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THE EFFECT OF BIBLE STUDY

by  
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This month the Scripture Union is directing attention to the importance of regularly reading the Bible day by day. It is an excellent thing to form the habit of reading a chapter or half a chapter or some other portion of God's Word each day, because God's Word is the instrument that God uses in forming a Christian character in us.

You will remember that Genesis 1 tells of God's purpose of creating men and women in His likeness and in His image. This divine purpose is finally fulfilled when our characters and personalities conform to the character of Christ Who is the perfect image and reflection of God. This purpose will reach its fulfilment when we see Christ at His coming. But already God is at work in His children and the way that the Holy Spirit brings about this transformation of our character is through the Word of God, by applying it to our minds and to our wills and to our whole personality as we read it, so that by His power we grow into that character of God which has been revealed to us in His Word. Thus the regular reading of the Bible is most important for growth as a Christian; and not only the reading of the Bible privately but also the reading of it publicly in the congregation, and especially its explanation and application by the preacher, for the preacher is called by God to this work of ministering God's Word to God's people. Unfortunately it is often true that sermons nowadays are taken up with other things than explaining and expounding passages of the Bible; but if this is so, God will not work through such sermons in the way He works through His Word.

Just as we ought to read the Bible daily ourselves as individuals and attend to hear it expounded weekly in church, so those of us who are heads of families have a responsibility for reading and explaining God's Word to our children and all who

live in the home of which we are head. We cannot get out of this responsibility any more than the minister can get out of his responsibility, for reading and explaining the Word of God to those under his charge. For it is only through a knowledge of the Word of God received into the mind and accepted in the heart that Christians grow into the likeness of Christ. Where there is a lack of knowledge of God's Word, there will also be a lack of Christlikeness in the character and actions, whether of an individual or a home, or a church congregation, or a denomination.

Perhaps the gravest weakness of the Roman Catholic denomination is that in the past it has not encouraged a knowledge of the Bible amongst its members. As we all know, at the time of the Reformation the English translation of the Bible was condemned and as many copies as could be collected were destroyed by orders of the Bishop of London, and its translator, William Tyndale, was arrested and burnt at the stake. Indeed towards the end of the middle ages, even knowing the Bible by heart was regarded in the church courts as evidence of heresy, and was sufficient ground for condemnation to death. This distrust of allowing ordinary church members to possess and read a copy of the Bible in their own language or to know its contents continued on in the Roman Catholic church, so that as late as the middle of last century Pope Pius IX in his Syllabus of Errors described Bible Societies as "pests".

The Roman Catholic church regards the Bible as under the control of the church. This is illustrated in the preface to the paperback edition of the Papal Encyclicals edited by Anne Fremantle, published seven years ago. In this preface written by a Jesuit, Gustave Weigel, we read on page 10, "For the Catholic, God reveals Himself through the medium of the teaching of ... the church ... The church uses many means: the teaching of authorised masters, i.e., the bishops and their primate the pope; the liturgy; books written by men of the church under divine inspiration, i.e. the scriptures; the common beliefs and practices of the Catholics stretched out over time and space. The inspired books, which have God as their

author in consequence of their inspiration, are ecclesiastical instruments for teaching, guiding and exhorting. They are not over the church, but rather a part of the church's panoply to be used in her work of accomplishing the task of uniting man to God. It is the church which teaches, the church which sanctifies, the church which builds and vitalises. The church is not a fruit of the book but rather the book is the fruit of the church". This quotation puts very clearly the traditional Roman Catholic position with regard to the Bible. The writer says explicitly that the Bible is not over the church but the Bible is just one amongst many other instruments which the church possesses. The writer calls it an "ecclesiastical instrument" implying that it is to be used or disused in the church's wisdom and in the past it has been mostly disused. But if you reflect, this is an extraordinary position. If, as Roman Catholics acknowledge, the Bible is God's Word, then God's Word must be sovereign over all our actions. When God speaks a word it is our part to submit and to obey. Moreover God's Word cannot be man's instrument. God's Word, as the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us, is "quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword". Christians have been entrusted with this sword by God, we use it under His direction, but it contains its own power within itself. As Isaiah chapter 55 puts it "My word that goes forth from my mouth shall not return unto me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I please and it shall prosper in the thing whereunto I send it". The church is the minister of God's Word, that is its servant or its slave. It is not its boss or its controller.

If we fail in our ministry and keep back God's Word from ourselves or our families or our congregations, the result will be a stunting of Christian growth; but if we minister God's Word faithfully and prayerfully the result (it is good to

remember) will not be according to our abilities, which are slight, and weak, but according to the strength and power of the Word of God itself, which is mighty to cast down strongholds, as St. Paul put it. We have an interesting illustration of this fact in the modern Roman Catholic church. Amongst Roman Catholics the study of the Bible has been on the increase this century and this is leading to very interesting developments. We may perhaps date this increase of interest in the Bible to 1893 when Pope Leo XIII issued a bull entitled "Providentissimus Deus" in which he commended Bible study. This was followed by the foundation of the School for Biblical Studies at Jerusalem and the establishment by Pope Pius X of the Pontifical Biblical Institute at Rome in 1909. Then 50 years later in 1943 Pope Pius XII published a most important encyclical entitled "Divino Afflante Spiritu" by which he greatly stimulated the study of the Bible amongst Roman Catholics and in contrast to his predecessors of last century, urged Roman Catholics to "favour and assist those pious associations whose object is to circulate copies of the Bible ... and to encourage Christian families in the habit of reading them devoutly every day". He also urged the commendation "in word and practice" of modern vernacular translations of the Bible. Moreover the Bible was now to be translated from the original languages in preference to the Latin. It must be remembered that even so modern a translation as that of Msgr Knox's was still made from the Latin vulgate rather than from the original text. Moreover the Pope enjoined teachers of sacred scripture in the seminaries to "complete the whole course of biblical teaching in such a manner as to equip young candidates for the priesthood and the ministry of the divine word with that knowledge of Sacred Scripture, and inspire them with that love of Holy Writ, without which the apostolate cannot be rich in fruit", and he concluded with the prayer "May the future priests

of the church find in Holy Scripture a pure and perennial source of their own spiritual life, and at the same time food and strength for the office of preaching which they are to undertake", adding "Christ will be better known by men, more ardently loved, more faithfully imitated by them according as they are moved with more eager desire to know and meditate upon Holy Scripture and especially the New Testament. For as St. Jerome says 'to be ignorant of the scriptures is to be ignorant of Christ' ... it is in the scriptures ... that all will learn to know Christ".

We may thank God for these indications of a new attitude to scripture, for if continued and not suppressed, it will work its work. For the Word of God, if read prayerfully, contains within itself its own mighty power to convict and convince. God is not a man, and His words are not mere ecclesiastical instruments, whatever we may say, but they are powerful in breaking down strongholds of Satan. If the Bible is read prayerfully and humbly, it will work its own work. This has always been the experience of Christians. It was the experience of the Reformation and I think we may already detect in the modern Roman Catholic church the effect of the Bible now being re-read and re-studied in some parts, at least, of the Roman Catholic world. Thus this year Professor Hans Kung, one of the theologians summoned to Rome to attend the Vatican Council, and who is a professor in the Roman Catholic theological faculty at Tübingen, has published a book entitled "That the World May Believe" which contains some passages which are indistinguishable, in my judgment, from the doctrine of justification by faith over which the whole Reformation was fought and which Protestants believe to be so clearly revealed in scripture. Thus on page 83 Kung writes "in the cross and resurrection of Christ God has shown Himself gracious towards all men, adjudging them righteous. A man has to abandon himself to God empty handed without works, putting his whole trust in Him; in short he has to believe. It is only from this state that he can then fruitfully do the works

of love. And only thus can we finally face the judgment". Kung goes on to speak of this "justification of the sinner and his selfless trusting abandonment to God" as the consequences when a man "surrenders himself in faith ... to the one true God in Jesus Christ", leading to the "showing forth of this faith in works of love". And on page 102 he writes, "Baptism is no use unless it is matched with a decision of faith; baptism is the sacrament of faith. Faith means decision: Are you going to rely ultimately on yourself or on God? Are you going to take everything yourself sufficiently into your own hands or leave everything selflessly to Him? Are you going to trust His word or not? Believe or not believe?"

It is true that these sentiments are not characteristic of the modern Roman Catholic church as a whole. As we have seen from the preface to "Papal Encyclicals" the old attitude is still being vigorously expressed at the present time, but if the Word of God is read it will continue to have its salutary effect. As Kung says on page 57 "If Catholics and Protestants both look into the mirror of the Gospel and both keep measuring up more and more to the demands of our Lord in the Gospel then we shall, step by step, come nearer to each other". This is true, and we may thank God that a Roman Catholic has written it and pray that God's Word will continue to work its work both in him and in us. We ourselves have had free access to the Scriptures for 400 years. We need to look to the rock from whence we are hewn and redouble our determination to read God's Word for ourselves, to teach it to our families and to preach it in the congregation. Nothing can be a substitute for the Word of God. Sermons full of pious ideas will not work the transformation of the character in the way that expositions of God's Word will do. For the Word of God touches the conscience and stirs up the will of the hearer as well as illuminating his mind, for the Spirit of God works with His own Word. It is His sword. So by reading and meditating on the Word of God as given to us in Holy Scripture, we will be built up into the likeness of Christ and so fulfil

God's purpose for us in creation, namely that we should be conformed to the perfect image of His Son. So let us renew our resolution to read God's Word and teach it in our home and in our church.

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