

Noah who? Biblical illiteracy: Biblical illiteracy

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

A generation or two ago, American novelists could assume that people would understand biblical allusions, hence titles like *East of Eden*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Song of Solomon*. That assumption is no longer valid. The *Chicago Tribune* reported last summer on the Biblical Literacy Report, which revealed that two-thirds of high school students have no idea what “a Damascus Road experience” is, and don’t have a clue about who Noah was. That article inspired me to preach a series of sermons, “Bible Stories Everybody Should Know.”

The decline in Bible literacy sparked the creation of a new textbook for public schools, *The Bible and Its Influence*. Judging from the [review by Luke Timothy Johnson](#), it might be a good resource for congregations. After all, it’s not only the secular, stay-at-home-on-Sunday-morning folk who don’t know much about the Bible.

I disagree with those who think the nation’s moral decline began with the Supreme Court’s 1963 decision that Bible reading and prayer in the public schools violate the Constitution. I remember well the practice at my school: every morning before classes began, ten verses were read by a teacher or student. The readers hoped and maybe prayed to get a passage with no unpronounceable names. It was a thoroughly innocuous ritual. I don’t remember paying much attention. Did we gain biblical knowledge by osmosis, by those words washing over us every morning? I don’t think so. I think the ritual was actually detrimental to the integrity of Christian faith and the Christian church.

Nevertheless, something happened to the culture at about the same time. Maybe parents stopped telling Bible stories to their children. Maybe Sunday school curriculum stopped emphasizing biblical content. Maybe children stopped going to Sunday school.

Whatever happened or didn't happen, the postmodern preacher knows not to assume that people will follow his or her references to biblical incidents and personalities. The rule is: define, explain as you go. In other words, teach.

My tradition used to refer to ordained clergy as teaching elders. Sermons were assumed to be at least in part teaching and learning events. One of my favorite definitions of a local church is that it is a theological seminary—a place where people learn to think theologically and to look at the world through theological lenses. That means that one of the tasks of the church is to remember, rehearse and teach the content of the Bible. Everybody could do a better job at that.