



FAMILY BIBLES

Marilyn Sharpe

Do you still wear the outfit that you wore at your Confirmation? Would you put that same outfit on a toddler? Why not?

Now, I'll bet that you are wondering what this has to do with family Bibles.

In the same way that you outgrew the clothes you wore in junior high, the Bible that is appropriate today for our middle school youth or our toddlers is not the one you would expect them to read for devotions or use as a study Bible as adults.

In Bibles, one size does not fit all. Our children and their parents need a whole "wardrobe" of Bibles to fit every age and stage of their lives. This is especially important for a culture in which parents are not steeped in scripture and may not know the stories that just a generation ago were considered basic knowledge, part of our shared heritage.

Part of Martin Luther's genius was understanding that the Word of God needed to be accessible to all. He translated the Bible into German, not elegant, academic German, but the everyday language of those he served, understood by all. Luther wanted all to hear God's living word for them, so that they would find themselves in God's story and God in their story.

The best advice I've heard in a long time is that we all ought to tear the back covers off our Bibles, because God's word is not complete until it is joined to our stories and our stories are not complete until they are joined to God's story.

Canadian pastor, Peter Van Katwyck

Today, many parents cannot share Bible stories by heart. Not only can they not recount the stories of minor biblical characters, but they don't know the stories of Jesus or of the giants of the faith. They don't have any stories that shape their understanding of God at work in their lives. They cannot tell these stories to their children ... because they do not know them.

So, where should we begin?

BEGIN AT THE BAPTISMAL FONT

As they grow in years, place in their hands the Holy Scriptures...

Holy Baptism, LBW

When the child in their arms was splashed with promise, named and claimed as a child of God, parents were given this guidance for how to raise this child in the faith. What is our next step as a congregation? Let us begin early to support families to tell the old, old story.

Here are some innovative and faithful steps that congregations are taking to make sure that parents not only “place in their hands the Holy Scriptures,” but open those Bibles and learn them by heart. Not by memory, but by heart!

BEGIN EARLY, GIFT THEM OFTEN

Some congregations place a board book Bible in the child’s FaithChest, given at baptism. *Baby’s First Bible* has a little handle for the child to carry. Appealing, child-friendly illustrations and simple, age-appropriate words tell the most familiar stories. Remember, this may be a parent’s first Bible . . . or the first one they have opened in years and years and years. This can be such an inviting first step.

Bethel Lutheran Church in Willmar, MN gives their first Bible to three year olds. *God Loves Me Bible* has a place for a photo of the child to be slipped into the cover. Forty-six simple stories each have a two page spread, telling the story on one page, and the facing pages all proclaim, “God loved _____. And God loves me!” What a wonderful message.

Older preschoolers can receive *Pray and Play Bible for Young Children*, a large format book with 14 stories, gorgeous illustrations, and three pages following each story, filled with prayers, songs, crafts, activities, and projects that families can do together to amplify the impact of the story.

For other families with preschoolers, *My Goodnight Bible: 45 Bedtime Bible Stories for Little Ones*, is the perfect way for families to do devotions regularly at the child’s bedside. Each story closes with Quiet Time, simple questions for children and parents to wonder about; Prayer Time, a child’s prayer to close the ritual; and Sleep Time, focus on a single word from the story, that makes the child feel safe, beloved, and necessary to God’s family.

Children love Bible story cubes, a familiar story that literally unfolds before your eyes. (Warning: it took a four year old to show me how it works. Hint: follow the arrows.) When a child has seen and heard it once, the child is ready to lead the family in devotions, using the story cube.

For young readers, *The Young Reader’s Bible: 70 easy-to-read Bible stories* and *The Beginner’s Bible: Timeless Children’s Stories* encourage children to read the stories to their parents and younger siblings.

PARENT-CHILD CLASSES

Congregations offer classes for parents and children together before the children receive their Bibles. They have a chance to practice reading the Bible together and experience simple devotions as a family. David Lynn of Tucson, AZ, who has a passion for partnering home and congregation to pass on faith, believes that we should “never expect a family to do at home what they haven’t first practiced in the congregation.”

NEVER GIVE A CHILD A “NEW” BIBLE

Before giving a child a Bible, invite parents, godparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other adults who love the child to gather. Give them colored pencils or pens and a list of favorite Bible verses and stories. Hand them the Bible and ask them to underline or highlight their favorite stories or verses; then sign it and identify it as their favorite. In the margin, write a brief prayer or blessing for the child. If an adult important to the child is not in town or available, mail it to them instructions about what to do and the date you need it back. Then, give it to the child and watch their eyes light up!

GIVE THE BIBLES IN WORSHIP

Always make the gift of the Bible a part of corporate worship. Pastors, please hand the Bible to the parent to give it to the child. It’s baptismal. Use it as an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of Scripture for all the generations.

At First Lutheran Church in Minot, ND, the pastor hands the parent the Bible to give to their third grader, then hands the third grade child a Small Catechism to put into the hands of their parent.

PEER MINISTERS LEAD HOME BIBLE STUDIES

The week following the gift of a new Bible, have trained youth Peer Ministers go to the home of each recipient and do Bible study, using the new Bible with parents and children.

RESOURCE THE FAMILY TO READ SCRIPTURE TOGETHER

Find simple devotional books for all ages and make them available. Offer Bible study for all ages and some intergenerational groupings. Make it a part of congregational dinners. Make good, simple Bible dictionaries and concordances available and teach children, youth, and adults how to use them. Coordinate the scripture that is read in worship with scripture that is studied in Sunday school and Bible study for all.

Invite children, youth, and families to read Scripture in worship, sometimes from a children’s Bible.

BUT, IT’S NOT IN THE BUDGET

The wail goes up, “But it’s not in the budget.” So, be creative. Do this outside the normal budgeting process, if you need to. Ask for memorials to be dedicated to equipping families to pass on faith. Take a special offering, asking the congregation to invest in faith nurture. Invite a person with a special heart for this to donate money to cover the costs. We figure out a way to keep the lights on, the furnace working, and salaries paid. Can there be anything more central to the body of Christ than to hear, to read, to know, to study God’s Word?

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:16-17