

## Bible as a Core Subject

As interested and caring parents and family with children in a Christian school, you may have wondered about the role of Bible as a core subject in the curriculum. We at ACSI believe that the study of the Bible is a Christian school distinctive that is both unique and essential. As I considered how best to present the topic, I concluded that no one has done so more compellingly than my friend Richard Riesen in his book *Piety and Philosophy: A Primer for Christian Schools* (Phoenix, AZ: ACW Press, 2002). Dr. Riesen, principal of Pacific Christian on the Hill in Los Angeles, offers two primary reasons, as reprinted below with the author's permission:

### So That Students Are Educated

At the most basic level and from a strictly academic point of view, we teach Bible to ensure that those who graduate from our schools are literate; that is, literate and informed, worthy products of a quality education—because we take the view that no one, Christian believer or not, can be properly educated without knowing the Bible. In the fascinating *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (1988), which was an attempt to outline in dictionary format what Americans need to know to be literate, what the authors call “this shared information [that] is the foundation of our daily discourse” (ix), the first of 23 chapters (not in alphabetical order) is devoted to the Bible, and here is what they say on page one.

No one in the English-speaking world can be considered literate without a basic knowledge of the Bible. Literate people in India, whose religious traditions are not based on the Bible but whose common language is English, must know about the Bible in order to understand English within their own country. All educated speakers of American English need to understand what is meant when someone describes a contest as being between David and Goliath, or whether a person who has the “wisdom of Solomon” is wise or foolish, or whether saying, “My cup runneth over” means the person feels fortunate or unfortunate. Those who cannot use or understand such allusions cannot fully participate in literate English.

While it is true that Christian interest in the Bible is not limited to its role “as literature,” the Bible is nonetheless very great literature indeed, and those for whom it is much more than literature ought not to be the last to recognize the fact. Nor will it hurt to remind ourselves again that the purpose of the Christian school is to educate; and if our students leave our schools without a proper understanding of the rich, civilization-shaping literary merits of the Bible, we shall have been derelict in our duty as educators.

Whether the Bible can be read as literature, in the sense of only as literature, is an interesting question. The answer is, of course it can; people do it all the time. Whether it can be read meaningfully that



way—read as it was intended to be read, and therefore read with understanding—is, however, doubtful. The Bible, although great literature, was not meant to be “only literature,” simply to be enjoyed, or even to provide insight. It was meant to be understood and obeyed. It is God’s Word; it is Holy Scripture. To read it as anything else is to miss its point.

[The Bible is], “if you like to put it that way, not merely a sacred book but a book so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach. You can read it as literature only by a *tour de force*.

You are cutting the wood against the grain, using the tool for a purpose it was not intended to serve. It demands incessantly to be taken on its own terms: it will not continue to give literary delight very long except to those who go to it for something quite different” (C. S. Lewis, “The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version,” *Selected Literary Essays*, 144).

Nonetheless, one of the principal reasons we teach the Bible is simply to ensure that our students are educated.

### So That Students Understand the Gospel

The second reason we teach the Bible is so that our students will understand the Christian Gospel. If the Bible is really all about Christ, as some have argued, or at least about the relationship of God to man, and if that relationship is central to our reason for being as Christian schools, then we cannot *not* teach the Bible. Nor is putting it that way to contradict what I have said throughout this book about the Christian school’s essentially academic purposes. Making sure that students understand the Gospel is, at one level, an academic as well as a profoundly spiritual obligation. The spiritually serious, especially, need to know how to exegete the text. Moreover, I want to make sure that by the time my students leave my school they understand clearly what the Christian Gospel is about—and if they choose to reject it, what it is they have chosen to reject. I do not want my graduates ever to be able to say that what they learned of Christianity from me was so muddled, or so bound up with legalism or attempts at emotional or psychological manipulation, that the clear Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ never got through. Hopefully our students will respond, by grace to grace, and put their trust in the Savior; but even if they do not, they will have stored away for use when they need it later, an unclouded understanding of what the Gospel is.

Many Christian school mission statements include something about students’ salvation or Christian maturity, as well as their training in academic subjects. Articulated in mission statements or not, those are the twin foci of Christian school education: academic training (including an understanding of a Christian worldview) and Christian nurture. This is what Christian schools do, and the teaching of Bible is required for both. —Richard Riesen

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Ken Smitherman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "K".

Ken Smitherman, President  
Association of Christian Schools International

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