than he should not lift up his head to quarrel, but bow his head for worship.” *Anselm (as quoted in Our Great Heritage, I, p. 186)*

<sup>12</sup> Praise be to you, O LORD; teach me your decrees.

<sup>13</sup> With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.

<sup>14</sup> I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.

<sup>15</sup> I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.

<sup>16</sup> I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.

<sup>27</sup> Let me understand the teaching of your precepts; then I will meditate on your wonders.

<sup>28</sup> My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.

<sup>29</sup> Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me through your law.

<sup>30</sup> I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws.

<sup>31</sup> I hold fast to your statutes, O LORD; do not let me be put to shame.

<sup>32</sup> I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.

<sup>41</sup>May your unfailing love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your promise;

<sup>43</sup>Do not snatch the word of truth from my mouth, for I have put my hope in your laws.

<sup>105</sup>Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

<sup>130</sup>The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

<sup>131</sup>I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands.

<sup>132</sup>Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name.

<sup>133</sup>Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.

<sup>160</sup>All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.

<sup>171</sup>May my lips overflow with praise, for you teach me your decrees.

<sup>172</sup>May my tongue sing of your word, for all your commands are righteous.

*Psalm 119 (selected verses)*

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. <sup>2</sup> But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. <sup>3</sup> He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. <sup>4</sup> Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. <sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. <sup>6</sup> For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”

*Psalm 1*

I like plants. I like to try to grow them and maintain them. I’ve learned that leaving a houseplant in a closed vehicle during the hottest days of July will probably severely hurt it or kill. I know that if you neglect plants and stop watering them, they will eventually die. These are not new or unfathomable plant tips. Most people have already learned these simple truths. (Remember, I said that I like plants, not that I’m a plant expert). While they are simple plant tips, how often do they still go unobserved? How often have you seen drooping and dying plants in your or someone else’s house? It wasn’t that they didn’t know the plant needed water, but that they forgot to take the time to water the plant.

God places a simple, but very important task in front of Christians, one that is especially important for pastors. Read, study, believe and do God’s Word. It’s simple, but very important. You know that your faith dries out without the water of the Word. That alone would be reason enough to drive us to stud his Word fervently and diligently. And, God does more than goad us into personal Bible study. God draws you with the power of his Word. He uses his Word to: point you to your Savior, fill your heart with sprouting and strengthened faith, hurl your sins into the depths of the sea, show you your righteous clothes, grow your knowledge and love of God, empowers and motivates your life lived in view of God’s mercy as a living sacrifice to God, and increase your love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control.

The list could go on and on, but the point is clear. God works powerfully through his Word. He gives great blessings through the study of his Word. God’s blessings in your personal Bible study. Your God is an awesome God! He plants you beside the river of his life-giving Word which he uses to water and feed you throughout your life until he brings you to eternally walk before his throne along the heavenly river of life.

## Sources

### Pastoral Input

*Responses by a variety of pastors to a survey (letter and questions attached)*

### Essays

*from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary ([www.wls.wels.net](http://www.wls.wels.net))*

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### Books

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## Ideas and Planning for YOUR Personal Bible Study Program

Pick one or more from each column, add any addition ideas and compose your own personal Bible study plan.

### Goals and Purpose

- † Grow in faith and my relationship with God
- † Kick my old Adam squarely in the teeth
- † Grow in understanding God's grace
- † Keep my faith rooted in the good news basics
- † Appreciate over and over again how high and wide and deep the love of God is in Christ
- † Grow in faith, which will prompt growing in godly living
- † Direction in life and personal Christian living
- † Grow in my conviction that Christ is my Savior
- † Give me strength against temptations
- † Increase my Christian maturity
- † Grow in Bible knowledge (to increase my knowledge of Scriptures, God's big picture of plan of salvation, the whole counsel of God, to be well-versed in Scripture, to refresh my memory, learn better how things fit together historically)
- † Grow in pastoral skills - ability/strength/wisdom to serve members, and do outreach; become better able to communicate biblical truths

### What Pastors Say (Survey Quotes)

- † "1) grow in my relationship with my Lord, 2) be comforted myself so that I can comfort others in their need – although too often I find myself reading for someone else first. 3) grow in knowledge of God's Word – to always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks me to give the reason for the hope that I have."
- † "My primary goal is to grow in my faith as my reading shows me my sin and my Savior. A secondary goal is to be better equipped (motivated and educated) to minister with God's Word in the congregation."
- † "First, I would like to deepen my personal relationship with my God. I want to grow in faith. I want to learn more how to share my faith. I want more strength to fight temptation. I want to use the spiritual gifts I have better and to acquire more."
- † "I have not set any specific goals down on paper – but if I did, it would be to grasp ever more deeply how wide, and long, and high and deep is the love of Christ, that I might be filled to all the fullness of Christ."
- † "Quiet time to let the Lord speak to me and redirect my thinking, my priorities, my sense of identity, etc."
- † "Nothing real exact; I want to listen to the voice of the Lord and go mining in his heart and mind. It is always a delight, and when I'm done, I know both him and me better. It makes my day!"

### Scripture Reading Plans (English)

	Examples
1. <i>By Program</i> † Pre-Programmed  † Self-Programmed        † Pseudo-Programmed  2. <i>As Need, Life, Work Dictates</i>	"Read Through the Bible in a Year" programs, One-year Bible, Brug's schedule  a. Simple – 3 chapters OT, 1 NT, 1 Psalm/ 1 Proverb ch. b. Complex - "I [not me – a survey response] begin in Advent with the prophets, then go to Matthew and Hebrews [by Easter]. After that I will read John and his epistles and Revelation. Then back to the OT for either the Books of Moses or the historical books. I sandwich in Job, Esther, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Wherever it seems to suit me that year. Then back to Luke and Acts, ff, by maybe some more of the historical books in the OT, and then Mark ff by the Pauline Epistles, After Easter I change the order of things around from year to year, but that's pretty much how I do it." c. By Time – Scripture read in a set time (15 minutes, 30 minutes, 45 minute, 1 hour, from 5:20-6:00 am)  Capricious book hopping  What I'm studying, preaching, teaching, or as questions arise

## Original Language Study

<b>How much?</b>
† A little
† A lot
† None
† With a study group

### What?

1. Half an hour of Hebrew/ Greek reading/ day
2. Page from Licht auf dem Weg (Light on the Path)/ day
3. One passage of Greek and Hebrew/ day
4. 80 verses aloud (English and Hebrew/ Greek)/ day
5. One chapter Hebrew and Greek/ week
6. Follow book/ set program

## Worship with Study

### Formal and Informal Plans

Matins and Prime
Morning Praise (Christian Worship)
Morning Devotion (Christian Worship)
Worship pattern from book ( <u>Minister's Prayer Book</u> , <u>Daily Prayer</u> )
Blended Worship

### What Pastors Say (Survey Quotes)

- † “On Tues., I sing through the upcoming Sunday’s hymns and pick a stanza or two to memorize for singing a few times each day.”
- † “I begin by singing the morning hymn from *Morning Praise* found in *Christian Worship*. I then read a psalm selection that fits the church year as suggested in the two volume set *Daily Prayer* (a CPH devotional tool for pastors now out of print). I then read a couple chapters (now I am reading through the Old Testament) finishing that by asking Luther’s fourfold questions (What is God saying here? Where does this make me glad? Where does this make me sad? What does this lead me to pray for?). After that, I use *Light on the Path* to read through a passage of Greek and Hebrew. I follow that with time for prayer for the congregations and individuals on my prayer list. If I don’t allow myself to be rushed, the time typically spent (beginning to end) is 30-45 minutes.”

## Prayer with Study

### Prayer Plans

Reading Prompted
Before
During
After
Before, during (as passages hit home), and after
<b>Need/ Thank Prompted</b>
Personal (daily and work life)
Members (problems, challenges, opportunities, thanksgiving)
<b>Program Prompted</b>
Pray through the membership list, present and former congregations
ACTS (Adoration/ Confession/ Thanksgiving/ Supplication)
Routine (i.e. - Prayer for Grace, Luther’s Morning Prayer, Lord’s Prayer)
Printed prayer for pastors ( <u>Daily Prayer</u> ; <u>Minister’s Prayer Book</u> , etc.)
<b>Combination</b>

### What Pastors Say (Survey Quotes)

- † “I try to call on a regular basis 9-10 households and ask what they want me praying about for them – I’d like to do that every day, but I don’t yet.”
- † “My daily prayers usually contain a request for wisdom and understanding as I ponder the Word.”
- † “I pray often, more than I ever used to. I pray a lot of on-the-go prayers like ‘this day is awesome’, ‘I could use some help here’, ‘thanks for doing that.’ Before study or preaching I pray mostly for the help of the Holy Spirit to understand, learn, apply, teach what I’m reading. I’ve also tried to spend more time praying for others (a list would be good if I were disciplined), but I probably do that more at bedtime rather than study time.”
- † “My thoughts usually center around a prayer of Luther Prof. Fredrich gave us. ‘Lord, help me to understand this correctly, but more importantly, help me to act on it. If my study is not done to your glory, let me not understand a single syllable. But give me just enough understanding that you may be glorified through me.’”
- † “At times as you read you are already “praying through” what you are reading – the best study of the Word is a constant conversation with God as we “seek his face.” But “formal” prayers, with a specific and every changing prayer list, are done at the end of my devotional time.”
- † “The only “routine” I have is to remember each of the congregations I have served each day I have devotional time. Other than that, my prayers differ substantially every time I pray. One other “routine” I could add is that I conclude my prayers with the ancient morning prayer of the church, the “prayer for grace” and the Lord’s Prayer.”



## Other Religious Reading

### How many hours each week?

0, 1, 2, 3, 5, 6-10, 10-15, Several

### What “stuff”?

Range – 50-100% Lutheran sources (average – about 85% Lutheran)

Walther’s Law & Gospel

## Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly

Lutheran Confessions

Luther’s Sermons (in German)

Comparative study of Lutheran/ Reformed dogmatics books

Pieper, Walther, Chemnitz, etc.

## Our Great Heritage Wauwatosa Theology

Reformed – various (Warren’s “Purpose Driven...” devotional, “How-To...”)

### What Pastors Say (Survey Quotes)

Re. “other reading” -

- † “Remember as I answer this that this has become for me a specific part of my calling – but I would say that I spend on average (it varies greatly week to week) about 6-10 hours.”
- † “Hardly any. I look at my bookshelf and think about it a lot. Does that count?”

Re. “what stuff”

- † “75% Lutheran 25% other. However, (Very important point for me) I don’t read the “other” to learn, as much as I read it to be critical. I enjoy evaluating the “other” stuff and to how it truly compares to Scripture with special emphasis on law/gospel.”

## Study Time

### What Pastors’ Say (Survey Quotes)

### When Do You Study?

Morning (1<sup>st</sup> thing at home, or 1<sup>st</sup> thing at the office)

Evening

Morning and Evening

Scheduled elsewhere in the day

Sometime while I’m awake (daily schedule, chaos, and duties dictate when)

### How Long do you Study?

15 minutes, 30 minutes, 45 minutes, 1 hour, 2 hours

- † “Usually, the first thing when I get into the office. I ask the secretary to hold calls at that time.”
- † “After rising in the morning, shower, shave, before anyone else is up and around.”
- † “I try to do it as first work of each day.”
- † “No set time. I like to do it in the morning if at all possible. There are several days where we begin with early morning Bible class so it gets moved throughout the day.”
- † “I try to read early in the morning before coming into church. If I don’t get it done at home I try to do it first thing when I get to church.”
- † “First thing in the morning – 6am or 6:30 – depending on which alarm I listen to.”
- † “For me first in the morning works best. Otherwise I get too distracted by the cares and troubles of the day, without having adequately armed myself to meet them.”
- † “If I allow myself to begin any other task after breakfast, it is very rare that I will be disciplined enough to come back to my personal study later in the day. I try to do personal study every day Monday through Friday, but there are all too many weeks when a day or two are missed (sadly, once and awhile even more than that!)”

## Your Personal Bible Study Plan

	<b>Your Present Study Plans</b>	<b>Your New/ Improved/ Augmented/ Re-affirmed Plans</b>
<b>Goals and Purpose</b>		
<b>Scripture Reading Plans (English)</b>		
<b>Original Language Study</b>		
<b>Prayer with Study</b>		
<b>Worship with Study</b>		
<b>Other Religious Reading</b>	<i>How much?</i>  <i>What?</i>	
<b>Study Time</b>	<i>When?</i>  <i>For how long?</i>	