

BIBLE LITERACY PROJECT

An educated person is familiar with the Bible

The Case for Bible Literacy in Secondary Schools

Biblical Literacy: Crisis and Solution

What would you say is the single most important book an educated person needs to know? When the heads of college English departments were asked what book “at a minimum, every incoming freshman should have read” their number one answer was: The Bible.[1]

Yes, the Bible.

Yet today relatively few students receive high-quality, academic instruction about the Hebrew Scriptures and/or the New Testament. For example: While 81 percent of English teachers in one local survey said that teaching about the Bible was important in literature classes, just 10 percent said they actually do so.[2] Scholarly reviews of textbooks in public schools confirm that virtually all religious references, including the Bible’s role in our history, art, and literature, have been excised from the curriculum.[3] One survey of high school textbooks showed that just one quarter of one percent of literature readings was from the Bible.[4]

Why Does Bible Literacy Matter?

There are many important rationales for bringing high-quality, academic instruction about the Bible to all American schoolchildren. Students of all faiths (and none) need to know about the Bible to engage their American heritage in key areas of language, arts, and literature, as well as history, law, and politics. Why should any student, regardless of faith tradition, be denied the tools to understand some of the most inspiring rhetoric in American history? Contemplate just a few of the achievements of Western culture that have been inspired, in part, by Biblical language and narratives: Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Handel’s *Messiah*, Michelangelo’s *David*. The list is endless.

Language and literature

Without Bible literacy, students are denied full access to their own linguistic, literary and artistic heritage.

The goal is not simply to study of the Bible as literature, but to understand the Bible’s unparalleled influence on the whole Western tradition. The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament were not crafted for artistic purposes, they have been (and continue to be) regarded as sacred texts by millions of people of faith. As such, they have exercised great influence on novelists, poets, artists and composers, as well as ordinary speakers.

“It’s hard to teach American literature without Bible references,” points out one English teacher.[5] Here is how another high school English teacher put it:

“Today we discussed *The Old Man and the Sea* ... when he carries the mast, he falls, he lies spread out on the mast, it’s just like Christ crucified... Most of the class didn’t have any idea ... *A Tale of Two Cities*—one man is sacrificing himself for another, just as Christ sacrificed himself for mankind. Sidney Carton walks through the garden before he decides just as Christ walked through the garden. I tell the students, I’m not any particular religious persuasion at all. I’m not a Christian. You just have to know the Bible.” [6]

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History, law, and politics

On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

“We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop ... And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”

The next day he was assassinated.

It was one of the great, tragic and truly gripping moments in American history. To grasp its full significance, students born 25 years or more after King’s death must know more than that Dr. King was a great civil rights leader. To understand Martin Luther King, Jr.’s last public words, we have to know about the text that inspired him. Without any knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, King’s freighted references, “mountaintop” and “promised land,” become at best vague rhetorical flourishes, at worst mere gibberish to 21st-century American students.

The civil rights movement is but one example of the importance of a background in the Bible. The Mayflower Compact; Abraham Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech; the temperance and the abolitionist movements; Harry Truman’s 1949 inaugural statement that “all men are created equal because they are created in the image of God;” to give just a few examples—little of America’s historic public rhetoric or great reform movements can be fully comprehended by those who do not know the Bible.

European history, too, from the legacy of the Roman Empire up through the Crusades, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the rise of the nation-state, to the pilgrim wanderings that led to America’s founding, is literally unintelligible without at least a basic working knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and/or the New Testament.

To understand is not always to endorse. The history of the public use of the Bible in political rhetoric and reform movements poses important intellectual questions about the relationship of church and state, an ongoing debate in which the next generation of American citizens and leaders will surely participate. We do not urge the study of the Bible as a simple source of political legitimacy, but as one of the key texts whose publicly debated meanings have shaped our past and reshape the present.

The Crisis of Biblical Illiteracy

Until recently the importance of the Bible in a good education was widely acknowledged and uncontroversial. Now, however, our heritage, our roots and our culture are needlessly being lost. Why? Too many Americans believe that it is illegal to teach about the Bible in public schools.

One reason for this misconception has been confusion about a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s. In 1963, the Supreme Court ruled that public schools may not require devotional use of the Bible. In that same decision, however, the Supreme Court explicitly acknowledged that academic study of the Bible in public schools is constitutional, as part of a good education. In his majority opinion to the court in *Abington v. Schempp*, Justice Thomas Clark wrote:

“It might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of ... the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. ... Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.”

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This decision banned devotional use of the Bible in the curriculum, but not academic teaching about the Bible. Many educators failed to recognize this distinction, however, and simply ceased teaching about the Bible altogether. Those who did recognize the distinction could find few curricula that presented the Bible in an academic manner.

Our current public school curriculum with its highly visible absence of instruction about these core texts, assumes one of two things: either that all American children are already well educated in Christian and Jewish texts, or that knowledge of these books is unimportant to a good liberal arts education.

Neither assumption is true. To the first point, religious instruction in and academic instruction about the Bible are not the same things. Religious study of the Bible, for example, does not examine these texts' role and influence in American and European history, art, literature, law and politics.

Furthermore, many American teens do not receive religious instruction of any kind.[7] Moreover, as religious diversity in America increases, the rationale for high-quality, academic instruction about the Bible becomes stronger, not weaker. Students from non-Christian or non-Jewish backgrounds are less likely to have the basic literacy about the Bible they need and deserve to engage American history, arts and letters.

The exclusion of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament from the public school curriculum has unfortunate consequences, direct and indirect. What we exclude from our children's education, the so-called "null curriculum," communicates an active message: either that the study of religious texts and history is so dangerous and disruptive that a tolerant society cannot include it, or that the Bible is not something educated adults think is very important for children to know.

We disagree.

The Bible Literacy Project aims to change the frame of reference in the public square by forcing the foes of teaching about the Bible to recognize their argument for what it is: not a case for tolerance, neutrality, or good scholarship, but the advocacy of ignorance and cultural illiteracy.

However, our story begins not with confrontation but with an amazingly successful new effort at peacemaking. Working with the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center, we produced *The Bible & Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide*, in which a highly diverse group of organizations managed to agree on what the issues were—both with regard to the issues of legality and basic fairness – for a school that chooses to include the Bible in its curriculum. The National School Boards Association and the American Jewish Congress endorsed the *Guide*, along with the National Association of Evangelicals, the Christian Legal Society and other religious, educational and civil liberties groups.[8]

Our primary task now is to move beyond words, to action: To produce and muster support for a Bible literacy curriculum for public schools that is fair, balanced, rigorous and constitutional; a textbook which will harm no child's faith, while leaving every teen knowledgeable about the Bible.

Leading Bible literature scholars, faith leaders, and educators have reviewed our course to ensure its fairness and accuracy. The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty has agreed to defend, free of charge, any school district sued for using our Bible curriculum in a manner consistent with *The Bible & Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide*. [9] The Bible Literacy Project is promoting consensus on the need for teaching about the Bible. Will you join us? With your help, we will ensure the next generation of young people receives the comprehensive education it deserves.

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- [1] A.M. Juhasz and L.R. Wilson, 1986. Should students be well read or should they read well? *NASSP Bulletin* 70(488):78-83.
- [2] Marie Goughnour Wachlin, 1997. "The Place of Bible Literature in Public High School English Classes," *Research in the Teaching of English* 31(1): 7-49.
- [3] See, for example, Warren A. Nord, 1995. *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press).
- [4] Marie Goughnour Wachlin, 1993. The place of Bible literature in public high school English classes. (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oregon). Available from University Microfilms International (Ann Arbor, MI).
- [5] Marie Goughnour Wachlin, 1997 Op. Cit.
- [6] Marie Goughnour Wachlin, 1998. "The Bible: Why We Need to Teach It; How Some Do," *English Journal*, March: 31-36.
- [7] In any given week, 49 percent of teens attend religious services (church, synagogue, mosque, etc.), while 24 percent of American teens say they never read the Bible. George H. Gallup, Jr., *The Spiritual Life of Young Americans: Approaching the Year 2000* (Princeton, NJ: The George H. Gallup International Institute): 8-15.
- [8] *The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide*, 1999. (New York: Bible Literacy Project and the First Amendment Center), The Guide has been endorsed by the American Association of School Administrators, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, the Christian Educators Association International, the Christian Legal Society, the Council on Islamic Education, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., the National Council for Social Studies, the National Education Association, the National School Boards Association, the People for the American Way Foundation, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.
- [9] To qualify for free legal assistance, the course should therefore be taught by a teacher who has taken one of our training courses and who is NOT incorporating material from any other Bible curriculum - in particular, materials developed by the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools - into the course.