

## Legislation would allow course on history and literature

# Bible school

One of the bills filed in the Legislature for the next session would authorize high schools to offer elective courses on the Bible. It's a good idea but one that must be carefully negotiated.

Senate Bill 1338, authored by Sen. Tom Ivester, D-Elk City, would permit elective courses on the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and New Testament and their impact on history and literature.

"The courses would be an objective study of the Bible and not the teaching of religion," Ivester said.

That's a worthy goal and one that I have supported in the past and continue to support.

There have been various polls taken over the last few years that reveal an astonishing lack of Bible knowledge by young people, even those who profess to be church-attending Christians.

That might alarm many people and even please others. But, setting aside the religious viewpoint of the Bible, the importance of the book to literature and history is valuable and undeniable.

Understanding Shakespeare can be difficult for a junior in high school (although it is well worth the effort) but to read the Bard and not recognize his many references to the Bible leaves any study of his work unfulfilled.

Of course, Shakespeare also alluded to classical mythology many times and those references should be noted also.

The influence of the Bible in literature doesn't stop at Shakespeare. Novels are full of biblical allusions and references. For instance, John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" and "East of Eden" are direct references to the Bible. And there are



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countless others.

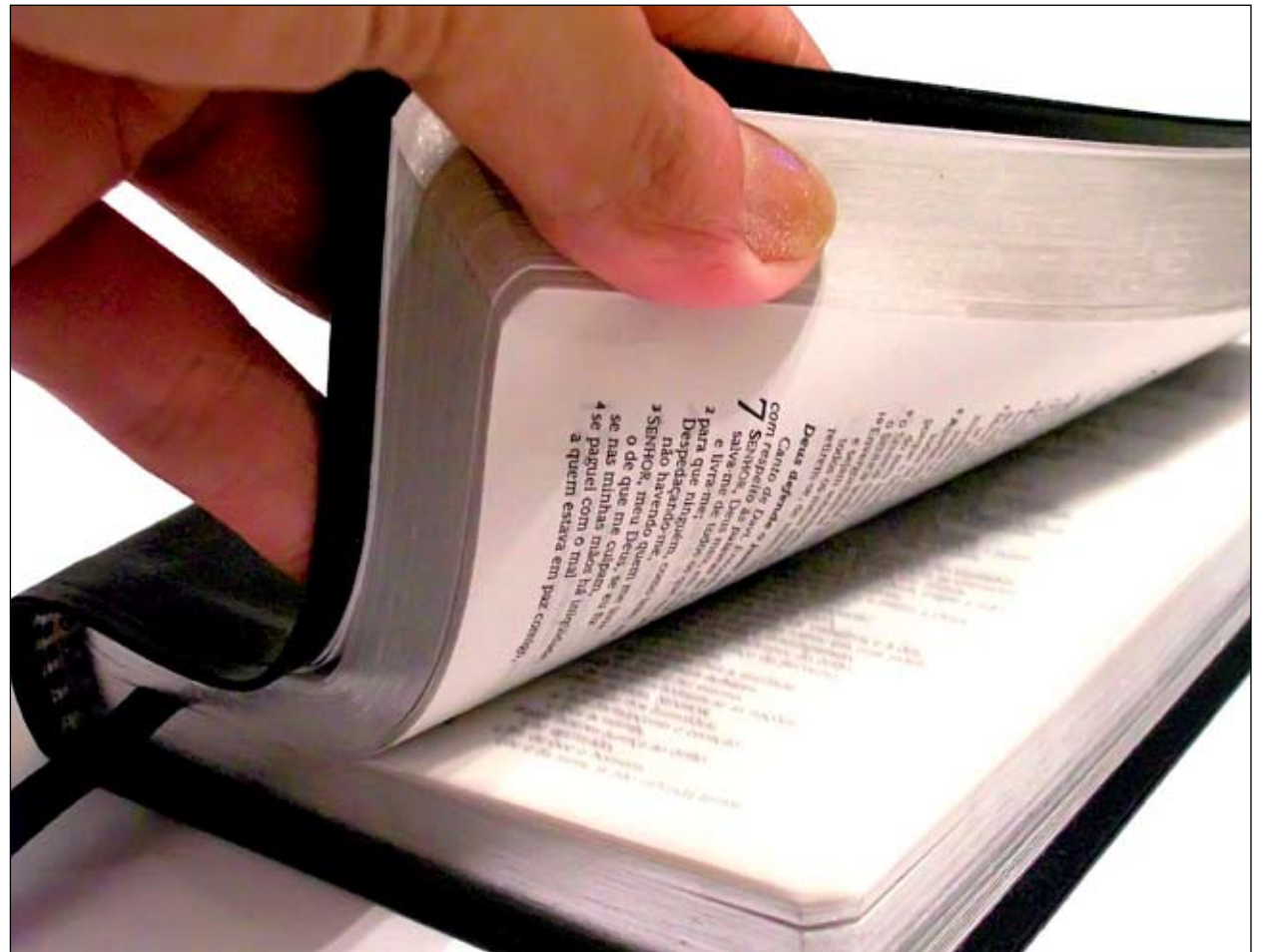
The impact of the Bible and religion on history cannot be denied or ignored. The Crusades, the Reformation, the Inquisition and even events in our lifetimes that relate to the Bible have molded civilization and will continue to do so.

Those are only a few of the many reasons our high school students need a working knowledge of the Bible. It is, however, a tricky endeavor distinguishing the study of the Bible from religion.

First of all, this is not an endorsement of teaching any sort of religion in public schools. Nor should it be considered the first step toward returning organized prayer to the classroom. And it certainly does not support the teaching of creationism alongside evolution or the science of the big bang.

To make this idea work, a legitimate curriculum must be used. The best one out there, in my opinion, is the Bible Literacy Project. It is a nonprofit organization based in Fairfax, Va. Its Bible study textbook, "The Bible and Its Influence," is available to schools and has been endorsed by interfaith groups, First Amendment watchdog associations and educators. The curriculum is already used in 350 schools in 43 states.

It is a scholastic and unbiased review of the stories on the Bible and



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how they relate to literature and history. It is very specific about who should teach the course and offers five principles that must be made clear to students and teachers.

They are:

1. You are going to study the Bible academically, not devotionally. In other words, you are learning about the Bible and its role in life, language and culture.
2. You will be given an awareness of the religious content of the Bible, but you will not be pressed into accepting religion.
3. You will study about religion as presented in the Bible, but you will not be engaged in the practice of religion.
4. During this course, you will encounter differing religious views, but the views will neither be encouraged nor discouraged.
5. You will never be asked to conform to any of the beliefs you encounter in this course.

In short, if the Legislature plans

on introducing a Bible study course into the public schools, this is the best one.

In fact, much of SB 1338 reflects a tone similar to the guidelines of the Bible Literacy Project.

Unfortunately, there are other programs that purport to be unbiased but whose motives are questionable.

The National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, based in North Carolina, claims that its course is in use in 423 schools in 37 states.

A 2005 study out of Southern Methodist University found that the National Council promotes a fundamentalist Protestant interpretation of the Bible, often ignoring other beliefs such as those of Catholics, Jews and even mainline Protestants. Critics claim that it teaches as historic truth the stories of the Exodus, the flood, the destruction of the Tower of Babel and the resurrection of Jesus.

The president of the National Council, Elizabeth Ridenour, says her curriculum "teaches what the Bible 'says' and not how others interpret it." That is not what is needed in a Bible course in the public schools.

The Senate bill is likely to be wildly popular with the public, but for the wrong reasons. If legislators are going to approve teaching the Bible as an elective course in the public schools, then they need to be very careful what they endorse.

This must not be considered a way to "get God back into the schools." The Bible must be taught purely as it relates to literature and history. Nothing more.

Again, literature and history are for the public schools. Religion belongs in Sunday school.