

Connections



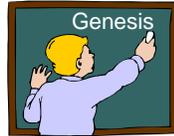
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Harmful school Bible courses

A 2006 report issued by the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund, a non-profit organization that promotes religious freedom and individual liberties, revealed serious academic and constitutional problems in most of the twenty-five Bible courses that were offered in Texas public schools.



Then in 2007, the Texas Legislature passed a bill requiring Texas school districts to include in their curricula the study of the influence of the Bible on history and literature. This law did not require districts to offer a specific course on the Bible, but it provided guidelines for those that chose to do so.

In 2012 the TFN Education Fund therefore embarked on a new research project to find out what effect, if any, the 2007 Texas law had had on Bible courses. TFN contracted with Dr. Mark Chancey, a religious studies professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas and author of the 2006 report, to write the new report. It has just been published, and unfortunately its answer to the question of how much effect the 2007 law has had is “very little.” The full report and an abridged version of it are available free from the Texas Freedom Network’s website, www.tfn.org/biblecourses.

The report addresses a problem that exists not only in Texas but also elsewhere in the U.S.: having biased views and even false information about the Bible presented as fact. Such presentations can be inappropriate even when they’re made in churches, as they so often are, but they’re totally out of place in public schools. So whether or not you live in Texas, I urge you to read at least the abridged version of the Texas Freedom Network report and actively help to change the conditions that it describes.



How could you help?



You could help to combat the problem of having biased and misleading Bible courses presented in public schools by getting informed and then speaking up. Your help is needed especially if you live in Texas, and above all if you live in one of the Texas school districts that a new report calls the “most problematic.” I hope you’ll make the report known to school board members and also in your church, among your friends, in your local newspaper, and in the organizations you’re in.

If you live somewhere else, how about finding out if a similar problem exists in your area’s public schools? Is there anything in your state that’s similar to the Texas Freedom Network? If so, why not get on its mailing list and financially contribute to its efforts?

And no matter where you live, I suggest that you read Mark Chancey’s 2005 report about *The Bible in Public Schools*, a curriculum widely used in many parts of the U.S., which he calls “deeply flawed” because of its bias and misleading information. You can find this report on the Texas Freedom Network website along with the 2013 Texas report.

See and publicize *The Revisionaries*

A documentary film about the efforts of the religious right’s “culture warriors” at the Texas State Board of Education and the Texas Freedom Network’s efforts to stop them was shown in late January on PBS TV. If you saw and appreciated this film, *The Revisionaries*, shown on the program *Independent Lens*, I urge you to contact your local PBS station and say thanks. Ideally, send a contribution to the station, mentioning your appreciation for the showing.



If you missed the film on PBS, I suggest that you look for it on a website. Another option is to contact the Texas Freedom Network and arrange for a showing. Or you might buy a copy, show and discuss it, then give it to your church library and mention it in your church newsletter.

Getting biased and inaccurate Bible courses removed from U.S. public schools will require a lot of help from all of us, Texans and non-Texans alike.

Only one view of the Bible

A big problem with the Bible courses offered in Texas schools in the 2011-12 school year, as shown by the materials that schools submitted to the Texas Freedom Network at its request, is that many of these courses promote a distinct bias that favors conservative Protestant Christianity over all other faith beliefs.



“A fair number of courses,” Mark Chancey found, “are blatantly and thoroughly sectarian, presenting certain religious views as fact.” This feature, according to the 2013 TFN report, reflects a failure by state and local officials to implement provisions in the 2007 state law that were designed to protect the religious freedom of students. “When the only or primary viewpoints presented are all associated with one particular religious community,” Chancey points out, “it is difficult to argue that the course is not promoting the beliefs of that group.”

The choice of which Bible to use contributes heavily to the bias that Chancey found. Klein ISD’s course, for example, teaches, “The Bible is one volume which consists of 66 books.” Yet different branches of Christianity use versions that contain different lists and different numbers of books, and different versions and translations reflect different interpretations, and few courses acknowledge this.

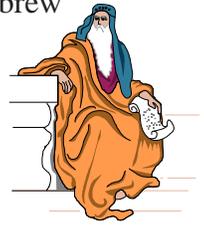


“Belton ISD, for example,” Chancey reports, “uses the *NIV Study Bible*, which is replete with explanatory notes written from a conservative Protestant perspective ...” And the primary Bible used in White Settlement ISD is not even a translation but rather the popular paraphrase *The Living Bible*, which also “is geared toward conservative Protestant sensibilities.”

Besides ignoring the differences between the Bibles used by Catholicism and by different branches of Protestantism, most courses also ignore the differences between Judaism and Christianity. “Courses commonly describe the Bible almost entirely in Christian terms that exclude Jewish views,” Chancey finds, “usually opting for Protestant definitions that ignore not only Jewish beliefs but also those of other branches of Christianity.”



One common way in which some courses promote Christianity over Judaism, he reports, is by teaching students to interpret the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as a set of prophecies supernaturally fulfilled in the New Testament. This interpretation not only reflects bias, it also contradicts many scholars’ views.



Bible courses in several districts, Chancey found, assume or even directly say that God inspired or even dictated the Bible. “While teaching about these views might be appropriate in a course that examined what different religious communities believe about inspiration,” Chancey explains, “presenting such views as if they are factually accurate blatantly crosses the legal threshold.” As an example, he cites a slide from Klein ISD: “The Bible is united in content because there is [sic] no contradictions in the writing. The reason for this is because the Bible is written under God’s direction and inspiration.”

Little academic rigor

Besides favoring one interpretation of Christianity over all other beliefs about the Bible, many 2011-12 Bible courses in Texas schools lacked the academic rigor that the 2007 law requires, Chancey reports. The majority of course materials, Chancey found, focus entirely on memorization of content.



Many almost totally neglect the cultivation of critical thinking skills.

“Questionable use and choice of videos weakens the academic quality of many courses,” Chancey’s 2013 report also says. A high-school course in Duncanville, for example, relies heavily on Bible cartoons from a Hanna-Barbera series. And students in Port Isabel ISD spend two days watching a video that presents “a new interpretation of angelic beings described as extraterrestrials.”

Also, the courses include numerous errors and distortions, and many fail to let students know scholars’ views about the Bible’s contents. They especially ignore the views of scholars about who wrote the gospels and other parts of the Bible, when those were written, when and whether events described in the Bible happened, and how biblical content may

relate to scientists' findings. Unfortunately many churches also ignore this scholarship, even though they all need to make it known. But for school Bible courses to ignore it seems unthinkable.



It's also unconstitutional. "The courts have ruled," Mark Chancey reminds us, "that to teach the Bible as straightforward, unproblematic history is unconstitutional because doing so basically promotes a particular religious viewpoint. Yet that is what many Texas Bible courses do."

Pseudo-scholarship about America

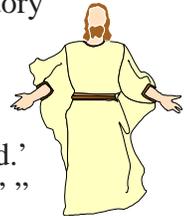
Many also present what Chancey calls "pseudo-scholarship"—information that looks factual but isn't. One of the most blatant examples is the claim that America was founded as a Christian nation based on biblical Christian principles. Such claims, Chancey observes, "are problematic not only because they are historically inaccurate but also because they figure prominently in attempts by some to guarantee a privileged position in the public square for their own religious beliefs above those of others."



Quotations from political philosophers, historic documents, the Founding Fathers, and other famous Americans, Chancey finds, are typically strung together and cited completely out of context. "Fake quotes never actually uttered by the speaker to whom they are attributed," he finds, "are cited side by side with legitimate ones. Even authentic quotes are sometimes presented in such a way as to misrepresent the views of their sources, and no quotes that would support alternative viewpoints are discussed or acknowledged." He cites Belton ISD's course as "one of the most heavy-handed in this regard."

Aimed at proselytizing or conversion

Many Texas Bible courses, Chancey has found, use materials designed specifically to proselytize students or convert them to a particular interpretation of Christianity, rather than to present an unbiased view of the Bible's influence in history and literature. Says a book used in Dayton ISD, for example, "May you fully come to believe that 'Jesus is the Christ, the son of God.' And may you have 'life in his name.'"



Some courses, Chancey reports, prompt students to look to the Bible for personal life lessons and binding moral instruction. These courses not only present certain religious views as fact, they implicitly or explicitly urge students to adopt those views.

"In these classrooms," he observes, "students and teachers often use language implying that they form a Christian community engaged in devotional Bible study." Yet according to the law and court decisions, public school courses about the Bible are constitutionally permissible only so long as they are academic rather than devotional in nature. They must not promote particular religious views.

Lack of training for teachers



In some cases, Mark Chancey finds, the sectarian bias and lack of academic rigor in Texas Bible courses seems intentional. But in others, it seems to indicate a lack of training more than a deliberate agenda. Chancey thus sympathizes with many of the courses' teachers. Some did not ask to teach these courses, he finds, but were simply assigned to them. Some are using materials they did

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

not select but that were chosen by committees or school boards. Training and guidance are mandated by Texas law but are not provided, so teachers often have little choice but to merely pass on the incomplete and often mistaken information that they have gotten from popular culture or their religious backgrounds. “The result,” finds Mark Chancey, “is that religious bias often finds its way into their courses, despite the best intentions of good teachers.”

Selective concern for the Constitution

It’s ironic that so many Americans are currently paying so much attention to certain parts of our Con-

stitution but apparently unconcerned about other parts. Warnings about not adopting gun laws for fear of violating the second amendment fill today’s news. But where are the warnings about violating the first amendment, which forbids the government from establishing religion? Conservatives are strangely silent about that part. That means that many of us, liberals and conservatives alike, and Christians and non-Christians, need to become more visible and vocal about it.



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February 2013

An exorcist in every school?



In a January 16 press release, Texas Governor Rick Perry said this about the recent school shooting in Connecticut: “The sad young man who did that in Newtown was clearly haunted by demons ... ”

Demons? What century is Perry living in?

If he’s right about what causes such disasters, then instead of an armed guard in every school or an armed teacher in every classroom, as the National Rifle Association and others have advocated, maybe what’s needed is an exorcist in every school.

I wonder when someone will get around to recommending that.

