

Is a formal Bible study an 'addition' to the church? If it is wrong, what makes it so?

Written by Josh Winslett

Saturday, 29 December 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 17 July 2014 15:44

Revised 5-23-13

The term “**bible study**” can be very nebulous. Like any term or phrase in the English language, there can be many definitions associated with the phrase. By “**formal Bible study**”

I take that to mean a question and answer session during a typical organized worship service.

In many places in scripture we can find people asking questions to ministers. In Acts 8:29-39 we see that the Ethiopian Eunuch was baptized after a dialog with Phillip. In Acts 10 the entire household of Cornelius was converted to the knowledge of the truth through an in dept biblical discussion.

Acts 17:11 describes people that actively studied God’s word and were more noble then those who ignored the word. These noble Bereans studied the word daily. The scriptures were a rare commodity in those days. It is probable that they studied together at the temple, their place of worship. In many places we can find where the disciples asked Jesus, their teacher, questions (*Matthew 17:10, Matthew 24:3, Mark 7:17, Mark 9:28, Mark 10:10, Luke 8:9, John 9:2*). To see that preaching was often accompanied by dialog a person would only have to do a word study in the book of Acts on the words preach, preached and preaching.

Furthermore, the apostle Paul did more then just the typical formal lecture style preaching. Acts 17:2 states that Paul *reasoned* out of the scriptures with those at Thessalonica. The English word '*reasoned*' comes from the Greek word '*dialogomia*'. This is the Greek word from where we get our English word '*dialogue*'.

These words hold the general connotation of having a conversation or discussion one with another.

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The dialogue discussions and questions in the above mentioned verses may or may not have been in a formal worship service but we see a pattern of students gathered together asking questions from their teacher. Multiple times the above questions led to conversions.

Like many things in life, if done properly, a bible study can be profitable. Here are some biblical guide lines for bible studies:

1 Timothy 3:2 *"A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;"*

The only person commanded to be a formal teacher in the church of God is a bishop/elder. Those men to whom God has called to preach are to do the teaching.

1 Corinthians 14:40 *"Let all things be done decently and in order."*

Anything done in the house of God is to be done in an orderly fashion. No one should argue with, interrupt, or belittle the minister as he answers questions from the congregation.

Hebrews 13:17 *"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you."*

God has placed his ministry as someone that is a superintendent over spiritual things. The word bishop means superintendent. In this text the writer uses the phrase "rule over" to indicate the role of the minister. In teaching and answering question they are watching for the welfare of your lives. That is not to mean that they are to lord over God's heritage. He commands his ministers to be loving, meek, and longsuffering. The minister himself is to be a servant. So then how is he to "rule over" the congregation? He "rules over" by proclaiming the greatest authority and only rule of faith and practice, the word of God.

John 21:15-17 *"....feed my lambs.....feed by sheep.....feed my sheep..."*

There is no New Testament precedent that gives any reason to segregate because of gender, rank, race, age, or maturity. In *John 21:15-17*, Jesus commands Peter to feed his sheep and lambs, the person that feeds sheep is the same person that feeds the lambs. The understanding of a child can often be greater than that of a wise and prudent adult (*Matthew 11:25, Matthew 21:15*

). To imply that children cannot learn on the same level of an adult is contrary to words of our savior.

Galatians 3:28

gives the final understanding that within baptized believer, there are none superior or inferior; all are treated on the same level.

1 Timothy 2:12 *"But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to*

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be in silence."

Women are not to lead formal church bible studies. Only the minister has the biblical authority to lead the congregation in study. For further clarification on this point check out our answer to question; "Should a Woman Lead a Bible Study."

2 Timothy 2:23 *"But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes."*

Questions should be well thought out and prayed about before being submitted to the qualified minister.

By that definition and qualifications, I would say that a formal bible study is not an 'addition' to the church. When done the right way, bible studies can be a very useful tool in teaching the congregation. Nevertheless, if anything done in church capacity goes against these general rules (qualified ministers, integrated worship, decent and orderly behavior), it would not be following the biblical guidelines and I would consider it 'wrong'.

I would like to end with two Historical quotes.

"An answer to a sister who asked about our churches having prayer meetings and Bible discussions: The Baptists, in the early days of this country, had prayer meetings, but of late they have been discontinued with few exceptions. It would be better if they were kept up. There are so few members in our churches who can lead in prayer in the introduction of service. It is in agreement with the Scriptures that teach much about prayer and the obligation to pray with and for each other. To be engaged in prayer would be much better than repeating gossip and talking foolishness. The prayer meeting might be combined with reading the Bible. As to Bible readings, I have had them in my churches for twenty-five years. When we meet, we read as many chapters as we can and talk about the passages as we read them, thus, having many profitable times together.

I have heard objections to our meeting together to read the Bible by Baptists who probably read very few chapters at home the entire year.

What we need is to read the Bible more. The members would understand the preaching better if they were informed on the teaching of the Bible. In the time of the Saviour, the people gathered in the synagogues to hear the Bible read, for they did not have the books as we do now. Jesus went there and read, and then would take occasion to tell what the passages meant. Read Luke 4:16-21. It is alright to read the Bible at home, but the trouble is that people let other things engage their attention and neglect the reading of the Bible. I have known preachers who have objected to Bible readings (discussions) when they themselves would have been benefited by such gatherings: their sermons showed they were not familiar with the reading of the Bible.

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Reading leads to investigation, which is what the Bereans did. See Acts 17:10-11. They were commended for this searching of the Scriptures. It is better to read the Bible in company with others, for the exchange of thoughts helps us to an understanding.” **Elder Walter Cash, From Messenger of Peace, 1927**

"In those days it was common to hold prayer meetings among the Baptists; and in that church a portion of every Sunday and Wednesday was devoted to the prayer meeting, at which we attended to the reading of the Scriptures, giving short exhortations, singing, and reading select sermons and commentaries of some approved authors, and generally some one would propose a text, and those present would give their views on its meaning. I am sorry Baptists have so generally ceased to sustain this useful practice. I have been as much edified by the exercises of the members as by any sermons I ever heard. And then all the different gifts of the members were brought out; and, being so often together, and religious worship being the object of their social meetings, their confidence and brotherly attachments were cultivated and confirmed. One great advantage was derived from this constant exercise of the brethren's gift, and it was this: when anything prevented the preacher from filling his appointment, the assembly did not disperse without a religious service, for the brethren would proceed with the meeting by prayer and exhortation, etc." **The Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson (1788-1866)**
Chapter Four, Page 40-41

Final note: This subject should not be a point of contention. There are good ministers that agree and disagree with formal bible studies. This is a topic that should always fall under the label of Christian liberty.