

Using the Scriptures at Home

By: Pastor John C. Lawrenz

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When Jesus said, “the truth shall make you free,” He was addressing the same human condition as the impassioned politician who calls for freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom from despair. Should we fail to realize this we would diminish the great truth that Jesus is “God with us”, a 100% man who was and is very much a part of mankind’s upside-down world, “yet without sin.” It was because Jesus was untainted by the mind-clouding infection of sin that His solution to human misery is broader, deeper, and higher than the political rhetoric of the American Revolution, the Bicentennial, or any other political movement of this world.

In these “satellite” essays on the theme “The Truth Shall Make You Free,” we are to look first at the home, then at the school and finally at the church. Each is a focal point of life for the Christian. Though all three are interrelated, and certainly overlap, they have different emphases. The church is a place of worship. The school is a training ground for the mind and body. The home is the building block of human society.

The first mini-essay addresses itself to using the Scriptures in the home. It is supposed to open up practical suggestions on how all of us can reach out for that real freedom which Jesus promised in His Word to each of us as part of a Christian home, whether we be father, mother, husband, wife, son, daughter, brother or sister.

In our country the Constitution functions as the glue which holds a family of 220 million citizens together. It is also our blueprint for lawful activity and a fountain of inspiration for us as Americans. The objective of every Christian home should be to make the Holy Scriptures its “Constitution.” To make the Scriptures a force which binds a family together, guides its growth and development and inspires it in the face of the assaults of an ungodly world requires that same practical wisdom which we would favor for the continuance of our constitutional democracy. A good American citizen knows his Constitution. A good Christian knows his Bible. Ignore the Constitution and civic freedom diminishes. Uphold, protect and defend the Constitution and civic freedom flourishes. Thus there is a direct relationship between Constitutional awareness and a free society. Surely there is the same direct relationship between Bible awareness and the truly free Christian home. Ignorance of God’s truth is a blueprint for disaster. However, when God’s truth is the living cornerstone of home life, there must result that freedom from fear, want, and despair which Jesus promises.

It goes without saying that an unused Bible occupying a place of honor on the family coffee table is not the cornerstone we are talking about. In the Old Testament reading for last Sunday (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 - Three Year Lectionary) Moses admonished Israel to take God’s truth to heart, to impress it upon the children, to talk about it while sitting at home, to make it a topic of conversation on the road and even while lying down to sleep and getting up to work. God’s truth was to give strength to the working man’s hand, it was to sit upon the thinking man’s brow, and the difference between the home permeated with God’s truth and the outside world was to be immediately obvious to all who entered the household gate or who passed over the household threshold. If we were to sum up Moses’ admonition, which is still as good today as it was 3500 years ago, we would say that God’s truth must get out from between the book covers and into the mainstream of family life.

Practically speaking, how is this objective to be reached? Moses doesn’t say. The other divinely inspired writers of Holy Scripture only sketch the broadest of practical guidelines. We are to call upon the Name of God in prayer. We are to search the Scriptures. We are to confess with our mouth what the Spirit has worked in our heart. And finally we are to apply what the Word says to ourselves and to others. A home that is using the Scriptures will be praying, studying, confessing and applying God’s truth. Let’s take a look at each of these areas to suggest practical improvements.

An area open for vast improvement in our Lutheran homes is the area of home Bible study. Luther used to say that the simple layman armed with Scripture was more powerful than Popes and Councils. Families need

to be encouraged to make time in their busy schedules for the reading and discussing of the Bible itself. Obviously this must be done with a version of the Bible that talks on the family level. We need to encourage the use of reliable modern translations in the home. Another thing we can do is help our people with a selection of material. Cover to cover Bible study often gets bogged down in the levitical laws and long lists of Old Testament names. It would be well-spent time if our pastors would set up a program of home Bible study suggesting a logical and edifying progression of Bible selections. Such a guided study program could be supplemented with a few questions to get a family discussion going. How often such home Bible study can be held and still be practical will vary from household to household. Perhaps we could imitate the ancient (and some modern) Jews who set aside time once a week after supper hour for the head of the house to gather his family around God's Word for an hour's prayer and meditation. On other days of the week the Synod's booklet, *Meditations* could be used as a short, yet profitable Bible study.

Whether short or long, once a day or once a week, the method of conducting home Bible study is important. In study of any kind there are two basic approaches. One focuses on the teacher, the other on the learner. Teacher-oriented learning is good when a group is dedicated, disciplined and somewhat uniform in abilities and skills. By nature no sinner is dedicated to Scripture study. Discipline smacks more of the Law than the Gospel. And as for uniform abilities and skills, what family doesn't have a toddler, teen and adult all under the same roof? A learner-oriented approach to Bible study would seem the better alternative. We have our Lord's promise that the Holy Spirit, working through the Word, will lead us into all truth. Learner-oriented Bible study uses this promise as a guiding principle. The Word of God is laid before the learner. He is challenged to investigate, discuss, compare, and apply what he reads. Following this method truths are more apt to be viewed as personal beliefs rather than "what the church says" or "what Dad and Mom say".

God "talks" to us when we study His Word. No less important is our ability to speak with God. We can also look upon the improvement of our prayer-life as means to improve our use of the Word of truth. In the broadest sense our whole life of faith is prayer, that is, a state of open communication with God. Prayer, in a narrower sense, however, may be defined as conscious communication with God. Prayer is putting our full trust in God into words. The more public such a prayer is, the more care we take in choosing words and expressions. On the other hand, private prayer is apt to be a reflection of thoughts that run through our mind as we talk with God. In Sunday worship prayer is usually carefully pointed, organized, and written. Prayers in the home should fall somewhere in between. Since a family prayer is not purely personal it must reflect the spiritual concerns of everyone in the group. Yet since it flows from the intimacy of a closely-knit collection of individuals it can be free flowing and informal. Lutheran homes are apt to favor memorized table and pillow prayers. It is part of our tradition. One way to improve our use of the Scriptures is to cultivate the art of unmemorized prayer. In such prayers the truths of Scripture which have been learned can be put in our own words as we thank God, confess our unworthiness to Him, and ask Him for blessings of body and soul in Jesus name.

The development of prayer and Bible study skills in the home pays two important dividends. First, the family member will know how to confess his faith confidently and accurately. He will become a first rate evangelist in the home. More important for the growth of the Lord's kingdom, he will have the Spirit-given confidence outside the home to meet the Lord's challenge given in 1 Peter 3:15 "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." The second dividend is that he will have the Spirit-given knowledge to apply God's Word correctly. The home is the best place to reprove, correct and encourage. The infallible standards are found in God's Law. The incomparable motivation is found in God's Gospel. Obviously the very best school for life will be a home that knows and uses the Scripture so well that the doctrine of Law and Gospel and proper distinction between the two are second nature.

Want, fear, and despair are universal maladies but each one has a Gospel antidote. Our freedom from these and all other ills may be worked by the Spirit in the home, school, or the church. Of the three, however, it is the home where "the truth that makes us free" can be used and shared with the least amount of outward formality and the greatest amount of freedom. If we are to become more free in our use of the divine Word—in prayer, study, confession, and admonition—let the Christian home be the first, not the last place to begin.

