

Jeff Johnson: Truth, warts and all

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Mrs. Brau, my first-grade teacher, made us recite: “Columbus sailed the ocean blue, in fourteen hundred ninety-two.” I went to college only to find out Columbus, the pride of Genoa, no more “discovered” America than Al Gore invented the Internet.

The mere thought of somehow teaching American history after that course frightened me into studying business. Little did I know I soon would enter the realm of teaching Sunday school to fifth-grade boys. No wonder James declares, “Not many of you should become teachers” (3:1).



Jeff JohnsonI can remember my late older brother, Bill, being fed to the middle-school boys right after he professed Christ at the age of 35. The only way he could keep order in the class was to roll up his sleeves and show his forearm-length dragon tattoos. If things really got bad, he would show them the Grim Reaper inked on his back.

I can remember my brother calling me and telling me an irate parent informed him he had made teaching mistakes. He put the wise men beside the shepherds, called Jonah’s big fish a whale, said Eve ate an apple, insisted there were three Magi, and asserted there was only one creation

story. I told him he was part of that great cloud of witnesses that had gone before him.

What am I to do with Scripture that presents such a mixed bag of characters and themes? Noah was a “good man,” but after the flood, he got drunk and naked in his own house. Abraham was the father of a nation but tried to pass his wife off as his sister. Jacob was chosen to lead a nation but cheated his own brother out of his inheritance. In fact, the book of Genesis can make your skin crawl with tales of rape, incest, promiscuity, drunken parties—and that’s with God’s chosen people. And that’s just the beginning of the Bible. Help!



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The truth is that the Bible—which is our history as God’s people—is more colorful, more controversial, more scandalous than I often let on. Stories with unpredictable endings. Love scenes that turn my face magenta. Contact BaptistWay Press quick.

I really don’t need to believe Columbus was the first to discover America to credit him with other achievements that made him a great explorer. Likewise with the biblical heroes with all kinds of warts. I can tell it like it is and let the richness of the biblical witness inform my relationship to God. That’s why I have nothing to fear when I seek the truth, tell the truth and live the truth. And have great resources to help me teach. No lie.

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