

Biblical Teaching

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This article first appeared in Christian School Teacher, Spring 2003, and is reproduced here by permission. It draws upon the recent book The Bible and the Task of Teaching by David I. Smith and John Shortt.

In a characteristically unusual poem, Austrian poet Ernst Jandl describes a bizarre orchestral performance. As the conductor steps up to the lectern and raises his baton, the musicians imitate him by swinging their instruments into the air. The conductor reacts by tapping the lectern with his baton, only to see his musicians respond to his motion by smashing their instruments on the floor. He stretches out his arms – they begin to flap around the room like birds. His head falls to his chest – they burrow into the floor. And so the outrageous performance progresses, without ever arriving at anything that might be describable as music.

At first the performance seems chaotic – the orchestra runs wild, leaving the conductor sweating and broken. The poem's title, however, gives us a clue that something else is afoot. The poem is called "the fanatical orchestra", and as it progresses, it becomes apparent that the actions of the musicians are far from random. On the contrary, their every motion is a fanatical attempt to obey, in the most literal way possible, the conductor's slightest movement. The desire to obey is not lacking, only the wisdom to know what kinds of responses might be appropriate and what kinds might be bizarre. As Jandl portrays his conductor with arms outstretched and head sunk upon his chest, we are given a hint that the sometimes curious efforts of Christians to obey their crucified Lord may be part of what he has in view.

Jandl's poem raises an issue that is deeply pertinent to Christian education. His fanatical orchestra illustrates in an extreme manner the point that it is possible to be committed to obedience, but to fail for lack of wisdom. In Christian education terms, it is possible to accept the authority of Scripture as God's word, to affirm its authority over every aspect of the curriculum, to declare that what goes on in the school must be built upon biblical foundations – and yet to generate little that might count as music to God's ears.

Affirming that Scripture is our authority does not yet tell us how Scripture might authentically shape what goes on in classrooms.

The most sincere efforts at pursuing the project of biblical Christian education can at times be faintly reminiscent of Jandl's musicians. Alongside the many faithful uses of Scripture in Christian schools can be found examples of biblical texts being yoked to curriculum content in a manner that shows little sensitivity to the intent, context or concerns of the Scriptures. Teachers with whom I have discussed this have offered me examples of references to the fire of God being mentioned during work about temperature and Jesus' reference to Peter as a rock being appended to materials about geology! Both examples surely stray rather a long way beyond the meaning of the scriptural text. Yet the problem here, as with the orchestra, is not lack of commitment, but lack of wisdom.

Even when Scripture is more sensitively handled, its relationship to the curriculum can remain superficial. I recently read through a math workbook in which many of the word problems dealt with Christian matters ('If Mrs Brown buys 15 exercise books for her Sunday School class at 75 cents each...'). It included a scattering of appropriately cited Bible verses among the math activities. I looked at all of the problems that had to do with money (there were many), and found that all of them concerned either earning money or spending it on consumer goods; there was not a single instance of money being given or shared that I could find in the entire book. Sincerity and superficiality can, it would appear, comfortably coexist.

All of this has a bearing on how we see the project of making education Christian, which must at least in part mean relating education to the Christian Scriptures. It appears that it is not enough to affirm the authority of the Bible over the whole curriculum, and that even including regular references to or quotations from Scripture may be little guarantee that what is going on is in any very deeply satisfying sense "biblical".

So how *should* we relate the Bible to education? The findings of a three year research project carried out at the Stapleford Centre (a Christian education centre in Nottingham, England, see www.stapleford-centre.org) suggest that there is not just one answer to that question, but several, all worth exploring. After surveying a wide range of Christian discussions of education, we identified five distinct models of how Scripture might guide

teaching and learning. They are described in full in the book that emerged from the project, *The Bible and the Task of Teaching* (Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre, 2002). In the space of this short article I will describe four of them briefly before expanding a little more on a fifth.

1. Living the Scriptures

The first two models are, we have found, familiar to most Christian teachers. First there is what is often referred to as an ‘incarnational’ model – the teacher ‘incarnates’ the virtues and character qualities described in Scripture in the classroom. Here the life of the teacher is the bridge between Scripture and learning: teachers study Scripture, are shaped by its call to become like Christ, and the gains in humility, love, compassion, patience or perseverance become evident in their classroom presence and relationships with students. Passages such as James 3:1-17 and 2 Timothy 2:23-25 become their watchword. As they teach, they also model biblical ways of being.

2. Tracing the teachings

A second model focuses more on the implications of what the Bible teaches about reality. It begins by seeking to formulate statements of truth as taught by Scripture, and then attempts to trace the implications of these statements for contemporary education (‘humans are made in God’s image, so we should reject mechanistic theories of how the learner functions,’ ‘sex is a gift designed for marriage, so we should teach it in the context of family, not just biology’). Sometimes it might appear that particular teachings clearly require or exclude certain ideas or practices; often it will be more a case of trying creatively to design practices that are in harmony with what Scripture teaches.

These first two models are sometimes rhetorically pitted against one another (pietists with warm hearts and empty heads versus doctrine junkies with detailed worldviews but an overly intellectual approach to faith). In fact neither can stand without the other: if we do not live what Scripture teaches, our worldview talk may fall on skeptical ears; if our integrity and devotional warmth are not accompanied by clear thinking, they may lead our students to follow us in doubtful directions.

3. Stories and the Story

A third model focuses on story. Various theologians have in recent decades pointed out that the Bible is not just a collection of doctrinal points that need to be reorganized into a

more logical order; it is made up in large measure of stories. At the same time, philosophers have argued that the stories we hear and tell ourselves are important building blocks in our sense of self, and educational theorists have been pointing out that education is itself a form of storytelling. This does not only mean that teachers and textbooks constantly use stories as illustrative examples. It also refers to the fact that the curriculum itself tells bigger stories about our world and the trajectory of human life – of noble Columbus who discovered the New World or of gold-hungry Columbus who conquered America; of increasing technological progress leading to improved quality of life and the conquering of famine and disease or of blind faith in technology leading to environmental destruction and ever more destructive warfare; of a smooth upward path through life marked by growing personal wealth and power or of sacrificial choices based on other sets of values; of history as a slow march towards secular liberalism, or of the secular West as a temporary anomaly in a religion-soaked world. As these brief examples illustrate, the stories implicit in our curricula involve our basic values and ways of seeing the world. So also does the Scriptural story about the world and the people who inhabit it. Is the shape of the Scriptural story reflected in the shape of our curricular stories? How can one story judge another?

4. From canon to classroom

A fourth model looks to the shape of the biblical canon (the collection of books affirmed by the Christian church as God-breathed), and suggests that we can learn something from it about teaching and learning. If we look at different sections of the canon we find different models of teaching and learning. There is the Torah (the books of the Law), where the children ask what the things mean and receive authoritative, stable, identity-affirming answers (e.g. Exodus 12:26-27). There are the prophets, where the refrain is a more unsettling “you have heard it said, but now I say...”, and the concern is more often to disrupt the people’s settled sense of how things should be (e.g. Jeremiah 7:21-26). There are the wisdom books, in which appeal is made to experience – go look at some ants, or a lazy person’s vineyard (Proverbs 6:6, 24:30). There is Jesus, in whom all of these models become combined as he teaches from the mountain, overturns tables and points to the lilies (Matthew 5, 6, 21). The basic question here is: what different patterns of teaching and learning does Scripture model for us, and does the overall shape of

Scripture give us clues as to how they fit together and complement, challenge or balance one another? Should all of them be reflected in our teaching?

There is very much more to be said about each of these four approaches – there are whole articles and books pursuing each in various ways. There is not, however, the space to explore each of them here. Instead, so as to get a little more concrete in at least one area, I will unpack a fifth approach in slightly greater detail. The fifth approach is concerned with metaphors.

5. Musing over metaphor

Scripture is full of evocative metaphors (God as shepherd, rock or husband; believers as temples, building blocks or limbs, and so on). Educational thinking is also infused with guiding metaphors (schools as families, factories, or marketplaces, learners as blank slates, buckets, plants or consumers, and so on). Such metaphors can have a profound impact on how we conduct ourselves - just as a view of God as cosmic policeman will nurture a different spirituality from a view of God as gracious Father, so views of teaching as a form of coaching, as a form of shepherding or as a form of acting set quite different tones in my classroom. The question is: how do the two realms connect?

It is worth noticing first that we have a variety of metaphors for the very attempt to think biblically, and that each directs our attention in a different way. When we talk about biblical ‘foundations’ we focus on security and solidity, on that which makes the building stand firm; but the image also suggests something static, that stays put, out of sight, once it has been laid. Talk of Scripture as a pair of ‘spectacles’ or as giving us a ‘worldview’ focuses on seeing, and suggests that Scripture will give us a more clear-sighted vision; it also seems to imply that we have an unobstructed overview of reality, and might suggest a certain spectatorial detachment. Thinking of Scripture as a “lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105) suggests a journey at night with a flickering torch that enables us to see just far enough to choose our next steps, and that is not static, but moves with us as we travel on. Each metaphor has its own way of being helpful, but each is also limited taken alone, and might constrict us if it overly dominates our thinking.

Moving on to focus specifically on teaching and learning, we can find various examples throughout history of biblical metaphors guiding educational reflection. John Amos Comenius, the famous seventeenth-century pioneer of modern education, began his major

work on pedagogy with talk of gardens. He wrote in the preface to his *Great Didactic* that “God, having created man out of dust, placed him in a Paradise of desire, which he had planted in the East, not only that man might tend it and care for it, but also that he might be a garden of delight for his God”. Humans in other words, were not only placed in a garden of delight, they were called to *be* a garden of delight, an idea that Comenius drew from Isaiah 5 (“the men of Judah are the garden of his delight”, v.7). This expanded in Comenius’ writings into a whole network of garden metaphors, in which, for instance, the textbooks for different classes received names such as the violet-bed, the rose-bed and the grass-plot, the teacher is to “water God’s plants”, and the school itself was to become a ‘garden of delight’. Tracing the scriptural roots of Comenius’ imagery makes it clear that he does not have in mind here the Romantic idea that children should be left alone to grow and blossom naturally, with minimal adult intervention. A garden of delight is the opposite of a natural wilderness. It is a place of careful cultivation and ongoing discipline. It is a place where God should be able to walk in the cool of the day and find fragrance and enjoyment. It is a place where play and pleasure have their legitimate role. It is a place where the drama of decision, whether to obey or disobey our creator, is played out daily. In these and other ways, Comenius allowed a particular strand of biblical imagery to permeate and form his thinking about schooling. The results were a vision at variance with the dominant image patterns today, which commonly imagine schooling in terms of economics (curriculum as product, student/parent as consumer, teacher as manager) or information transfer (brains as computers, teaching as input). More recently, Parker Palmer (in his book *To know as we are known: Education as a spiritual journey*) has invited us to consider some of our images of the process of knowing. In the Western world, he points out, we commonly think of knowing as a form of power. We ‘wrestle with’ or ‘hammer away at’ problems before eventually ‘cracking’ them. We ‘grasp’ new knowledge (unless it ‘beats’ or ‘escapes’ us), sometimes ‘breaking it down’ so that we can ‘master’ it. Such imagery reflects a basic stance of manipulation and control. How might teaching and learning look, Palmer asks, if we thought more often of knowing as a form of loving, specifically the kind of loving described in 1 Corinthians 13? Such knowing might be characterised more by personal involvement,

loving attentiveness, patience, humility and respect. Like Comenius, Palmer works out of an imagination infused by Scripture.

What if we paid more attention to biblical metaphor directly in our teaching? A teacher at a Christian school in Australia decided after learning more about metaphor to rework a unit that she was teaching to a class of teenagers as part of a social studies program. The unit was about death and dying. Her approach up to that point had been to start with explanation of Christian doctrines concerning death and the afterlife, and then move on to a study of how death was handled in Australian society. In the revised version of the unit, the starting point was a discussion of the metaphors embedded in the euphemisms for dying that students had heard in everyday speech. Together the class unpacked the implicit picture that each metaphor offered of what death is like. Then they moved on to consider the images of death found in Scripture, such as falling asleep (Acts 7:60) or taking down a tent and moving into a new house (2 Corinthians 5:1). The implications of these metaphors were explored and compared to the cultural metaphors already discussed. The original approach to the unit had not been wrong, but the shift to a greater focus on metaphor opened up new learning opportunities and provoked students to allow *their* imaginations to be informed by biblical imagery.

Obviously our analysis of the various approaches to relating the Bible to education offers a basis for further work, not a finished product. It points to some of the paths that we might explore as we seek to be responsive to Scripture in our lives as educators. As we look back over our research, two broad points seem important. First, each approach has both possibilities and dangers, both strengths and limitations. Pursuit of any one approach on its own is likely to lead to lop-sided results; it is as the various approaches interweave and begin to supplement and correct one another that the richest possibilities emerge. Any adequate notion of what it might mean to have a 'Christian worldview' will need to attend to all five areas, to lived response, careful concept, storied vision, canonical balance and sanctified imagination. The different approaches are not alternatives, but strands of a rope.

Second, these approaches taken together give us a wealth of possibilities to explore. Trying to relate the Bible to education can sometimes seem like a narrow balancing act or a desperate quest for the two or three verses of Scripture that make some oblique

reference to one's curriculum area. We suggest that such feelings arise from a view of the relationship between Scripture and learning that is too constricted. To be sure, nothing said here offers quick and easy answers – every approach calls for long and faithful attentiveness to the contours of Scripture and the classroom. The relationship between the Bible and education is, however, rich and variegated. It is more like a forest than a tightrope. Anyone for a hike?