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Op-Ed Contributor

Teach, Don't Preach, the Bible

By **BRUCE FEILER**

YESTERDAY'S ruling by a federal judge that "intelligent design" cannot be taught in biology classes in a Pennsylvania public school district has the potential to put the teaching of the Bible back where it belongs in our schools: not in the science laboratory, but in its proper historical and literary context. An elective, nonsectarian high school Bible class would allow students to explore one of the most influential books of all time and would do so in a manner that clearly falls within Supreme Court rulings.

In the landmark 1963 Abington case (which also involved Pennsylvania public schools), the Supreme Court outlawed reading the Bible as part of morning prayers but left the door open for studying the Bible. Writing for the 8-1 majority, Justice Thomas Clark stated that the Bible is "worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities," and added, "Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistent with the First Amendment."

Though the far right may complain that this academic approach to teaching the Bible locks God out of the classroom, and the far left may complain that it sneaks God in, the vast majority of Americans would embrace it. But the devil, as some might say, is in the details. School board officials in Odessa, Tex., for example, have been embroiled in a running controversy over their choice of a curriculum for an elective high school Bible class. While the board's choice is now between two competing curriculums, pressure from civil liberties groups has prompted changes in even the more conservative alternative.

By helping to design an academic course in the Bible, moderates can show that the Bible is not composed entirely of talking points for the religious right. In fact, on a wide range of topics, including respecting the value of other faiths, shielding religion from politics, serving the poor and protecting the environment, the Bible offers powerful arguments in support of moderate and liberal causes.

In the story of David, the ruthless Israelite king who unites the tribes of Israel around 1000 B.C.E. but is rebuked by God when he wants to build a temple, the Bible makes a stirring argument in favor of separating religion and politics, or church and state to use contemporary terms.

In the Book of Isaiah, God embraces the Persian king Cyrus and his respect for different religions, even though Cyrus does not know God's name and does not practice Judaism. By calling Cyrus "the anointed one," or messiah, God signals his tolerance for people who share his moral vision, no matter their nationality or faith.

In the Book of Jonah, God offers a message of forgiveness and tolerance when he denounces his own prophet and spares his former enemies, the Ninevehites, when they repent and turn toward him.

In recent decades, the debate over religion has been characterized as a struggle between two groups that Noah Feldman calls "values evangelicals," like Roy Moore, who placed the Ten Commandments in the Alabama Supreme Court, and "legal secularists," like Michael Newdow, who attacked the use of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. This debate does not represent reality.

The Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics, completed in 2004 by the University of Akron, shows

that only 12.6 percent of Americans consider themselves "traditionalist evangelical Protestants," which the survey equates with the term "religious right." A mere 10.7 percent of Americans define themselves as "secular" or "atheist, agnostic." The vast majority of Americans are what survey-takers term centrist or modernist in their religious views.

These mainstream believers represent to their religiously liberal and conservative neighbors what independents do to Republicans and Democrats in the political arena. They are the under-discussed "swing voters" in the values debate who, the survey shows, are slightly pro-choice, believe in the death penalty, support stem-cell research and favor gay rights but oppose gay marriage.

Above all, they welcome religion in public life but are turned off by efforts to claim exclusive access to God.

At a time when religion dominates the headlines - from Iraq to terrorism to stem cells - finding a way to educate young people about faith should become a national imperative. Achieving this goal in a legal, nonsectarian manner requires Americans to get over the kitchen-table bromide, "Don't talk about politics and religion in public."

The extremists talk about religion - and spew messages of hate. Religious moderates must denounce this bigotry and reclaim Scripture as the shared document of all. When flamethrowers hold up Scripture and say, "It says this," moderates must hold up the same text say, "Yes, but it also says this." The Bible is simply too important to the history of Western civilization - and to vital to its future - to be ceded to one side in the debate over values.

Bruce Feiler is the author, most recently, of "Where God Was Born: A Journey by Land to the Roots of Religion."