Lesson plans

By Mark Chancey in the August 23, 2005 issue

Chances are you have never heard of the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools or its textbook, *The Bible in History and Literature*. But if you are a member of a school board, you may be hearing about it soon. Over 1,000 schools in 308 school districts in 36 states from Alaska to Florida currently utilize the curriculum, and over 175,000 students have taken courses based on it, according to the NCBCPS Web site (www.bibleinschools.net). It's not a huge number, but it's on the increase, says president and founder Elizabeth Ridenour. Seven years ago, only 71 school districts were using the curriculum.

The NCBCPS has not listed the schools using the curriculum so its geographic impact is difficult to measure. Over a fifth of the schools are in Texas and Louisiana, and it's likely most of the others are in the rural south and midwest.

The NCBCPS's list of advisers reads like a Who's Who list of religious, social and political conservatives. It includes two U.S. representatives, the chaplain to the U.S. Senate, and two of *Time* magazine's "25 Most Influential Evangelicals"— Joyce Meyer and David Barton. The group has been endorsed by Family Research Council president Tony Perkins, the Eagle Forum, Focus on the Family and a host of similar groups and figures. The NCBCPS uses such organizations to advertise, and then looks to grassroots supporters to push the curriculum in their school districts.

That's what happened this past spring in Odessa, Texas, where the NCBCPS registered 6,000 signatures in support of the cause. The debate there drew attention from the national media. One of the people voicing concern was David Newman, an English professor at Odessa College and father of a 12-year-old student. Newman is Jewish, and he told the *Dallas Morning News* that his daughter already was occasionally made uncomfortable with questions from classmates. "They'll ask her why 'your people' killed Jesus. Or if she knows that Jesus is her savior. . . . I don't think it's hate. It's just kids being kids. But I worry what will happen if a pronounced Christian viewpoint is taught in the class."

The school board unanimously approved offering a Bible course, reportedly receiving a standing ovation from the audience. The board has apparently not finalized its choice of curriculum. Many in the city advocate using NCBCPS materials.

Courts have ruled clearly that teaching the Bible in a nonsectarian manner is legal and appropriate in public schools, and the NCBCPS insists that its course is indeed nonsectarian. “The program is concerned with education rather than indoctrination of students,” says the Web site. “The central approach of the class is simply to study the Bible as a foundation document of society, and that approach is altogether appropriate in a comprehensive program of secular education.”

Ryan Valentine of the Texas Freedom Network takes a different view: “Academic study of the Bible in a history or literature course is perfectly acceptable,” he says, “but this curriculum represents a blatant attempt to turn a public school class into a Sunday school class. Even that may be giving it too much credit—this curriculum wouldn’t even pass muster in most churches I know.”

The curriculum does make occasional efforts to be evenhanded. It nowhere urges students to become Christians. A separate CD offers perspectives from multiple religious traditions. Some pedagogical components are quite helpful, such as map exercises, reading comprehension questions, quizzes and recommendations of classic musical works inspired by biblical stories. Creative activities include preparing foods that are traditionally associated with Passover and writing a monologue describing Jonah’s inner feelings. The book is well illustrated and parts of it are visually appealing.

Nevertheless, the curriculum does present a distinct theological perspective. Discussions of science are based on nonscientific literature, Jesus is presented as the fulfillment of “Old Testament” prophecy, and archaeological findings are cited as evidence of Bible’s complete historical accuracy. Almost an entire unit of the curriculum is devoted to depicting the U.S. as a historically Christian nation, with the strong implication that it should reclaim that purported heritage.

The Protestant Bible is the course’s norm, and the Bibles of Judaism, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy receive scant attention. The first page highlights the King James Version as “the legal and educational foundation of America.” Christian theological claims are sometimes explicitly affirmed and a Christian audience presupposed, as in statements like: “The tabernacle of the Old Testament

was a ‘shadow of things in heaven.’ Hebrews 8:1-5 tells us that the real Tabernacle is in heaven. This is where Jesus himself is our high priest (Heb. 8:2).”

There are occasional surprises: the book does not insist that Job was written by its namesake, and it even presents a brief overview of the synoptic problem. But it generally advocates traditional views of biblical authorship, early datings of biblical books and the historicity of biblical reports. Students are asked to describe the impact of Noah’s flood on world history. The Exodus is confidently dated to 1446 BCE, with no other views represented. An inscription is cited as confirmation of the accuracy of the Tower of Babel story. Stories of miracles and divine intervention are portrayed as historically accurate —an approach that might be unproblematic in many religious schools, but which the courts have explicitly ruled out for public school settings.

The curriculum’s appeal to archaeological materials aptly illustrate its emphases and its shortcomings. A summary statement cites a claim by a “respected scholar, Dr. J. O. Kinnaman,” that “of the hundreds of thousands of artifacts found by the archaeologists, not one has ever been discovered that contradicts or denies one word, phrase, clause or sentence of the Bible, but always confirms and verifies the facts of the Biblical record.”

J. O. Kinnaman is not a name well known in contemporary academic circles. He has argued (in *Diggers for Facts*: *The Bible in Light of Archaeology*) that Jesus and Paul visited Great Britain, that Joseph of Arimathea was Jesus’ uncle and dominated the tin industry of Wales, and that he himself personally saw Jesus’ school records in India. According to an article by Stephen Mehler, director of research at the Kinnaman Foundation, Kinnaman reported finding a secret entrance into the Great Pyramid of Giza, in which he discovered records from the lost continent of Atlantis. He also claimed that the pyramid was 35,000 years old and was used in antiquity to transmit radio messages to the Grand Canyon. Kinnaman might not be the best figure on which to base material for a public school textbook.

The book’s treatment of the Dead Sea scrolls is equally problematic. Most scholars will be startled to learn that the “scrolls contain definite references to the New Testament and, more importantly, to Jesus of Nazareth”; that fragments of New Testament books were found in the Dead Sea caves; that one scroll mentions the crucifixion of Jesus; and that some Jews at Qumran accepted Jesus as the Messiah. They will be even more puzzled by claims that the Dead Sea scrolls prove that the

Hebrew text underlying modern translations “was identical with the original text as given to the writers by God and inspired by Him.” In light of such claims, it is perhaps not surprising to encounter these study questions on the scrolls: “Describe the impact of this discovery on those who do not accept the authenticity of the Bible” and “Determine the evidence from the Dead Sea scrolls confirming the claims of Jesus as the Bible describes him.”

In discussing scientific issues the book argues that biblical writers accurately described the global water system and wind patterns. The claims are based primarily on a book by evangelist Grant R. Jeffrey, *The Signature of God* (Frontier Research Publications, 2002). The cover of at least some editions of this book proclaims it as “Documented Evidence That Proves Beyond Doubt the Bible Is the Inspired Word of God.”

In several instances, the curriculum advises teachers to use resources from the Creation Evidence Museum in Glen Rose, Texas, an organization that believes in a six-day creation, a 6,000-year-old earth, and the simultaneous existence of humans and dinosaurs. The material also presents an urban legend as scientific fact. Students are told to “note in particular the interesting story of the sun standing still” in the book of Joshua. “There is documented research through NASA that two days were indeed unaccounted for in time (the other being in 2 Kings 20:8-11).” A Web site is provided for an article titled “The Sun Stood Still” about the alleged NASA discovery. The “Ask an Astrophysicist” section of the Web site of NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center dismisses this story, and folklorist Jan Harold Brunand has documented the evolution of the legend.

Much of the course appears to be designed to persuade students and teachers that America is a distinctively Christian nation—an agenda publicly embraced by many of the NCBCPS’s advisers and endorsers. One need not even open the book to find this agenda. The cover is decorated with a photograph of the Declaration of Independence and an American flag. The title pages of most units depict similar images. A consideration of the Ten Commandments draws students’ attention to the possibility of instituting biblical law in America.

A unit titled “The Bible in History” relies heavily on the thought of David Barton, founder and president of WallBuilders, an organization based in Aledo, Texas, that argues against the separation of church and state. His views prompted considerable controversy when the Republican National Committee hired him to stump for

President Bush at churches in 2004.

Even something as seemingly innocuous as a dictionary recommendation reflects a theological agenda. The book recommends the 1828 edition of *Noah Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language* and provides contact information for its publisher, the Foundation for American Christian Education (FACE). A visit to FACE's Web site reveals that this edition contains "the greatest number of biblical definitions given in any reference volume." An advertisement there reads, "This dictionary is needed to Restore an American Christian Education in the Home, Church, and School."

Perhaps most shocking of all, however, is the way the curriculum reproduces nearly verbatim lines, paragraphs and even pages from its sources. Though it occasionally notes its sources, nowhere does it explicitly acknowledge that it quotes them directly. In addition, many passages are virtually identical to ones in uncited sources. In one unit alone, 20 pages are almost identical to uncited online materials. All in all, the wording of nearly 100 pages of the curriculum—approximately a third of the book—is identical or nearly identical to the wording of other publications.

The NCBCPS wants to reach many more school districts. Ridenour has recently announced efforts to expand the use of the curriculum. It may be coming to a school district near you.

Chancey's report on the NCBCPS is available at tfn.org.