

Caution: Bible class in session: Falling toward a deeper life of faith

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

It is Columbus Day, and I am halfway through the Bible survey course that I teach every other year. Twenty students signed up this time, although one dropped out after I asked him to rewrite his paper on the canonization process. The rest have declared “Septuagint” the coolest new vocabulary word, despite the fact that there are few opportunities to use it outside of class. One girl who tried it on her pastor reported that he was not amused, especially since she had to explain to him what it meant.

As usual, we are racing through the material. We covered the Pentateuch in two hours, the historical books in two more and all of the prophets in three. Next week we will spend an hour on wisdom literature (with 20 whole minutes for Job) before making the transition from Malachi to Matthew. I justify the rush on the grounds that a glimpse of the Big Picture helps those with biblical myopia.

Most of my students profess to live by the Bible without ever having read more than 50 pages of it. Their knowledge of what is in it comes from their parents, their preachers and their Bible study leaders, as well as from movies such as *Left Behind*. There is no one thing that can be said about all of these interpreters, except that they all have more power than the text.

When I ask students to read what is actually on the page, most see what they have been taught to see. The story of Adam and Eve is the story of original sin. The snake is Satan, the apple is disobedience, and Eve is the seductress who leads men astray. If I send them back to locate “sin,” “Satan” and “apple” in their Bibles, some are generally astonished to find that the words are not there. Whether they know it or not, they are on the edge of a dangerous decision. They are either going to hang on to their interpretations and do whatever they have to do to make the text fit, or else they are going to let the text lead them to expand their interpretations.

The danger arises partly because many of them come from communities that censure nonconformity. If they begin asking the wrong kinds of questions at church, they may find themselves at the center of quite a lot of pastoral concern (if they are lucky) or shunned (if they are not). If they persist, some may even find themselves estranged from their own families. But even those who are free of such constraints are not safe in my classroom.

Until six weeks ago, one young woman confessed, she honestly believed that the Bible was a journal. "I just thought, you know, that people wrote down what happened each day." Now she knows otherwise, and while she is still not sure what she thinks about the documentary hypothesis, she has read the two creation stories in Genesis for herself. She also knows about the differing accounts of David in Chronicles and Kings, and she has noticed the way that Isaiah's writing style changes dramatically at chapter 40.

As interesting as these things are, they call a great deal into question. How reliable was the oral tradition? What was lost in translation? Where there are two accounts, which one is true? Who decided what would be in the Bible and how dependable were those people? In one form or another, these are all questions about the trustworthiness of the Bible, and they lead to the one question that no college course can answer: *Is this the Word of God or not?*

No wonder people steer their fledglings away from me. "Major in education," one student's preacher told her, "and get your religion at church." If he and I are working against each other, then it is because we believe the same thing: that how people read and interpret scripture is the single most important factor in how they practice their faith. Every church fight I can think of right now, as well as every clash between Christians and non-Christians, rests on some interpretation of scripture. While I do not expect this ever to end, I do welcome the opportunity to introduce even 20 students at a time to the rich complexities of the Bible. When they pay attention to what is actually on the page, they generally find that scripture does not so much support their religious ideology as call it into question, leaving them nowhere to turn but to the God beyond their concepts of God.

The problem with blessing the questions is that I don't have any place to send students who want to keep asking them when their one religion class is over. Even in churches that support free inquiry, Bible studies tend to serve up more for the heart than for the mind. It is hard to find anyone who cares about the effect of

Hellenization on biblical texts, or whether Paul really wrote those letters to Timothy and Titus. Such questions are far from irrelevant, especially as they inform Christian attitudes toward women and Jews. I just don't know of any local churches that are addressing them.

Meanwhile, I take my job so seriously that some days I hate doing it. Like my precursor the snake, I work near that tree in the middle of the garden, but unlike him I hiss a warning to those who approach. "Think hard about staying in this course," I tell my students at the beginning of the term, "because once you know things you cannot ever go back." Then I do my best to care for those who stay, believing that God is with them even as they fall—from innocence toward the promise of a deeper life of faith.