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The Bible: An educational perspective

Mike Thompson walks into the classroom, cracks a religious joke and the class laughs. He is already not what they expected. He has an air of cool confidence as he tells the class that he does not have all the answers.

Thompson is a religious studies professor at Oklahoma State University, specializing in the Bible. His classes study the Bible in a scholarly manner that focuses on analyzing the Bible critically. He has had multiple job titles in his 41-year career, but he declares himself an educator.

Thompson grew up in “a wonderful little town called Newkirk” in northern Oklahoma in a religious family. It was this background that first got him interested in religion, though he originally had no intention of becoming a professor.

“This was not my goal, my original plan was to be a public school teacher,” Thompson said.

Thompson worked with the church for four years before deciding to further his education in religion. He grew up reading and learning the Bible, but he decided he needed a formal education if he was going to continue in the field.

He moved to Fort Worth and took a 90-hour course on divinity, which ultimately lead to him earning a Ph.D. in historical theology. Thompson was surprised he was so far from his original plan to be a public school teacher.

After graduating, Thompson took a job as a junior minister at a church, and then moved to San Francisco to be a seminary professor. Thompson became an ordained minister at the age of 22, and although he has actively served churches, he has always maintained his career as an educator.

“Regardless of whether someone is religious or not, a good portion of the world is influenced by Biblical teachings because more than 50 percent of people on the earth are taking the Bible very seriously, so for an educated person to have a working knowledge of the Bible is very important,” Thompson said.

Dan Buttafuoco, an attorney and president of the Historical Bible Society, wrote an article titled, “Five Reasons the Bible is the Most Important Book on Earth.” The article’s first reason echoes Thompson’s thoughts.

“It would be impossible to claim to be an educated person in today's world without having at least some familiarity with the events contained in this book,” Buttafuoco said.

Thompson also feels it is important for universities to offer courses on the Bible, “I couldn’t imagine a university doing a good job and not offering courses helping people to understand the Bible, not to influence, just to help them understand why we think this way. The Bible is an incredible book for understanding civilization and history.”

Gary C. Burger of New Media Ministries also points out that Christianity is the only religion that has a book written by people who had firsthand encounters with the people they were writing about. The Bible contains real historical accounts.

Thompson has spent most of his career studying the Bible, and his knowledge is evident in his classes. In addition to his knowledge of the subject, Thompson’s teaching style also draws students to his classes. Janey Rapp, a student of Thompson’s, always enjoys his class.

“He seems very knowledgeable, and I enjoy his teaching style because he talks to you like he would in a conversation,” Rapp said. “He makes a lot of jokes and makes learning the material enjoyable.”

Thompson was teaching in a seminary school in Chicago when he got a call from OSU. An old colleague of his was an endowed chair here and was nearing retirement. Thompson was suggested for the position and OSU called requesting an interview. Shortly after his interview, Thompson was on his way to Oklahoma. He has been a professor for OSU for 11 years now, and he enjoys the students he teaches.

Some students do not take kindly to Thompson’s critical approach to the Bible, but he likes to make it clear that he has no intention of criticizing it.

“The word criticism when it’s used in terms of scholarly study, it doesn’t mean we are being critical, it means we are being as objective as possible,” Thompson said. “It is an attempt to be as honest and open as we can, to not be afraid of asking questions, to sometimes say ‘I’m not sure,’ and I do that all the time.”

Students enjoy Thompson’s honesty. Even though he has been an educator for many years and studied the Bible extensively, he recognizes that he does not have all the answers. This is a trait many professors lack. Michelle Browne is a student currently taking Thompson’s New Testament class.

“I like that he says that he doesn't have all the answers because most professors think they know all the answers,” Browne said. “It's refreshing to have honesty in the classroom.”

A critical look also helps Christians in their understanding of the Bible. Knowing the context in which a passage is written brings a perspective and understanding.

Thompson explains why it is important for Christians to study the Bible from a historical perspective.

“It really brings life to a biblical text if we can say ‘OK, Paul was here when he wrote this, or Paul was writing to this city, what do we know about this city?’ and then all of the sudden it helps us understand why he said that,” Thompson said. “Without that a lot of his letters are lost to us, we will misinterpret them, we’ll say goofy things, and we’ll make foolish mistakes.”

Thompson’s perspective on the Bible is interesting and relevant. The fact that Thompson is a believer who also can view the Bible objectively in a historical context is what makes him unique and is what students love.

“It is my role to be as open and objective to students as I can and to say you can believe, but we also want to be able to ask questions and be informed people,” Thompson said. “We don’t have to be afraid of studying the Bible; the Bible is doing fine; it’s been around for a long time.”

## References

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