

How did Bible Readings for the Home get started?

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The following is quoted from *Training Light Bearers*, pages 11-17, chapter title—
Early History

The First Bible Study

The circumstances that brought about the question-and-answer method of Bible study within our own ranks are very interesting. From the beginning of the Advent Movement in 1844 the message was proclaimed largely by preaching, which must be understood in the usual meaning of the term. The pioneer leaders in the cause of God were diligent students of the Bible, and from the pulpit, taking a text and preaching therefrom, instructed the congregations of Adventist believers. As an auxiliary to preaching, the extensive circulation of literature by the tract and missionary work, in which all church members were included, proved increasingly effective in the advancement of the message of truth.

It was in 1883 that the plan of conducting Bible studies was introduced to Seventh-day Adventists as a major method of evangelism by S. N. Haskell, the “father of the Tract and Missionary Societies,” who at that time was president of the California Conference. As he later told the story, he gave his first “Bible reading” during a southern California camp meeting held near Lemoore in May, 1883. In the midst of the sermon a severe storm arose and the clashing of the elements made so much noise that it [pg. 11]

seemed as if the service would have to be discontinued, because the people could not hear what the preacher said. It was then that the Holy Spirit impressed Elder Haskell to try another plan. Stepping down from the pulpit, he took his place in the center of the tent and gathered the people close in around him. Then, instead of continuing to preach to them, he gave out texts of Scripture, to be read by different persons in the congregation in response to questions he asked. The following is a reconstruction of how this may have been accomplished. When Elder Haskell asked:

“How were the Holy Scriptures given?” someone arose and read [2Timothy 3:16, 17](#), in a clear voice—

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God.”

In another section of the audience another brother arose and read from [2Peter 1:21](#): “The prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”

When Elder Haskell's deep voice rang out—

“For what purpose were the Scriptures written?” back came the reply in the words of Paul:

“For doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” ([2Tim. 3:16, 17](#)).

All the people listened intently for the next general question and watched to see who had the answer: “What is necessary on our part?” “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me” ([John 5:39](#)).

And then a woman arose, and raising her voice to [pg. 12]

its highest pitch, gave added emphasis to what is necessary on our part by reading:

“Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee. . . . I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word” ([Ps. 119:11-16](#)).

The truths presented in this manner made a deep impression on the minds of the people. It was evident that here was a new and very effective way of “preaching” truth.

Ellen G. White was at this camp meeting, but she was not present during this “stormy” service. However, her son, W. C. White, knew of the experience and gave a glowing description of the meeting to his mother. The very next day Elder Haskell and other ministers were called to meet Mrs. White, and then the messenger of the Lord told them that the meeting about which she had heard was in harmony with the light she had received from the Lord. She stated that in vision she had seen hundreds and thousands of Seventh-day Adventists going from house to house with the Bible under their arms, teaching the truth in this way. (See *Testimonies*, vol. 9, p. 126.)

This endorsement of such a plan brought great encouragement to Elder Haskell, and he began at once to prepare question-and-answer Bible studies, which were called Bible readings, because the students did the reading, and the preacher or teacher asked the questions which the reading of Scripture texts answered. It may be of interest to know that the first two Bible studies prepared by Elder Haskell dealt with themes of fundamental importance. The first Bible study was entitled “The Coming of the Lord,” and the second, “The Sabbath.” The fact that these Bible studies averaged one hundred and fifty questions. [pg. 13]

with even a larger number of texts of Scripture, indicates how thorough was the instruction. However, it should be noted that the experience of succeeding years has demonstrated the impracticability of such lengthy studies, and it is accepted as a well-established fact that a few carefully selected, pointed, and definite texts used at one time are much more effective than a multiplicity of texts covering the entire subject.

A recommendation passed at a camp meeting in California indicates the plans for the permanency of this work.

It reads as follows:

“**Resolved, (2)** That we recommend that as far as practicable, the various churches and little companies of Sabbathkeepers hold Bible readings similar to those conducted on the campground, for the purpose of better informing themselves in the Scriptures, and

also of interesting their neighbors in the special truths of these last days.” —*Signs of the Times*, Sept. 27, 1883.

From that time on, decided emphasis was placed on the importance of Bible studies being given by workers and laymen. Beginning October 30, 1883, a ten-day Bible Reading Institute was held in Battle Creek, Michigan, for the purpose of fitting men and women for active duty in the field, especially in the work of holding Bible studies. Elder Haskell was in charge, and a general invitation to all Seventh-day Adventists was extended.

The announcement read:

“Not only young men and women are wanted, but men of mature years; even if their heads are sprinkled with gray hairs, they are none too old to visit families and tell what God has done for them, and read the Scriptures.” —*Ibid.*, Oct. 18, 1883.

From a report of this first institute we quote as follows:

“The institute for instruction in Bible reading commenced at Battle Creek, Michigan, October 30, and has continued with [pg. 14]

increasing interest. It is the largest gathering of our leading brethren from different parts of the country that we have ever had. Over three hundred have joined the class, and the Bible readings have created an unusual interest. . . . The attendance at these meetings has increased from a congregation of a few hundred persons . . . to over one thousand, including many of the citizens of this city. The Bible readings will be continued through the conference, and will be conducted by different ministers from various parts of the field, who will prepare lessons to present.” —*Ibid.*, Nov. 22, 1883.

During this remarkable institute, which called the attention of the entire denomination to the work of giving Bible studies, and placed the plan on a solid footing for all time, the following counsel was received from the messenger of the Lord:

“We are not doing all we might do to encourage workers in the great harvest field. We must encourage simplicity; we must not degenerate into formal service. We must lay responsibility upon humble, God-fearing men. I know God will accept their efforts if they will dedicate themselves to Him. If they will place themselves in the channel, the light from the throne of God will shine through them. Jesus will work through their disinterested efforts. The Bible readings will be a means of getting the truth before a large number. Men and women may do a good work here. Our sisters are not excusable in letting the talents God has given them rust from inaction.” —*Ibid.*, Nov. 15, 1883.

The denominational colleges began at once to include courses of instruction in Bible studies, and in a number of large cities training centers were established, known as city missions, where students from colleges, during the summer vacation, and church members of all ages were placed under experienced instructors. And while being taught the doctrines of the third angel's message and how to make them known through Bible studies in the homes of the people, they were required to spend certain hours each [pg. 15]

day in actual field work, distributing literature, learning how to meet the people and secure openings for Bible studies, and becoming accustomed to all that is involved in the art of giving Bible studies, for indeed it is one phase of that “highest of all sciences” — the “science of soul winning.”

Elder Haskell Describes a Bible Study

Elder Haskell presented a pen picture of a Bible reading [study] in the early days, which is both interesting and enlightening. He wrote:

“The plan which as yet has seemed to be most successful [for conducting city missions] is that of holding Bible readings in families and obtaining subscriptions for the Signs. . . These Bible readings embrace more than a single family. Sometimes they are held with the family during the first visit, then an appointment is left for another, when the family themselves invite in their neighbors. In this way the families become interested for their neighbors, and not unfrequently there will be from five to fifteen in attendance at each Bible reading. They sit around a large table, each one with a Bible, and all turn to the various texts. Questions are asked and the Bible explained, or rather texts are quoted so that the Bible explains itself. On Sabbath and Sunday there are public social meetings or readings at the mission rooms. Bible readings are also held on board the ships. Some of our sisters are quite as successful in holding Bible readings as our brethren. . . It is as important that our brethren be instructed how to do this successfully as it is to do missionary work of any kind. Some will naturally adapt themselves to it, while others need a special drill to prepare them to give the readings acceptably. One thing is certain, God is with His truth, and He will help those who do not only feel their need of Him but feel the importance of qualifying themselves to labor in the best manner.” — *Ibid.*, Aug. 14, 1884.

Bible-Reading Gazette

In order to strengthen the plan of preparing and holding Bible studies, the General Conference began [pg. 16]

to publish a monthly magazine of twenty-four pages, called *Bible-Reading Gazette*. Referring to this publication, which made its appearance in January, 1884, Mrs. A. T. Robinson writes as follows:

“To those who would prepare and send to the publishers four Bible readings, the offer of a year's subscription to *Bible-Reading Gazette* was made. The plan was a success, and in a very short time more than 12,000 copies of the Gazette were being used. By the end of the first year the demand had become so great that the twelve numbers were published in a bound volume under the title *Bible Readings*. This book ushered in the Bible-reading era.”

We find that the year's volume of the *Gazette* contained 162 studies, 2,800 questions answered, diagrams, notes, and texts written out. This material was contributed by more than a score of writers. It may be of interest to note the order of subjects given in the *Gazette* and the number of questions allotted to each.

A partial list follows:

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Number of Questions</i>
The Sanctuary	149
The Law of God	111
Spiritual Gifts	126
Tithing	98
Conversion	58
New Earth	48
Sabbath	61
The Scriptures	27

United States in Prophecy, No. 1	104
United States in Prophecy, No. 2	53
Twenty-three Hundred Days	72

Bible Readings has been enlarged and is still published, after many editions, under the title *Bible Readings for the Home*. Millions of copies have been sold to the public; it has served as a guide in searching for truth, and is a standard textbook for all who are willing “to act their part, doing house-to-house work, and giving Bible readings in families” (*Testimonies*, vol. p. 141). [pg. 17]



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