

Politics, Culture Wars, and the Good Book: Recent Controversies Over the Bible and Public Education

The Bible was never legally banned from public schools. The famous 1963 U.S. Supreme Court case *Abington v. Schempp* prohibited state-sponsored devotional reading of the Bible in public school classrooms, but explicitly left open the possibility of objective, nonsectarian, academic study of the Bible. Or5hw 70.4 (Orossro0v/65Or5hwwotateeuhat(objective,)] TJ

tradition for the construction of American identity, the growing pluralism of American society, the balance between free exercise of religion and the prohibition of government establishment of religion, the balance between the rights of the majority and the rights of the minority, the attempts by some sectors of the Republican Party to spread religion and by some sectors of the Democratic Party to “get religion,” and the struggles at the state and local level to control what is taught in schools. As has so often been the case, the classroom is on the frontlines of these so-called culture wars. Students, and the Bible, may end up as the losers. In this essay, I will provide an overview of these recent controversies, beginning in Odessa and then moving to the state legislation, with an eye on these types of issues.

In March 2005, the Ector County Independent School District in Odessa, Texas received a letter from a conservative advocacy group, the Alliance Defense Fund, asking it to offer a Bible course. The letter was signed by several local citizens, including the mayor and a state representative.⁶ Within a few weeks, a lawyer from the Alliance Defense Fund addressed the board. “The Bible,” he argued, “was the foundation and blueprint for our Declaration of Independence, for our Constitution, and our entire educational system.” This lawyer was also affiliated with another organization: the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools. He asked the board to consider the National Council’s course and claimed that it had an illustrious history.⁷

The National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools was founded in 1993 in Greensboro, NC. Its goal is to “bring a state

other than the Bible. As of August 2006, it claimed its curriculum is in use in 365 school districts in 37 states—including 52 districts here in Texas. In fact, these numbers are highly inflated; in the 2005-2006 school year, only 11 school districts in Texas used the NCBCPS curriculum.¹¹

After the March school board meeting, grassroots support in Odessa for a Bible course grew quickly. Following the National Council's strategy, local supporters began circulating a petition, which eventually swelled to 6400 signatures. The petition presented the offering of a Bible course as a Constitutional right.

Some Odessa citizens, however, were concerned about the National Council's course. One was a Jewish parent who teaches English at Odessa College, David Newman. Newman argued that the council's course appeared to advocate Christianity, and he made his opposition clear. He noted that his daughter was already occasionally on the receiving end of uncomfortable comments from her classmates. Newman told the *Dallas Morning News*, "They'll ask her why 'your people' killed Jesus. Or if she knows that Jesus is her savior . . ." He continued, "I don't think it's hate. It's just kids being kids."¹² Newman's protests drew considerable media attention and raised the profile of the Odessa situation to the national level.

On April 26, the school board met with this issue as the principal item on its agenda.¹³ According to the *Odessa American*, approximately 300 people attended. Dozens more gathered outside, some lining the streets, others caught up in ecstatic worship, singing, clapping, praying, chanting, shouting, jumping up and down, running in circles around a tree, and at times, seemingly speaking in tongues. Inside, several citizens addressed the board, pleading for a course. Some framed their petition in terms of cultural literacy, noting the importance of the Bible on western culture. Others argued that the Bible had a special role in American history. One noted that the first reader used in American schools was the Bible. Another suggested that Columbus was guided by the Bible to sail in 1492.

One citizen repeated quotes about the Bible that he attributed to a host of famous historical figures, including Patrick Henry, James Madison, Noah Webster, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams [*sic*], Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln. He read Isaiah 33:22, "For the

LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us.” He argued that Isaiah’s separate references to judge, lawgiver, and king inspired the Founding Fathers to divide the American government into three branches. Repeating an argument found on the National Council’s website, he claimed that America had entered into a period of social decline since widespread Bible reading had been removed from public schools in 1963: “Over the years that

discussion of the Dead Sea Scrolls—arguing that the scrolls mention Jesus, include passages from the New Testament, and were written by Christian Jews—can only be characterized as tabloid scholarship. It advocated showing creation science videos from the Creation Evidence Museum in Glen Rose, Texas. These videos claim that the earth is 6000 years old, was created in six days, and that humans and dinosaurs roamed the earth together before being wiped out by Noah’s flood. It presented an urban legend as fact, repeating the old story that NASA had discovered a “missing day in time” that corresponded to the story of the sun standing still in Joshua 10. It claimed that our Founding Fathers intended America to be a distinctively Christian nation, built on biblical principles, and implied that the Bible (that is, the King James Version), more than the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, is the nation’s founding document. America, it strongly suggested, should reclaim this purported Christian heritage. In addition, the curriculum was extensively plagiarized, much of it straight from uncited websites. Even the discussion of “Thou shalt not steal” was plagiarized.

In my opinion, the curriculum does not appear to have been a “good faith” effort to be academically mainstream, to model academic honesty, or to avoid being sectarian. Rather than writing a 2-page letter, I wrote a 32-page report, which TFN released on August 1, 2005. As news of the report and the curriculum spread, scholars across the country began offering endorsements of my report—at least 185 scholars at schools across the country, including colleagues in the Religious Studies Department and at Perkins School of Theology.¹⁸

The National Council responded furiously, issuing an August 4 press release stating that the report had been written by anti-religion extremists who were advocating totalitarianism and were trying to ban the Bible from public schools. They denied that the report had any merit at all, besides noting “a missing footnote or two.” On August 12, however, they began discretely mailing out a version that apparently relied heavily upon my report as a guide for revision. Less than a month later, on September 9, the publication of the new version was publicly announced by Chuck Norris at a news conference in Washington DC. Though this revised version is an improvement

over the earlier one, it is still troubling. Its overall quality remains amateurish, much of it is still derived from online sources, and, most troublingly, it still encourages a construction of American identity as distinctively Christian—or, more specifically, distinctively Protestant.¹⁹

The revised National Council curriculum was not the only Bible

attention, continued to speak against it. A junior high English teacher, also Jewish, echoed his complaints: “Seeing six thousand people on their knees in prayer—that’s pretty intimidating if you’re a minority in a community.” The teacher acknowledged that a majority of the community wanted the National Council’s course, but, she said, just because the majority wanted it did not make it okay. Describing the National Council’s course at a public hearing, she observed, “I was really struck by how many times my [Jewish] identity was meant to be a stepping stone to something else, and that did not feel good. That is not a course I would want my daughter to take.” At the same public hearing, several other educators spoke in favor of the Bible Literacy Project’s textbook.

The school board met again on December 20²⁵—the same day that the federal judge in Pennsylvania ruled that the teaching of intelligent design in Dover’s public schools was unconstitutional.²⁶ Fourteen members of the public addressed the board. Though both curricula had their supporters, it was clear that the majority of the assembled crowd favored the National Council. One school board member referred to phone calls he had received from the community: “The calls that I have received have said, ‘We want a Protestant in the classroom, and we want a Protestant religious Bible class.’” He noted the extremely problematic nature of such expectations. He and another member expressed concerns about the feelings of Odessa’s minority religions.

A third board member countered these objections: “The fact remains,” he said, “that in the last 3 weeks I have received 140 phone calls from my constituents and concerned parents and grandparents who want their children to study the National Council curriculum. I have had zero phone calls in support of the other curriculum I don’t feel that I have any choice in this matter but to support my constituents.”

A motion to use the National Council’s curriculum passed 4-2.²⁷ Outside, demonstrators celebrated by singing a song associated with the civil rights movement: “Victory is mine, Victory is mine, Victory today is mine, I told Satan, Get thee behind, Victory today is mine.” Apparently, the rejection of the Bible Literacy Project was seen as a victory over demonic powers. The situation in Odessa was settled.

In 2006, state-level initiatives to increase the number of Bible courses replaced Odessa as the focal point of controversy. The first bill (SB 736) was introduced by a Republican in the Missouri Senate on January 4. It stated, in part, “that any public school district may offer a class or classes in which the Bible is taught.” Perhaps the most striking aspect of the bill was that it simply affirmed what the U.S. Supreme Court had already declared legal decades earlier in *Abington v. Schempp*. Since the bill introduced no change to the status quo, one cannot help but wonder if its true purpose was to provide state legislators with the opportunity to demonstrate to their constituents that they are defenders of the Bible. The bill was placed on the legislature’s informal calendar but never came up for a vote.

In Alabama and Georgia, Democrats and Republicans introduced rival Bible bills, with Democrats taking the lead in both cases. These bills not only affirmed Bible courses; they also offered state funding for them. On January 10, a Democratic Representative in Alabama formally offered a bill (HB 58) creating a high school elective course called “The Bible and Its Influence” and specifying the Bible Literacy Project book as its textbook.²⁸ The reaction to the bill by some legislators and citizens can only be described as a firestorm. Predictably, some complained about the specification of one textbook in a state law, arguing that it would impinge upon local sovereignty over education.

Other objections, however, were considerably more pointed. Republican State Senator Scott Beason suggested that the Bible Literacy Project textbook was, in slanted the Bible. “Beason questioned the appropriateness of some of the questions the textbook asks students, such as: ‘If God is good, why does he allow bad things to happen?’”²⁹ For him, this question appears designed to undermine students’ faith—despite the fact that it is the very question posed by the biblical classic, the Book of Job.

Two members of the State Board of Education issued a press release implying that the Bible Literacy Project’s course relied entirely on its textbook and did not even use the Bible.³⁰ Attached to the press release was a series of charges and complaints about the Bible Literacy Project from a “t-1[sheet” distributed by a number of socially conservative groups, such as the Christian Coalition of

Alabama and Concerned Women for America of Alabama.³¹ One of these state board of education members alleged that the Bible Literacy Project textbook was theologically suspect,³² a charge that had also surfaced earlier in Odessa.³³ The Alabama Eagle Forum sent out an online newsletter with similar complaints.³⁴

Faced with opposition on multiple fronts, the Democrats' House bill was voted down on February 7. Republican Senator Scott Beason explained his opposition to Agape Press, again charging the Bible Literacy Project with undermining Christianity and for political correctness. "For instance," the journalist wrote, "Beason points out, in citing eras, *The Bible and Its Influence* resists using the traditional descriptors 'BC' and 'AD,'" and instead uses BCE and CE. Beason also drew attention to discussion questions such as "If God allows bad things to happen, can he really be considered good?" and "Did Adam and Eve receive a fair deal from God?" "Those examples," Beason argues, "are among the 'multiple references' in *The Bible and Its Influence* that 'question the sovereignty of God, and question whether or not God's Word is inerrant, and many, many things that I don't think K-12 students ought to be subjected to.'"³⁵

Republican Representative Nick Williams issued a press release titled "Bible Distortion Bill Defeated."³⁶ "Normally," he wrote, "I would be all for this type of legislation, but this bill promoted a certain liberal textbook instead of promoting the Bible. As conservative legislators, we could not allow this terrible bill to pass. It would have had a very negative impact on our teenagers." Rep. Williams expressed support for the National Council on Bible Curriculum. Within a few months, both Williams and Beason accepted invitations to serve on the National Council's Board of Advisors.

Despite the failure of the House bill, three weeks later a Democrat introduced similar legislation in the state Senate (SB 499). Like the House Democratic bill, this one specifically mentioned the use of the

shall demonstrate clearly that they have used a broad array of sources, and have engaged an extensive list of educational and religious groups, to ensure a fair and balanced curriculum that does not promote one particular viewpoint or church teaching.” Despite a 4-2 approval in the Education Committee (March 9), the bill never came to a vote.

Republican bills in both the Alabama House and Senate suffered a similar fate. The House bill (HB 545), sponsored by over fifty legislators, proposed the creation of an elective high school course called “The Bible” and specified the textbook: the King James Version, a translation favored by many conservative Protestants. The specification of the Bible as the textbook should probably be interpreted as a nod to the National Council, which uses only the Bible as a textbook, and thus a slap at the Bible Literacy Project. The Senate bill (SB 472) was more generally worded, creating a Bible elective and specifying that local districts could select a curriculum from a list of resources approved by the State Board of Education. Both bills died at the end of the legislative session.

How did the Bible Literacy Project become so controversial to Beason, Williams, and other Alabama legislators? Most of the criticisms of the Bible Literacy Project mentioned above originate with two online columnists, Berit Kjos³⁷ and Dennis L. Cuddy.³⁸ Both assemble a list of passages from the textbook that they argue belittle the Bible and the Christian 3.6 osbages 3.6 osand ori Tm /TT8 1 TT -63.9Education.

many cases they note, perhaps a few reflect unfortunate wording on the Bible Literacy Project's part. Many of their criticisms, however, are unpersuasive. Consider these representative examples, taken from Kjos's articles:

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options to students, the Bible Literacy Project is modeling what Kjos calls “dialectical thinking,” a thought process utilized by Hegel, adopted by Marx and Lenin and employed in the Soviet Union’s brainwashing techniques.

Most damning for both Kjos and Cuddy are the endorsement of a few associated with the Bible Literacy Project of the political philosophy “communitarianism,” which, in the words of Kjos, “places the importance of society ahead of the unfettered rights of the individual,” a belief that she views as un-Christian. She compares Communitarianism with Communism and with the views of Gorbachev, Marx, and Lenin. Kjos and Cuddy accumulate examples of passages that seem to support this sinister view of communitarianism, such as the caption for a photograph on page 369: “These two teenagers have volunteered their time for Habitat for Humanity”

The complaints of Kjos and Cuddy cannot be fully understood apart from their larger conceptual framework that the groundwork is already being laid for America to be subsumed within a New World Order based on communitarianism, run by a One World Government that will arise out of the United Nations. Both have written extensively on this danger. Cuddy, for example, has written books arguing that the government allowed September 11 to happen so that it could curtail our individual liberties with the hope of hastening the implementation of the New World Order.⁴¹ For Kjos, even the well known evangelical minister Rick Warren, author of the national best-seller *The Purpose Driven Life*, has adopted this socialistic, globalizing, anti-American, anti-Christian agenda.⁴² In the eyes of these columnists, the Bible Literacy Project is a part of this larger movement and must be stopped. The American Family Association articles never highlight this central, defining aspect of the arguments of Kjos and Cuddy.

Cuddy’s arguments eventually made their way into outlets other than Agape Press. Through newspaper editorials and Christian radio talk shows, he has attempted to spread his views about the Bible Literacy Project. Others have also championed his cause, such as a columnist writing for the website of former presidential candidate Alan Keyes.⁴³

What is ironic about the criticism of the Bible Literacy Project by sectors of the Christian Right is that the individuals who created the Bible Literacy Project are primarily conservative Protestants. A column at the website of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State laments the involvement of the project's founder, Chuck Stetson, with Christian Right groups and Republican politics.⁴⁴ The association of the curriculum with Democratic bills also does not appear to reflect Stetson's intentions. Regardless of Stetson's own religious and political inclinations, the Bible Literacy Project went to considerable effort to produce a curriculum that would be acceptable to a broad spectrum of American society. In a polarized society, however, perhaps the most unpardonable of sins is attempting to build a bridge.

How the Bible Literacy Project will fare in Georgia remains to be seen. In January 2006, Democratic senators there introduced a bill (SB 437) authorizing state funding for Bible courses. The bill did not specify a textbook, but its Democratic sponsors bandied about a copy of the Bible Literacy Project's book. The charges seen in Alabama

course: the books “commonly known as the Old Testament” and the books “commonly known as the New Testament”—that is, the

Endnotes

- 1 The legal question this ruling begs is how exactly does one teach about the

- 20 www.bibleliteracy.org.
- 21 E.g., Luke Timothy Johnson of Candler School of Theology at Emory University in "Textbook Case: A Bible Curriculum for Public Schools," *Christian Century*, Feb. 21, 2006, 31-37 cf. the support reflected in "Report of the Sixty-eighth International Meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005): 662-670.
- 22 Steven L. McKenzie of Rhodes College, "Review of *The Bible and its Influence*," at <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=465>.
- 23 "ADL Says Bible Teaching Guide for Public Schools 'Unacceptable,'" http://www.adl.org/PresRele/RelChStSep_90/4821_90.htm, press release issued November 7, 2005.
- 24 Letters dated December 19 and May 4 can be found at <http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=20194>.
- 25 Jay Gorania, "Both Sides of Debate Express Strong Opinions," *Odessa American*, December 21, 2005. This paper's description of the meeting also includes details from audio recordings of it.
- 26 *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* (M. D. Pennsylvania 2005).
- 27 David J. Lee, "National Spotlight on ECISD in '05," *Odessa American*, December 31, 2005.
- 28 <http://alisdb.legislature.state.al.us/acas/ACASLogin.asp>. The bill had already received attention in December before it was officially filed.
- 29 Bob Johnson, "House Turns Down Bill to Teach Bible Course," *Ledger-Enquirer*, Feb. 7, 2006.
- 30 <http://www.bettyeters.com/legislation.htm>.

