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Bibb's students learn to express — and examine — their views

What professor doesn't dream of students queuing up at the office door to engage in further discussion following a rousing classroom debate?

This scene is often a reality for religion professor Bryan Bibb, a recipient of the **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching** for 2007-08. Besides infusing the classroom with "infectious enthusiasm," as one student has described his style, Bibb creates an atmosphere of openness in which students feel free to express ideas and opinions.

Bibb's specialties include Old Testament theology, the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israelite religion. A 1994 Furman graduate with advanced degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary (Master of Divinity and Ph.D.), he says he has three primary goals for students who enroll in his classes.

Because students come in with wide-ranging perspectives on the Bible, Bibb first wants them to know what the Bible says; second, to understand why they interpret it the way they do (what circumstances, relationships and life experiences shape their thinking); and third, to examine why the Bible has been such an important cultural influence in the West.

While goals one and three appear innocuous enough, it's the second goal that shakes things up in the classroom, according to Bibb. "I want them to understand why they believe what they do. That's going to help them be more open and honest in engaging people who are different from them," he says.

"Sometimes they might feel upset or confused by the process, so I try to be very positive, very encouraging, non-threatening . . . [I try]

to meet them where they are and help them understand the Bible better. That's what I want to help them do rather than impose my own kind of agenda on them."

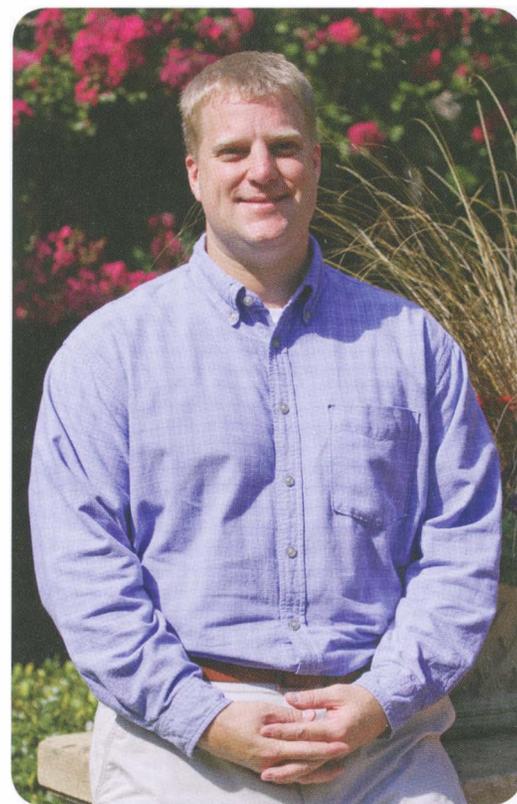
Sean O'Rourke, chair of the communication studies department, witnessed Bibb's gracious style when the two taught together in the interdisciplinary humanities series.

"The faculty often faces challenging and even contentious students when we read religious texts," says O'Rourke. Bibb, however, "seizes potential conflicts as teaching opportunities, engaging students in productive and constructive dialogue. In the end, even when students end up disagreeing with him, they rarely feel slighted or slammed, and never in my experience do they come away feeling that their beliefs and values are not respected."

Departing from a stale, lecture-heavy style, Bibb prefers to open classes with a brief lecture before posing questions in what he calls a Socratic approach. "I'll ask, 'If this is true, then what about this?' Then I'll have students work through the implications of the text we're reading or issue we're discussing," he says.

Bibb says he is most pleased when he can encourage students to talk to each other in class, rather than having only professor-to-student exchanges. "I try to structure the class in a way that gives them the freedom and permission to do that."

A self-proclaimed sci-fi buff and "techie," Bibb also enjoys injecting popular music and video clips into the learning process. O'Rourke recalls rave reviews from students about "The Theology of U2," a talk Bibb prepared for a fellowship group on campus. "[The presentation] is a good example of how Dr. Bibb



JEREMY FLEMING

goes well beyond the call to help students make connections between terribly complex subjects — especially theology — and matters of everyday student interest."

O'Rourke goes on to say, "Dr. Bibb's love of learning and quest for knowledge are contagious. Students leave his classroom with a newfound appreciation for liberal education — and for life."

— TINA TARKINGTON UNDERWOOD