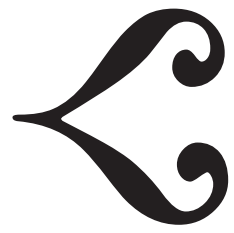


# Hosea Lesson 17

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EDITORIAL

## What Has Happened to Bible Classes?

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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 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 distinctives 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. □

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## "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."

In those days before the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians (722 B.C.), the prophet Hosea focused upon one of the causes of Israel's impending destruction—ignorance was a fundamental problem (4:6). In a similar vein, Isaiah, speaking for the Lord, warned the southern kingdom of Judah of a coming time of punitive devastation: "My people are gone into captivity for lack of knowledge" (5:13). The prophetic curse was fulfilled in the Babylonian Captivity (606-536 B.C.).

Since the great truths of the Old Testament serve for our learning (Rom. 15:4), surely we can conclude that a sustained ignorance of Jehovah's will can bring nothing but tragedy to the modern church.

Christianity is a religion of instruction. Where there is no solid biblical instruction, the Christian system can neither commence nor survive. One of the basic differences between the Mosaic regime (into which one was born physically) and the church of Jesus Christ, is the fact that knowledge is prerequisite to identifying with the faith of the gospel (Jer. 31:31-34). Jesus declared that favor with God must involve instruction, reception, comprehension, and commitment (Jn. 6:45).

Anyone with a smattering of Bible knowledge, and any experience at all within our brotherhood, is aware of the fact that the church of today is facing a time of great crisis. We have those among us who have a pathetically low regard for the concept of Bible inspiration/authority. Not a few have made serious compromises with the dogma of evolution in an effort to mesh with society. Many of our people are very fuzzy on what constitutes a Christian. They think the church of Christ is just another denomination. A number of prominent personalities contend that there are few guidelines for regulating worship, and so the church must jazz-up its services to appeal to an entertainment-oriented culture. Basic truth has been thrown to the wind. Why are things in such a state of chaos? One of the reasons is ignorance. There probably has not been a time in this century when Bible knowledge among the Lord's people has sunk to such a base level. Let us be more specific.

First, we are suffering a leadership crisis. Where are the godly elders who know the Bible from "cover to cover?" Where are the bishops who can, and will, stand and exhort in sound doctrine and convict the gainsayers (Tit. 1:9). There are still some great elders, but far too many who are serving in this capacity have been given the job because they were successful businessmen, had wealth, or possessed other traits that were wholly unrelated to tending the flock of God.

Second, the church has on its hands a new generation of preachers who have matriculated through some of our schools (and denominational seminaries), but who do not understand the most elementary matters about the role of the gospel preacher. They are experts in everything but the Word of God. These new princes are theological clones who can scarcely frame a sentence that the com-

mon man can understand. They know nothing, teach nothing, stand for nothing—but, unfortunately, a lot of our people love it this way.

Third, it is no longer the case that the average person-in-the-pew is a good Bible student. Everyone has probably heard the old story about the judge who couldn't find a Bible in his courtroom with which to swear in a witness; so he simply called for a Christian man and had the witness place his hand upon the brother's head. The days are gone when we were known as a "Bible-toting, Bible-quoting" people. Many members of the church never carry a Bible to worship, and they could not cite scriptural references on the most fundamental of doctrinal issues.

Fourth, most of our schools are not the solid training centers they used to be. The time was when the presidents and faculty-members of our colleges were great gospel preachers/teachers who knew how to powerfully proclaim the truth and win souls. They were rich in Bible knowledge. Many of our current administrators have arrived in their positions because they are adept at fund raising. Too, we have become so "degree" oriented that we have allowed the secular accrediting systems to structure our teaching programs according to their ideals. Is it any wonder that some of our schools have become the trojan horses by which corruption has wormed its way into the church? Some of our colleges constitute one of the greatest threats to the church today.

Fifth, the Bible school literature that we have produced in recent decades is woefully anemic. It is hard to find material that is strong in doctrine. The current slick and colorful literature is filled with case-study scenarios and role-playing exercises that rely more on human wisdom than respect for the authority of God's Word.

Sixth, our homes are void of biblical instruction. Domestic lives are so crowded—both dad and mom working, children involved in school, sports, etc.—that virtually all religious instruction has been left up to the Bible school, which, in many instances, represents a sorry effort. A hastily-prepared, Saturday-night lesson, with a fill-in-the-blanks format, simply will not provide the foundation for spiritual stability.

Seventh, most congregations are suffering serious attendance problems. Only a fraction of the local church attends Sunday or Wednesday evening gatherings. Aside from the Lord's day morning assembly, only a skeleton crew will attend the services of a gospel meeting. Almost no teenagers will be in evidence. It is utterly amazing at the casual way in which many children of God treat the meetings of the church. Neglect of the assemblies for trivial circumstances—even by leaders, Bible class teachers, etc., is a common occurrence.

The crisis we face is real and deadly. Unless there is a revival of interest among church leaders; unless there is some resurgence of rich teaching of the sacred Scriptures; unless there is a rekindling of passion for the cause of Christ within the church—we are in for rough times. The church cannot flourish if she continues to drift in the same sluggish direction. May God help us to responsibly address these problems. *WJ*