

Nothing Takes the Place of Bible Study

by the Rev. Sylvia Karlsson

So many things promise spiritual renewal these days that sometimes it's hard to know where to begin to find authentic nurture for our Christian journey. Certainly each of us will respond to renewal experiences in different ways based on our personalities, life situations and interests. However, I believe that underlying all of our choices, the prime foundation is Bible study, and nothing takes its place for our spiritual journey. Nothing takes its place, no matter what our choices are, no matter where we are on the path, and no matter what else we need for renewal of our spirit.

Nothing takes the place of Bible study because we are compelled to understand the relevancy of being Christian in this place and at this time. Too often the interpretation of the Bible has been given over to those who speak the loudest, even if they have taken passages out of context to suit their purposes. If you find yourself claiming the name of Christian, then ask yourself what you are doing to understand our faith teachings. As Christians in a mainline denomination, we owe it to ourselves and to the greater community to reclaim the scriptures as we understand them, with integrity, with scholarship, with love and with relevance for our lives.

In our women's Bible study at my church, we are doing our best to study the Bible with all the variety of stories. At nearly every session, more than one woman will say, "I never knew that was in the Bible"—and this comment comes about all the stories, both the familiar and the unfamiliar ones. We do not study the Bible in a simplistic or syrupy or sentimentalized way. Instead we strive to learn it with straightforward meaning, enjoying the pleasant stories, getting into some depth on the difficult stories, and truly finding comfort from both. In order to achieve that balance, we are called to grapple with the Bible's message for

today, to put stories in context, and to reflect on all the stories, both joyful ones and those of sadness and injustice.

So how can this balance be achieved, you might ask? Many good study guides are available in bookstores, and our United Church of Christ publishing houses have some great ones. (See the list of current books on page 2.8.2. To order contact United Church of Christ Resources at 800-537-3394.) Find one that interests you, and then consider these tips:

❁ Don't just start reading the Bible from start to finish. The Bible is long, boring in parts, written by many people over centuries, codified by committees, and misunderstood out of context. Yet the Bible is fascinating, too! Find a quality curriculum that suits your purposes and the amount of time the leader needs to put in.

❁ Start a group so you are not alone, but don't try to combine Bible study with a support group. Small groups are wonderful to build community in a church, but sharing in the support group tends to use up the allotted time, and the foundation of Bible study gets put off again.

❁ Study all the stories, including the sad ones and the happy ones. Most of us who learned the Bible as children don't know all the stories that are in the Bible, and these stories are helpful for all the situations of life. With as much as we know about mental health today, we know that only focusing on joyful stories is unrealistic and does not prepare us or our families to deal with the tough issues or difficult times that are bound to come along in our lives.

❁ Use different translations of the Bible, but always read an academic study Bible as part of the

lesson, like the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* or the *Harper Collins Study Bible*. Many translations help us "hear" the stories in different ways, but translating ancient languages into English is not simple, easy, or even agreed upon among scholars. A study Bible helps to keep the passages in context.

❁ For women's groups, use the *Women's Bible Commentary* as a resource. First published in 1992, (edited by Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, from Westminster John Knox Press), this highly readable commentary provides a solid background from women's perspectives on many of the stories of the Bible, not just stories about women.

❁ If you share the leadership, gain continuity by having a leader take four or more sessions

before trading off with someone else. The continuity for the group far outweighs the flexibility for the leaders, because the study is less fractured and more helpful in linking Bible study to the spiritual renewal in our lives.

Nothing takes the place of Bible study for spiritual renewal. Of course many other wonderful things help: retreats, book groups, support groups and community projects. Yet all these other things are given deeper meaning when Bible study is their foundation. As Christians on a lifelong journey, we don't deserve substitutes for understanding the way of justice, peace and love that Jesus envisioned. Nothing takes the place of Bible study for understanding the basic beliefs that affect our lives, individually and in the wider culture. Nothing takes the place of Bible study as the foundation for spiritual renewal. Nothing.

Resources Available for Bible Study from United Church Press and Pilgrim Press

Order by calling 800-537-3394

For Lenten study:

<i>Bread of Life: Lenten Reflections for Individuals and Groups</i> by Barbara J. Essex	\$9.95
<i>Meditations on the Way of the Cross</i> by Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Brother Roger of Taizé	\$7.95
<i>Calmly Plotting the Resurrection</i> by Donna E. Schaper	\$7.95
<i>Journey to the Cross</i> by Myra B. Nagel	\$8.95
<i>A Passage Through Sacred History</i> by Don C. Skinner	\$9.95

Studies for Women in the Bible:

<i>Jesus and Those Bodacious Women</i> by Linda H. Hollies	\$11.95
<i>Wisdom's Daughters</i> by Elizabeth C. Watson	\$12.95
<i>Bad Girls of the Bible</i> by Barbara J. Essex	\$13.95

General:

<i>Insights: Bible Studies for Growing Faith, A User's Guide to the Bible—the first in a series</i>	\$6.95
<i>The Word and You, A Lectionary Based Exploration of the Bible</i>	\$16.95
The Scripture Project—every church received a summary report which includes a 6 week Bible study	Free

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