

Teaching a ‘biblical worldview’ – but how, and which one?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Teachers have to be perpetual students. I learned a long time ago that to be an effective educator you have to keep a few things in mind: Only teach what you know and honestly admit you don't know a whole lot of other things. Common sense? Foundational reasoning for educators? You would think so.

In an excellent exposé of religious schools in North Carolina, reporter Brian Gordon writes: “For the 2020-2021 school year, at least eight of 10 schools that received the most [state-funded] scholarships profess ... to teach lessons rooted in biblical worldviews.” (“In NC, private schools receiving taxpayer dollars teach U.S. history their own way,” Citizen Times, Sept. 9, 2021).

Instruction in critical thinking is critically needed. In Gordon’s article, he quotes an education consultant who asserts: “A person can hold biblical viewpoints and still be able to think critically.” But which biblical viewpoints, filtered through which religious lenses? This makes a tremendous amount of difference.

For instance. I’ve thought for many years that reli-

gion, even the Bible, should be taught in public schools. Religious literacy is important. We had a “Bible as Literature” class in high school and it seemed fairly well taught. Which is, of course, the caution here.

Who can teach religious literature as literature? Who can teach from an unbiased perspective? Yet, that gets to the heart of it – everyone teaches from some degree of personal perspective but what matters is how much the teacher is aware of that, and is open about the fact their teaching is shaped to some extent by their own experience, education and worldview. The most reasonable approach would be to admit this is active in the classroom and then to remind students there are such things as facts, objective truths, that need to be critically considered.

In other words, students shouldn’t leave a class saying “I accept this is true because the teacher said so” any more than a person should leave a Bible class or sermon and say “I accept this is true because the teacher – or preacher – said so.” Any teacher with integrity wouldn’t want people to say those things. They want students (congregants) to think for themselves. When it comes to knowledge, “I read it in my Bible” isn’t sufficient. What about others who may hear a different message from the same book?

So let’s consider what a “biblical worldview” is, since so many faith-based schools and congregations claim they teach it. Biblical worldviews come in many

shapes and sizes:

- Jewish (Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform or Secular?). Jewish interpreters of the Hebrew Bible differ widely on what the Book says and how to apply it to Jewish living.

- Christian (which one: Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Fundamentalist. . .?) Among Christians there are many views of what “the Bible says.” (In chaplain days I told people: “The Bible doesn’t say anything! It’s all a matter of interpretation, what people think the Bible says”). Ask any bible-believer what their “favorite” part of the Bible is and we hear many responses.

- Muslim (since the Qur'an draws from biblical teachings, Muslims also differ on what the stories mean for today). A relevant question might be: What is the “qur’anic worldview,” a view based solely on the Qur'an? Those who teach the book might have very diverse opinions.

Apart from specific traditions and what they emphasize in their chosen holy books, there are other ways to read these books that make a great difference in what “worldview” is presented. They can be read as:

- Literal (God’s word directly speaking)
- Spiritual guidance (listening for a divine voice)
- Wisdom (searching for wise instruction)
- Myth and legend (alongside Greek, Roman,

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Norse, Indigenous)

- World literature (narrative story-telling, poetry, cultural history)

What copy of the Hebrew Bible did Jesus carry with him, what copies did he hand out? Did he teach: "Live your life

by these scrolls – see the world through ancient eyes!"? Does anyone need a book to do what Jesus taught, to follow his fairly clear instructions to love your neighbor and live a life of compassionate service? If Moses carry stone tablets under his arm for the rest of his life, or Muhammad ride around on a camel distributing Qur'ans? Seems silly to imagine that.

When someone says they espouse "a

biblical worldview" it's an invitation to raise important questions: Which Bible (and why that one)? Which worldview? Whose interpretation – who taught you that opinion? What does that worldview mean for you? And perhaps more importantly, how does it impact the rest of the world?

If the view is anti-science, presents a selective, sectarian history, or denies full humanity to a group of people, an al-

ternate worldview is needed. And it shouldn't be supported by the rest of us

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