

# 12

## The imitation of Christ

An itinerant Jewish teacher was approached by some of his followers who put to him the question “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” The teacher did not answer immediately. Instead he looked around and, seeing a little child, he called him. Did he do so by name? We know not, but in some way he made it clear that he wanted this child to come and stand among the adults. The child obeyed because the teacher spoke and acted with a certain authority. The teacher then said to those around him, “I tell you truly that you will never as much as enter the heavenly kingdom unless you change and become like a child. The greatest in this kingdom is the one who has humbled himself to the level of this child.” The teacher went on to speak about welcoming children “in his name” and the terrible consequences of causing a child to sin. To be dragged gasping for breath to the depths of the sea by the dead weight of a millstone would be a far better destiny. “Gouge out the eye that causes you to sin”, he said, “for it is

135

better that you should enter life with one eye than be thrown into the fires of hell with two.” And he then told them a story about a shepherd who left his ninety-nine sheep on the hills to go in search of one that had wandered away and was lost. “Your heavenly Father, like that shepherd,” he said to them, “is not willing that any of these children be lost.”

The teacher was, of course, Jesus and the story comes from Matthew chapter 18.

In our study of ways of relating the Bible to education, we come now to models for teaching and learning that we find in the Bible. The Bible may not have much to say about twenty-first century textbooks, curricula, or forms of educational organisation. But its pages are full of teachers and learners, and standing out among them, head and shoulders above the rest in his teaching, is the man of whom it was said “No one ever spoke the way this man does”.<sup>1</sup> We start, therefore, with Jesus as the model teacher.

## Jesus as model teacher

Much has been said and written about Jesus the teacher, his teaching style and methods,<sup>2</sup> and it is not the purpose of this book to provide an exhaustive analysis of this subject. Our focus is on the strands of the rope that link the Bible and education, and our concern is to point to the rich variety of these strands and the ways in which they intertwine, rather than to provide an exhaustive analysis of any of them. Nevertheless, it is probably helpful to outline some of the main points that can be made about Jesus as teacher before going on to say something about what this could mean for our thinking about education today.

The Gospels present Jesus as one whose main activities in his three-year ministry were teaching and healing, and there are rather more references to his teaching than to the healings he performed. Teaching language is used in relation to him more often than

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1 John 7:46.

2 See, for example, Manson, 1935, Kidner, 1984, Perkins, 1990, and especially the intriguingly titled and very rewarding-to-read chapter 6, ‘Why didn’t Jesus tell Bible Stories?’, of Melchert, 1998.

preaching or prophecy language.<sup>3</sup> He was addressed frequently as ‘teacher’ and the other most common titles given to him in the Gospels were ‘lord/master’ and ‘rabbi’, both of which can have pedagogical connotations.

Charles Melchert, in presenting Jesus as a sage-teacher, a teacher of wisdom, lists among the many forms of wisdom saying attributed to Jesus by the Gospel writers: “folk and literary proverbs; antithetical, synthetic, and comparative proverbs; better sayings; numerical sayings; riddles; rhetorical and impossible questions; beatitudes; admonitions and instructions; disputations; and aphorisms”.<sup>4</sup> And then, of course, there were also his parables, the feature of his teaching that springs to mind most readily for most of us.

His proverbs and aphorisms sound like the sayings of the Old Testament book of Proverbs: “The eye is the lamp of the body”; “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?”; “People do not pick figs from thorn-bushes, or grapes from briars”.<sup>5</sup> They make use of vivid images from the everyday world of plants and animals and of everyday concrete observations.<sup>6</sup> But, as Melchert points out,<sup>7</sup> they also go beyond conventional wisdom and even challenge and subvert it, e.g. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” and “You have heard ... ‘Eye for eye ...’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person.”<sup>8</sup> His parables too make much use of everyday life events but invite a fundamental reorientation on the part of their hearers. They are, like metaphors, forms of ‘seeing as’,<sup>9</sup> and invite us to see things differently, in a new light. As the short narratives they are, they beckon and hint towards a change of perspective and lifestyle.

3 Melchert, 1998:214-215.

4 Melchert, 1998:241.

5 Matthew 6:22; 7:9; Luke 6:44.

6 These images were themselves often rooted in the Hebrew scriptures rather than simply chosen by Jesus from among things in the everyday world of his time, e.g. the links between the parable of the mustard seed and the cedar shoot in Ezekiel chapter 17 or the tree of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in Daniel chapter 4.

7 Melchert, 1998:242-245.

8 Luke 6:27; Matthew 5:38-39.

9 Melchert, 1998:248.

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

Jesus often leaves things deliberately open. His sayings, stories and, not least, his constant use of questions all seem designed to “tease into active thought”<sup>10</sup> rather than provide all the answers, to jolt out of the taken-for-granted and set us off on a new path. They can have multiple interpretations according to our situations and needs. Walter Wink says, “Parables have hooks all over them; they can grab each of us in a different way, according to our need.”<sup>11</sup> Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

This effect is heightened by the “wit and zest” with which he put things. Derek Kidner writes:

Think of that engaging rogue, the unjust steward, managing not only to outsmart his employer but to get the man’s customers and tenants nicely compromised as well (and unable to say ‘No’ whenever he might turn up for a little hospitality later on). Or that battleaxe of a widow who reduces Judge Jefferies’ ancestor to a jelly. Or again those wild exaggerations (too familiar to us now) like the man who has a camel in his cup but only notices the fly; or the idiot who would tempt pigs with a pearl necklace. And then there is that teasing mockery about the prophets who are so conveniently dead. ‘You’re the old firm, aren’t you! Your fathers did the killing, you put up the monuments.’<sup>12</sup>

But the training that Jesus gave his followers involved rather more than their sitting at his feet and listening to what he said. They were trained more as ‘apprentices’ than as students:

Discipleship as Jesus conceived it was not a theoretical discipline ... but a practical task to which men were called to give themselves and all their energies. Their work was not to study but to practise. Fishermen were to become fishers of men, peasants were to be labourers in God’s vineyard or God’s harvest-field. And Jesus was

10 From C. H. Dodd’s definition of parable quoted in Melchert, 1998:246.

11 Wink, 1989:161 quoted in Melchert, 1998:257.

12 Kidner, 1984:11.

their Master, not so much as a teacher of right doctrine, but rather as the master-craftsman whom they were to follow and imitate.<sup>13</sup>

The model teacher was himself the model of that which he taught. He embodied the character that he set forth as the ideal. This is seen as clearly as anywhere else in the account of his washing of his disciples' feet. After he had done it, he said to them, "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet."<sup>14</sup>

All in all, this is a very inviting picture. Here we have a model for our teaching, one in whose teaching style there is so much to attract and from whom it would seem we can have much to learn for our teaching in our day. But that was then and there and we are in the now and here. Is there not a huge gap between cultures, times and situations which makes it difficult to see exactly how this model can work for us in twenty-first century classrooms? Is there not a cultural objection to reading off from what Jesus said and did what we should say and do with our students?<sup>15</sup>

## The cultural objection

We saw earlier some of the objections to linking the Bible with education that were expressed by Paul Hirst and others. One of these was to the effect that in practice efforts to abstract educational principles from what the Bible has to say and then to apply them to schools in our day do not yield anything of substance. Hirst claims that to "take ideas of social control out of a biblical, social context, and transfer them directly

<sup>13</sup> Manson, 1935:237-270 quoted in Giles, 1981:8.

<sup>14</sup> John 13:13-14.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it could also be objected that there is a gap between the subject-matter of Jesus' teaching and that of the twenty-first century teacher of, say, mathematics or physics as opposed to, say, theology. We would suggest, however, that our openness to be shaped by the influence of Jesus the teacher operates at a deeper level, concerned with those things that are generic to the activity of teaching, e.g. its relational aspect.

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

to an East End school in our twentieth-century industrial society is patently ludicrous".<sup>16</sup> The indirect route of abstraction and application, however, leads to disagreement on both biblical interpretation and particular applications. Hirst's example concerned taking ideas about discipline and punishment from the Bible, but could not a similar thing be said of any effort we might make to use Jesus as a model for our teaching? Does it require a sandal-clad itinerant lifestyle? No? So we cannot directly imitate what he did; are we not therefore into the same inconclusive process of abstraction and application?

However, a closer look at this objection reveals that it makes much of the need for agreement. It seems to require detailed prescription in order to have anything of any substance. This suggests a very mechanical view of teaching whereby all good teachers teach in identical ways to one another and all right-minded teachers think alike. Is such detailed agreement what we should seek? It is surely in the nature of personhood that we will have our personal styles and approaches in all their rich diversity. Taking Jesus as the model or paradigm teacher does not require us either to copy in slavish detail what we see in him or to abstract principles and apply them in some exact way to our teaching. The imitation of Christ is more about acting in the spirit of what he did than about either literal copying of everything he did or a rational process of abstracting principles and applying them. We may not literally wash our students' feet (perhaps in some circumstances we should consider the possibility of doing so!) but this hardly means that we should not be characterised by a servant-attitude. How precisely this might work out in a particular situation may not be something that we can prescribe in advance, but it does not follow that it cannot make a real difference in practice. And in many present-day educational contexts this would be as radical as it apparently was for Jesus in his day.

This is a matter of being shaped by exposure to the example of Jesus (an example which integrates precept, story, image and action) through immersion in the gospel accounts and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Taking the teaching of Jesus as a model for our teaching of our students is therefore not simply a matter of abstracting principles from the Gospel accounts of his teaching and applying them. It is not here a cognitive matter of inferring a way of proceeding and deciding to implement it. Insofar as it is, this comes under the

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<sup>16</sup> Hirst, 1971:306.

heading of the beliefs-to-practices model of chapters 4 and 5. Opening oneself to the influence of a person's actions is both more open-ended and more widely pervasive than, say, using a manual to take apart the engine of a car. And openness is an important ingredient in this. The danger is that we read back into the example of Jesus what we already take for granted as good teaching. The challenge is to open ourselves and our practices and prejudices to the possibility of seeing them all differently. Here again N. T. Wright's analogy of the performing of the missing Act V of a Shakespearean play that we have referred to in chapter 5 becomes relevant. There is ever a need of a movement to and fro between the act being prepared and the four acts already given, between the practices we engage in and the model provided for us in the Gospel accounts of Jesus. The process requires humility, openness to change and imagination to see new possibilities. It is more like painting a picture in the style of the master than following the instructions in a technical manual, more a matter of teaching as an art than teaching as a technique.

Knowledge is seen here in personal terms. It is not knowing *that* something is the case, although it will include elements of this, but more a matter of knowing in a relational sense, knowing another person and, in knowing them, knowing how and when to say or do things in relation to them.<sup>17</sup> It is a matter of coming to know a person through the Bible, a living person whom we meet in the pages of scripture and who is actually present in our situation. It is in seeing him, contemplating him that we are "being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" and, as this passage makes clear, this is the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup> This is, of course, not to say that all the hermeneutical problems of reading Scripture are sidestepped, but simply that there is an added ingredient in the whole situation which is of enormous significance.

It is important to note that what the Bible calls us to is not to be different but to be faithful.<sup>19</sup> It is often assumed – both by its proponents and its attackers – that for education to be Christian is always and everywhere to be distinctively so. Following this line, we may look at how Jesus taught his followers and conclude that there is much there

17 Cf. Blomberg, 1998.

18 2 Corinthians 3:18.

19 Cf. Wolterstorff, 1989.

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

that is generally acknowledged as good teaching practice anyway. But the call to faithfulness does not demand differences at every point. And anyway, it is arguable that what is affirmed as good teaching practice in the example of Jesus may actually be seen as good practice on a wider basis because our culture with its educational practices is already deeply influenced by the example of Jesus, the teacher.

We have focused thus far on the model provided by Jesus as teacher. There are, of course, other ways in which Jesus is a model to us in matters relevant to education. For example, he provides a model of knowing and knowing is a central matter in education. Paul Moser puts it as follows:

Spiritual communion with God as Father requires filial knowing of God, involving trust, love, prayer and obedience towards God as Father. Such filial knowing finds its unique paradigm in Jesus, the Father's unique Son. ... In restoring the central views of Jesus on knowing God to their place of first importance, we shall open ourselves to the kind of liberating power characteristic of the life and ministry of Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

Moser goes on to explore the implications of taking Jesus the knower as a model for our knowing, and thus provides another example of Jesus as an educational model.

### 'If a child should ask ...'

Jesus stands out as a teacher and is generally acknowledged as such. But the Gospel accounts of the teaching of Jesus are not the only place in the Bible where we may find models for our educational practices. We turn now to the Old Testament *Torah* (Genesis-Deuteronomy) and, in particular, to a passage that is often taken as a starting point in discussions of education and Christian belief: Deuteronomy chapter 6. The chapter comes immediately after a brief account of the Ten Commandments and how they were given by God and before a whole series of chapters containing detailed decrees and laws telling the

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<sup>20</sup> Moser, 1999:601.



people how they should live. Moses is recorded as urging the people to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and strength, and to impress the commandments upon their children. He says,

Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Verses 7-9)

After further urging to obedience, Moses says,

In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders – great and terrible – upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as he commanded us, that will be our righteousness. (Verses 20-25)

In his exploratory study of canon as a model for biblical education,<sup>21</sup> Walter Brueggemann argues that this exchange between

21 Brueggemann, 1982. Brueggemann's work has its roots in the theological reaction to the historical critical movements, which sought to get behind the text of scripture to something more authoritative and reliable. This reaction was led by Brevald Childs and James Sanders and it took the canon of scripture as a given and focused on its shape, e.g. the order of its books, and on the processes by which it becomes normative. Important works here are Childs, 1970, 1985; Sanders, 1972, 1984, 1987. See also an account strongly influenced by Brueggemann's work and focused on higher education in Spina, 1989.

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

child and parent or between learner and teacher (along with other similar exchanges recorded in Exodus and Joshua<sup>22</sup>) provide us with a paradigm of a mode of teaching and learning.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, as we shall see in the next chapter, this is but one of several modes, all of which are important to a whole education process but, for the moment we will focus on this one. It begins in “the yearning of the child to belong to the secret” known by the adults in the community. The child asks about the *meaning* of the decrees and laws (or, in Exodus, of the pass-over meal or, in Joshua, of the twelve stones set up beside the river Jordan) but the response does not provide a direct explanation. There is what Brueggemann terms “important slippage”<sup>24</sup> between the child’s question and the adult’s response. The child has asked for an explanation but the adult says, “Let me tell you a story”, and that’s it – no exhaustive logical explanation nor any ‘moral’ that is separate from the story and of which the story is merely a vehicle. The story is, as Brueggemann puts it, “the bottom line ... told and left, and not hedged about by other evidences ... not like a preacher who adds two paragraphs after the manuscript, as if to buttress and reinforce it”.<sup>25</sup> He writes,

The Torah does not answer every question. It picks the ground quite selectively. The response of the adult is authoritative. It does not let the child determine the ground. But it is also honest to the child. It concedes ignorance. More than that, it honors mystery. It assures the child that there is much that we do not know and cannot know.<sup>26</sup>

The narrative is *presented*, it is a gift to the child. It sets out an orderly, trustworthy life-world wherein the child can feel safe. Brueggemann suggests we divest the idea of ‘Torah’ of the narrow and forbidding connotations of ‘law’, and see it instead, in a way that is more true to its nature, “as an articulation of world

22 Exodus 12:26; 13:8; 13:14; Joshua 4:6; 4:21.

23 Brueggemann, 1982:14-39.

24 Brueggemann, 1982:21.

25 Brueggemann, 1982:26.

26 Brueggemann, 1982:22.

coherence, as a shaping of reliable order, as a barrier against the chaos that waits so close”.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to repeat that Brueggemann does not present Torah education as the whole of biblical education. There are other modes modeled in the Old Testament canon. But, at the same time, this particular mode is not one that we leave behind in early childhood, with other modes reserved until later. All persons “face the threat of darkness ... grow weary of dispute and questioning and risk ... need those times of ‘homecoming’ when they can return to the sureties which do not need to be defended or doubted”. Torah is, he says, “finally intergenerational” – it is not only for the young but for all generations.<sup>28</sup>

... and in our day?

This example of a biblical model for teaching is quite different from that of Jesus as the model teacher. The narrative element is present in both but the focus here is not on an individual teacher with his disciples but on a community educating the next generation and giving to it an orderly life-world. We focused on Jesus as turning certainties upside down for his listeners (although, as we shall see in the next chapter, there are other modes of teaching also present in the Gospel accounts), whereas here the certainties are passed on. Even then, it is important to note that these certainties are not universally accepted;

27 Brueggemann, 1982:19, referring to the strange darkness of chaotic waters depicted in Jeremiah 5:22. This nomos is given so we are neither without nomos (anomic) nor left to construct and validate our own nomos (autonomous).

28 Brueggemann, 1982:21. Hirst would term this a *primitive* conception of education. For him, the Torah would express “the view of education a primitive tribe might have, when it seeks to pass on to the next generation its rituals, its ways of farming and so on, according to its own customs and beliefs”. We need instead a “more sophisticated” concept (Hirst, 1971:308). Against this two points must be emphasised. One is that Brueggemann does not present the Torah mode as the only mode, and neither shall we. The other is his point about our needing a “homecoming” at all ages and stages in life. This mode is not primitive in a cultural sense, nor is it primitive in terms of individual development.

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

indeed they are quite radical alternatives to the life-worlds of the Canaanites and other peoples within and around Israel.

Application of this model to our day, Brueggemann suggests, would lead us towards a fairly conservative, teacher-centred educational model in which sure truths are passed on with authority. The key point in a canonical approach, however, is to look not just at one particular model, but at the constellation of educational models offered by the canon as a whole. The Torah offers us a model of teaching which projects a stable and secure life-world; other parts of the canon offer other models, and it is to these that we will turn in the next chapter.

# 13

## Further biblical models

The time is the eighth century before Christ. A shepherd leaves a small village which lies a few miles south of Bethlehem in the hills of Judah. He is setting out to travel to Bethel, the chief city in the northern kingdom of Israel. Somebody else must keep his sheep and tend his fig trees because, for now, he has more important and more urgent work to do. The shepherd is a man with a message for kings and peoples, especially for the king and people of Israel. "The lion has roared", he shouts, "Who will not fear?" He speaks not of a mighty beast that he has heard in the thicket, where it prowled seeking animal or even human prey. This lion is the Sovereign Lord, Israel's and Judah's God, and the shepherd who tells of his presence is the one we know as Amos the prophet. "The Sovereign Lord has spoken," he calls out again, "Who can but prophesy?"

The Lion-King, the Lord "roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem". What does he say? This is what the Lord says, through

147

Amos his prophet. There is a judgment coming, and it is coming for all of Israel's neighbours, for Phoenicia and Aram to the north, Ammon to the east and Philistia, Edom and Moab to the south. None is spared, not even the southern kingdom of Judah, for the Lord will send fire upon it that will eat up even the fortress-city of Jerusalem.

Up to this point, there are probably eighth century BC equivalents of 'Amen!' and 'Preach it, brother!' from the audience. However, all of this is but the prologue to the main message of the shepherd-prophet. This message is for Israel, for the people among whom Amos now stands and for Jeroboam their king. For them the roar is loudest and longest. The lion neither roars in the thicket nor growls in his den when he has caught no prey. They will not escape what is to come, neither the swift nor the strong, neither the warrior nor the horseman. The fact that the Lord has chosen them and brought them out of Egypt and into this land of milk and honey will not save them. Their sacrifices, tithes and offerings will not help them. For they have trampled on the poor, oppressed the righteous and "turn(ed) justice into bitterness". Will any be saved? This is what the Lord says: "As the shepherd saves from the lion's mouth only two leg bones or a piece of an ear, so will the Israelites be saved". Not even two legs of lamb, just their bones! But these words speak of hope on the far side of the darkness, of a new day that is coming. The Lord will then restore the ruins of Israel, he will plant his people in their own land, never again to be uprooted. On that day, says the Lord their God through Amos the prophet, "new wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills".<sup>1</sup>

Amos is a true prophet. His recorded speeches display all the marks of prophetic literature: their account of both his own call and credentials and those of Israel, his pleas to the people to repent and to God to relent, the pronouncements of judgements and the promises of restoration.<sup>2</sup>

What, you ask, can all this have to do with education and schooling in the twenty-first century? The disruptive ministry of the prophet seems far removed from the activity of today's teachers! What relevance can this have to classroom education nearly three millennia

1 The quoted phrases are from Amos 3:8, 1:2, 5:7, 3:12, 9:13.

2 Sanders describes seven different kinds of statement which are characteristic of prophetic literature, all of which are found in the book of Amos – see Sanders, 1972:74-75.

into the future? Much in every way, is the answer that Walter Brueggemann gives us in his book *The Creative Word*.<sup>3</sup>

## The prophets and education

We saw in the previous chapter that Brueggemann regards Torah education as a paradigm of a particular mode of teaching and learning. But it is not the only mode that he finds in the Old Testament scriptures, and to teach as if it were could do the community a great disservice. He writes:

A community which educates its members in the Torah will do them a great service. It will make available a center for life, a core of memory, a focus around which to organise all of experience. But if a community educates only in the Torah, it may also do a disservice to its members. It may nourish them to fixity, to stability that becomes rigidity, to a kind of certitude that believes all of the important questions are settled. The answers need only to be recited again and again.<sup>4</sup>

Can it not be said of much Christian education in churches and probably also in schools and homes that this rings true? Sadly, all too often this is the dominant mode. What else is needed? Brueggemann's first answer is that we also need the prophetic mode of teaching.

But what do Amos and his fellow-prophets have to add to our understanding of learning and teaching? Prophecy and teaching seem a bit far removed from each other. Prophecy is popularly seen to be essentially a matter of foretelling the future. The word has connotations of magical prediction, something not too different from astrological utterances. These specially gifted people can see further than the rest of us and we hang upon their words for the fate of planet earth. But this popular understanding misses the heart of prophecy by a long way. Its heart is to be found in the task of relating faith and history. Sanders describes the prophets as those that took the faith that the God of Israel was the

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, 1982:40.

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

Lord of history out of the temple or sanctuary and into “the marketplace of human affairs where history was in process”. History for the prophets meant “not just the future, but past, present and future – the present and immediate future viewed in light of the past”.<sup>5</sup> The past is seen through the stories of the Torah, and this provides for continuity between the Torah and the prophets. However, the prophets also critique the community’s settled understanding of the Torah and move beyond it. As Brueggemann puts it,

... the Torah is the ‘Yes’ of God to Israel (2 Cor. 1:19). Yes, I will be your God. Yes, you are my people. Yes, I will be with you. The prophets add a critical footnote to all of this. ‘Yes, but what if ...’ Thus there is a tension between Torah and prophets which must always be attended to in education. The tension is the dialectic of establishing or *asserting the consensus*, and then raising questions which break or challenge or *criticize the consensus* for the sake of a new word from the Lord. The two divisions (Torah/prophets) of the canon together suggest that education is a nurture of a restlessness with every old truth for the sake of a new truth which is just breaking upon us.<sup>6</sup>

The poetic imagination of the prophets seeks to provide a different context for life in the world by “creating a different presumptive world which is buoyed by different promises, served by different resources, sobered by different threats and which permits different decisions”.<sup>7</sup> The prophets call their hearers to step outside the familiar, to see everything differently, to nurture their flights of thought with new metaphors, to refuse the domesticating pressures of the conventionally mediocre. The prophets stand for an openness to spiritual reality beyond the bounds of the dominant rationality of the culture. Their claim to speak in God’s name challenges the belief of the powerful that decisions all rest in their hands.<sup>8</sup> A mode of teaching oriented to

5 Sanders, 1972:55.

6 Brueggemann, 1982:41.

7 Brueggemann, 1982:52.

8 See also Brueggemann, 1978.



the prophets will not simply tell students “this is the way it is”, but will seek creative and vivid ways of making them feel that things should be profoundly *different* from the way they are now. It will point to the sinful distortions of life as presently lived and seek to awaken a hunger for change.

In an article on educating for social justice,<sup>9</sup> Clarence Joldersma provides examples which could illustrate such a mode of teaching in action. He questions the wisdom of encouraging the trait of self-sacrifice in a young African-American woman who exhibits a caring gift when the character of that gift is partially a consequence of being female in a marginalised group of people. He asks whether we can wholeheartedly celebrate a would-be cheerleader making the squad because of her looks or body shape when we ought to question the value system which defined her success, “a social injustice embedded in the current configuration of cheerleading”. He suggests that service learning experiences which purport to help ‘urban street kids’ may reinforce stereotypes in the minds of the participating students if they themselves are not also helped to see “the more complex nature of the problem, including the students’ own implicit role in creating that situation by virtue of being part of a privileged socio-economic or racial group”. Joldersma goes on to say,

Seeking shalom needs a *critical* side, one that engages students to become ‘sites of resistance’ with a healthy dose of distrust of the status quo injustices in which they are embedded.<sup>10</sup>

So we have a second mode of teaching and learning in the Old Testament canon. We need both. If all is the promotion of stability, security and continuity, we have an education which fixes and fossilises and accepts the world as it is too complacently. If all is the questioning of the received ways of thinking and acting, we have an education which deprives learners of any stable place to stand. However, Brueggemann

- <sup>9</sup> Joldersma, 2001; the article is a response to Stronks & Blomberg, 1993.  
<sup>10</sup> These examples come from pages 110, 111, 113 and 114 of Joldersma’s article. A well-known example of a Christian educator whose work is in this mould is Paulo Freire (Freire, 1996a, 1996b), whose pedagogy seeks to evoke a critical awareness of injustice and promote social change.

goes on to suggest that we have more even than this to learn from the shape and processes of Old Testament literature and he turns his attention to the third major division, that known as the Writings.

## Wisdom added to knowledge

The Writings are the third division of the Hebrew Bible. They are in a way the 'everything else' that is left after we have taken the books of the Law and the Prophets. They include the Psalms and the Wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) and also 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs, Lamentations and Daniel. They therefore contain: the historiography of the chronicler, the short stories of two women in very contrasting settings, a love song, an elegiac lament at the fall of Jerusalem, the apocalyptic visions of a Jew in Babylon as well as a dramatic poem in which the writer wrestles with the paradox of the suffering of the righteous, the parables, riddles and aphorisms culled from contemporary proverbs, and the philosophical questionings of the searcher for meaning in the face of apparent meaninglessness.

It is in these writings that Brueggemann discerns a third mode of teaching and learning, one that focuses on the discernment of order in everyday living, on the exploration of the potential and limitations of individual and communal experience. The emphasis is on the wisdom that must accompany the knowledge given in the story and critically evaluated under prophetic questioning. This, of course, is not detached spectator knowledge but the 'on the field' knowing of those who know who they are and to which people they belong. Having all that, how then shall we live? Sanders puts it in this way: "... wisdom stresses realism ... The word *wisdom* in the Bible sometimes means the craft of living under God so that disruption is held in check and stability is maximised".<sup>11</sup>

Between the two poles of the security of our big story and our openness to probing criticism of all our understandings of it, we need to learn to live wisely in all the varied experiences of life, from the ordinary pastoral setting of the cornfield to all the risks of life in royal court, from the ecstasies of loving intimacy to the depths of anguished

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11 Sanders, 1972:99.

grief, from the soaring flights of the seer to the profundities of the common-sensical.

Wisdom and knowledge go hand in hand through the pages of scripture. The leaders of Israel had their wise men to advise them. The Christian church has its teachers and prophets to whom we flock to hear their words. Where are the wise? Where the love of wisdom? Wisdom is not spectacular. She does not draw the crowds. She is too realistic, too ordinary and everyday. But she calls aloud in the streets and raises her voice in the public squares, "How long will you simple ones love your simple ways?"<sup>12</sup>

Of this third division of the Hebrew scriptures and associated third mode of education, Brueggemann writes:

... we have here neither *disclosure* nor *disruption*, but *discernment*. The educational task, then, is to discern and to teach to discern, to attend to the gifts given in experience, to attend to the world around us. It is to read ourselves and that world in its playfulness, to know that what immediately meets the eye is not all there is. It is to know that as we touch the dailyness of our lives, we are in touch also with something precious beyond us that draws close to the holiness of God. In this way we learn that in our knowing we have not been permitted to know fully, but only in a mirror darkly (1 Cor. 13:12).<sup>13</sup>

Similar thoughts are expressed by Charles Melchert in his very helpful book on biblical wisdom and education as he writes:

One of the major liabilities of contemporary education is the tendency to become a series of isolated specialities that seem to have little to do with learning to live one's daily life in the real world. Wisdom texts have an in-depth concern for the *whole* human condition. Focusing upon the everyday questions of the ordinary individual and community, wisdom texts can help us attend to and

12 Proverbs 1:20, 22. 'Simple' in Proverbs generally denotes one without moral direction and inclined to evil.

13 Brueggemann, 1982:75.

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

learn from birth, life, death, sex, polite manners, sensuality, doubt, pride, injustice, suffering, and other realities and joys of everyday life. These texts are both intellectually honest, as they deal with the puzzles and mysteries of human life and divine presence, and emotionally passionate, as they express and try to make sense of the pain, the incoherence, the sadness, the despair, and the exuberant joy of human existence.<sup>14</sup>

Melchert goes on to point out that wisdom texts assume we can learn from others, even from those outside our cultural and religious tradition. Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes all seem to borrow or adapt material from Semitic or Egyptian sources and they weave it into a framework of Hebrew thinking. In this way, the material from without is valued for the truths it contains and refined for use by the people of God in their own way of life.

Melchert also says that the wisdom texts teach that we can find God in nature as “an arena of divine presence”, whilst at the same time being sensitive to the limits of our understanding of Him. Brueggemann suggests that there is a playfulness and delight in the discerning of wisdom in experience, not only good humour but also the ‘play’ that we find in a steering-wheel, “slippage that cannot be overcome or explained” for “to want more certainty is to crush the wonder that belongs to knowing”.<sup>15</sup> Melchert writes in similar vein:

Sometimes they tell the reader-learner *what to do* (which is the teacher-author’s task), but more often they tell the reader *how to steer* (which is the learner’s task). They make observations and invite or tease readers into drawing their own conclusions, to be practised and tested in life experience, which learners must do for themselves.<sup>16</sup>

There is a sense of the interconnectedness of all things but we cannot see in our darkling mirror just how and where many of these

14 Melchert, 1998:3.

15 Brueggemann, 1982:80; cf. Johnston, 1987.

16 Melchert, 1998:59.

connections are to be made.<sup>17</sup> A growing ability to make these connections, to discern how to 'steer' through life wisely, is perhaps most clearly and poignantly evident in areas such as learning about human relationships or making career choices. However, the need for wisdom is also present across the wider curriculum, for instance in learning about how to relate to the natural world.

### The significance of the canon

Having considered some educational models implicitly present in the Torah, the prophets and the writings, we can now stand back and consider why the concept of canon is so important to Brueggemann's argument, and what makes it a distinct addition to our range of approaches to the Bible and education. Clearly, Brueggemann has been involved in interpreting various particular statements, stories and images in the Hebrew scriptures and exploring their educational implications. However, he goes beyond examining individual passages and invites us to consider the implications of the fact that the Bible, in its final canonical form, contains this *range* of pedagogical emphases standing in this particular relationship to one another.

In other words, it is not enough to note that this or that passage of Scripture models this or that pedagogical emphasis; we should go on to ask what overall collection or pattern of emphases is modelled by the Bible as a whole. As Brueggemann points out, the Torah comes first and provides the foundation, a stable sense of identity, but it comes to need the word of prophet, which both builds upon the Torah and criticises the complacent consensus which it can engender. Within this secure-yet-vulnerable context of Torah and prophets the Writings invite us to explore the meaning of our experience of the world around us. Accepting these different texts as *canonical*, as carrying authority when taken together, seems to imply that not only individual passages but also this overall pattern of pedagogical emphases should be taken seriously.<sup>18</sup>

17 On wisdom and pedagogy see further Blomberg, 1998; Blomberg, 1986. See also Groome, 1980:139-151.

18 This point is developed in relation to college education by Spina (1989).

## THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

This is an addition to the approaches considered thus far in this book for two reasons. First, it raises the possibility that the results of the various strategies for relating the Bible to education could, even if successful on their own terms, still be unbiblical in terms of the bigger picture. We could immerse ourselves sensitively and creatively in the statements, stories, exhortations and images of the Torah, but the results would still be partial. They would not reflect the other canonical emphases, the critical challenge of the prophets and the exploratory wisdom of the writings. A canonical approach emphasises the need to attend to the whole, and to find in it correctives to our natural propensities as teachers. Am I mostly a Torah teacher, committed to the value of teaching basic truths well? Perhaps I need to hear the warnings of the prophet. Am I more prophetically inclined, eager for my students to question and criticise the deformities of the world around them? Perhaps I need to ask where they will find a secure sense of identity, or what they might gain by watching an ant. Attending to the larger canonical pattern can provide a way of questioning different teaching styles without denying their value.

Second, a canonical approach invites us to attend to a different aspect of the Bible. While the other approaches considered thus far ask us to identify biblical teachings, exhortations, images and stories, a canonical approach invites us to consider the *process and shape* of the biblical canon. We are asked to consider the pedagogical process by which the biblical writings were passed down across the generations, a process recorded in many of the passages discussed above. In other words, what pedagogies were considered right for the communication and preservation of God's truth? We are also asked to consider the overall shape of the final canonical text, its peculiar pattern of emphases and the way it places the pedagogical voices of Torah, prophets and writings in relation to one another.

### Back to Jesus

By now the attentive reader may well be feeling a growing gap in the argument: do the Torah, the prophets and the writings by themselves make up the 'overall shape' of the Bible? What of the New Testament? This is indeed a serious point of incompleteness in the way in which a

canonical approach to education has been articulated. Brueggemann, whose account is the most extensive, limits himself to the Old Testament, and even there gives little attention to the narrative history books. What about the rest of the Christian canon?

This question immediately returns us to the first biblical model we looked at, that of Jesus the Teacher. In his teaching it is not hard to find exemplified all three modes. Here was someone who, in his mountainside teaching, asserted that he had not come “to abolish the Law and the Prophets”. Far from it, he had come to “fulfil” them, to affirm them by filling them out with his life and teaching.<sup>19</sup> The Law truly and rightly said that one should not commit murder or adultery nor divorce one’s wife nor break an oath. Here we stand and here he stands. But Jesus the Prophet-Teacher questions our traditional understandings of these commands, understandings that have turned to stone as the centuries have passed. “An eye for an eye” says the Law, but he says “go not one mile but two, go the distance of love, even love of those who would torture you”.<sup>20</sup> He refers frequently to Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Jonah and thereby roots his listeners in the familiar story of their people but, he asks them, are they truly the children of Abraham, the followers of David’s example?

In Jesus we find not only the rooting in the Torah and the prophetic shaking of accepted readings but all this, as we saw in the last chapter, accompanied by the proverbs and riddles, the sayings of wisdom that called again and again for the discerning of experience. Jesus is the ‘model of the models’ for in his teaching can be seen the three emphases already discussed.

Even having extended Brueggemann’s account to include Jesus, there is more work to be done: what is added by the later New Testament books, or by the narrative histories of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles? Nevertheless, enough has been said to enable us to identify the *strategy* at work, one of pointing us to the way in which the Bible, not merely in its several parts but also in its overall shape or pattern, models a particular range of educational emphases. This is the key point for our purposes here. If the existing attempts to work out the implications of this approach remain deficient, that does not

19 Matthew 5:17.

20 See Matthew 5:38-42.

necessarily deny the validity of the approach; perhaps there is an invitation here to further work.<sup>21</sup>

### And one more thing ...

Early in the process of writing this book, we made a presentation to a conference of Christian educationists in which we outlined the main links we saw between the Bible and education. In the question session after the presentation, one person put her hand up and quietly suggested that we might be missing something from our list. We seemed to be focused on answers, she suggested, perhaps we were missing the way in which the Bible alerts us to new or different questions to be asked in educational discussions.

In his book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, George Marsden argues that Christianity can shape research agendas for, he says, “Christian motives can determine what fields people go into, what topics they study in those fields, and what questions they ask about those topics”.<sup>22</sup> Marsden goes on to instance some examples. These include a study of the French Revolution which broke new ground because it looked at the religious origins of that movement in contrast with the prevailing outlook which sought only secular roots (and naturally only found them). They also include a study of Puritan sermons which was not only focused differently from other Puritan scholarship but also asked a different set of questions: previous scholars had focused on the place of the Puritan mind in American intellectual history; the study discussed by Marsden inquired into Puritan faith as a factor in history, and as a result gave more attention to sources such as the spirituality and devotional practices of the

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21 The same holds for other weaknesses in Brueggemann’s particular account. We find, for instance, his mapping of the three pedagogical emphases of the Old Testament canon onto modern understandings of teacher-centred, critical and child-centred pedagogy loose to the point of being misleading. Nevertheless, even if a simplistic correlation of, say, the Writings with Dewey is inadequate, the broader point about the importance of acknowledging the diverse pedagogical models in Scripture still stands.

22 Marsden, 1997:64.



Puritans.<sup>23</sup> Part of what Christians are called to is living certain questions that their faith leaves them with, and not only to walking in the truths that it supplies.

Here again is this emphasis upon the raising of different questions. And does not the Bible itself provide us with examples of this too? Its 'research agenda' seems to be distinctively focused. When we read the stories of the kings of Israel there seems to be a certain selectivity and even incompleteness about them. The stories are summed up with statements about whether or not the kings did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. But what of the economic progress of the nation under their different rules? What of the gaps in their stories – and the chapters taken up with detail of particular events, e.g. the illness of a foreign army commander, repairs to a temple, the discovery of a dusty old scroll? The lengths of the accounts do not seem proportionate to the lengths of their lives or the relative impacts of their reigns in the world of their time. The accounts we have fit in neither of our categories of biography or history. When we come to them we find that the Bible is pursuing a set of questions which may not be the same as ours, and this underlying set of questions itself offers a model which can redirect our questioning.

The Bible may be linked with education in stimulating questions about neglected aspects or ignored issues. The prevailing view of language teaching, for example, may focus on the cognitive, the affective, the social and, more recently, even the cultural. But what of the spiritual and moral? Are these important not only in religious education and personal and social education where the spiritual and moral are normally seen to be at home? In the teaching of languages? Or mathematics? Or science?<sup>24</sup> The focused agendas of the Bible remind us that we should beware of letting the fashions of the age shape our agendas. Perhaps as important in education as the 'hidden curriculum' (of the underlying worldviews evident in practices and ethos rather than in written statements of mission) is the 'null curriculum', that which is not there at all because the prevailing worldview ignores it or shuts it out.

23 Marsden, 1997:65, 71.

24 Such questions about the spiritual and moral dimensions of apparently 'secular' subject areas lay at the basis of the Charis curriculum project. See Shortt, 2000; Smith, 1999.

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

Education can too easily become the practice of the absence of God or, at least, of some of the central divine concerns that come to the fore in the Bible. With the example of the Bible's different kinds of interests and focuses before us, we may be stimulated to ask questions that would not otherwise be asked. The answers to those questions may not come directly from the Bible nor even easily be found anywhere, but directions are changed and new and better vistas of possibility open up before us.

The modelling function of Scripture, which has been the focus of this chapter and chapter 12, adds to and interpenetrates the approaches discussed earlier in the book. One reason for Christians to take story seriously is because the Bible in general and Jesus in particular seem to honour story as a prime vehicle for learning and understanding. In the same way, the profusion of fertile metaphors in Scripture can lead us to take the role of metaphor in our educational thinking seriously. The Bible's central interest in faith can lead us to place an exploration of the implications of our beliefs high on our agendas, and the imitation of Christ has always been central to the Christian understanding of growth in virtue. Once again we find the various strands of the rope connecting the Bible to education to be intimately intertwined; pursuing any one strand sooner or later brings us into contact with the others. Having considered them all individually, it is time to stand back and see where we have come to.

# 14

## Living the question

We started this book with a question: in what sense could education be 'biblical'? How could the Bible, which does not seem to talk directly about schooling, teaching techniques, or many of the areas of knowledge which have come to form the school and college curriculum, have much to say to present day teaching and learning? How are we to understand Christian claims that the Bible is relevant to educational discussion? An advertisement for a periodical in the UK once had the slogan "I never knew that there was so much in it!" We have attempted to show that this may apply to the Bible as an educational text, that it should in fact be seen as a rich resource for the Christian educator, much richer than we have often taken it to be. The links between the Bible and education are several and varied and the relationships among them are complex and subtle. The possibilities for further exploration stretch out in many directions.

## A rope of many strands

Both advocates and opponents of attempts to link the Bible with education have too often worked with too narrow a view of how this might be done. At times the assumption has been that such links must be strictly logical, proceeding either deductively from biblical statements to educational conclusions or inductively by abstracting principles from the Bible and then applying these in educational contexts.

We have argued that the logical strand of the rope linking the Bible with education is much 'thicker' than this. Biblical statements and principles may not only *require* educational conclusions: they may also *disallow* certain beliefs and practices, they may *commend* others and still others they may *permit*. The looser logic of this relationship suggests that the Bible may guide us in our educational practice but in a way that provides for our God-given human creativity to flourish within a bounded range of possibilities. This led us to posit for the Bible a shaping or patterning role in relation to educational designs and practices which makes us focus on whether or not the latter 'fit' or 'comport well' with our whole sets of beliefs rather than on whether they 'follow from' particular beliefs.

This, in turn, suggested further strands to the rope: those of narrative and metaphor. Indwelling the biblical meta-narrative and allowing biblical metaphors to play a formative role in our thought and practice are both ways of linking the Bible to education that cannot be reduced to purely logical links between biblical statements/principles and educational consequences/applications. Both stories and metaphors shape our thought and practice at deep levels and they should not be simply regarded as decorative but unnecessary additions to factual language.

Another strand to the rope is one that itself makes metaphorical use of the biblical idea of incarnation. The Word may 'become flesh' in our lives as Christians in the classroom. It matters what kind of people we are in our relationships with our students. The emphasis is on the personal character of the teacher who is herself or himself the link between the Bible and education. The importance of this emphasis cannot be over-estimated. Without it, all our logical deductions and all our talk of the biblical story or biblical metaphors are mere talk. At the same time, taking seriously an incarnational approach leads quickly to serious reflection on issues of pedagogy and curriculum.

This link between the Bible and education is of great importance but it does not exist on its own.

The question of how we are to 'incarnate' the gospel in our practice as teachers also leads to consideration of the models for teaching that the Bible provides. Standing out from among all these is Jesus himself, the model teacher, who himself exemplifies an integration of other biblical models discerned in the main divisions of the Old Testament canon.

## Objections revisited

We noted at the outset the existence of both puzzlement and scepticism regarding claims that education might be 'biblical'. Having surveyed a varied array of examples of what thinking biblically about teaching and learning might involve, we are now in a position to put both the scepticism and the puzzlement in some perspective.

In chapter 2 we discussed three basic objections to the very possibility of relating the Bible meaningfully to present-day education. The first pointed to the cultural and historical gap between ancient Israelite educational practices and the task of teaching in our own context. Much has changed and the curriculum has expanded considerably since biblical times, so how can we be expected to copy what people did back then? The second objection pointed out that the more abstract and general principles which might bridge the gap between Bible times and now do not give us very specific guidance. A whole range of other, more mundane considerations tend to do most of the work in determining our actual actions in the classroom. The third objection argued that the Bible was in any case never intended to address the majority of our current educational concerns – it is a book concerned to speak to us about our ultimate commitments, not about questions concerning child psychology or the technology curriculum.

In the light of the examples discussed in the ensuing chapters, these objections now appear somewhat limited in scope. The first assumes that we will be trying to copy the cultures presented in the Bible mechanically, rather than seeking to share their wisdom. There have indeed been many cultural and educational changes since Bible times. They have not, however, removed the significance for educational thinking of the basic narratives, images, beliefs about the world,

or implicit models which subtly guide our notions of teaching and learning in particular directions. There is no less necessity today for a broader vision within which our daily actions make sense. The examples that we have discussed have not been instances of particular pedagogical practices simply being copied or transplanted from ancient Israel into the present-day classroom. Instead they are instances of the worldview of the Bible continuing to resonate in the thinking of believing teachers. Granted that mechanical copying of biblical practices will not get us far, there are still plenty of more supple strands connecting the Bible to educational reflection.

The second objection is limited in at least two ways. First, it lays the emphasis squarely on the idea of biblical *principles*, which in Hirst's case seem to be understood as propositions telling us what ought to be done. We have argued in the foregoing chapters that while this kind of approach does have a role to play, the process of biblical reflection is much broader. In addition to prepositional claims and principles, there is also a significant role for virtues, images, stories and models. This objection, like the previous one, turns out to be concerned with only one strand of a richer, more complex set of connections between scripture and pedagogy.

This objection's other limitation is that it seems to assume that for biblical principles to be doing much of significance they must be able to tell us what to do independently of other considerations. However, none of the approaches explored in this book need commit us to the idea that we simply start with a belief (/image/story/model) and then work our way deductively in a single direction down to educational practices. There is always movement in both directions. Sometimes a particular conviction which we hold will lead us to design things a certain way. Sometimes time spent in the classroom will throw up experiences which cause us to rethink some of our cherished ideas. (How many experienced teachers have all the same beliefs about learners that they had when they started teaching?) Sometimes we may discover a new procedure through happy improvisation and only later work out where it fits in the design and develop beliefs about why it works.

In other words, beliefs do not simply dictate practices, they interact with them and with our growing experience of the world. For example, John Amos Comenius, whose work we discussed in chapter 9, believed that all learners, rich or poor, male or female, were made in God's image. He also held that intellectual gifts were given freely and

in varied measure by God and therefore offered no grounds for boasting. As a Christian he also considered humility to be a virtue and pride to be a vice. All of these beliefs contributed to his conviction that education should be for all, that “there is no exception from human education except for non-humans”.<sup>1</sup> He went further to claim that there should not be separate schools for rich and poor, male and female, able and weak students. Children of both sexes, children from both wealthy and poor family backgrounds, and children of all levels of intellectual ability should be educated together.

While Comenius’ Christian beliefs explicitly guided his educational views here, the relationship is not one-way logical requirement. The coherence of Comenius’ views depends, for instance, on the belief that selective schools will tend to foster an unhealthy pride. But this belief could in principle be modified by experience. Suppose that Comenius had in the light of further experience come to believe that pride thrived more in common schools than in selective ones. This discovery would have changed the implications of his Christian beliefs. The perceived implications of our basic beliefs shift as our experience grows. This does indeed make it difficult most of the time to show that a certain practice is *purely* the result of a particular faith commitment, but this does not change the fact that faith is playing a guiding role in our thinking. In place of one-way deduction with guaranteed results we have a more complex interaction between faith and experience.

The third objection, that the Bible is not an encyclopaedia designed to answer all our modern educational questions for us, seems no more devastating than the other two in the light of the varied strands connecting the Bible to education. In fact, none of the examples that we have considered regard the Bible as such an encyclopaedia. Tracing the connections between the Bible and teaching has not forced us to go against the biblical grain, forcing the Bible to be what it is not. Calls to live in the light of redemption, basic claims about issues such as human nature or the meaning of the world, stories and images that invite us to see and live in the world in certain ways, patterns and models offered for imitation across the generations – these are the very stuff of the biblical writings and clearly connect with educational concerns. It is in such connections, and not in the notion that the Bible will offer us a set of prepackaged

1 Pampaedia, II:30, in Dobbie, 1986.

## THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

answers to our educational questions, that we have sought and found the Bible's relevance to teachers. Agreeing that the Bible is no encyclopaedia does not, then, leave it disconnected from educational concerns.

To those who react to the notion of a 'biblical' approach to teaching with more puzzlement than out and out scepticism, we suggest in the light of the examples surveyed here that the possibilities for developing such an approach are rich and varied. The Bible is connected to education by many strands, any or all of which could and should be explored much more extensively in relation to a host of particular educational contexts and concerns. While a superficial glance at the Bible will yield meagre returns, a deeper wrestling with the claims, challenges, images, stories and patterns of the Bible will yield plenty for believing teachers to chew on.

### The Bible as content

This book has not been directly concerned with how the Bible should itself be taught in the classroom, but the issues that we have explored here do have implications for that task. As we noted at the end of chapter 2, simply inserting material drawn from the Bible as educational content does not guarantee that the education offered is in any strong sense 'biblical'. Clearly the Bible has a place in many parts of the curriculum, not only in religious education, but also in areas of study where its influence has been profound, such as history (consider, for instance, the role of biblical faith in the Puritans' migration to America) and literature (consider, for instance, the poetry of a John Donne or George Herbert). Realising the variety of ways in which it can speak can lead us to richer ways of dealing with the Bible as a part of educational content.

As writers, we were involved in a curriculum project a few years ago which produced teacher resource materials for, among other things, the teaching of English literature. The work with which the writing team of teachers of English started was Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and very quickly they found that the materials would be incomplete without a unit of work on the imagery used in the play. A number of the image patterns they found echoed those used in Christian liturgy and the Bible (light and darkness, washing and water, blood, and



clothing). Reference to biblical sources, with their distinctive patterns of imagery, can give a fuller understanding of the play and of the times in which it was written and first performed.

At times, some Christian curriculum materials seem to view the Bible largely as a collection of sayings or individual truths to be noted, sung or memorised, or mainly as a collection of stories or doctrines. At times attempts to introduce the Bible across the curriculum are contrived, as when English translations of the Hebrew or Greek of the Bible are used to provide examples of points of English grammar, or the mandate to be fruitful and *multiply* from Genesis is mentioned in an arithmetic lesson about the operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Such limited attempts should not obscure the possibilities for a deeper encounter with the Bible in various curriculum areas. Studying the different strands connecting the Bible to educational reflection can inform and enrich the ways in which the Bible is handled in the classroom. Approaching the Bible through its claims, exhortations, stories, images and patterns could lead to a more authentic engagement with the text and its fruits than would an approach focused more narrowly on one or two aspects or on the occasional citation of individual sayings taken out of their context.

### A core to the rope?

Jesus drew conclusions, often surprising ones, from the statements of the Old Testament scriptures. He went beyond the letter of particular commands and commendations to the spirit of the whole set of scriptural beliefs. He used metaphors freely and told stories frequently. And he lived what he taught and made relationships central to the whole business of living in his father's world. In Jesus the Teacher we see not a list of alternative ways of relating the scriptures to teaching, but rather an embodiment of them all altogether in a way that is far more substantial and attractive than any of these approaches taken individually. In him, to paraphrase Colossians chapter 2 verse 3, are hidden all the treasures of wisdom, knowledge and guidance for Christian education. In his teaching ministry, the strands of our rope do not run side by side, they are woven together.

The various approaches surveyed here belong together, interacting with and supplementing one another. At the outset we compared

them to the interwoven strands of a rope. But is any one of the strands more basic or central than the others? Is there a core to the rope or could one of the strands be seen instead as a silver thread through every strand? Some might respond that surely the logical kind of link is the more central for it is the 'tightest' relationship and keeps a check on the others. But others might immediately say to this that without incarnation in lived and loving experience, all else is, in Paul's words, mere sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. Some will urge that our propositional claims and everyday actions only gain sense in the context of a broader story, or that all of our language is in some sense metaphorical, or that the canonical approach offers a framework within which our various propositions, stories and metaphors can be held in balance. We suspect that an argument could be made for any of the strands being taken as the core of the rope, and that our conclusion will depend largely on what we mean by something being 'core' or 'basic' at any given time.

The rope connecting the Bible to education is woven of many strands, and they are deeply intertwined. More linear approaches are complemented and mutually corrected by those which are more a matter of patterning. Propositional claims can place limits on the meaning of metaphors, but also themselves commonly contain and depend upon metaphorical language. Metaphors and stories give rise to, and in turn are made plausible by particular ways of living. Metaphors and statements take on particular meaning within stories. 'Incarnational' approaches and the idea of the Bible modelling educational emphases are close to one another. The idea of teaching as storytelling is a metaphor. The longer one looks, the more interconnections become evident. In practice, the different strands are hard to separate cleanly, and actual examples of Christian educational discussion or practice will tend to draw upon several or all of them, weaving a rounded language of faith from proposition, story, metaphor, model and life lived with God.

It is because of this interweaving of the different strands that we do not think it appropriate to try to present any one of the strands as the most basic or the most important. The different approaches need each other and complete each other. Keeping this in view would help to mitigate the concerns of some who have criticised the common use of the ideas of developing a Christian *mind* or a Christian *worldview* to express how scripture should impinge upon our cultural practices.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, has suggested that focusing on the idea of a Christian worldview

... puts too much emphasis on a “view”, that is, on what we have called cognition. To be identified with the people of God and to share in its work does indeed require that one have a system of belief – call it the Christian world and life view. But it requires more than that. It requires the Christian way of life. Christian education is education aimed at training for the Christian *way of life*, not just education aimed at inculcating the Christian world and life view.<sup>2</sup>

An emphasis on a whole way of life draws in all of the various strands that we have explored. Wolterstorff’s reminder that what is ultimately at stake is a Christian way of living, of being and becoming in the community and the world, fits readily with both the modelling strand and the ‘incarnation’ strand of our rope, but it also draws in the ways in which we see, our hopes, memories and day to day roles, and the beliefs by which we orient ourselves. The different strands gain their vitality as part of a lived whole.

### Living the question

This emphasis on Christian living is also relevant to a further objection to the enterprise of thinking biblically about education, one that we discussed in chapter 8. It’s all very well describing all these ways in which the Bible could inform education, some will respond, but why would we want it to? For many, any efforts in this direction will appear sinister, either because they believe that the kinds of beliefs and values inspired by the Bible are outdated, wrong or oppressive, or because they fear that these beliefs and values will be imposed in oppressive ways on those who do not share them through the instrument of education.

Note that this is a different kind of objection to the ones considered earlier. In this book we have focused specifically on the question of how the Bible can be meaningfully related to education, and have

<sup>2</sup> Wolterstorff, 1980:14. See further Fernhout, 1997.

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

therefore given most of our attention to those objections which claim that it can't be done, that there is no meaningful relationship. The argument that the results will be oppressive is a step further along the path: it accepts that the Bible can lead to particular educational beliefs and practices, but argues that it should not be allowed to do so.

We do not wish to reject this concern out of hand. Through the years the Bible has indeed been used to defend ugly prejudices and practices, and it has often been wielded more as a cudgel than as the word of life. Neither can we answer it here at any length. Such an answer would involve defending the Bible and the wider enterprise of Christian education against their critics, a task that lies well beyond the scope of this book.<sup>3</sup> A brief response is nevertheless appropriate, and will sound the note on which we wish to close.

We believe that the darker side of the use of the Bible in different times and places is bound up with human sin. Fallen readers abuse the Bible by turning it to their own ends and using it to shore up their own prejudices and ambitions. As we saw in chapter 8, this process is clearly recognised, described and condemned within the pages of the Bible itself.<sup>4</sup> The best response to it will ultimately be grace-filled counter-examples of repentant and hopeful living in the light of scripture, examples which bear out the Apostle Paul's statement that against such things as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control there is no law.<sup>5</sup> If these fruits of the Spirit do not animate the results of our efforts to think biblically, we will know that something has gone wrong somewhere along the line. Without the fruits of grace, applications of the Bible will become lifeless or positively harmful.

It is partly for this reason that we have made no attempt in this book to offer a biblical recipe or blueprint for education, instead describing a variety of particular attempts to live as educators in the light of scripture. These attempts are all instances of redemption in progress, episodes along the path of renewal rather than comprehensive solutions to be set in stone. We hope that our attempt to put up some signposts pointing out the broad lay of the land will inspire readers to find other ways of connecting the wisdom of scripture with their

3 See further Sandsmark, 2000; Thiessen, 2001.

4 See chapter 8, pages 93-94.

5 Galatians 5:23.

educational tasks, ways which will go beyond what we have outlined. The possibilities for further reflection and research are considerable, both in terms of developing the approaches described here further and in terms of applying them to particular curriculum areas, contexts or educational issues. The question of how the Bible can illuminate the teacher's task is not one to be settled once and for all by laying out a recipe for mechanical adoption; it is a question that must be lived ongoingly by those who have come to recognise in the Bible the words of life.

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## Index

- Allen, R. T., 60-62  
Altruism, 49-50  
Amos, 147-148  
Anthony, Edward, 52-53, 56, 63, 64-66  
Approaches, 53, 57-60, 64  
Aristotle, 46  
Augustine, 9, 45  
Authority of teacher, 127, 128-129  
Authority of the Bible, 15-19, 24, 32, 52, 63-64  
Autonomy of students, 39, 47
- Bauckham, Richard, 99  
Behaviourism, 62
- Beliefs, background, 53; basic, 60, 165; control, 59 ; data-background, 58  
Bible as object of study, 32-33; as educational content, 166-167  
Bible's influence on culture, 32-33  
Biko, Steve, 71  
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, 56, 57, 65, 66  
Booth, Wayne, 132  
Brueggemann, Walter, 143-146, 149-152, 153-156, 157  
Bruner, Jerome, 96n.16
- Canon, as model, 143-156, 157, 163; process of, 152, 156; shape of, 22, 152, 156, 167

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

- Carter, Ruben, 71  
Carvill, Barbara, 19n.10, 123  
Character of teacher, 38, 40-41, 48;  
  see also Virtue(s)  
Charis Project, 56n.3, 57, 159n.24  
Clouser, Roy, 31-32  
Cohen, Ted, 132  
Columbus, Christopher, 67-68, 74,  
  92, 100  
Comenius, John Amos, 9, 101-102,  
  106-112, 113, 114, 115, 118,  
  121, 125, 126, 164, 165  
Commendation, 61, 162  
Commitments, 21, 31, 32, 43, 53,  
  62, 163, 165  
Counseling-learning, 126-127  
Creation, fall and redemption, 77,  
  82, 83, 85  
Criticism, canonical, 22; historical,  
  21  
Cultural contexts, 20-21, 25, 27-28,  
  138-142, 163  
Curran, Charles A., 126-131  
Curriculum, 48, 49, 61, 162, 167;  
  hidden, 159; null, 159
- Debarment, 60-61, 162  
Deductive logic, 37, 51-52, 60-62,  
  125-126, 140-141, 162, 165,  
  168; see also Commendation,  
  Debarment and Permission  
Designs, 53, 63 ; see also Methods,  
  Procedures and Techniques  
Distinctives of Christian education,  
  15, 29, 47, 141-142  
Dylan, Bob, 71
- Eco, Umberto, 90  
Education at home, 26; in Christian  
  schools, 26-27, 95; in  
  churches, 9, 33; in Nazi Ger-  
  many, 39; in Norway, 9; in the  
  United Kingdom, 10; in the  
  USA, 10  
Egan, Kieran, 78-80, 83-84, 89-90  
Encyclopedia, 31-32, 165-166
- Ethics, 50  
Examinations, 28-29
- Fernhout, Harry, 97-98, 133  
Filter image, 61  
Fittingness, 84-86, 162  
Foundations, 15  
Freire, Paolo, 93n.9, 151n.10
- Gardening metaphor, 101-112,  
  114-115, 118, 121, 125, 126  
Graunt, John, 76
- Hart, Trevor, 99  
Heart, 41, 62  
Hill Brian V., 122-124  
Hirst, Paul H., 20n.13, 25, 27, 30,  
  51-52, 61, 139-140, 164  
History, 49, 74-77, 100, 149-150,  
  158-159, 166  
Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 117-118  
Human nature, 39, 59, 108-111,  
  127  
Hume, David, 46  
Humility, 45, 57, 130-131, 135, 165
- Iceland, 13  
Image of God, 29, 164-165  
Imagery, 21, 57, 112, 113, 115, 124,  
  13, 156, 163, 164, 166-167;  
  see also Metaphors  
Imagination, 119, 129, 132, 133,  
  150  
Incarnation, 127-131  
Incarnational approach, 35-43, 48,  
  50-51, 162, 168  
Interpretation, 28, 33, 73-74,  
  73n.13, 95, 141  
Intimacy, 132
- Jandl, Ernest, 17-18  
Jesus as model teacher, 136-142,  
  145, 156-157, 160, 163, 167  
Johnson, Mark, 104  
Joldersma, Clarence, 151

- Kidner, Derek, 138  
Knowledge metaphors, 121-122  
Knowledge, personal, 141
- Lakoff, George, 104  
Laments, 19  
Language teaching, 69, 123, 159;  
    French, 41-43; German, 55-57  
Lee, D. John, 97
- MacIntyre, Alasdair, 30, 46, 71, 72-  
    73  
Malcolm X, 71  
Marsden, George, 158  
Mathematics, 25, 76, 99, 100, 159,  
    167  
Meaning and meaningfulness, 72-73,  
    144,  
Melancthon, Philipp, 9  
Melchert, Charles, 137, 153-154  
Mendus, Susan, 46-47  
Me Power, 55-57, 65  
Meta-narratives, 76-77, 82-86  
Metaphors, 21, 101-134, 150, 162,  
    168; biblical, 21, 104, 113-124,  
    126-134 ; clusters, 120-121,  
    124 ; educational, 21, 115-116,  
    131 ; fertile, 116, 119-120, 125,  
    132, 160 ; root, 120-121, 124 ;  
    see also Gardening metaphor  
    and Knowledge metaphors,  
    121-123  
Methods, 40, 53; see also Designs,  
    Procedures and Techniques  
Metz, Johann Baptist, 100  
Middleton, Richard, 20n.13  
Models, 57; for teaching, 135-160,  
    164  
Moser, Paul K., 142  
Moses, 143  
Moskowitz, Gertrude, 55-57  
Motivation, 45  
Murphy, Daniel, 106
- Narrative, 18, 19, 21, 57, 67-100, 82,  
    144, 156, 160, 162, 163, 164,  
    167, 168; shape, 86-88; see also  
    Meta-narratives  
Neill, Stephen, 13  
Neutrality, 20-21
- Objections, 24-34, 163-166  
Olson, Bruce, 92
- Palmer Parker J., 40, 121-122, 123,  
    126  
Parables, 69, 70, 82, 87, 137, 138  
Parental responsibility, 26-27  
Pedagogy, 48, 162, 164  
Permission, 61, 162  
Perspectives, 21  
Pietism, 38, 51  
Plantinga, Alvin, 49-50, 51, 60  
Plato, 68-69, 78, 90  
Poetry, 18, 19, 166  
Polo, Marco, 90  
Postman, Neil, 70, 76-77, 83-84, 85,  
    89-90, 91  
Postmodernity, 20  
Presuppositions, 62-63, 96n.16,  
Principles, biblical, 28-30, 113, 139-  
    140, 164; general (moral), 25,  
    28, 37, 163  
Procedures, 52-53; see also Designs,  
    Methods and Techniques  
Prophets as model, 147-152, 156,  
    157  
Propositions, 21, 50, 51, 58, 113,  
    125, 133, 164, 168  
Psychology, 50
- Questions, raising different, 158-160
- Reason, 20, 25, 49-50  
Relationships, teacher-learner, 27  
Religious education, 81, 159  
Rhetoric, 30  
Rogers, Carl, 127  
Rope metaphor, 23, 24, 99, 134, 136,  
    160, 162-163, 166, 167-169  
Roques, Mark, 80-81

THE BIBLE AND THE TASK OF TEACHING

- Rousseau, Jean Jacques, 106-107,  
114, 125
- Sacrifices, 13-14
- Sanders, J. A., 149-150
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 128
- Schön, Donald, 119-120
- Schools, 26-27
- Schwehn, Mark, 44-48, 50
- Science, 20, 39, 49, 50, 99, 100,  
159; and religion, 68, 80-81,  
85-86
- Shakespeare, William, 63, 85, 94,  
141, 166
- Shape of teaching, 47-48
- Shaping by metaphors, 116, 124
- Shaping by story, 70-71
- Shaping by the Bible, 37, 162
- Simon, Herbert, 49-50, 60
- Sin, effects of, 93n.9, 170
- Soskice, Janet Martin, 104n.9,
- Speech-acts, 98
- Techniques, 40, 44, 52, 65, 120; see  
also designs, Methods and  
Procedures
- Thiselton, Anthony, 98
- Torah as model, 142-146, 156, 157
- Tracy, David, 124
- Values, 39, 169
- Van Brummelen, Harro, 115
- Virtue(s), 44-51, 160, 164; see also  
Humility
- Von Braun, Wernher, 75
- Walsh, Brian, 20n.13, 95
- Washington, Denzel, 71
- Way of living, 169-170
- Wilder, Amos, 91
- Wilson, John, 103, 131-132
- Wink, Walter, 138
- Wisdom, 119, 152-156, 157, 163,  
171
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas, 58-60, 62,  
169
- Worldview, 15, 64-65, 64n.21, 15-  
116, 131, 164, 168-169
- Wright, N. T., 18-19, 39, 63-64, 73,  
141
- Writings as model, 152-156

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