



## ***The Bible In Public School***

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As Christians we are citizens of two worlds. We live in this world and have an earthly citizenship. At the same time, we ultimately and pre-eminently are citizens of Heaven (**Phil. 3:20-21**) and merely “aliens and strangers” here on Earth (**1 Pet. 2:11**). We are called to submit to every human authority and to render obedience to that authority, whether it is wielded by righteous men or not (**Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17**).

This creates some interesting challenges for believers who seek to live as citizens of Heaven while living in the world which lies under the influence of the evil one (**1 John 5:19**). One of those challenges is to constantly evaluate political movements, current events, and cultural trends in the light of biblical truth. As Christians, our political ideals must be theologically grounded and biblically driven. They must be the product of sound biblical interpretation, theological truth, and God-exalting doctrine. When we speak to a political issue, whether in a public forum or a private setting, we must always bring the Word of God and theological truth to bear upon the issue. Every thought we have must be subject to biblical truth and must be consistent with sound doctrine. If our viewpoint is not theologically and biblically founded, it is merely the pragmatic musings of worldly wisdom which come straight from Hell (**James 3:15**). Our positions on abortion, capital punishment, national defense, universal health care, free market economics, welfare, taxation and the like should all be first and foremost *theological convictions* and not merely *political or pragmatic preferences*.

It is my desire in this article to apply some theological truth and clear thinking to an issue which appears to be gaining some steam in many circles, namely the **Bible Initiative**.

### **The Bible Initiative**

The Bible Initiative, as it is being promoted in the State of Idaho, is “*an initiative allowing School Boards to permit the Bible to be studied as literature and for its influence on history.*”<sup>1</sup> Those who are promoting the Bible Initiative are desirous that the Bible be taught as literature in our public schools as part of an “*elective curricula concerning the Bible.*” According to the petition, “*any elective Bible curricula shall at all times be presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, and shall not be used at any time to endorse or promote sectarian or denominational doctrine.*”<sup>2</sup>

A quick Google search reveals that this movement is not isolated to the State of Idaho. In fact, there is a National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (bibleinschools.net).<sup>3</sup> It has even captured the attention of at least one national Christian radio program which addressed it on a couple of different occasions.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Knee-Jerk Reaction**

If you are a Christian who loves the Bible, your initial reaction to such an idea is probably something like, “Really? Wow! What a great idea. I love the Bible! I love Bible teaching. I believe the Bible to be the Word of God and I would love for kids in the schools to know more about God and the Bible. Where do I sign?”

1 Taken from the Initiative Petition. You can read the entire Initiative Petition at ourgodlyamericanheritage.com.

2 This is from the wording of the Bible Initiative Petition available at ourgodlyamericanheritage.com.

3 Another organization, Bible In The Schools, promotes similar initiatives at bibleintheschools.com.

4 Wretched Radio, hosted by Todd Friel (wretchedradio.com) is heard at 3-5 p.m. Eastern on SIRIUS Family Net Radio (ch. 161) and on stations across the U.S.

That was certainly my reaction when I was first presented with this idea over 10 years ago. I quickly signed the petition, which I saw sitting on the counter at a local business. Recently, the idea was presented again to me as a petition to “*have the Bible taught as history.*” In truth, the petition requests that the Bible be taught as “*literature and for its influence on history.*” As you will see in a moment, there is a world of difference between the Bible being taught as actual **history** and the Bible being taught as **literature** which has had an influence on history.

My response this time around was to think about this whole idea **theologically** and ask myself, “What are the theological implications of this? What does my theology of God, the church, the gospel, evangelism, and Scripture tell me about this initiative?”

On theological grounds, and due to a high view of Scripture, I do not support the measure to have the Bible taught as literature in the public schools.

### **Before We Begin**

This critique is in no way intended to be an evaluation or criticism of **all** public school teachers. I am well aware that there are many strong, evangelistic, active believers whom God has called to be salt and light as teachers in the public school system. I thank God for them and believe that they serve a necessary and God-honoring role in that part of the public sector. They fulfill their vocation nobly.

At the same time, it cannot be denied by any fair-minded person that the bulk of teachers in the public school system are not believers. Genuine believers are a dwindling minority in most areas. Further, by and large the public school system is not sympathetic to biblical Christianity or its teachings. Generally speaking, pluralism, secular humanism, Darwinian evolution, post-modernism, and the religion of atheism are the reigning ideologies of the day in the classroom and curriculum of the public school.

With that said, my reasons for opposing the teaching of the Bible in the public school as literature can be grouped under three headings.

### **A High View of Scripture**

**Reason #1: A proper view of Scripture requires that we assert, preach, teach, and defend the Bible not as**

**“literature” but as it is in truth, the Word of God.**

There is a vast difference between teaching the Bible as literature and teaching the Bible as history. To teach the Bible as literature that has had an impact upon history, is to equate Scripture with Shakespeare, Homer's *Illiad* or *Odyssey*, or the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. It equates the biblical authors with Plato or Aristotle.

To teach the Bible as merely literature would necessarily require that we only assert what is *minimally* true of Scripture. It *is* literature. It *has* had an impact on the world. But it is **far more** than that. The Bible is the **only** authoritative, binding, true revelation of the one true God to man. Yet to claim that of Scripture in the public school would necessarily be to teach the Bible with a sectarian interest and not simply “*as part of a secular program of education.*”<sup>5</sup>

Do we really feel that the Bible is merely a piece of neglected literature? What does it say of our view of Scripture if we want it taught as literature, like we would want *War and Peace*, the works of Shakespeare, or any other piece of influential literature to be taught? It means that we would be willing to concede before the world that the Bible is a book on par with other great books; that it should find its place on the list of great literary works. I am not willing to concede that. It is not *just influential* literature and I am not willing to compromise on that point just to get the Bible into public schools!

**Reason #2: The Bible cannot be taught rightly unless its authority and veracity are asserted and taught.**

To teach the Bible as history requires that one believe and assert the truthfulness of the entire Scriptural account. One must affirm that it is true history in order to teach it as such.<sup>6</sup> But this initiative says nothing as to the truthfulness of Scripture or even the nature of Scripture.

5 The Initiative proposes that it be taught as “part of a secular program of education” and “shall not be used at any time to endorse or promote sectarian or denominational doctrine.” To make any claim about the Bible which would be worthy of it would necessarily promote doctrine, namely, the doctrines of inspiration, inerrancy, and the infallibility of Scripture.

6 To repeat, this is **not** what the petition is proposing. The petition is proposing that the Bible be taught as literature which has had an impact on history. It should also be noted that I believe that the Bible is true, that all that it affirms and teaches is true, and every event it records actually happened exactly as it is described in the pages of Scripture, including the recent creation of the entire Cosmos in 6 literal 24 hour days and a global flood. I have no arguments with asserting that the Bible is true and I teach it as history every Sunday.

No serious consideration can or would be given to the **content** of Scripture, its truth claims, or its doctrines. It could only be examined as a “work of literature” and as a work of human origin that has influenced history. The Initiative proposes that it be taught as “*part of a secular program of education*” and “*shall not be used at any time to endorse or promote sectarian or denominational doctrine.*” Once again, to make **any** claim about the Bible which would be worthy of it, would **necessarily** promote doctrine--the doctrine of Scripture. Can we really ask that the Bible be taught without reference to doctrine?

To treat the Bible as just another piece of influential literature is to ignore the question, “Is the Bible **true** or not?” We might say that Shakespeare's tales have influenced history, but that doesn't make them true. Something can have a profound impact on history (positively or negatively) without being true. To teach it as merely literature is to necessarily imply that its truth claims are irrelevant to its message and impact. It is to imply that it is not more than literature.

Are you willing to say that the Bible should be taught apart from any reference to its truth claims or claims to authority? Can we endorse a proposal that promotes the Bible be taught while neglecting **the one element** of it that sets it apart from everything else, namely that it, and **it alone**, contains saving revelation and divine truth? If that truth is not presented, then the true nature of the Bible is slighted, ignored, and purposefully veiled. I am not willing to promote the veiling and ignoring of the true nature and origin of the Bible.

**Reason #3: The Bible cannot be properly taught without treating it as the inspired, inerrant, infallible revelation from the only One True and Living God.** To give Scripture the place that it demands in the hearts and minds of man, it must be treated, taught, and believed on as the inspired Word of God. To treat it as anything less is to spurn the Word of the Living God and to disbelieve what God has revealed. Can we support the teaching of the Bible in any arena which would neglect those essential doctrines and solidify in the minds of the hearers the false and damning notion that the Bible is not what it claims to be?

**Reason #4: Teaching the Bible as merely literature or history would strip it of its core message.**

The Bible is not just a collection of stories, miracles, genealogies, myths, legends, songs and human wisdom. The central message of the Bible is not moral or political,

but redemptive. The Bible is the story of redemption -- God's redemption of a fallen race through the sacrificial death of God the Son on a cross and His Resurrection from the tomb three days later. All of the Old Testament points to that reality. All of the New Testament teaches the history and implications of that central truth.

Every book of the Bible contributes to the story of **redemptive** history. Can you teach the history of the Jewish people apart from the theme of redemption? Can you teach about the Exodus event and its impact on world history without making any reference to its central redemptive truth? Can you teach the Psalms as a collection of songs without reference to the theme of redemption? How can you teach the message and role of any prophet of the Old Testament without highlighting the message of ultimate and sometimes immediate redemption? How do you begin to approach the New Testament without reference to its redemptive emphasis? This **cannot** be done without doing violence to the Bible itself.

The Bible is not just a history of different peoples (Jews, for instance), but is the history of God's redemptive work on behalf of fallen man. To teach the Bible as a “history of the Jews” or as “literature that has impacted history” would be to emasculate it of its central theme and purpose - **Redemption**.

Can we support a movement that must ignore the Bible's central message and purposefully veil it in order for it to be taught as part of “*secular education*?” Can we slice and dice the Word of God in that fashion? Are you willing to endorse the emasculation of Scripture, just so it can be taught in the public schools? I am not.

**Reason #5: To teach the Bible as part of a “secular education” while avoiding any “sectarian or denominational emphasis” would remove the offense of the cross.**

How can you teach a book whose gospel offends the unbeliever without offending the unbeliever? This could only be done if the offense of the cross is removed and its divisive, contentious, and discriminating elements are ignored and/or purposefully veiled.

Yet the Bible is a constantly divisive book. It divides the world into believers and unbelievers, lovers of God and haters of God, obedient and disobedient, saved and lost, redeemed and damned, sheep and goats, children of God and children of Satan, citizens of Heaven and citizens of this world, and the Kingdom of Light and the kingdom of

darkness. The central message of the Bible is that those who rebel against God will face judgment for their deeds unless they repent, bow the knee, and receive the forgiveness that comes through faith in a Person: God manifested in the flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. How are you going to teach the Bible rightly without stating that fact? Can you do so without sectarian or denominational emphasis? No. You would have to remove that message. This ends up stripping the Bible of any teaching which would make it offensive to Christ-haters. Are you willing to promote the teaching of the Bible in a way that ignores the distinctions that the Bible clearly draws? I am not.

**Reason #6: This approach to Scripture pretends that the Bible is neutral, when it most certainly is not.**

The Bible is not neutral toward other religions, false teachings, false teachers, false religions, idols, idol worshipers, or falsehood of any kind. To pretend that it is, and then teach it as such in order to not promote any sectarian perspective, is to twist and distort, ignore and intentionally veil the teaching and nature of Scripture itself.

The Bible is a sectarian book! It is distinctly a Christian book and its teachings condemn every falsehood and false religion or religious system in the world, without exception or apology. Can you teach this book in a non-sectarian way without promoting any one perspective or truth claim? Only if you are willing to intentionally distort the nature and teaching of Scripture.

Can we promote a teaching of the Bible which will cause the hearer to believe that it is merely literature and not the Word of God, that the Bible has no special authority or believable truth claims, and that the Bible is not inspired, infallible, or authoritative? Can we support an initiative that is willing to ignore the central redemptive theme of the Bible, strip it of its God-given offense, and intentionally veil its distinctive sectarian condemnation of falsehood? I can't. I have too high a view of Scripture to countenance submitting it to such abuse.

### **Who Will Do The Teaching?**

**Reason #7: We should not ask Christian school teachers to teach the Bible in this way.** One may wish and hope that the task of teaching the Bible would be entrusted to one of the Christian teachers mentioned earlier. However, as much as we might wish that to be the case, reality would prove to be much different. We all know that Christian teachers would not be sought out to

teach a course on the Bible to students in the public school.

Even if a Christian teacher were asked to teach the Bible as literature, could they in good conscience teach it as *merely* literature without reference to its central themes, doctrines, and distinctive elements? Should we expect them to teach the Bible in that way? You couldn't make me teach it as merely literature that has impacted history! I couldn't in good conscience teach it without asserting its doctrines, its authority claims, and its offensive elements. **Once again, it must be taught in a way that gives it its rightful place.** If it is not, then it is not being honored the way God would have His Word to be honored.

Can we ask Christian public school teachers to be unfaithful to the Scriptures so that it can be taught without reference to its sectarian emphasis "*as part of a secular program of education?*" I could not insist upon such a travesty. That being the case, who then do we ask to do this? Unbelievers?

**Reason #8: I do not think it is a good idea to ask pagans to teach Scripture as part of a "secular program of education."**

Do we really want rank, pagan, Christ-hating idolaters, whose lives, teaching, worldview, and ethics are roundly condemned by the Bible, teaching the Bible? Really? Can this turn out well?

Scripture says that the natural man (unbeliever) is unable to rightly assess spiritual truth (**1 Cor. 2:10-16**). He cannot know the things of God because his mind is hostile to God (**Rom. 8:5-8**) and he is darkened in his mind (**Eph. 4:17-19**). Rebels against God suppress the truth in unrighteousness (**Rom. 1:18-21**). What makes anyone think that they will do even a fair job of teaching the Bible? Can you say that you want Christ-hating pagans teaching the Bible to your kids? I don't! If you don't want them teaching the Bible to your kids, why would you want them teaching the Bible to other people's kids? There are men in pulpits all over this nation whom I wouldn't allow to teach Scripture to my kids! There are **pastors** I don't want teaching the Word of God because of how they handle it! What makes you think an unbeliever can do it any better? We can't even get the Bible to be taught properly *in the churches* in this nation! How can we expect that it will be taught properly in the schools? Can we support the improper teaching of Scripture? Anywhere?

Will God-hating, evolutionary, atheistic, pagan teachers handle the Word of God fairly, accurately or truthfully? Don't bet on it! Give them the chance to teach the Bible's influence on history and they will distort both the Bible and history. By the time it is all said and done, the Bible, the Church, and Christianity will have been blamed for the Crusades, the Inquisition, oppression of women, slavery, White Supremacy, scientific ignorance, child abuse, the bombing of the Oklahoma Federal Building, the Branch Davidian Waco debacle, and every other misery and tragedy ever to befall mankind. Is that really what we want? Do we **really** want a generation or more of children taught the Bible by those who hate it and its God?

Some of the strongest condemnations in Scripture are directed toward those who mishandle Scripture in teaching. God takes seriously the way in which His Word is handled and by whom. How can I promote the mishandling of God's Word by people who are not even saved, let alone equipped to handle that Holy Word? I can't.

I can't promote false teachers mishandling Scripture, untrained Christians mishandling Scripture, or pastors mishandling Scripture. How can I support unbelievers mishandling Scripture as part of a "*secular program of education*" and think that that will bring the blessing of God?

### **The Proper Method**

A third set of reasons I would oppose such a proposal has to do with it being a well-intentioned but misdirected method.

**Reason #9: Trying to get the Bible taught by unbelievers in the public school system is not the mission of the church - evangelism and gospel proclamation is.**

Evangelism. That is what we should be on about. We are nowhere told or commanded to try to legislate biblical principles and moral agendas, or to get the Bible into the public schools. We don't see Paul trying to get the Scriptures taught in the Roman schools and centers of learning in his day.

Paul preached. He witnessed. He preached Christ. He preached the Word. He boldly proclaimed in the synagogues and in the marketplaces the Word of God. This is the God-ordained method for advancing the Word. Preaching. We should be about the task of gospel witness and proclamation. It is the gospel which is the power of

God unto salvation.

Are you concerned about the kids in the public school system? Then go down after school and stand across the street and hand out tracts, engage the kids in conversation, share the gospel with them, teach Sunday School, or serve in Awana. Get down to the beach and engage them one-on-one in conversation, sharing the gospel. Open-air preach! Get out and do the work of an evangelist. Preach the gospel with boldness!

There is a multitude of ministries of the God-ordained organ of evangelism--the Church--that will be far more effective than a petition. These activities have ample biblical precedent. Working to get signatures on a petition does not.

Let's not deceive ourselves into thinking that we are advancing the gospel by getting pagans to teach pagans the historical impact of the Bible. That is not how the Word is to be handled. That is not how the truth is to be taught. That is not how God advances His Kingdom. It will only end up inoculating people against the truth, rather than converting them to it.

Movements like this can be subtly deceptive and make us feel good about ourselves for "doing something" for the Lord, when in reality all we have done is advance a petition which requires other people to do the work that we should be doing.

**Reason #10: The Bible is not a mystical book with mystical powers.**

God's blessing will not reside upon this nation merely because we have the Bible taught in schools. Nor is it the first, or even a necessary, thing for God's blessing. Some would argue that we are under the judgment of God as a nation because we have taken the Bible out of the public schools. I would argue that the absence of the Word of God does not result in God's judgment, it **is God's judgment**. Long before we took the Bible out of the schools, the hearts of this people had grown cold and indifferent to it. This apathetic indifference to the voice of God in Scripture *resulted* in its removal from the fabric of our society. The result for a nation choosing to worship and serve the creature rather than the creator is a famine in the land for the Word of God.

Somehow legislating the Bible back into the classroom is not going to make for a more moral populace, or a more blessed nation. The preaching of the gospel and the bold proclamation of the Word from the pulpits of our land will do it. That is why we are told to "preach the Word" (2

**Tim. 4:1-4)** and not to try to get the Scriptures into the public classroom. We are commanded to preach the gospel, not collect signatures. How could we honestly expect God to bless a nation when the church within that nation is not doing what the church should be doing, namely, preaching the Word and proclaiming the gospel.

### Dealing With Some Objections

By this point, you might be thinking of some objections to the things I have just presented. Here are my answers to some potential objections.

**Objection #1: “There is power in the Word of God, and if you believe in the power of the Word to work, you should support this measure.”**

The Word is powerful, and always accomplishes what God sends it to do. But the power of the Bible is in the message of the Bible when properly understood. It is the meaning of Scripture that is Scripture. It is not a mystical book which simply works like some incantation when read. The Bible is God's Word and carries power when accompanied and used by the Spirit of God and rightly presented. To misuse Scripture, to twist it, to teach it wrongly, to hide its teaching, is to work *against* Scripture, not for it.

Would you also argue that we should support the teaching of the Bible by emergent-church leaders, heretics, false teachers, word-faith-prosperity preachers, and wolves in sheep's clothing? After all, it is the Word of God. If they are teaching from it, shouldn't we do all we can to support their ministry? No! We must stand against it because they are **abusing** Scripture and not **using** Scripture.

I do not doubt the power of the Word. If you believe in it too, then spend your time supporting the preaching of the Word and the proclamation of the gospel by believers. Get out and share the gospel instead of petitions. I believe in the power of the Word over the power of a petition.

**Objection #2: “But someone could get saved by hearing the Bible read in the public school.”**

It is true that someone **might** get saved as a result of it. But I have every reason to think that thousands will be hardened in their course of sin and rebellion against God because of teachers mishandling the Word of God, spending months denying the Bible's teaching before their class, and blaming everything from abuse of children to xenophobia on the teachings of the Bible.

This will only result in a hardening of the heart toward the truth. It will promote error which will become ingrained in the heart of the hearer and make our job even harder when we have an opportunity to present the true gospel. I would rather have someone ignorant to what the Scriptures teach than have them hardened to the truth, believing a raft of lies, and embittered against the Bible and Christians as a result of someone's mishandling of Scripture.

Let's grant for a moment that someone **might** get saved. That is still no reason to do this. We should not be asking, “What can we do that **might** result in someone getting saved?” We should do things God's way, not ours. This petition is worldly wisdom at its finest and not at all God's method for accomplishing God's end.

It is pragmatism to argue that the end justifies the means. We should be asking, “Is this what we are commanded to do? Is this the God-ordained means of evangelism?” The answer, unequivocally, is, “No.” Our message is clear and our mandate is simple: preach the gospel to every creature and proclaim the Word.

If having the Bible taught by unbelievers to unbelievers would result in souls getting saved, then people would be getting saved in the cults all the time! To be consistent, you would also have to argue that I should promote the teaching of heretics and false teachers to their flocks in hopes that it will result in souls getting saved.

**Objection #3: “You don't have a very high view of Scripture and what it can do, if you don't support it being read and taught in our public schools.”**

Actually, I would argue that my view of Scripture is too high to allow me to compromise its integrity and teaching, promote its abuse at the hands of whoever would get appointed to teach a course on it, and ignore its clear mandates. I would ask, “What is your view of Scripture that you are willing to promote it **merely** as literature that has impacted history?”

### Unintended Consequences

I do not doubt that measures such as the Bible Initiative are well-intentioned. I do not for one moment believe that those who are seeking to advance measures like this are intending to do harm. I think they firmly believe that this would be a good thing and would help make for a better country and culture. I don't think they want to veil the teaching of the Bible, corrupt its message, or distort it in any way.

However, what is intended and what actually happens are not always the same thing. In fact, in the area of public policy, law, regulation and legislation, what is intended is seldom what is actually accomplished. Further, just because someone's intentions are good does not mean that what they are intending is good. This is a great example of that very thing. Supporters may have the noblest of intentions; however, what is intended could actually end up hurting our cause in the end. If you shoot yourself in the foot with good intentions, you still shoot yourself in the foot.

We do not judge ideas by the intentions behind them. We judge them according to the revelation of Scripture itself. When weighed in light of what is biblical, what actually exalts the Scriptures, and what gives honor to the Word of God as the Word of God, this measure is found sorely wanting.

### **Conclusion**

Applying theological principles to cultural trends is not always easy. In this case, I think it is pretty simple and straightforward. I think a biblical view of God, His Word, evangelism, the gospel, and our calling as Christians requires that we give Scripture its proper place and treatment rather than lower it to make it somehow palatable to a God-rejecting, Christ-hating world. I believe that a high view of Scripture necessitates that we oppose such a minimalistic view of it and how it should be taught.

I trust you are sensible people and will think this thing through for yourself, to the glory of God and His Word.

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