

Teaching Bible in the Home: Not Supplemental But Fundamental

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This speech was given at the gathering of the Grand Rapids area Sunday School teachers at Hudsonville Church in the summer of 1993.

Why is teaching our children so important and enjoyable? Primarily because God gave these children to us their parents and told us to teach and nurture them. Already in Genesis 18:9 God said about Abraham: “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and shall keep the way of the Lord...?” And in Deuteronomy 6:7 God said to us parents: “And thou shalt talk of them (God's Words) when thou sittest in thine house and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.”

Why does God emphasize this? Because in this way God has directed the lives of His children—from Paradise until now in the twentieth century. God planned that His covenant promises to His people would go through the *organic* lines of their children: Adam, Seth, Enoch, Abraham. To Abraham He said, “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee *and thy seed after thee*, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy *seed after thee*,” Genesis 17:7. And we know that God stressed the organic line of His people through all of the Scriptures. In our situation God also has chosen to give *His* babes to *us*—parents in the covenant line—for their nurture. That does not mean that we may not *delegate* some of their training to the Christian schools if we are not capable or circumstances do not allow us to teach them, especially in these days of technology. Nor should our Sunday School classes be disbanded. And we must stress the importance of attending church services and catechism classes.

However, as *parents* we are still responsible for *all* of their instruction, delegated or in the home, with an emphasis on *godliness* as we walk together toward our eternal home. And as parents we must be aware of and utilize a few basic truths that apply to the instruction of our children. (1.) Teaching and learning in school, and in catechism and Sunday School, must in the nature of the case be more formal. I know this from 30 years of teaching in a Christian school. Children need structure and some degree of formality to learn. (2.) Teaching in the home is more relaxed but *never* haphazard or careless. (3.) Teaching Bible truths in our homes requires thought, planning, and *atmosphere*—calm, loving, firm, godly, and eager. Parents furnish the atmosphere in their homes. That’s a rather awesome task, isn’t it? (4.) But remember that *children* furnish the home, and, all other things being equal, our children will more easily express the questions and feelings deep down in their hearts about God's wonders along with their indignation against evildoers *in the home*.

What methods should parents use? Each home is different, of course, and methods will vary. Teaching Bible and applying biblical truths in the home tends to be more spontaneous and informal. And naturally, structure differs with five-year-olds and teenagers. Each family will find what fits in their lives.

Whatever time frames parents choose should be regular and systematic. The obvious time is Bible reading after the evening meal, often a rather relaxed time. Other times can be Saturday nights as preparation for Sunday services, Sunday afternoons, or on boring trips—*our* family specialty!

Parents should carefully set an atmosphere for teaching Bible. The atmosphere should be regular, orderly, consistent, but not rigid and dull. It could be as simple as “Let’s play a Bible game now.” or “Time to learn your catechism.” or “Find a quiet place to go over your Sunday School verse.” Or it may be a lesson for which both parents and children prepare. In reading the Scriptures at mealtime or bedtime, parents and children can take a few minutes to prepare—to read the passage and get in the mood for study. If we parents set an atmosphere of joy, enthusiasm, and interest, our children are likely to respond in kind. And if we read short passages, we are more likely to hold the attention of our children.

Reading short passages has several advantages. Study can be thorough. In a family setting we have the opportunity not only to study portions of God’s Word but to discuss them intimately—without having Johnny at school turning around and staring at you. And there isn’t so much peer pressure—there shouldn’t be, anyway—in the comfortable atmosphere of the home. In studying a short passage, parents can encourage their children to interrupt to ask questions, right away before he forgets the question. Parents can also encourage children to make observations during Scripture reading—“I never thought about it this way.” This, of course, can be carried too far and become counterproductive and irreverent. Common sense must prevail.

A couple examples will illustrate how studying a text can generate questions and discussion. In reading Matthew 22:41-46 (use your Bible to read now), a child may ask, “How *could* Jesus be David’s Son and His Lord?” By discussing this question, parents encourage children not only to try to understand the question but also to delve into the spiritual depths of this wonder. And in studying John 6:66-71, children usually respond from their hearts and ponder how Jesus could *endure* having the devil with Him for three years, especially with Judas present as a constant reminder. Our children—God’s children—respond not only to the facts of biblical history but also to the spiritual pathos that such a text evokes.

How can parents and children prepare for instruction at home? Preparation is not always easy, and for that reason it is good to have some references and resources available when there are hard questions. Three references are basic: a Bible dictionary for explanations, a concordance as a textual guide, and a Bible atlas for help with times and places. Parents can use these helps when children ask hard questions, but more importantly they can study to gain a clearer outlook, an over-all view of the Scriptures, before they teach the children. If parents teach their children at an early age how to use these helps, the children will be comfortable using them and will reap a large harvest of knowledge, which will be of benefit for the rest of their lives. But big books and difficult study are not always necessary to teach. Especially for younger children, when parents read a Scripture passage or Bible story, the children will *live* the story. An example from my days of teaching first grade will illustrate this reaction of young children.

The Bible lesson that morning had been about Rachel and Leah, the quarrelling wives of Jacob. We learned that Rachel was godless and self-centered and that Leah was God-centered. Then at recess time as the children were putting on coats and mittens, they were interested in something else and making a commotion. I asked what all the noise meant, and they told me “Oh, don’t worry! We were just voting, and we all voted for Leah.” What a beautiful response from our children!

Finally, as far as methods are concerned, parents must always teach the *antithesis*—something crucially important in these times. Not only must parents teach their children to recognize the antithesis in Bible stories, but they must also live the antithesis and teach their children to live it as well.

So far the focus has been on *teaching* the stories and concepts that children need to learn. Another aspect of instruction is *memorization*. Memorizing should not be a severe burden and not usually a punishment; rather it should be viewed as a crucial part of a godly upbringing. It can be a beautiful alternative to watching TV, even though at first children may resist. Parents need to draw a contrast between the jewels of God's Word and the trash on television.

How do parents teach their children to memorize? Start when they are young. Start slowly and with short, easy passages. Recite together. Try some classics: Psalm 19—God's care—"The heavens declare the glory of God..." and for older children Proverbs 15—about ethics—"A soft answer turneth away wrath..." Learn Psalm 23, Romans 9, and Hebrews 11. To avoid a negative attitude with longer passages, start with 2 or 3 verses, and children may soon begin to enjoy memorizing. Offer an incentive—a new Bible or a worthwhile book—for memorization of a long passage. Make it a family project on Saturday nights or Sunday afternoons, especially in summertime. Experience has taught me that children don't memorize only words, but *God's Words*.

Another way, very enjoyable and very instructive, to teach in the home is with Bible games. Most children enjoy the "Who am I?" games—"I'm thinking of a man in the Old Testament." Several commercial games are also available, and all serve to increase and sharpen knowledge of biblical history, geography, time settings, sequence, and characters. I once had a child ask me if it was right to say who we would like to see first when we get to heaven. And could I guess, who he would like to see first? If done in reverence, a game of this sort can open up the Scriptures. More importantly, it serves to make children identify the admirable characteristics of the saints of ages past. Such a game can spark a discussion that draws the whole family closer to heaven.

Finally, parents can teach the Bible by having their children sing the Psalms in the *Psalter* and learn their riches by memorizing and carrying them in their hearts. This can be done at dinnertime devotions, on Sunday afternoons or evenings, or on long trips. Here again, no two families will teach their children alike, but all homes must be one in their goals.

To conclude, let me tell you about the custom of a family in another country. After the evening meal and reading of a Scripture passage, the family goes to the living room. There the father asks some review questions to reinforce the Scripture reading. Then they stand in a circle, holding hands, and sing a psalm or two and close with a prayer. Though it may take a little extra time, their devotions tie together all the aspects of teaching the Bible to our children and praising our God.

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