

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### LACK OF BIBLE MEMORIZATION

“For God so loved the world that He...” If you are a typical church leader you are able to complete that statement. Why? Because you have memorized John 3:16. Perhaps like Timothy you have been instructed in the Scriptures from childhood. Christians view the Bible as a friend that gives counsel; a navigational instrument that directs their journey; a playbook that diagrams how the game of life should be executed. Scriptures committed to memory are used daily by the Holy Spirit to speak and direct our lives.

But wait a minute! If Scripture memorization is so important, why do pastors list lack of Bible memorization among their top five Christian education challenges? Are Christians memorizing Scripture less today?

The feeling among many ministers is that adults are memorizing less today than they have in the past. When they were children parents helped them with memory work. Time was made for recitation of verses and they were frequently rewarded for their efforts. But today most adults have not grown up in that kind of culture. And today *adults are not forced* to do any type of memory work, so many no longer learn in this manner.

Furthermore, children are memorizing less Scripture today than their counterparts did a few decades ago. *Curricular option and mediated instruction* in well equipped learning centers have replaced simple lessons. Instead of a Bible story followed by rote recitation, modern curriculum employs scores of Bible-learning activities to teach the theme of a passage.

*The proliferation of Bible translations* has further complicated the memorization of Scripture. When many of us were children, there were two prominent translations, with some newcomers penetrating the field. Today there are scores of translations, five even having their own complete concordances (KJV, RSV, TLB, NASB, AND NIV). The lack of a common Bible version discourages group reading and recitation. When people don't practice memory work together, they lose the motivational benefit of accountability.

*The pace and race of daily schedules* also squeezes out Bible memory. Unfortunately, many families are sacrificing the important for the urgent.

While Dad's schedule has increased some, Mom's schedule and that of the kids has skyrocketed. More than 60 percent of married women work outside (*and* inside) the home. Children now participate in athletic programs and community cultural activities. And the entire family seems mesmerized by cable and the internet.

Our educational sophistication, proliferation of translations and fast-paced living has not been a calculated attack on Bible memory. Nevertheless, their subliminal impact is significant.

Can we as church leaders reverse this trend? Can Bible memorization become a regular feature of discipleship? Can our members again emphasize it as a personal spiritual discipline? The answer to these questions is a resounding yes. The proof lies in the fact that many individuals and congregations are having good success in this area. But before I share several suggestions, let me first articulate four assumptions worth clarifying regarding memorization.

### ***Assumptions about Memorization***

My first assumption is that *memorization is important*. While this statement seems obvious, some challenge it openly, while others indirectly deny it through their indifference.

Why don't you memorize the telephone numbers of all your friends? You might respond, "Why bother, the numbers are at my fingertips if I need them." Some individuals feel the same way about memorization. Having a Bible close at hand, and being familiar with its content is valuable, but some feel to actually memorize it is more work than it's worth.

But there's a danger in that attitude. For example, while an astronaut might take his flight manual into space, he still memorizes hundreds of procedures essential to his well being. Similarly, having the Lord's precepts stored for immediate recall is important for daily living. In the words of Moses, the Scriptures "are not just idle words for you – they are your life" (Deut. 32:47).

Psalm 119:11 states: "I have hidden your word in my heart *that* I might not sin against you" (emphasis mine). Notice the time reference. The Psalmist had stored the Lord's commands in his intellect and affections so that when he was tempted to sin, the words would direct him away from disobedience. The Bible is not simply a manual that can be consulted periodically; it is a book of living words that gives insight for godly living.

I offer the second assumption as a caution that *memorization does not equal spirituality*. While it is desirable to program our minds with God's living Word, we cannot assume that knowledge of the Scriptures (or even memorization) assures godly maturity. We are all familiar with individuals

who are walking encyclopedias of Bible knowledge, yet are insensitive, proud or even caustic.

The child who has memorized 300 verses does not automatically become less self-centered than the child who learned only ten verses. It may only demonstrate he or she was more highly motivated to perform a given task simply for the reward that would be received. While I do believe there is a correlation between a sincere commitment to memorization and spiritual growth, it's naïve to think that the practice alone produces maturity.

My third assumption deals with the purpose of memory work: *memorization is not an end process, but paves the way for ongoing meditation.* The Apostle Paul instructs Christians to put off the old self and put on the new self. He tells them that this is accomplished “by the renewing of your mind” (see Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:22-24). A Christian’s attitudes, speech and actions can find direction each day from a mindset that is God-centered. Our daily desire is to “practice the presence of Christ.”

Since God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts and his ways higher than our ways (Isa. 55:8-9); our computer brains are programmed best with his viewpoint. God’s values are revealed primarily in the Scriptures. As we store his Word in our hearts, the Holy Spirit brings those verses to memory at appropriate times. For example, when I notice that I am raising my voice at my children, a bell goes off in my mind: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Pro. 15:1). When I feel ripped off, the bell goes off again: “Love...keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:4-5). The point of this discipline is not to display a trophy that says I have memorized a thousand verses. It is to foster meditation and application of the Scripture in our daily walk.

My fourth assumption is related to learning theory: *memorization that is meaningful is best caught, not taught.* Parents who harp on their children to learn an assigned verse, but do not exemplify the memorization of Scripture themselves are saying one thing verbally, but experientially teaching the opposite. While children do learn verses because of pressure or reward, secondary reinforcements will not produce an ongoing lifestyle of memorization.

By way of contrast, parents who intentionally allow their children to observe them memorizing, are in a better position to pass on this discipline. Handing your Bible to a child while you state, “Hey, Ben, check me on these verses,” is a teaching vehicle too infrequently used by parents.

With these assumptions now stated, let me list a number of suggestions that will help churches encourage better memorization. Bible memorization will increase when a church: stresses the value of memorization; uses a preferred translation; provides a program with accountability; offers helps for memorization; and takes advantage of short-term approaches to memorization.

## ***Stress the Value of Memorization***

Many Bible passages pronounce the importance of meditating on Scripture. Joshua 1 records the promise of success for those who meditate on God's Law. Psalm 119 explains that hiding the Scriptures in one's heart leads to a godly walk. Second Timothy 3 reveals that the Bible is profitable for teaching and training, and also for rebuke and correction.

The value of memorization is best demonstrated by the Lord Jesus. When tempted by the devil, he responded by quoting the Scriptures. If Jesus took the time to learn the Scriptures to the point where he could quote them, then his followers will profit by following his example.

People's beliefs are reflected by what they say, but their values are revealed by what they actually do. A congregation will not develop a high view of memorization merely by a pastor exhorting them to learn the Word. Just as Christ demonstrated Scripture memory, *church leaders can exemplify* a commitment to storing significant verses in their minds. Pastors in their sermons can quote an occasional verse when explaining the Scriptures. The Sunday School teacher, club worker or youth leader can relate a memorized verse or two that is personally meaningful. Bible quotations can serve to introduce songs. Even games can be played where verses are begun and the class is asked to complete the quotation.

Some churches have stressed the importance of memorization by selecting a theme verse each year and *a key verse each month*. While different age groups memorize verses in their respective programs, the congregation as a whole also learns the key verse together. Some churches print the verse in their newsletter and on their bulletin each Sunday of the month. Some have even taken time in a worship service to recite together the verse of study.

*Presenting gifts that encourage memorization* is another way to elevate the value of memory work. Graduation is a special time in the life a high school senior. One church typically gave a subscription for a collegiate magazine to their graduates, but recently changed the practice. They now give a graduation gift of the *NIV Navigators Topical Memory System* to their graduates.

Many churches follow a long-term practice of *awarding camp scholarships for memory work*. This too places value on memorization. Churches that are successful in this endeavor publicize the program well in advance. Some give camp dollars for individual passages, while others knock off a certain portion of the camp fee, or cover the entire fee if a child completes the program. Size and difficulty of portions are selected in accord with the conceptual learning stage of the child. For example, one church uses key doctrinal verses for their high schoolers to memorize. The particulars of these programs vary from church to church, but the practice of Scripture

memory for camp attendance helps students both study the Word and participate in a great learning environment.

### ***Use a Preferred Translation***

Another suggestion that will help churches in memorization is to adopt a common Bible translation. I know what you're thinking: easier said than done! I agree. While some people prefer ham on rye to salami on pumpnickel, likewise some people prefer the TLB to the NIV. Furthermore, just as some people insist that the Reuben is the only way to go, still today some people will insist that only the King James is inerrant. Nevertheless, preaching is more easily followed when the congregation uses a similar translation, and so is memorization easier when one translation is predominantly utilized.

Though church leaders cannot legislate which translations people use, they can make it convenient for people to use a common translation. Andover Church made purchasing new Bibles for the sanctuary their Thanksgiving project. They placed in each pew a modern translation which already had broad appeal in the congregation, and from which the pastor preached.

Franklin chapel purchased, at a discount price, a large shipment of Bibles in the translation they endorsed. These were acquired in November, and it was suggested that people buy copies to give as Christmas gifts to family members and friends.

Many churches award Bibles to their children, usually as promotion gifts when they reach a certain grade level. Churches that follow this practice should not look for the least expensive Bibles, but select a children's edition of the translation used by the leadership and church body.

Using a common version makes it possible for students in class to memorize directly from the Scripture, and not just from activity pages or workbooks. A common text can help two people memorize together, or even a group of individuals learn a given passage. Adoption of a preferred translation will not in itself assure a memorizing congregation, but it will remove one of the barriers that hinder group memorization.

### ***Provide a Program with Accountability***

When people are born into the family of God, they instantly gain many spiritual brothers and sisters. God has not called his adopted children to fend for themselves (see Heb. 10:24-25). While Christians can individually memorize important Bible verses, frequently they need the encouragement of others to help them continue the practice. Therefore, it is beneficial for

churches to provide a program that uses accountability to encourage memorization.

Many congregations entrust memorization to the Sunday School, while others assign it to the club program. Unfortunately, a closer investigation sometimes reveals that neither program is accomplishing the task. Let me illustrate. At Marquette Church several Sunday school teachers assumed that the Wednesday night staff stressed memorization, while the club workers thought the Sunday School teachers did it. In actuality, very few teachers were requiring memorization, and none of the adult programs encouraged it.

Assurance that Bible memorization is taking place somewhere in the church begins with the Discipleship Team (Christian Education Committee) determining which program per age group is best suited to oversee the memory work. Supervision is then needed to help ministries achieve their goals and guide other programs away from duplication. For example, if a church is using its midweek club program for Bible memorization, then leaders should make sure the Sunday School teachers do not assign portions for memory.

Relatively few adult Sunday School classes encourage memorization. But many churches are successful in helping adults memorize through home Bible studies. The smaller cell group makes the assigning and reviewing of verses more feasible. For example, the adults in the home Bible study program at Southside Church learn twenty-six verses in their first nine-month period together. Those that continue on in other groups memorize additional verses.

Memorization for the youth group is similar to that of the adult ministry. A vehicle for accountability is essential, and several churches have chosen midweek discipleship groups as the place for some memory work. Sure we'd like all our youth to memorize the Scripture, but a large group meeting like the Sunday School, where there is a greater variety of commitment levels, is not a place of high accountability.

Most children's programs have enough subdivisions that at some place in the program a small enough teacher-student ratio exists for a teacher to work on Bible memorization. Some students require only a simple smile or hug from their teachers after they have completed a memory verse to keep them going week after week. Other children thrive under a club program that offers ranks, badges and numbers indicating student point achievements (some kids are also turned off by this type of competition).

Whatever the format, an ongoing system of accountability is another factor that encourages both the memorization and application of Scripture.

## ***Offer Helps for Memorization***

Churches that are serious about Bible memorization frequently provide resources that facilitate memory work. For example, the teachers at Kenwood Church handletter weekly verses for their children on colorful card stock. At St. Paul's Church the youth director provides a blue notebook for the teens in his discipleship group. In addition to their Bible study work, these young people write out the verses which they are trying to memorize. The men's early morning study at Central Church uses 3" x 5" cards to record the verses their group is working on. In each of these churches the leadership has gone beyond merely suggesting texts to memorize; they have also provided resources (notebooks, packets of cards) to help their learners.

Things quickly memorized can just as quickly be forgotten. But things mastery-learned over time will remain with us long-term. A personal record system of verses, therefore, further facilitates memorization. For example, some people highlight verses in their Bibles and memorize directly from the texts. As they reread their Bibles, the marked verses are easily reviewed.

Many teens and adults have profited from the *Navigators Topical Memory System*. Packets of cards on salvation, temptation, victory, etc., are available in several translations. Blank cards are also available for recording other verses worth memorizing. The Navigators also market a wooden box for filing verse cards. When verses are stored by themes, groups of references can be easily retrieved and reviewed.

The degree of commitment to a system, and the amount of time spent in reviewing verses will vary among people. But any system that highlights significant verses will enhance better habits of Scripture memorization.

## ***Advantages of Short-Term Approaches to Memorization***

A few years ago I invited several of my neighbors to join in a neighborhood Bible study. My plan was to spend Thursday evenings during the school year studying the Book of Acts. One neighbor expressed that he couldn't afford to invest that much time, but if I could offer a six-week study he would come.

Tom's hesitancy to commit to a long-term project is shared by many people. While some individuals will get involved in a club program or home Bible study, others will only make a short-term commitment. A goal of memorizing a shorter passage of Scripture at key times throughout the year is a way of reaching those not currently involved in an accountability structure.

For example, there are specific events on a church calendar useful for an all-church memorization effort. During Advent or Lent a portion of Scripture can focus hearts on the Christ. Similarly, a portion on freedom (e.g.,

Gal. 5:1, 16-18) is appropriate for the Fourth of July. Portions on outreach or witness (e.g., Rom. 10:9-15) fit well during a mission's emphasis.

One last means of memorization is worth mentioning. Many people listen to music for pleasure and relaxation, but music is also profitable for worship and instruction. Have you noticed how the jingles on television commercials are easily memorized? Many Christian songwriters are using the same phenomenon to record Scripture in song. Whether it is a *Kids Praise* album or many of the praise choruses, music is an uplifting way to treasure God's eternal message in our hearts.

### ***Conclusion***

For six years I worked on M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in adult learning. The rigors of papers, tests, comprehensive exams, dissertation and oral defense did not keep me from finishing that program. However, a year after I graduated, I enrolled in a simple correspondence course but failed to complete the work. What was the difference? The formal schooling forced deadlines, dates and standards upon me; the correspondence course left me on my own. The press of a busy schedule crowded out my independent studies. In a similar way, many people recognize the importance of memorizing Scripture, but let life's demands drain their daily time and energy.

Bible memorization is hard work. It's easier to sit in front of the television eating pretzels than to discipline oneself to learn the Scriptures. In fact, it's even easier to spend physical energy on a work project than to spend mental energy concentrating on a biblical text. Nevertheless, if we value the meditation of relevant scripture at critical moments in our day, then we must work hard at producing an atmosphere that encourages the memorization of Scripture in our churches. A common translation, ongoing programs with accountability, short-term approaches and helps for memorization will all facilitate better Bible acquisition.

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## **A Check list for Bible Memorization**

Does our church...

- Stress the Value of Memorization
- Designate a Preferred Translation
- Provide a Program with Accountability
- Offer Helps for Memorization
- Take Advantage of Short-Term Approaches to Memorization