

BIBLE IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS 1700-1900

In early American church schools, private schools, and public schools, the Bible was used as a textbook as well as a devotional guide. The 17th century founders of American society discerned in Scripture the patterns by which God directed the whole of human destiny. . Hence, the methods and aims of education were finally to be governed by the biblical revelation, and in the most fundamental way God was the one true teacher. This view of education was particularly evident among the Puritans who settled New England in the decades following 1630 (Barr,7)



Barr says the Bible was a powerful force in education in the 17th and 18th centuries and gradually declined in the 19th and 20th centuries. “Opening exercises began with the Lord's Prayer, Bible readings, and roll call (Kalman, 16). Even by the mid-20th century, Pennsylvania public elementary and secondary schools began with the Lord’s prayer, Bible reading, roll call, and the pledge of allegiance to the flag.

The King James Version of the Bible and some earlier versions were brought to America by Puritans, Presbyterians, and others. Every family tried to have one, and they valued schooling because they needed it to read their Bibles, so the colonists became more literate than the Europeans. In 1638, two years after they started Harvard College, the Puritans saw a new translation of Psalms be the first book printed on the first printing press brought from Europe to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and a translation of the Bible into an Algonquian Indian dialect by John Eliot was printed there in 1663 (Thor, 6.451). It is of interest to note that the Living Oracles, the first modern English translation, was published in Bethany, Virginia; was translated by George Campbell, Philip Doddridge, and James MacKnight; and was edited and published by Alexander Campbell.

The Bible itself was used for learning to read and for reading in the schools; the ABCs were learned by use of Bible names like A is for Adam, B is for Boaz, C is for Caleb, etc.. Bible passages were selected to be read based on level of vocabulary. Bible stories and principles were taught; Bible history was learned by selecting historical passages for reading, and Bible principles were emphasized by memorizing the ten commandments. Attitudes toward God and the Bible were instilled by use of both prose and poetry extolling the Bible as God’s word and by reading the Bible both devotionally and to study English. Passages from Psalms, Proverbs, and the sermon on the mount as well as parts of the Pentateuch, Job, and the prophets were read to teach Biblical morality.

The Bible was usually taught with a Calvinistic slant by use of the Shorter Catechism attached to the New England Primer with many statements about original sin. Every family tried to own a Bible

and (if they could afford it) the New England Primer, in which each story had a moral or lesson for children to learn. Liberals who decry the inclusion of Bible texts and references to God in school books as “indoctrination” at the same time applaud modern elementary books with stories designed to teach gay morality and tolerance of all except Christian life styles. Puritans, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Quakers in 17th, 18th, and 19th century America had no such qualms about “indoctrination”: they had God and the Bible in their textbooks and used the Bible itself in their schoolrooms for devotional reading and for learning English as well as religion and morality.

Benjamin Harris’ New England Primer was first published c. 1690, and the New England Primer Improved was published in 1847 with The Assembly’s Shorter Catechism attached. One sentence the Primer required students to memorize was, “What we are afraid to speak before men, we should be afraid to think before God.” Something of the mood of those days is reflected in a poem written in the front of a school book: Whoever steals this Book away may Think on that great judgment day, when Jesus Christ shall come and say Where is that book you stole away. Then you will say I do not know and Christ will say go down below. (Kalman, 15).

The series that replaced the New England Primer and became popular in other parts of the country was McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers. The McGuffey Readers were first published in 1836, and more than 122 million copies of the readers were sold by the 1920’s. In some areas only the Bible was more popular than the McGuffey Reader (Kalman, 10). William H. McGuffey was a president of Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. The history of McGuffey’s Readers is characteristic of all 19th century readers. The first edition of McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers appeared in 1836. While non-Biblical material predominated, a significant amount of Biblical content was found within the pages of these six readers. However, there were two major revisions of the Readers the first in 1857 and the second, more drastic, in 1879. Each revision eliminated some of the biblical material. . . . The diminishing attention to the Bible through the century [1800’s] is not easily explained. . . by the end of the century the world view and value system in McGuffey’s Readers were radically secularized. (Barr, p.29).

In the 1853 edition of McGuffey’s Eclectic Fourth Reader, more than ten whole chapters from the Bible text were published without comment other than a few questions asked about topics or themes. They included Job 3; Job 5; Job 38:1-27; Job 39:19-25; 2 Samuel 18; Psalms 19, 115, and 148; John 9; and Revelation 21. By 1896 McGuffey’s Eclectic Fourth Reader contained the Sermon on the Mount in its entirety (Matthew 5, 6, 7) plus six stories in which references were made to Bible events and a few single Bible verses or parts of verses quoted. By 1920 McGuffey’s First Eclectic Reader, (the only one available to this writer) had only one poem about the Lord being near and hearing us and a story that mentioned God as having made the birds and having taught them how to build their nests. No Bible people or quotations were found in it. Thus we see how Bible texts and references were gradually eliminated from the McGuffey’s readers throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries without any known pressure from laws and court rulings such as have eliminated the Bible from American schools in the late 20th century. The reason for this diminishing use of the Bible in American schools must be the general decline in respect for God and his word as irreligion advanced; what else could it be? A later article will trace how the Bible has been further removed from American classrooms.

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