

## OPINION

### Why we should teach the Bible in all our schools

Greg Clarke

Fewer and fewer people know the Bible, even among those with religious commitment. The latest National Church Life Survey of 500,000 people across 22 denominations, reported in yesterday's *Herald*, shows a whopping 59 per cent of respondents read the Bible only occasionally, rarely or never at all.

But why would you bother reading it if you didn't have some belief the words of the good Book were true? What could motivate you to wade your way through those strange, cigarette-paper pages?

To my mind, there are still plenty of reasons to bother with the Bible. But at least one is indisputable, and it reveals a gaping hole in the Australian educational experience. You need to know the Bible in order to understand the history, literature and arts of Western culture. In fact, it is an educational and cultural tragedy that the Bible has quietly disappeared from the schooling experience of many Australians.

In the US, a major project to restore biblical literacy is under way, called the Bible Literacy Project. It is a joint venture of Jewish and Christian educators intended to "encourage and facilitate the academic study of the Bible in public schools". In a country where religion and public education mix like oil and water, it is no mean feat they have got their textbook, *The Bible And Its Influence*, into the curriculum in 40 states, and counting.

The project had its own statistical grounding. A Gallup Poll for the project found only 37 per cent of American high school students could recognise any of Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount (Australia would have to be worse). And yet 98 per cent of English teachers surveyed agreed knowing the Bible delivered a distinct academic advantage in the study of English literature.

I know it firsthand. I was the only one in my first year tutorial who understood what the title of John Bunyan's book, *Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners* was about. (You need to be familiar with the first letter to Timothy, chapter one, verse 16, to get it.) And I laughed alone at the joke in *Waiting For Godot* when one of the tramps says, "One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage." (See Jesus' crucifixion in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 23.) Two ticks to the boy with the Sunday school upbringing.

We need something similar to the Bible Literacy Project, something that enables the teaching of the Bible in the English, art, music and history classrooms. An Australian version of the project would see discussion of Les Murray, Tim Winton and John Coburn in place of Emerson, Melville and Abraham Lincoln. But the backbone is there in the American work: a textbook that respects the content and structure of the Bible, Hebrew and Christian, and then seeks to communicate to students its vast significance for understanding the Western tradition, and more.

There's no need to be sidetracked by six-day creationism, or Zionism, or the subtleties of denominational differences. This is about teaching the Bible in the same way that you teach scales for learning a musical instrument, or the colour palette for painting. It's necessary to the whole task of understanding what is going on in our culture, literature, and history.

I have a vested interest in biblical literacy; after all, I'm a Christian and I think there's something to the big, unfolding story it tells. But I'm also a literary academic, and I can't bear the biblical ignorance students display. Regardless of whether you find something alive and kicking in the Scriptures, there is a strong argument it should be somewhere near the foundation of Australian education.

*Greg Clarke is a director of the Centre for Public Christianity in Sydney and the director of the Macquarie Christian Studies Institute at Macquarie University. This article appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on 11 September 2008*