

Biblical Studies

Gordon J. Spykman

Biblical studies are academic in nature, they involve theoretical inquiry. Their major objective is to transmit to students the best and most lasting results of the Biblical-theological reflection which has been carried on in the Christian tradition represented in the school's supporting community, exploring it, testing it, applying it in concrete case studies, weighing alternatives, and devising authentically academic ways of eliciting honest responses to it on the part of students. The primary task is not to train theological experts or researchers. Rather, the task is to introduce the younger generation to the most significant insights and ideas coming up out of the Biblical-theological legacy of the Christian community which sponsors the school.

Biblical study has a confessional focus. Those engaged in this discipline seek to understand and rethink the rich deposit of theological-historical-doctrinal-ethical truths as confessed in the Christian community in which the school is set. In a community confessing the reformed faith this will call for exploring the basic Biblical motifs of creation, fall, and redemption as they are unfolded in the Scriptures:

1. the drama of covenant history as it moves along from Genesis through Revelation,
2. the promissory character of the Old Testament and the fulfilling character of the New Testament, both coming to a crowded climax in Jesus Christ,
3. the Biblical view of man created as image of God, both as sinner and as saint,
4. the central Biblical themes of covenant, kingdom, church, world, salvation, law and gospel, work, play, knowledge, human relationships, government, family, war and peace, justice, love, etc.

We must share with students the revelational unity which runs through this rich diversity of Scriptural truth. Step by step through the grades, obeying God's built-in laws for child development, we must lead students into an increasingly deeper and fuller knowledge of these Biblical teachings. Also, in harmony with the students' growing maturity, we must honor their freedom and responsibility in decision-making. We can and indeed must teach

students what they ought to believe and how they ought to respond to the truth We cannot, however, make them believe and obey. For this we must rely upon the Word to do its own work and the Spirit to apply it personally and communally.

By honoring this confessional focus, the Christian school through its courses in Biblical studies can help to enrich the confessional life of the Christian community. When Bible courses lack such a focus, they easily degenerate into an amorphous forum for discussing any and all kinds of spiritual truths and moral values. Rather, we should teach students to think confessionally and theologically about the issues of life, just as we teach them in history to think historically as Christians, or in civics to analyze political aspects of life as christians, or in social studies to size up sociological developments as christians, or in language arts to be sensitive to word usage and sentence structure as christians in short, biblical studies should set as its objective the nature of students as “junior theologians.” Biblical studies is doing “junior theology.”

In Biblical studies as well as in every discipline educators must recognize the necessity of building a pedagogically sound program of graduated Bible courses which is oriented to the process of student development through the grades. Theological and pedagogical considerations go hand in hand. At each level we must be concerned not only about what ought to be taught, but also about how it ought to be taught. Pedagogical alertness in Biblical studies requires that we seek to honor the God-given norms for child development as we discern them from careful observation of how and why children learn and/or fail to learn. No curriculum planner or teacher can defy these creational laws for student development with impunity. God will not allow us to get away with such malpractice. The effectiveness of doing "junior theology" at any particular level of learning depends therefore on teachers having a good grasp of the stages in student development as well as of the content to be offered.

The following is a pedagogically-oriented program of Biblical studies, it is offered for further reflection.

At the primary level

Biblical studies should consist mainly of Bible stories shared with children in the most dramatic ways possible. These Bible storytelling sessions are opportunities to build a fund of Bible knowledge which can serve as the construction-blocks upon which the rest of the Bible curriculum can be erected. The stories should be told childomorphically, that is, in the

imagery and concepts of that age, closely oriented to the children's world of experience. Though historical order and cause-and-effect relationships are not yet meaningful to pupils of this age, Bible stories can nevertheless highlight some simple Biblical themes. Though not yet ready to grasp the historical redemptive continuities of Biblical revelation, these pupils understand simple references, such as "a long time before Christ" or "right after the coming of Christ." Somehow the one Story must come through in the many stories, with emphasis on the big ideas of the Bible and colorful re-enactment of the mighty acts of God. The teacher must be a person with a plan which looks ahead to succeeding years, even though he/she cannot share the plan fully with the students now.

At the intermediate level

Students are ready to deal with certain aspects of the Biblical narratives lifted out of their whole setting and to examine them in depth. Simple chronological sequences in the history of redemption can be sketched. Biblical episodes can be arranged into meaningful groupings of people, such as the patriarchs, the judges, the kings, the prophets, the "silent four hundred years," the life of Christ, the work of the apostles. Students can be led to discover that while there is but one Jesus Christ and that He is central to the whole Bible, yet we have in the gospels a fourfold witness to his earthly mission, each gospel writer looking at Christ from his own point of view. Effective instruction will depend less on what the teacher is doing and more on what the students are doing with the Bible and with other resources. Now they can begin to do "junior theology" somewhat on their own, with guidance, by means of written exercises, by using simple aids and resource materials (maps, atlas, dictionary, concordance, handbook, Bible storybook, as well as the Bible itself), and by engaging in some simple research projects either individually or in groups.

At the junior high school level

Students are now able to handle Biblical materials in a clearly historical and analytical way. Now Biblical methods can express the historical-redemptive message of the Bible. Therefore Bible courses should be organized according to the way in which the drama of salvation unfolds within the Bible itself. As our hermeneutic we must exploit the historical-redemptive method. The Bible stories and simple Biblical studies from earlier years can now be organized into a well-structured survey of covenant history as God's way with His people pushing things forward toward the coming kingdom. Students can be introduced to the findings of modern archaeology (e.g. the Qumran Community and the Dead Sea Scrolls), the cultural context of the ancient Near Eastern world, and the customs of Bible

times. They can learn to apply some of the basic principles and methods of Biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) Increasingly teachers should encourage student initiative in carrying out Biblical research projects so they can learn to use the tools of Biblical theology and become more deeply involved in actual theologizing.

At the senior high level

Biblical studies can now begin to branch out into a number of related areas of theological study, such as Christian doctrine, the history of Christianity, world religions, Christian ethics, sects, and cults Students should also be encouraged to read some classic and current popular books on theology as well as some contemporary popularly written journals on religion and theology.

The cap-stone of the total Christian curriculum might be a senior course called "Christian Perspectives," or "Christian World-and-Life View," or "Man in Society," in which teachers guide students in bringing the full impact of the Biblically grounded and directed curriculum to bear upon our calling to live the Christian life in every sector of society.

Biblical studies and the unity of knowledge

In its academic function Biblical studies is no more an island than any other discipline. Life is of one piece and something of this religious wholeness must come to curricular expression. There is not only a rich diversity of aspects within created reality, and accordingly also among the various disciplines which study these different aspects of creation, but there is also a unifying structure which binds these variegated structures together into an harmonious whole. This revelational unity is reflected in the unity of knowledge lodged in the heart of man, the concentration point of his entire selfhood, out of which are all the issues of life, including the educational issues dealt with in the school. The unity which exists in the created order is the abiding foundation for the interrelated unity which exists among the diverse aspects of life (confessional, ethical, political, economic, social, aesthetic, psychic, biotic, numeric, etc) to which the various disciplines address themselves.

This unified structure underlying all human knowledge makes possible the development of all kinds of interdisciplinary projects and unit studies in the school Biblical studies draws upon many disciplines in its attempt to understand the whole of its revelational content, such as history in its study of the unfolding of culture and use of power in time, geography in its

study of man's use of land and water forms, the social sciences in its study of social institutions and the emotions of people, literature in its study of aesthetic response in imaginative language, as well as language in its study of the meaning of words in context and the meaning of context in its original language. In its own unique way Biblical studies can also contribute content to other disciplines. For example, Biblical and church history can be integrated with the study of some segment of world history, or with characters and events which appear in imaginative literary works, or with examples of family and tribal life in sociological study, or with examples of political customs in certain time periods

In the overall curriculum the Bible serves a perspectival function as it leads us to discover norms for thinking in any discipline. In this fashion it has the unique function of being the ground and directive for all thinking. At the same time Biblical Studies is a scientific endeavor which contributes insights that quite directly influence thinking in all the academic disciplines. At the elementary level especially, but also at the secondary level, it will be difficult to experience the difference between the Bible as the ground and directive for the whole curriculum and Biblical Studies as the leading discipline in the curriculum. When Christian teachers and students search for and gather information, and together think about God's world, they use their understanding of Biblical revelation to guide their observations and their process of thinking. As they look at the results of their endeavor, they pray that these results may be quite consistent with their understanding of Biblical revelation.

Comments and implications:

1. The Bible in its perspectival function stands in opposition to the secular-humanist view which by relegating the Bible to the domain of "religion," denies that secular-humanism itself is a religion.

2. A compartmentalized Christianity often confuses the central task of the church and the school by allowing the Bible course to overshadow other academic courses. This view often leads parents to accept less achievement in these other courses, as long as Johnny does well in Bible.

3. Christian nurture does not rest upon the school alone. The home, church, Bible clubs, and other agencies also make use of the Bible, thereby also contributing to the total nurture of youth. However, the educational task of each teaching learning agency should be clearly defined so that the unique focus of Biblical studies in school may be better understood.

4. To integrate Biblical teachings with other disciplines and to teach Biblical studies well teachers need proper academic preparation (a) for a departmentalized setting the teacher of Biblical Studies should have at least a minor in theology in his A.B. program, (b) for a self-

contained and/or integrated setting the teacher should have some formal courses in the Biblical studies content for which he is responsible. The Christian school might consider providing time in the Bible teacher's schedule for acting as a consultant to teachers who function in a self-contained setting.

5. Devotionals and chapel services in school ought to be different from home devotions and church services. They can function in two ways (a) by giving direction to the tasks of the day or to the program of the school, (b) by offering time and place for students to share Biblical insights into the content of their studies. Students themselves should be encouraged to conduct devotionals and chapel services, preparing them under teacher guidance. The students may request speakers and other help needed for valid productions.

6. In Biblical studies as in every discipline we must start where the students are in order to guide them to where they ought to be. But where they are varies from person to person, from class to class, from one point in history to another, and from one community to another. This will demand certain variations in handling Biblical studies from time to time and from place to place. We will have to reckon with the level of spiritual maturity in the school community, the particular confessional-theological tradition represented by the school, and the effectiveness of other Bible teaching-learning agencies in the community.

7. The primary level ought to emphasize Biblical people and events. Six and seven year old students can, for example, chart the relation of the covenant families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A family tree of these people is as valid as a chart of their own family. By the age of nine, at the intermediate level, students will then have a fund of "names" upon which to build meaningful groupings of people, events, and time.

8. At the primary level devotions and Bible study may be combined at times. The students do not need a story every day. If they choose to dramatize a story or create art products, their activity need not be conducted during a "Bible period."

9. "Bible" need not be taught every day Individual and group research projects may build up for a time until the class meets to share the results of its research Then "Bible" may take the greater part of several days.