

Return to Wittenberg 2021 Conference

Hiding God's Word in Our Hearts

A Survival Workshop for Impending Persecution of the Church

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In this persecution simulation, participants will imagine that their Bibles, hymnals, and catechisms have been confiscated. How many of us can say, “Your Word I have hidden in my heart”? (Psalm 119:11) How much of the Bible, the hymnal, and the catechism can the audience reproduce from memory? The speaker may coach participants for teamwork, but he will not provide any clues as to content. For many Christians in the world, all they have left of God's Word is that which has been committed to memory. Are you ready to survive—and even to thrive—amid such persecution? Suggested materials: paper, pencils, laptops, internet access for virtual document collaboration—but no Bibles, hymnals, or catechisms are allowed!

Instructions

1. Divide into three groups (Bible, Hymnal, Catechism) with paper and pencils (or laptops).
2. From memory and cooperation, reconstruct as much of the outline and words as you can in the hour allotted.
3. Uses the following prompts to assist each group:
 1. **Bible:** The Bible contains about 750,000 words organized into 1,200 chapters. Even if you had it all memorized, it would take about 80 hours to recite it. So, in this one-hour exercise, use the following prompts to focus your attention on those passages that would be most useful for sustaining the underground church. Aim to write an “abridged Bible” that would be enough for preaching and teaching and mutual edification until such time as God blessed your catacomb congregation with access to a full Bible again. Paraphrase if you must, but preferably recall the actual words from memory, and when possible cite to book, chapter, and verse.
 1. **Literary Outline:** How many books total? What are the two main divisions? Within each of those two divisions, how else are the books grouped or classified? What is the thematic progression from one cluster of books to the next?
 2. **Doctrinal Outline:** What are the *sedes doctrinae* (“seat of doctrine” aka “proof passages”) for:
 1. The main two teachings of the Bible?
 2. The three articles of the Apostles Creed?
 3. The remainder of the six chief parts of the Christian faith?
 4. Controversies (creation/evolution; two natures of Christ; sacraments; etc.)?
 3. **Liturgical Outline:**
 1. Which Scripture passages are spoken or chanted regularly in the divine service?
 2. What about the texts memorized annually for the children's Christmas service?

2. **Hymnal:** Some Christians have suggested that if they were isolated with access to only one book, they'd want it to be a hymnal, not a Bible. The point is that a good hymnal flows straight out of Scripture, arranging the teachings of God's Word thematically for use in the church and setting those doctrines to music for enhanced communication and memorization. The liturgy, prayers, and hymns of the church should not, of course, be regarded as superior to the Bible, but nonetheless a good hymnal is a great treasure for preserving biblical teaching in our midst. In the hour allotted for this exercise, you surely will not reproduce all 600+ hymns, but can you at least develop an "abridged hymnal" that covers the essentials?
 1. **Divine Service:** What do the pastor and congregation do at the beginning, middle, and end of the divine service? What's the logic of progressing from one part to the next? Why have both the formulaic expressions and their sequence stood the test of time?
 2. **Church Year:** Which hymns do we sing at which time of year and why? What do those hymns teach us?
 3. **Ordinaries and Propers:** Which prayers, antiphonal responses, etc., do we use (nearly) every Sunday? Which ones are uniquely suited to certain occasions?
3. **Catechism:** Luther's Small Catechism was known as the "Bible of the laity." He purposely kept it short and simple, so that even children could understand it and commit it to memory. In fact, he urged that it be memorized first, and then instruction in how to understand it would come later and last for a lifetime. Even "Dr." Luther constantly returned to the simple truths of the catechism to refresh his understanding of Christian dogmatics. Of the three groups in this exercise, the "Catechism" group has the easiest task: recall from memory an average of 550 words for each of the six chief parts, 3300 words total—you might even have time to recite it twice through!
 1. **Organization:** List the six chief parts, and then subdivide each part, thus forming an outline.
 2. **WDTM?:** Recite and write from memory the words of each section you've outlined, including the "What Does This Mean?" response.
 3. **Synodical Exposition:** Various Lutheran church bodies have added "expositions" to the Small Catechism to assist in teaching its content. Each section of the Small Catechism is expanded into several sub-questions. Answers are stated together with several Bible passages as proof or illustration. While the entire exposition is too long to memorize, some of the key themes and "anchor" passages are worth the effort to recall, since they will help to clarify and stabilize what the underground church believes, teaches, and confesses. Indeed, that's the point of the exposition also for the above-ground church!
4. **Conclusion:** Share what your group accomplished (*thanks be to God!*) and encourage one another to cherish the Bible, the hymnal, and the catechism in your homes and in your churches.

Recommended Resources

- Marie MacPherson, "Persecution Lesson Plan," July 2016, www.hausvater.org/bible-studies/340.
- *Sing the Faith CD* (Concordia Publishing House)