



The Bible, Taught Well

By Monica Henson

Much of the general public, as well as a surprising number of educators believe that it is illegal to teach the Bible in American public schools. In fact, there is no legal prohibition against teaching *about* any religion, including Christianity. The key is this: teaching *about* religion, including religious texts, must be done (in a public school) without advancing and favoring one religion over any other, or religion over non-religion. In the United States, there has been a historical bias in favor of Judeo-Christian beliefs in government—sometimes perceived, sometimes actual—which is at the root of many lawsuits and court case decisions.

A good deal of the hullabaloo about how “they took God out of the public schools” and “they won’t let children pray in public schools” is in fact a misinterpretation of the U.S. Supreme Court decisions *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963), and *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971). Without going into a detailed analysis of each of these cases, what public school teachers really need to know is that teaching about religion must be done in a manner that advances a curricular purpose as part of an academic program and does not promote any one religion or religion as a whole. Teachers need to see the Bible as a rich resource for instruction in many subject areas and not be afraid to use it. Talking with administration before using the Bible in instruction can help teachers avoid inadvertently stepping across the legal line.

Evangelical Christians appear to be most upset that school personnel are no longer permitted to lead students in prayer; but there is nothing stopping students themselves from praying on their own in public schools. For example, students may pray in a public school, alone or in groups, as long as they are acting *of their own volition* and are not disrupting the academic environment. Teachers and administrators may not be the sponsors and originators of the prayers. This is what is meant by the “establishment clause” of the Constitution as interpreted by the Supreme Court: for a public employee to initiate or participate in a particular religious practice constitutes “establishment” of a certain religion by the government.

Public schools also routinely permit the formation of clubs such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, which is legal, as long as other clubs that may or may not be religious in nature have equal access to school facilities.

In addition to religious clubs and organizations and student-initiated prayer, public school classrooms are frequently the site of references to religion, particularly at the middle and high school levels in English and social studies classes. English teachers reference the Bible (and other religious works) frequently when they teach certain pieces of literature. More broadly, much of early American history could not be taught without referring to the Puritans and the Pilgrims. It is not possible to teach European history without reference to the Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformation, and the Crusades.

When I taught world geography to seventh graders, we had an entire unit of curriculum on Islam, Christianity, and Judaism when we studied the Middle East; we focused on Jerusalem is a holy city common to all three religions. My experience teaching English in junior and senior

high school was permeated with references to the Bible and to Christianity. It is utterly impossible to teach Shakespeare, much less Chaucer and Milton, without making connections to the Bible.

Using Biblical texts and literary references can make for interesting and engaging lessons. When I was a high school English teacher, one of my senior English thematic units was a quarter-long study called "Women and Power." In this unit, the students read Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, the story of the Fall in Genesis (The Bible, KJV), selected sections of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales*. The focus of the unit was the Wife of Bath's essential question, "What do women want?" and how did/do women gain and wield power.

The highlight of the fall semester was our extensive discussion of the Fall, working both in Genesis and Milton. The students were fascinated by the idea that a man could love a woman so much that he'd literally die for her, as Adam chose to do for Eve. Much class conversation was devoted to whether Eve intentionally tempted Adam to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, or whether he did so of his own volition when he realized that she had doomed herself and he didn't want to live eternally in the Garden of Eden without her.

The students moved on to a research paper on a powerful woman and compared their choices to the women we were reading about. They simply could not, however, drop the idea of Eve and the Fall, and that theme of women as temptresses kept popping up in class discussions as we studied Shakespeare and Chaucer's treatments of the battle of the sexes. I sensed an opportunity, and I suggested to the class that they hold a mock trial of Eve in order to decide the issue "once and for all." They responded enthusiastically, and the final six weeks of our semester was a rollicking collaboration between the class and me as we crafted a way to stage our trial.

Having spent a year in law school, I had enough understanding of the American legal system and mock trials to be able to set up a framework that worked well. I put forth the idea that our trial should actually be an appeal, as Eve had long ago been found guilty by the church and society. Therefore, we constructed the situation that Eve was appealing her conviction as the person who condemned the human race to die.

The class divided into a prosecution team, a defense team, a panel of justices who would hear the arguments and write an opinion, and the press, who would videotape the trial and create a newsreel of clips and interviews to summarize it, which would be shown after the opinion was rendered. I agreed to preside as Chief Justice and would not vote on the opinion, and the justices consisted of three boys and three girls.

The arguments on both sides were spirited and filled with references to textual evidence from all of the books, poems, and Bible passages we had studied previously. The questions posed by the justices were provocative and made for lively discussion with the attorneys. Frequently the lead attorney on either the defense or the prosecution would request time to confer with his/her team. All students made a point to "dress for success" during the days that we conducted our court sessions. The press corps avidly interviewed the attorneys as we moved toward a close. The local newspaper even came in to cover our proceedings.

Predictably, the opinion was split along gender lines, with a 3-3 deadlock. The students begged me to vote to break the tie, but I stuck to my decision to serve purely as facilitator of the process. At the conclusion of the semester, when students handed in their final exams and their class

evaluations, many of them said that this was the best semester of English they had spent in all four years of high school.

The important point to take away from this story is that it is not illegal to teach the Bible in public schools. It is necessary, however, to ensure in any discussion of religion or religious texts that the teacher does not take any position that advances religion or appears to promote one tradition over another. Teachers should clear in advance with their administration any lessons that might be considered controversial. Careful planning and awareness of the legal issues can make teaching the Bible in your classroom a rich and memorable learning experience for your students.

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