

**THE BIBLE AS MOTIVATOR: A PLAN FOR TEACHING THE BIBLE IN PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS TODAY**

By

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## **The Bible as Motivator: A Plan for Teaching the Bible in Public Schools Today**

Public education is an important cornerstone of our life together in the United States of America. While not explicitly discussed in the U.S. Constitution, one need only look to the history books to see that public schooling was foundational to the ideas that formed our nation, and it became part of each state's duty to its citizens. Additionally, from its inception in the United States, public education was linked to religious faith and freedom, as well as to the issues of justice, inclusion, and equality. While sentiments have, of course, changed over time, and the country has grown, shifted, progressed, and become much more diverse (culturally, racially, religiously), public education for all remains an important part of who we are. And, despite the fact that the ways in which the Bible and religion have been engaged in the public schools have changed significantly over time, the Bible still holds truth, power, and history that is relevant to those pursuing a public education today. This paper sets out to investigate a bit of that history and then make a proposal about the ways in which the Bible can be taught, explored, and appreciated in the public schools.

### A Brief History

In 1647, those who had settled in the colony of Massachusetts passed a school law that established the importance of public schools in the new world. This act was sometimes referred to as the Olde Deluder Satan act, because the first paragraph claims that if children do not learn to read and write, they can be more easily deceived by Satan.<sup>1</sup> Since this time, the purpose of education in general, and of public education in particular, has been much debated. It is likely that most Americans are not in agreement on this subject today. The possibilities range from

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<sup>1</sup> Cliff Schimmels, "Public, Christian, and Home Schooling," in *Christian Education: Foundations for the Future*, ed. by Robert E. Clark, Lin Johnson, and Allyn K. Sloat (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 598.

transmitting the culture, building an intelligent and robust labor force, healing social problems, creating valuable citizens, encouraging moral behavior, learning more about who God is, and many others.

While there is no universally agreed-upon overarching purpose for public education, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to determine one, it is clear that the Bible and Christian faith have played a role in the foundation of public education in the United States. In the years following the founding of the first public schools, the Bible continued to be taught and treasured in the classroom. However, it is also evident even to the most cursory observer that the role of faith and religion in public education has come into question in more recent history. For example, in 1963, in *Abington School District v. Schempp*, the Supreme Court decided that public schools could not require students to hear verses of the Bible read as a devotion at the beginning of each day.<sup>2</sup> Yet, that same court case also stated that the Bible could be read as literature: “It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. 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.” Still, the question remained: what distinguishes a religious exercise (not allowed) from a secular study of a religious text (allowed)?

In 1971, *Lemon v. Kurtzman* helped somewhat in answering this question.<sup>3</sup> This Supreme Court case established the *Lemon* test, which deals with legislation related to religion. Practically speaking, one could apply the *Lemon* test to issues regarding teaching the Bible in the public schools by asking the following (or similar questions):

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<sup>2</sup> *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 205 (1963).

<sup>3</sup> *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 612 (1971).

- Does the activity involve excessive entanglement with a specific religious group? (Financial support may be considered an entanglement.)
- What is the primary effect of the activity? Does it invite the celebration of any specific religious tradition? Does it enhance or inhibit any religious tradition?
- What is the primary purpose of the activity? Is the purpose primarily secular in nature?

In 1995, The United States Department of Education issued a directive to all superintendents in the U.S. in the hopes of clarifying some of these issues even further. That document spelled out the ways in which the Bible may be used in public schools today: “Public schools may not provide religious instruction, but they may teach about religion, including the Bible or other scripture: the history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible (or other scripture)-as-literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries all are permissible public school subjects. Similarly, it is permissible to consider religious influences on art, music, literature, and social studies.”<sup>4</sup> So, while the subject of teaching the Bible in the public schools is far from settled—there likely will be more court cases on this very subject in the future—it is clear that the Bible can be taught in a public school setting in a very specific manner with some limitations.

### A Plan for Today

So, why has teaching the Bible in the public schools become less common? It used to be common practice for teachers to read Bible stories to students or to have students read the Bible. Yet, by and large, this practice has fallen out of favor, likely for a number of reasons. Teachers

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Education Directive, August 10, 1995.

are often focused on their state's standards (which do not include teaching from the Bible), meeting the administration's goals, and helping students pass standardized tests. In addition, teachers may fear that a student or parent will be offended by the teaching of the Bible, and they may be concerned that there could be repercussions. Many teachers also desire to show respect for all of the religious faiths represented in their classes, and lifting up one particular religious text seems like it might be crossing a line. Some teachers are unsure about what is legal and what is illegal in this regard and have not been guided or trained about these issues.<sup>5</sup> Of course, some teachers are simply unfamiliar with the Bible themselves and would not even consider that teaching it in any way would be beneficial to students.

These are all good reasons as to why teaching the Bible in the public schools has become less common. And, Christians must, of course, respect and value the diversity of beliefs represented in their communities. Christian teachers need to follow the rules and practices set forth in their respective schools. Yet, it is possible that there is an appropriate way to teach the Bible in the public schools. It can be done and done well. It does not need to be done in a way that includes proselytizing, coercion, disrespect, or intimidation. It can be done in a way that is unbiased and respectful of all viewpoints. Most importantly, it can be done in a way that aids students in their understanding and contributes positively to their education and overall development.

One thing that is true about the Bible (whether one is a Christian who believes in its divine inspiration or not) is that it has been a great motivator. The Bible has inspired people to

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<sup>5</sup> Anecdotally, the author notes a recent story told by a friend whose child was studying the practice of mummification in school. Part of the assignment was for each student to explain what items he or she would bring to the afterlife. The friend's child said that he would bring his Bible, and his teacher scolded him and refused to allow him to say this in front of the class. This, it seems, violates the spirit of laws and guidelines governing the use of the Bible in public schools.

act and create all throughout history. In many cases, the Bible has inspired individuals to act in courageous, good, just, and honorable ways. It has motivated people to create brilliant works of art, architecture, music, literature, and the like. Unfortunately, in some cases, people have also used the Bible as a rationale for acting unjustly.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the outcome, there is no question that the Bible is inspirational and can be studied as such.

The following is a loose plan for teaching the Bible in public schools in a way that examines closely the reasons why this particular text is so captivating for many important figures throughout history and why it has had such a strong and lasting impact on the world.<sup>7</sup> The plan includes sample essay/project prompts or discussion/presentation topics in a number of subject areas. These prompts are not meant to be exhaustive; there are countless possibilities in each of these areas. Instead, these prompts serve as examples of the ways in which students in the public schools can be encouraged to research and understand the Bible in a way that is both legal and faithful to the text from a Christian perspective. It is true that exploring the Bible in this way may not lead to the development of mature Christian faith; that is not its goal. However, studying the Scriptures in this manner may be a much less threatening approach. Students who otherwise would not have reason to do so can engage with the Bible not as a religious text and not even as literature (though they may do this, too), but as *the* main influence behind great acts and works. This plan is not asking students to critique the text itself; it is merely asking them to consider what makes the text so compelling for so many others. It is also enabling them to grapple with the powerful themes of the Bible using a multitude of disciplines, senses, and intelligences. In many cases, the sample prompts demonstrate how students can be challenged to consider the

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<sup>6</sup> The author would like to point out that, in her opinion, by and large, when individuals have been motivated by the Bible to act unjustly, it has been due to a misinterpretation or mistreatment of the text.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that this particular plan is geared toward teaching the Bible at the high school level. Another, altered plan would be necessary for teaching the Bible in elementary schools.

motivating forces in their own lives and come to understand the ways in which others have been equally enthralled by the truth, power, and beauty of the Bible.

### *Art*

It is evident that the Bible has been the inspiration behind many of the great works of art throughout time. No study of art history would be complete without investigating Michelangelo's work in the Sistine Chapel or Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. The Renaissance is often looked upon as one of the greatest periods in human history for the flourishing of art in the Western world. Much of the work that was done was based on a return to classical sources for inspiration. The prevalent thinking during the Renaissance was influenced by one of Plato's theories on art. This theory taught that art is an imitation of eternal truth and beauty. Many Christian artists took this view seriously and sought to channel the eternal truth of Scripture through their work. As students examine the great works of art during this time period (as well as other time periods), they can interact with the great truths of the Bible in a way that makes them accessible, even to those who are unfamiliar with the text.

The possibilities for discussing the Bible as it relates to art are almost endless. Students can examine paintings, sculptures, architecture, drawings, ancient works, modern works, and artwork from every part of the world. The following are just a few sample essay prompts or topics for class discussion:

1. Examine Matthias Grunewald's *The Crucifixion*. What is happening in the painting? Who are the people in the painting? What is exaggerated and why? What words are located on the painting? What is their origin? Based on the crucifixion accounts in the Gospels, is this painting historically accurate? If not, why is the scene depicted this way? What might have

motivated Grunewald to create this work? The definition of the word “passion” in the dictionary includes references both to the suffering and death of Christ, as well as to strong and powerful emotions. Talk about how both of those definitions find themselves represented in Grunewald’s painting. It is often said that artists suffer for their work and that good art must find a way to convey or stir emotions. The Passion of Christ has given rise to the passion that many Christian artists pour into their art. If you were an artist, what are some of the driving passions in your life that would influence your art in the same way that the Passion of Christ influenced Grunewald?

2. Read 1 Samuel 17: 1-58 from the Bible, paying particular attention to the description of David in verse 43. Imagine what David might have looked like. Then, use your device to look at a 3-D image of Michelangelo’s *David*. Do you believe that the statue is an accurate representation of David as he is described in the story? In the story, David risks his life to take a stand for what he believes. What features in Michelangelo’s depiction of David help to convey the courage and conviction that allowed David to take such a stand? What beliefs do you hold that are so strong that you would be willing to risk your life for them?

3. During our recent field trip to various artistic sites in our community, we stopped at the local cathedral and examined their stained glass windows. Historically, stained glass windows were used by the Church to help convey Bible stories to those who were unable to read. Choose your favorite stained glass window. Discuss its context. Then, create your own stained glass mosaic using whatever materials you choose. What is your inspiration? If you wanted to tell a story to someone who could not read using a visual medium, how would you do it? What part of the story would be most important to you?

## *Music*

It is common practice for schools to sing sacred music within their choral music programs. Any comprehensive study of music would include music that is set to sacred text or inspired by religious faith. Most students undertaking a course of study in music would be familiar with, for example, Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's "Hallelujah Chorus," and the like. Investigating the words and meaning behind a piece (particularly when those words occur in a language other than the vernacular, which is often the case with famous sacred music, much of which is sung in Latin) is a legitimate tool for teachers to use and is one way to teach the Bible in this particular setting. Students would benefit significantly from a greater understanding of the meaning behind the words that they are singing. Any musician knows that understanding the context of the song lyrics is the first step to being able to interpret them accordingly during a performance.

It is pedagogically necessary for a music teacher to discuss the meaning of the text insofar as that meaning relates—or does not relate if the composer is using sarcasm or irony—to the music. Encouraging students to "feel the music" or to reflect the meaning of the text through the tone they produce vocally or through their facial expression does not demonstrate endorsement of religion but, rather, demonstrates artistic sensitivity to the relationship between music and text.<sup>8</sup>

It would be important and appropriate for students to explore the meaning of the text of the sacred music that is being performed. It would not only enhance the student's learning but may also enhance the way in which the audience receives the performance. Music has many purposes, but one of its purposes is to convey a message in a way that words alone cannot.

The following are some hypothetical essay prompts. A music course may or may not include the writing of essays, but the same prompts could be used to stimulate class discussion.

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<sup>8</sup> Faith Kasparian, "The Constitutionality of Teaching and Performing Sacred Choral Music in Public Schools," *Duke Law Journal* 46 (1997): 1156.

1. Choose three sections of George Frideric Handel's *Messiah*. Examine the words closely. Where do these words come from? What is their context (both in their original source and in *Messiah*)? What do they mean? What might these words have meant to Handel when he was composing this piece? What thoughts or emotions might he have been experiencing? What thoughts or emotions might he have wanted to evoke in those who would hear this piece? Why do you think that he chose to set these words to this specific music?

2. We will be singing Gabriel Faure's *Requiem* in our upcoming concert. Find a translation of the Latin text. What do you notice about the words? What is their historical context? Why might these words have inspired Faure to compose this piece of music? What is the overall message of this work? If you were to compose a *requiem* (piece of music relating to the topic of death and mourning), what would you want your audience to hear or experience? How might you arrange the piece in order to accomplish that goal?

3. At this year's Holiday Concert, we will be performing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Examine the words. To whom do they refer (i.e., who is Emmanuel)? Why might this particular piece of music be set to a tune in a minor key? Choose one of the following terms from the piece and research its origin and meaning: Rod/Branch of Jesse, Dayspring, Key of David, Desire of Nations.

### *Literature*

Classic literature is inundated with biblical allusions and themes. It has been said that there are over 1,200 biblical references in Shakespeare's works alone. There are a variety of ways in which one might engage the Bible in a literature course. "Students might study the Bible as literature. They would examine the Bible as they would other literature in terms of aesthetic

categories, as an anthology of narratives and poetry, exploring its language, symbolism, and motifs. Students might also study the Bible in literature, the ways in which later writers have used Bible literature, language, and symbols.”<sup>9</sup> Taking the latter as a suggestion, a teacher might invite students to explore biblical imagery in a work such as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, for example. Biblical imagery is very prevalent throughout many great works of literature, including poetry, prose, and drama. Inviting students to explore the biblical themes in their literature courses could open the door for a great deal of examination.

Students could investigate the Bible through the following assignments:

1. Choose a book from Madeleine L’Engle’s *Wrinkle in Time* series or C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Research the author. What inspired the author to write these novels? What message is he/she trying to convey? What are some biblical images that can be gleaned from these works?

2. In the poem, “Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward,” John Donne faces a personal conflict. Donne believes that it is the duty of every Christian to turn his/her attention toward the “Holy Land” in the east during various holy days and especially on Good Friday, yet his business interests are causing him to head west. How does he resolve this conflict? Have you ever felt similarly? In what ways do your values shape your actions or behaviors? Write a poem that captures this conflict and its resolution.

3. William Shakespeare’s classic play, *Measure for Measure*, takes its title and the source of its conflict from Luke 6: 36-38, which says, “Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure

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<sup>9</sup> “The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide” (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 1999), 14.

that you use, it will be measured back to you.” When Angelo seems to have gone a little mad with power, and his desire for perfect order is blinding him from his duty to show mercy, Escalus, his aid, turns to the audience and says one of the classic lines of the play: “Well, Heaven forgive him, and forgive us all. Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall.” How does the text from which the play gets its namesake shed light on the tension in the play? Has there ever been a time when you were so convinced that you were “right” about something that you neglected to show kindness?

### *History*

There is no doubt that the Bible has played a major role in the history of the world in general and in the history of the United States in particular. Many historical documents contain biblical references. The Bible has been invoked in many social movements, including abolition, temperance, and civil rights. Many important figures in history have been influenced by the Bible, and the Bible continues to be a factor in today’s hot-button political issues. One need only turn on a presidential debate to see the ways in which the Bible, faith, and God inspire candidates to take various positions on topics such as abortion, immigration, gun control, war, race, gender, sexuality, and more. Once again, there would be no shortage of opportunity to examine the Bible’s influence on historical happenings all throughout the world, in both ancient and modern times.

The following are some ideas for ways in which students could engage the impact that the Bible has had on history:

1. Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi encouraged nonviolent resistance when it came to advocating for their causes. Compare and contrast these two individuals. How

were they and their respective movements similar? How were they distinct? What motivated each of these men to take such a position? What role did their faith play in their actions?

2. In the Civil War, both the Union and the Confederates appealed to the Bible to buttress their positions. What arguments were made? What Scripture passages were cited? Compare and contrast this with what occurred in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Share your thoughts and opinions about the ways in which the Bible and faith played roles in these conflicts.

3. William Wilberforce was an English abolitionist and politician. What motivated him to make a great change in his life? What is his legacy? Have you ever been convicted to make a change in your behavior? What caused the change?

### *Science*

A great deal has been said about the Bible and science over the years. In particular, there have been court cases and public discourses regarding the way in which the Bible teaches the creation of the planet and how that teaching fits with (or does not fit with) what scientific evidence and discovery have to say on the topic. This paper will not seek to rectify any of these disagreements. Instead, it will explore the ways in which the Bible can be used in the field of science in ways other than those related to creation, evolution, and the like.

Many well-known scientists have been inspired to pursue their vocations because of their religious faith. As is the case in many other fields, the Bible has been a great motivator for scientific discovery. For example, Isaac Newton wrote biblical commentaries and had relationships with other Christian scholars. His religious faith and his pursuit of science went hand-in-hand. The Bible was his greatest passion, and he studied it daily.<sup>10</sup> Even Albert Einstein

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<sup>10</sup> John H. Tiner, *Isaac Newton: Inventor, Scientist, Teacher* (Fenton, MI: Mott Media, 1981).

was initially motivated to pursue science due to his interest in God. He famously said, “I want to know how God created this world. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know His thoughts; the rest are details.”<sup>11</sup> While there are people today who believe that the Bible and science are at odds with one another, history demonstrates that some of those who loved the Bible the most are those who pursued scientific inquiry with the greatest fervor. In several cases, a love for God inspired a love for the world that God created and a passion for knowing more about how such a world was ordered.

An understanding of the Bible as motivator within the field of science may come from the following assignments:

1. Choose one of the following scientists: Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Johannes Kepler, Louis Pasteur. What can you discover about his personal life? What was his education like? What motivated him to study science?

2. In Rodney Stark’s book, *The Triumph of Christianity*, he discusses the significance of the Christian faith to the rise of science in Western culture.<sup>12</sup> He argues that prior to Christianity, most cultures viewed the world as unpredictable and ruled by capricious gods. Stark believes that precisely because the Christian worldview assumed that a good God had created an ordered world out of chaos, Christians were able to study the world in a scientific way. They were expecting to find reasonable explanations for how their God had ordered the world.<sup>13</sup> Do you agree with his analysis? Why or why not? How do our underlying assumptions about the nature of the universe change our approach to the study of science?

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<sup>11</sup> Alice Calaprice, ed., *The Expanded Quotable Einstein*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 202.

<sup>12</sup> “The truth is that not only did Christianity not impede the rise of science; it was essential to it, which is why science arose only in the Christian West!” Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 275.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

## In Conclusion

This paper has advocated for the teaching of the Bible in public schools because it is evident that there is educational value in learning from such an important and profound text. That said, teaching the Bible in the public schools is not for the faint of heart, even if one fully understands legal precedent and local school policy. It is possible that administrators, students, parents, and colleagues will not understand these things well and may take offense or even vocalize their objections to a teacher who is teaching in this manner. Therefore, teachers must take all necessary precautions. Perhaps assignments explicitly involving studying the Bible could be given as one option among a number of suitable options and include the studying of other influential religious texts, as well. In all cases, teachers should take care to note conspicuously what specific techniques, theories, or competencies are being taught. This not only protects the teacher from any accusations about using the Bible inappropriately, but it also allows students, parents, and administrators to participate more fully in what is happening in the classroom.

In summary, this paper has sought to set forth a plan for teaching the Bible in the public schools today across a wide variety of disciplines. Its main assumption is that the Bible can be studied as it relates to the way in which it has inspired or motivated people. While teaching the Bible in this manner cannot be religious or devotional in nature, this teaching can still bear much fruit. Not only might it make for more biblically literate and broad-minded citizens, it may also encourage some students to delve more deeply into biblical studies. Perhaps students of other faith traditions might begin to investigate their own sacred texts more deeply or wonder about what other work(s) might motivate them to aspire to greatness. Throughout history, many people have found the Bible to be a beautiful, compelling text, and it has inspired them to take actions and produce creations that have changed the world. American public school students should have

the opportunity to study it, learn from it, and understand how it has shaped the society in which they participate. While the Bible does not necessarily transform every person who encounters it, it is a transformational text; experiencing such power should be part of every American's educational journey.

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