



A Bite from the Apple: Teaching about the Bible in the Public Schools

Isabelle Kinnard, J.D., PhD

As someone who spends quite a bit of time talking to people about religion in the public schools, I have come to recognize a pattern in the response to this topic: the sharp intake of breath, the long pause, and then, an impassioned torrent of words. Almost everyone has an opinion on teaching about religion or the Bible in the public schools: Yes! No! Why bother? These opinions are usually followed by examples and accusations like: “You wouldn’t believe what those people are doing!” The conversation often ends with the statement “I wouldn’t touch it with a ten-foot pole.” Few people are neutral about teaching the Bible and religion; even fewer have suggestions for how we might go about doing this in a legal, even-handed, and engaging way.

Teachers are reluctant to broach teaching the Bible in the classroom because administrators, parents, or lawyers may have advised them not to, for fear of a lawsuit. Even with consensus that litigation should be avoided, *how* to avoid a lawsuit is unclear. Sometimes there seems to be an infinite variety of “what-if” scenarios that could trigger such a lawsuit.

But rather than thinking of teaching a Bible elective course as forbidden fruit, there are numerous strategies and resources that can help teachers offer Bible electives that avoid legal woes. First of all, teachers should consider the legal basics about religion in the schools. There are three main principles that underlie the laws on religion in the public schools. The first two principles are spelled out in the religion clauses of First Amendment to the Constitution: *Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*. These are called the establishment and free exercise clauses. The third principle, equal access, was created by Congress in the Equal Access Act of 1984. The Act provides that all non-curricular student groups (including religious groups) shall have equal access to any limited forum (or afterschool club) created for them by the secondary school. The three principles, therefore, are:

- no government (here, school) establishment of religion;
- freedom of religious expression, and
- equal access for all protected people.

Like all laws, these laws describe basic rights and responsibilities. The no establishment principle is **the responsibility of government representatives to be neutral toward religion**. Neither school officials nor people acting in an official capacity may do or say anything that favors or disfavors either religion or irreligion. Teachers and school officials are bound by this responsibility whenever they are acting in their official capacity—i.e. in class, on a field trip, in the halls. . . . One of the best ways to think through whether you, as a teacher, are living up to this responsibility is to ask yourself “What is the academic purpose of this lesson or activity?” and “Does this lesson neither prefer nor denigrate *any* religion?”

Students (and school officials acting outside their official capacity), are entitled to protection of their **right to freedom of expression and equal access as long as the exercise of these rights does not interfere with the underlying educational mission of the school, or become a privilege not granted to others.** Freedom of expression includes not just speech, but also acts, attire, creative arts and other non-verbal expression.

Just as students are not granted complete freedom of speech or absolute privacy in school, their religious freedom rights may similarly be restricted when it interferes with the school's underlying educational purpose. Students, for instance, have the free exercise right to pray in school before or after school, in the cafeteria, between classes in the halls, and sometimes even in class before a test. But, a student's right to spontaneously pray is not protected during instruction or testing time. Teachers should realize that most of the time when a teacher is within sight or hearing of students in the school environment, individual teacher rights to freedom of expression must yield to the greater responsibility of no establishment that they bear.

With a basic understanding of rights and responsibilities, teachers will be able to have a solid initial impression of how to handle many situations that arise. In addition, there are a number of specific and succinct guides, with answers to frequently asked questions, available on the internet. Some of these are listed below.

Government:

- www.ed.gov/Speeches/04-1995/prayer.html

Nonprofit/Education

- <http://www.firstfreedom.org/education/constitution.html>
- www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/faqs.aspx?id=6246
- www.pewforum.org/religion-schools

Scholarly Professional Organizations

- <http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/thebibleinpublicschools.aspx>
- www.aarweb.org/Public_Affairs/Religion_in_the_Schools/default.asp

The Society for Biblical Literature is also here to help you with curriculum resources that will assist you in teaching about the Bible in an academic and professionally appropriate way. Enjoy the journey. You and your students will find it immensely rewarding.

Isabelle Kinnard is the Vice President for Education at the First Freedom Center in Richmond, Virginia.

<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>