
FIRST PERSON

Not Just American Literature

Treva Burgess

I looked out at my new class, a group of promising young law students from all over the nation selected because of their superior communication skills. Though thoroughly familiar with the subject matter, American literature, I knew this class would provide a special challenge, for I had not had a hand in choosing the textbook, and I was in China, teaching a group of curious, bright young Chinese.

One of our first essays was on what may be called "nature had it first." It was a fascinating story of how heat-seeking missiles had been developed based on studies of the heat-seeking ability of snakes, and how humans developed a sophisticated radar system based on the natural radar God gave bats. I asked my students if they had ever heard about God. Only three in my entire section said they had.

Then I asked them if they knew anything about his son, Jesus Christ. This time, they looked even more perplexed. No one in the class had ever heard of him. I then learned that during the Cultural Revolution, and even today, parents are forbidden to share religion with their children until they are 18.

Since they told me they had started to learn about evolution in third grade, I offered to read them the story of how I thought the world was made. The Genesis account fascinated them. They could see God's plan in action around them everywhere.

Our next essay on Alexander the Great gave me the perfect chance to read Neb-

uchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2) to them. They knew their world history well, and after hearing the story in Daniel, my student Connie said, "We must be in the toes of that great image, right?" I had a perceptive bunch on my hands.

An essay on stealing gave me the chance to read the Ten Commandments. (Law students should be familiar with the foundation of our current judicial system, I reasoned.) And as Christmas came near, I shared the story of Jesus' birth, beginning with Micah's prophecy about Bethlehem and ending with Luke's account of his birth.

The story of Jesus' death on the cross moved them, because they seemed to feel that he had died for them, too. But the good news of the resurrection morning and the promise of his return raised new and exciting questions in their minds.

One day, Tim asked if they could go to church with me at Christmas time. Of course I agreed, but he hastened to remind me, lest I get too excited, "We've never been to church before, so we don't have membership cards." Now it was my turn to be perplexed. Then I realized that

many Chinese Christians and American Christians aren't that different, crowding into the churches twice a year, during Christmas and Easter. To assure members a seat during these special seasons, the Chinese Christian churches had hit upon the reasonable idea of issuing membership cards. "Don't worry about it," I said. "There's plenty of room."

There was one important thing that I had to clear with my students before taking them to church, however. I reminded the class about what had happened on the seventh day of Creation Week, and asked them, "Do you remember what the fourth commandment says?"

I had read it only once, without commenting on it in detail, but my best student, Marvin, responded, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." "Right!" I replied, "And what day is the seventh day of the week?" No one hesitated, "Saturday!" I knew then that they had been absorbing much more than the literature component of the class, because in the Chinese language and on some calendars, Monday is listed as the first day of the week and Sunday appears as the seventh.

I took my entire class to church. They sang "Silent Night" for the congregation, and both the church members and students were blessed by this very special music. It must have been sweet to God's ears!

Our Christmas party with games, homemade cookies, and punch was a big success, but I reminded them that we needed to review for the



My literature class provides Christmas music in church.

upcoming finals. John spoke up and said, "We promise we'll review on our own, just please tell us some more Bible stories!" How could I refuse?

During the remaining two weeks, I taught them how to pray and shared more Bible stories with them, believing that the Holy Spirit would accompany them in their preparation and final exams. He did! My students earned the highest grades of all four American Literature sections, with scores ranging from 87 to 94%.

As they came to my office for their final grades, they brought me pictures and notes of appreciation. I was touched by all of them. One girl wrote, "Mrs. Burgess, I'll share a secret with you. Now I pray every night before going to bed. I pray for you, for me, for my boyfriend, and for everyone I love. I believe God hears me and can help me because you told me God is interested in everybody, including me."

During that school year, I know God helped me teach much more than just American literature.

Trava Burgess taught English language and literature in China for two years. She is presently an administrative assistant for International Teacher Service.

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