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”. 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

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1 Pampaedia, II:30, in Dobbie, 1986.
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.\footnote{Wolterstorff, 1980:14. See further Fernhout, 1997.}

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
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. 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. 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. 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

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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.