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What is a biblical metaphor?

What makes a metaphor ‘biblical’?

The manner in which Comenius marshalled his horticultural images reflects the pervasive influence of the Bible in his educational writings. Given the common tendency to think of the Bible’s relationship to education in terms of making inferences from biblical principles or propositions, this feature of Comenius’ writing is of more than historical interest, for it suggests a different approach. However, important questions remain. Can we simply regard the Bible as a quarry from which we can extract educational metaphors at will? Is it legitimate to take any image from the Bible and spin educational ideas out of it? What does it mean for an educational metaphor to be ‘biblical’?

Just borrowing?

The simplest and most obvious answer is to say that a ‘biblical metaphor’ is ‘one which is taken from the Bible’. In other words, if we take an image found in Scripture and find an educational use for it, then we are using a biblical metaphor. This seems to fit what we saw in Comenius – he took the pregnant image of the garden of paradise from the pages of the Bible and put it to educational use.

While this answer may be simple, obvious and appealing, it will not do, for at least three reasons. First, the Bible takes its images and metaphors from human experience. There seems to be no reason to suppose that the images found in the Bible are in themselves specially *authorised* as images, apart from the particular use to which they are put in Scripture. The fact that imagery involving rocks, mother hens, trees, winepresses, sheep and the like is copiously present in Scripture does not at all imply that the use of similar imagery in relation to, say, a chemistry course is necessarily in any way ‘biblical’. In the Bible God is described as a fortress – but there seems little reason to suppose that thinking of the school teacher as a fortress would be a particularly ‘biblical’ thing to do. What carries authority is a particular use of the fortress image to talk about God, not the image in itself or its potential use in other contexts.

Second, since the imagery of the Bible is not *unique*, an image found in educational reflection may also appear in the Bible but this may be coincidence; it may not have significant biblical roots. In its educational context the image may express meanings quite foreign to the biblical text. We have already seen an example of this in the contrast between Comenius’ and Rousseau’s use of horticultural imagery, where similar imagery is used to present significantly different visions of education. We could cull an image from the Bible and apply it to all kinds of things, but the connection with the Bible’s understanding of the world may be tenuous at best.

Third, harvesting imagery at will from the Bible may not be particularly *helpful*. The fruitfulness of a metaphor in one context is no guarantee that it will be illuminating in a different context. A metaphor which works powerfully in communicating a sense of how we should view some aspect of salvation may turn out to stimulate no particularly helpful lines of thought if we try to use it as a way of seeing, say, a school timetable.

In sum, if we think merely in terms of borrowing imagery, the Bible may (like any other fertile and evocative text) be a source of ideas, and those ideas might or might not prove helpful in educational terms, but it is not clear that the results would be ‘biblical’ in any strong sense simply by virtue of their incidental source. What we have in mind here is not, then, simply taking an image from the Bible and transferring it into an educational discussion. This first answer, despite its initial appeal, will not suffice.

Worldview critique?

A different answer to the question of how an educational metaphor could be biblical points not simply to the imagery itself, but to its cognitive claims. Harro Van Brummelen, in an article that offers a Christian critique of some prominent educational metaphors, suggests that “most educational metaphors are rooted in or imply a concept of human beings and their world”.¹ Metaphors implicitly embody claims about the way things are. These claims may be consonant with or in tension with a Christian understanding of the world. Seeing persons as machines, for instance, conveys reductive messages that do not sit comfortably with an emphasis on persons being made in God’s image. Given that Christian educators, like all educators, cannot avoid working with particular metaphors for various aspects of teaching and learning, “we need to work with ones that reflect our beliefs and our aims”.² Our Christian worldview should guide and regulate our dealings with metaphor just as it should guide and regulate our other dealings in the world.

This second suggestion seems more promising than the first. Like the first, it appears to be applicable to the discussion of Comenius in the previous chapter. The discussion there focussed not only on the garden image taken purely as an image, but also on its consistency with a worldview in which the themes of creation, divine-human fellowship and human responsibility played a key role. Instead of just borrowing images from the Bible, this approach wants to examine all images, from whatever source, for their implied worldview as it

¹ Van Brummelen, 1992:170.

² Van Brummelen, 1992:170.

emerges in the context of particular uses.

This process of scrutinising imagery in the light of Christian belief is indeed valuable, and many attempts to think Christianly about education are likely to proceed along these lines, identifying the basic images which drive an educational approach and subjecting them to scrutiny in the light of a Christian worldview. While valuable, however, this way of understanding the role of metaphors in Christian educational thinking is not the whole story.

Its weakness, as far as the present discussion is concerned, is opposite to that of the first answer. The first answer had the merit of focusing on the use of images taken directly from the Bible, but it raised the problem that the new use of the borrowed image may not be very 'biblical'. This second answer asks us to evaluate our metaphors in the light of a biblical worldview, but is less directly concerned with the role that might be played by the imagery found in the Bible itself. Van Brummelen explores the potential not only of viewing learners as images of God and teaching as a religious craft, but also of seeing the curriculum as a route map or an amoeba. The metaphors discussed are potential aids to educational reflection, and can come from any source, not just the Bible. The process of evaluation involves stating their implied worldview and then matching it up with the Bible's worldview. In other words, our metaphors become one more thing to be matched up with our conceptually articulated biblical worldview. This matching process is valuable, but it seems to be another instance of the approach discussed in chapter 5, where the Bible is related to education by working out the implications of a more propositionally stated worldview.

What is not sufficiently explored here is the possibility that metaphor itself might shape and inform our worldview, rather than being that which our worldview examines. If our basic metaphors actually shape our worldview, then perhaps the metaphors themselves provide a more direct link between the Bible and education.

What do metaphors evoke?

If these two answers are both incomplete, the question remains: what do we mean here by educational metaphors being 'biblical'? In order to develop a more adequate answer we need to return to recent discussions of how fertile metaphors work.

It is commonly pointed out that a fertile metaphor does not simply compare two things at a single point, but rather gives rise to an open-ended series of resonances, so that the task of listing what the metaphor means becomes almost boundless. The simple phrase “the Lord is my shepherd” is not adequately translated by any single statement such as “the Lord will protect me”, “the Lord will see that I am fed” or “the Lord will show me which way to go”. It implies any or all of these and many more besides: the Lord has an interest in my welfare, the Lord is stronger and wiser than I, I am part of a flock, I can’t see enough of the road ahead for myself...meditation on the verse could extend the list considerably. When we respond to this metaphor, we are not confined to a single characteristic of shepherd; we draw upon a whole range of facets of the relationship between shepherds and sheep. It is this process which makes the replacement of a fertile metaphor by a literal equivalent so inadequate.³

The list becomes longer once it is noted that personal experience comes into play. A metaphor does not merely evoke the defining properties of the things referred to, properties which could be assumed to be the same for everyone. A reader’s or hearer’s response to an arresting metaphor will typically also include a variety of more personal reminiscences and associations. When I think of the tree of life, my mind is drawn not only to the general properties of trees, but to the tree which grows in a neighbour’s garden and is visible from my kitchen window. In particular I find myself picturing the way in which, early on a breezy summer evening, the rays of the setting sun reflected from the myriad rapidly moving leaves can turn the tree into a mass of exuberant vitality. My response to a metaphor draws both upon the more general properties of that which is imaged (shepherds, sheep, trees) and upon my own more personal experiences.⁴

There is one more crucial element. When Gerard Manley Hopkins, referring to his mortality and the hope of resurrection, writes “Across my foundering deck shone/ A beacon, an eternal beam”,⁵ I personally find the metaphor evocative, but its meaning for me does not derive from my first-hand experience. I do not think of the ships on which I

³ Cf. Black, 1993; Davidson, 1979.

⁴ Of course, the difference between metaphor and non-metaphorical language on this point may be only one of degree.

⁵ Hopkins, 1970:105.

have travelled, for none of them have (at least while I was on them) foundered or been illuminated by a lighthouse. I do not think of the ships of my own day, or even of Hopkins' day. Instead, I find myself thinking of the sailing ships of old and of images drawn from films, novels and biographies that I have seen and read, from Robert Louis Stephenson's *Kidnapped*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, or John Newton's life story. Others may, of course, respond differently, but the point is that a metaphor can evoke not just my experience of the world, but my experience of *other texts*.

What's more, as metaphor shades into literary allusion, the pointers can be to a specific story. If someone comments regarding a mutual friend "he's a real Sherlock Holmes", my attention is drawn to the qualities of a particular character in a particular narrative. The passing reference provides a point of contact which opens out into a specific, bounded set of stories and the images of acumen and incisive reasoning which they contain. Those stories and images become the filter through which I am invited to view my friend, perhaps seeing him in an entirely new light as a result.

Towards a more robust answer

We are now in a position to glimpse a more robust sense in which an educational metaphor might be biblical. Metaphors can generate a widening field of perceptions, enabling us to see and do things in new ways. They appeal not only to our knowledge of the typical properties of the things referred to, but also to our experience. This experience may be first-hand personal experience, or it may be our acquaintance with particular texts, ideas and stories. The sense in which Comenius' garden metaphors were biblical rests on all of these points. The garden imagery was designed to connect the reader's experience both of gardens and of children with a particular biblical narrative. It formed the point of contact, the bridge connecting the story of Eden and its particular theological perspective with the reader's experience and educational realities. Metaphor can function to evoke a specifically biblical set of resonances.

This expands our earlier answers. In a loose sense, as we have seen, a metaphor might be described as biblical if the view of the world which it invites is consistent with that found in the Bible. In a stricter

sense, what we have in mind when we refer to a biblical metaphor is one which *is drawn from the Bible and which mediates the distinctive web of meanings found in the biblical text into a new situation*. This is more than just extracting an image at random and reapplying it without regard for the network of meaning from which it was extracted. The warrant for using a biblical metaphor in this stronger sense is not that the image happens to occur in Scripture, but that it draws us into the wisdom of Scripture.

Clearly, a metaphor which is biblical in this stronger sense will be consistent with the beliefs reflected in the Bible, but the process is not simply one of lining practices up with beliefs. It is the metaphor itself which provides the point of contact with Scripture and which sets up an open-ended set of interactions between biblical images, stories and ideas and educational practices. The process of thinking about education in the light of a theologically pregnant image must bring beliefs into play. It is, however, a different process from that of working out the consequences of more propositionally stated beliefs. Metaphor can join faith to practice through the medium of imagination.⁶

So what?

As we noted in the last chapter, when metaphors begin to resonate with our experience they can lead to pervasive shifts in our practice. A fertile metaphor applied to some aspect of our practice can generate a variety of fresh perceptions, some of which may suggest new ways of doing things. As Donald Schön relates, even such an apparently technical process as designing a paintbrush can be redirected through a shift in the designer's mental image. A group of designers had, Schön reports, been trying in vain to design a paintbrush with synthetic bristles which would paint as smoothly as one made from natural fibres. They had varied the properties of the new bristles without success, until someone remarked that a paintbrush is basically a pump. This shifted their attention away from the way in which the brush wiped paint onto surfaces. They began to think of the brush instead in terms of the action of a pump, pumping paint out onto the surfaces. Examining the way in which the paint was pushed through the hollow

⁶ Cf. Harris, 1987.

spaces between the bristles led to a successful design.⁷

In education more is at stake than technique. Educational discussion is always in some measure discussion about how we *should* educate – how we should treat children, what kind of communities we should create, what aspirations we should affirm, what goals we should set. Educational inquiry cannot be reduced to a clinical matter of determining the most efficient techniques; it inevitably involves normative considerations. A change of image can impact even such a technical matter as designing a paintbrush; the corresponding shifts which a change of image can bring about in educational practice are much more far-reaching. In this arena, it makes an enormous difference how we see. Metaphors encode the expectations which we have of the educational process. They also communicate those expectations to others and give them a sense of what they can expect from the educational institution.⁸ They play an important role in shaping and expressing our basic vision. If metaphors are not water lilies on a pond, decorative and opaque, but can instead be windows through which the light of a particular vision of reality is refracted, then an exploration of how metaphors can refract a biblical vision is surely of considerable significance to Christian educators.

Roots and clusters

Our discussion so far already suggests ways in which particular metaphors can function to bring parts of the biblical story into interaction with educational thought and practice. One important limitation of what we have said is that we have been focusing on individual metaphors. Many studies of metaphor have pointed out that the metaphors which inhabit our thinking tend to form clusters or networks loosely organised around a particular root metaphor.⁹ This tendency showed in the examples discussed in the last chapter. The root image of the school as a site of economic production was at the heart of a wider pattern of imagery including learners as investors, knowledge as capital, assessment as quality control, and so on. The basic image of arguing as

⁷ Schön, 1993.

⁸ See Beavis & Thomas, 1996.

⁹ Ricoeur, 1981.

warfare connects a variety of expressions such as shooting down, defending or buttressing arguments. Comenius' vision of teaching as gardening was at the heart of a network of imagery which included learners as plants, teaching as watering, learning as fruit-bearing, books as flower beds, and so on.

These wider networks of imagery help both to develop and to constrain the meaning of the basic image. They develop it in that they extend its reach, hooking it up to various more specific aspects of whatever is being described. They constrain it in that they give a more extensively sketched out shape to a basic image which might otherwise be developed in a different direction.

Love and power

We will consider another biblically-derived example of this clustering of metaphors in educational discussion, starting from Parker Palmer's book *To know as we are known: A spirituality of education*.¹⁰ Palmer's basic argument is that Western education has suffered from a view of knowledge as power. We wrestle with issues, try to master or penetrate areas of learning, manipulate ideas, crack problems and hammer out solutions. Such a view of knowledge, Palmer argues, encourages and sustains a stance towards learning in which we approach the world as simply an object to be dissected, manipulated and mastered. We end up focused on forcing reality to submit to our perceived needs and prying into secrets which will give us more mastery over life. "Curiosity and control are joined as the passion behind our knowing."¹¹

Palmer argues that we should question our understanding of knowing as power, for

another kind of knowledge is available to us, one that begins in a different passion and is drawn toward other ends ... This is a knowledge that originates not in curiosity or control but in compassion, or love – a source celebrated not in our intellectual tradition but in our spiritual heritage.¹²

¹⁰ Palmer, 1983.

¹¹ Palmer, 1983:7.

¹² Palmer, 1983:8.

He argues that we need to recover “from our spiritual tradition the models and methods of knowing as an act of love”, claiming that “the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own.”¹³

He is careful to specify what kind of love he has in mind. This love is “not a soft and sentimental virtue, not a fuzzy feeling of romance” but rather “the connective tissue of reality” which calls us to “involvement, mutuality, accountability”.¹⁴ In fact, Palmer has a specific model in mind. He appeals to Paul’s description of love in 1 Corinthians chapter 13, thus couching his proposal in specifically biblical terms.¹⁵

Whether Palmer’s basic claim that knowing is loving is intended as a proposal that we should adopt a different metaphor for knowing or as a more literal claim, what he says invites us to shift the wider pattern of imagery which we associate with knowing, learning and teaching. Palmer maps this shift further in the remainder of his book, but here we will turn to some other Christian writings on education which can be seen as contributing to the same pattern or cluster.

In a brief article published earlier than Palmer’s book, Brian Hill argued that:

Teaching style is not just a matter of possessing certain skills, but of seeing the teaching situation in its wholeness. We depend on models and metaphors to bind together the bits of experience...(M)any dimensions of the teacher’s task can be woven together by the biblical concept of reconciliation.¹⁶

Hill writes that reconciliation should be understood here in a way which leans heavily on Scripture. It refers in its biblical context to God’s ending, on his initiative and at great cost to himself, of the enmity towards him caused by our rebellion. It should lead Christians into a ministry of reconciliation, and Hill suggests that one way of relating this to education is to apply the biblical idea of reconciliation metaphorically to areas of educational thought and practice where

¹³ Palmer, 1983:8-9.

¹⁴ Palmer, 1983:9.

¹⁵ Palmer, 1983:15.

¹⁶ Hill, 1976:15.

things are out of joint. He refers specifically to tensions between the child and society, oppositions between thinking and feeling, and conflicts between different groups in the making of educational policy. Teachers, he suggests, should see their involvement in education as a metaphorical extension of God's great act of reconciliation.

A further example can be found in a recent book about foreign language education. David Smith and Barbara Carvill explore the implications of seeing foreign language learning as a form of hospitality to the stranger.¹⁷ Their discussion draws upon the biblical call to "love the alien as yourself".¹⁸ The aim is, however, not to claim that this biblical injunction intended to address pedagogical issues in present day foreign language education. The aim is rather to ask how those issues look if we adopt hospitality to the stranger as our basic image for foreign language learning. This might on occasion mean literally hosting members of the culture being studied; most often, however, it will refer metaphorically to how we interact with the foreign language and culture as we learn, inviting it into our personal space and interacting with it graciously.¹⁹ This image turns out to have a variety of consequences for the aims, content and methods of the foreign language curriculum, shifting the focus away from the rehearsal of consumer transactions and towards a more central interest in the lives and stories of members of the other culture.

Theological patterns

If we draw these three examples together, we find them forming an interrelated pattern. Palmer says that we should think of knowing as loving and explore the implications of that image for how we view teaching and learning. Hill's argument can be seen as addressing the question of how this is affected by the divisions and enmities of the educational world as we find it. Smith and Carvill ask: given that the basic human call is to love God and to love our neighbour, what kind of love is particularly relevant to encountering and learning about those from other languages and cultures?

¹⁷ Smith & Carvill, 2000; see also Carvill, 1991a, 1991b.

¹⁸ See e.g. Leviticus 19:34-35.

¹⁹ Smith & Carvill, 2000:83-103.

Moving beyond individual instances of biblical metaphors being given a role in educational reflection, to a consideration of how they link up into coherent networks, both helps to give them more specific meaning and extends their reach into various more specific aspects of education. Moreover, the connections among the different images mirror a biblical pattern. In the Bible, love of God and love of one's neighbour are placed centre-stage, reconciliation when these relationships stand broken is the heart of the Gospel, and love for strangers is repeatedly put forward as a specific form of love for one's neighbour.²⁰ The educational examples outlined above reflect not only individual biblical images, but also the pattern of relationships within the Bible between the centrality of love, the fallenness of the world and our relationships to strangers. Again we find that educational imagery can be the vehicle through which the Bible's influence becomes manifest.

Much more could be said in terms of a detailed appraisal of the examples offered here. For present purposes, however, the main concern is to clarify and illustrate how the Bible can interact with education through its *imagery* becoming interwoven with our educational vision. As David Tracy puts it,

not only is every major religion grounded in certain root metaphors, but Western religions are also 'religions of the book' – books which codify root metaphors ... For Judaism, Christianity, and Islam certain texts serve not only as charter documents for the religion, but as 'scripture' in the strict sense: that is as normative for the religious community's basic understanding and control of its root metaphors and thereby its vision of reality.²¹

In other words, our most basic metaphors do not just sit there waiting to be evaluated by our worldview; they *mould* our worldview.

²⁰ See e.g. Leviticus 19:18, 34-35; Matthew 25:34-36; Luke 10:25-37.

²¹ Tracy, 1979:90.