

KEEPING THE FAITH

Helping public schools teach Judeo-Christian history, thought, and values

By Eric Buehrer



For years, a secular mindset among educators and school officials has pushed legitimate education about Christianity off to an ever-shrinking portion of a public school student's life. The bias against appropriately teaching about the contributions of Christianity to society comes largely from educators who either think it is not legally allowed or that, even if allowed, it is not proper or culturally sensitive to do so.

Parents, educators, school officials, and students can calm their fears about the presence of Christianity in classrooms just by remembering the acronym C.A.L.M. because it is Culturally accurate, Academically expected, Legally supported, and Morally imperative.

Culturally Accurate

Christianity continues to have a significant influence on American society. Christianity is the religion with the largest number of adherents in America. Eighty-five percent of Americans claim Christianity as their religious affiliation, compared to two percent who identify themselves as Jewish. Six percent consider themselves atheists or agnostics and one percent fall into the category of other religions.¹

During a typical week, 40-44 percent of Americans, over 100 million people, attend church.² This is high when compared to other major Western countries. For instance, Germany's church attendance is 14 percent of the population; Sweden's is 4 percent. Even England ranks far behind the United States. Figures for weekly church attendance there range from 27 percent to only 8 percent.³

In light of our heritage and current demographic figures, it is little wonder that Christian holidays dominate the American calendar; that there are nearly 1,400 radio

stations in America airing Christian programs or music; that our hospitals have names like St. Joseph's and Baptist General; that our language regularly uses biblical expressions such as "good Samaritan," and "go the extra mile;" or that our national motto, "In God We Trust," was adopted in 1956, not 1856.⁴

It is reasonable to assume that American schools should teach American students about American culture, and that includes teaching them about the significant role of Christianity, both historically and currently.

Academically Expected

A quick look at state academic standards from around the country reveals a number of ways that state officials not only encourage educators to teach about the Bible and Christian thought; they expect it. Here are a few examples: In California, sixth-grade students are to "Note origins of Christianity in the Jewish Messianic prophecies, the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as described in the New Testament, and the contribution of St. Paul the Apostle to the definition and spread of Christian beliefs (e.g., belief in the Trinity, resurrection, salvation)."

The Colorado Department of Education states that, "Because religion plays a significant role in history and society, study about religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world. Omission of facts about religion can give students the false impression that the religious life of humankind is insignificant or unimportant."

In Massachusetts, junior high school students are encouraged to "Describe the origins of Christianity and its central features; monotheism; the belief in Jesus as the Messiah and God's son who redeemed humans

from sin; the concept of salvation; belief in the Old and New Testament; and the lives and teachings of Jesus and Saint Paul."

Even the National Education Association agrees. The union's 2000-2001 resolution E-7 states:

"The National Education Association believes that educational materials should accurately portray the influence of religion in our nation and throughout the world."⁵

Legally Supported

In the Supreme Court case of *Abington School District v. Schempp*, Justice Clark, writing the majority opinion stated:

"...It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment."⁶

It is common for public schools to forbid or discourage the singing of religious Christmas carols. However, this may come as a surprise to the Supreme Court. In the case of *Lynch v. Donnelly*, involving the public display of a nativity scene, the justices commented that during Christmas, "people are taking note of the season with Christmas hymns and carols in public schools."⁷

The Court assumed school children were singing religious Christmas carols!

In the Federal court case of *Florey v. Sioux Falls School District*, the ACLU was twice defeated in its attempt to have the school district's policy on recognizing holidays declared unconstitutional.

Morally Imperative

Today's young people are hurting. Many of today's youth are emotionally, morally,

and spiritually lost. Harvard University's Samuel Huntington asserts that a new "Dark Ages" of barbarism is descending on the world. Social critic Morris Berman in his book, *The Twilight of American Culture*, quotes Alexis de Tocqueville, "When the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit walks in darkness."⁹

There are millions of Christians within the public schools. They can confidently exercise their constitutional freedoms to tell people of Christian values and Christianity's contribution to society, the world, and academic subjects.

Adults in a student's life—parents, teachers, and school officials—are the gateways to better education for that student. □

1. George Barna, "Beliefs: General Religious," Barna Research Online, www.barna.org, (9-5-01).
2. The Barna Research Group puts the figure at 40% while a 1997 study from the University of Michigan places the figure at 44%. George Barna and Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), p. 213-14; and "Study of Worldwide Rates of Religiosity, Church Attendance," News Release (12/10/1997).
3. The 1997 University of Michigan study (see above) puts the figure at 27% while Peter Brierley, a British pollster, puts the figure at 8%. Peter Goodenough, "British Churches Face Worst Attendance Decline Ever," CNSNews.com (December 7, 1999). See also www.christian-research.org.uk.
4. Radio station figures are from the 2002 *National Religious Broadcasting Directory of Religious Media* (Manassas, VA: National Religious Broadcasters, 2002), p. 579.
5. www.nea.org/resolutions/00/00e-7.html.
6. *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. at 225 (1963).
7. *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 686 (1984).
8. Samuel Huntington; *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*; New York, NY: Touchstone; 1996., p. 321.
9. Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000) p. 52.

The Bible & Your State's Academic Standards

How to Use Your State's Academic Standards Regarding the Bible and Christianity.

If you have not already done so, order a summary of your state's academic standards indicating where the Bible and Christianity can be taught by visiting www.gtbe.org.

Ideas for Teachers

1. Become thoroughly familiar with the standards for your grade and subject. Don't assume your textbook incorporates the standards regarding the Bible and Christianity.
2. Personally invest time to study church history that you could include in lessons related to the development of Western civilization and American history.
3. Develop your confidence by reflecting on the difference between teaching about religion and the teaching of religion. You could even explain this distinction to students and parents. The California Department of Education offers this distinction:

"To teach about religion is not to instruct in religion. Teaching about religion embraces the study of various religions; appreciation of the nature and variety of religious experience historically and currently; information on past and present sources, views, and behavior of religious persons or groups; and the influence of religion on cultures and civilizations. Instruction in religion, by contrast, is to seek acceptance of and commitment to a particular religion, including a non-religion, such as secularism."¹
4. To help students understand that ideas have consequences, objectively teach the biblical principles and thinking behind the actions of historical figures who sought to implement their faith, (e.g., Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., America's Founding Fathers, Dr. Livingston).
5. Develop a discussion group of like-minded colleagues to formulate lesson ideas and exchange research on how to teach various aspects of your state's standards. If your state's standards are broad and give little guidance on specifics to teach, refer to California's handbook on its Social Studies standards for ideas. You can download a PDF of the handbook by visiting www.cde.ca.gov/ci/hs/cf/index.asp.

Ideas for Parents

1. Distribute copies of the standards and this article to parents, teachers, youth workers, and pastors. It is important to help people understand what is possible (and even expected).
2. In a friendly manner, let your children's teachers know that you are encouraged by your state's standards concerning the Bible and Christianity, and ask them how they will be teaching to the standards in their classrooms.
3. Use the standards as a starting point for discussions with your children at home regarding church history and the Bible's influence on the world.

1. *Handbook on the Rights and Responsibilities of School Personnel and Students in the Areas of Providing Moral, Civic, and Ethical Education, Teaching About Religion, Promoting Responsible Attitudes and Behaviors, and Preventing and Responding to Hate Violence* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education, 1995) p.19.



Gateways
TO BETTER EDUCATION

Keeping the Faith in Public Schools