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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

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”.¹ 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,² 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

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.³ 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”.⁴ 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”.⁵ They make use of vivid images from the everyday world of plants and animals and of everyday concrete observations.⁶ But, as Melchert points out,⁷ 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.”⁸ 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’,⁹ 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.

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”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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 battle-axe 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.’¹²

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.¹³

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."¹⁴

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?¹⁵

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

¹³ Manson, 1935:237-270 quoted in Giles, 1981:8.

¹⁴ John 13:13-14.

¹⁵ 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.

to an East End school in our twentieth-century industrial society is patently ludicrous”.¹⁶ 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

¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.

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.²⁰

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

²⁰ 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,²¹ 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.

child and parent or between learner and teacher (along with other similar exchanges recorded in Exodus and Joshua²²) provide us with a paradigm of a mode of teaching and learning.²³ 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”²⁴ 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”.²⁵ 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.²⁶

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”.²⁷

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.²⁸

... 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.

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.