

New surveys make case for public school Bible classes

BY RICHARD N. OSTLING
The Associated Press

Can you identify the following phrases?

“In the beginning.”
“Let there be light.”
“The promised land.”
“Eye for an eye.”
“A time to be born and a time to die.”
“Root of all evil.”
“Cast the first stone.”
“Love thy neighbor.”
“Do unto others.”
“Render unto Caesar.”

These notable Bible phrases were among 72 items that every student needs to know, as chosen by 41 high school English teachers. The panel also listed events (e.g., crossing the Red

68 percent couldn't identify who asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Sea, the Last Supper), people (Goliath, Solomon), places (Sodom, Babel), concepts (original sin) and festivals (Passover).

The teachers said biblical knowledge gives students a distinct academic advantage in understanding literature, a point others have made regarding history.

They were interviewed for a comprehensive “Bible Literacy Report,” issued by the Bible

Literacy Project of Fairfax, Va., an organization that wants U.S. high schools to offer courses and course segments on the Scriptures.

But wait — isn't that illegal, at least in public schools?

That was one concern when the Odessa, Texas, school board approved a Bible elective in April, following requests from 6,000 citizens.

Despite what many think, coursework is perfectly legal if handled properly. The U.S. Supreme Court encouraged such study in the 1963 cases where atheist Madalyn Murray and others won a ban on devotional Bible recitations in public schools.

The nonpartisan First Amendment Center and Bible Literacy Project brokered a 1999 accord, “The Bible in Public Schools,” which — remarkably — is endorsed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, six other secular education organizations, the National Council of Churches, major Jewish and evangelical Protestant groups and advocates of church-state separation.

The accord says Bible courses are acceptable if taught in “an objective, academic manner” that doesn't promote or discourage religious faith and avoids “a particular sectarian point of view” or “devotional” approach.

The “Bible Literacy Report” underscored the educational need with a Gallup poll of scriptural knowledge among 1,002 U.S. teens (margin of error: plus or minus 3 percentage points). Only 8 percent of the public school pupils said their schools offer Bible courses, which seemed obvious from these results:

■ 17 percent thought “the road to Damascus” was where Jesus was crucified.

■ 22 percent thought Moses was either one of Jesus' 12 apostles, Egypt's pharaoh or an angel, rather than the man who led Israel out of bondage.

■ 68 percent couldn't identify who asked, “Am I my brother's keeper?” (Cain, after he murdered Abel).

■ 28 percent didn't realize that “do not divorce” isn't among the Ten Commandments.

■ 53 percent couldn't say what biblical event occurred at Cana (Jesus turned water into wine).

Besides fears of legal trouble, lack of qualified teachers and crowded curriculums, many schools hesitate to offer Bible courses because adequate textbooks acceptable to various religious groups are lacking.

That's the Bible Literacy Project's next phase. In September it will release a textbook, *The Bible and American Civilization*, currently being tested in schoolrooms.

The organization says it's the first such textbook in 35 years to benefit from thorough scholarly review.

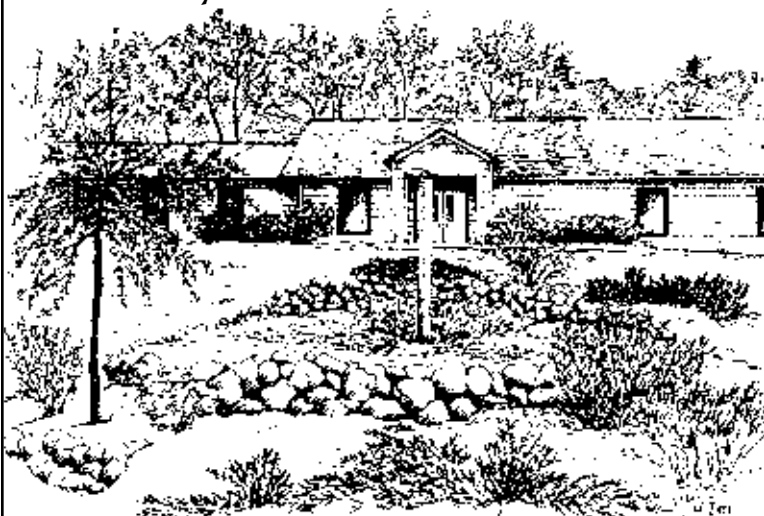
The biggest challenge will be handling different denominational interpretations and debates about the historical events and miracles in the Bible.

Advisers on this significant effort include Harvard Law School's Mary Ann Glendon (Roman Catholic), pollster George Gallup Jr. (Episcopalian), University of Chicago ethics professor Jean Bethke Elshtain (Lutheran), Reform Rabbi Marc Gellman (“the God Squad”), Jewish Publication Society chief editor Ellen Frankel and evangelical activist John Perkins.

A competing textbook, “The Bible in History and Literature,” is published by the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, based in Greensboro, N.C., which reports it's used by 236 school districts in 33 states. However, critics say it presents a narrow, conservative Protestant viewpoint.

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