

Schooled in religion: Bible verses in the classroom

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

The day always began at the Fairview Elementary School with the teacher reading ten verses from the Bible, alternating one from the Old with one from the New Testament. We bowed our heads and said the Lord's Prayer. Then we stood, placed our hands over our hearts, faced the American flag and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. In secondary school, the same opening exercises occurred daily but were heard over the public address system—Bible, prayer, pledge. Sometimes a student was asked to read the Bible and lead the prayer and pledge—no small responsibility if the passage contained strange and difficult-to-pronounce names. I can't remember whether the biblical passages related to anything in particular: did we read about the birth of Jesus in December? All I can remember is that my buddy Charlie Kaminsky, the lone Jew in my class, sat through the readings and that Chuck Thompson, whose parents were Jehovah's Witnesses, didn't put his hand over his heart and recite the pledge. Chuck was also the toughest kid in the class. Anyone who commented on his questionable patriotism paid for it at recess.

Then came the landmark Supreme Court decision in 1962 and the praying and Bible reading stopped. I can recall people in the congregation I was serving worrying about the repercussions in terms of general morality and even the future survival of the republic.

Now we hear that biblical ignorance is epidemic. An editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* laments the fact that significant percentages of the population, particularly young people, know nothing about the Bible—don't know, for instance, where phrases like "east of Eden" and "salt of the earth" came from, or who Abraham, Moses and Joshua were. We are poorer for it, the *Tribune* concludes, and I agree. My experience confirms that the press doesn't know much about the Bible either. I preached a sermon during President Clinton's travails and spoke about God using morally flawed people such as David for God's purposes. A reporter called and asked about the sermon. "By the way," he said, "Who was that David guy?"

Along with many people who value the way the Judeo-Christian tradition and its scriptures have helped shape our culture and our nation, the *Tribune* proposed that Bible content be included in the literature curriculum of public schools along with other important writings. This is a good idea, although I'm not convinced that biblical ignorance is related to the absence of the a.m. Bible verse readings in school.

One organized program to do what the *Tribune* proposes is *The Bible in History and Literature*, a textbook created by the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools. Mark Chancey has written an analysis of the project for this issue. The program makes me nervous—but read the article for yourself. Elemental biblical knowledge is a good thing. But another good thing is the nation's determination, from the adoption of the Constitution and Bill of Rights until the present, to create an atmosphere in which religion is free to thrive, build, recruit, raise money, read sacred texts—all without interference from the government. Any effort to superimpose religious commitment as revealed truth in an American public school classroom or textbook is a mistake and a violation of a precious principle.