

Trump, Bible Classes in Schools and the Separation of Church and State

In response to President Trump's tweet praising schools that were introducing Bible literacy classes, comedian and actor John Fugelsang responded with utter scorn: "The only reason you're president is that 62 million self-described Christians were completely illiterate about Jesus' teachings. Every time Trump mentions the Bible, an angel coughs up blood."

Let's put aside Fugelsang's mockery of Christians who voted for Trump. And let's ignore his attack on the president.

Instead, let's ask this simple question: Was Trump guilty of praising a blatant violation of the separation of church and state? He wrote: "Numerous states introducing Bible Literacy classes, giving students the option of studying the Bible. Starting to make a turn back? Great!"

Responding to the president's tweet, Ryan Hill simply quoted the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

But what does a voluntary Bible class in a public school have to do with the First Amendment?

Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

There is not the slightest connection, either imagined or real.

In fact, it was not until 1963 in *Abington School District v. Schempp* that the Supreme Court ruled that mandatory Bible

reading in public schools was a violation of the First Amendment. Yet, as radical as that decision was in light of American history, in no way would the logic of these justices touch on a voluntary class on Bible literacy.

But don't take my word for it. Let's go back to our nation's first 125 years and review what happened in our children's schools. You're in for a surprise. (I reference the following material in detail, with many additional examples, in *Saving a Sick America*, from which some of these paragraphs have been adapted.)

In 1690, the first *New England Primer* was published. The alphabet was taught using Bible verses for each letter, and the primer contained questions on the moral teachings of the Scriptures, children's prayers, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Shorter Catechism and questions on the Bible by Mr. Cotton.

The *Primer* continued to be in wide use in American schools of all types—public, private, home or parochial—for the next 200 years.

Over time, this primer was displaced by Noah Webster's *Blue Black Speller*, first published in 1783, "with its opening sentence declaring: 'No man may put off the law of God.' This speller [was] widely used in American schools and [was] peppered throughout with Bible verses. Later versions stated, 'Noah Webster who taught millions to read but not one to sin.'"

Generations of American children learned to read and write with this book, pointing to the high esteem with which the Bible was held in the culture, even by many non-believers.

I purchased copies of different editions of these two books for myself, and I was shocked by the content. It was far more Christian and Bible-based than the curricula in many a Christian school today. In fact, the material was far more

Christian and Bible-based than what is taught today in many a contemporary Christian church in America.

In light of textbooks like this, it's not surprising that a February 1813 report concerning a public school in Washington, D.C., had this to say: "55 have learned to read in the Old and New Testaments, and are all able to spell words of three, four, and five syllable. ... Of 59 out of the whole number admitted that did not know a single letter, 20 can now read the Bible and spell words of three, four, and five syllables."

In 1836, the first McGuffey reader was "published which [taught] the ABC's along with Bible verses. This reader [was] looked at as an 'eclectic reader' which combine[d] instructive axioms and proverbs, fundamentals of grammar and selections of the finest English literature."

Unfortunately, by the late 1800s, the Bible's central place in American education had been greatly eroded, as can be seen by reading subsequent editions of the McGuffey reader, which removed much of the biblical content.

Nonetheless, the Bible had been so central in American education for so many years that, in 1892, the Kansas Teacher's Union made this statement:

The free public schools of America are outgrowths of the parochial or pastoral schools of puritan New England, which were established by our forefathers to prepare their children for becoming useful members of society and the church. ...

Whether this was wise or not it is not our purpose to discuss, further than to remark that, if the study of the Bible is to be excluded from all State schools, if the inculcation of the principles of Christianity is to have no place in the daily programme, if the worship of God is to form no part of the general exercises of these public elementary schools, then the good of the State would be better served by restoring all schools to church control."

That is quite a statement!

Obviously, it never dawned on our Founding Fathers, nor on subsequent generations of American leaders, that this prominent role given to the Bible in our schools was a violation of the First Amendment. Neither did it become a major legal issue until 1962, nearly two centuries after our founding.

Contrast that with the extreme animosity to the Bible today, and, in an instant, you get an idea of how far we have fallen as a nation.

So, was the president right to celebrate this voluntary return to Bible literacy classes in some of our schools?

Absolutely.

Was it hypocritical of him to do so, given that he has not shown himself to be Bible-literate?

Absolutely not.

Even if there is not a Christian bone in his body (only God knows either way), he can still recognize that Bible knowledge is good for our families, just as an unhealthy eater can know that it's good for others to eat well.

So, thank you, Mr. President, for drawing attention to this trend.

May it grow and increase in our day. And may those of us who claim to be Bible-believers become truly Bible-literate (and, just as importantly, Bible-living) ourselves.