

2

The case for the prosecution

To many Christian teachers the puzzling point may not be the idea that the Bible has something to say to educators, but rather the idea that there is a problem with this. The Bible is, after all, “God-breathed and...useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,” so that we might be “thoroughly equipped for every good work.”¹ What’s the problem?

There are, in fact, a variety of problems. We do believe that the Bible can speak in life-giving ways to present-day education, but this does not mean that the problems can be lightly dismissed. They have been noted by both Christian and non-Christian educators; some have gone so far as to argue that there is no rope connecting the Bible to education, only a few frayed ends. Whatever our ultimate conclusions, there are good Christian grounds for welcoming critiques which

¹ 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

might promote sober self-examination. We propose, therefore, to take a good look at a range of criticisms in this chapter before moving on to a positive response.

Christian education as a form of nonsense

A short article by the prominent educational philosopher Paul Hirst, first published in 1971, still offers a good place to start, since it deals clearly and succinctly with a number of important issues.² Hirst argued that Christian belief should not and cannot serve as a legitimate basis for educational reflection. In fact, the whole quest for a Christian approach to education should, he claimed, be regarded as “a kind of nonsense...just as much a mistake as the idea that there is a distinctively Christian form of mathematics”.³

Part of Hirst’s argument was that educational thinking should be based on objective reason, and so Christian beliefs can at best add their vote of confidence to positions already established on independent rational grounds.⁴ In other words, we *should not* try to think constructively about education on the basis of Christian belief. This aspect of Hirst’s argument has become dated over the intervening years; Christian writers have not been convinced, and Hirst’s own view of reason has shifted.⁵ Of more enduring interest is another strand of his argument, which claims that even if we wanted to develop a Christian form of education, it *cannot* be done.

Hirst suggested that even if Christian education is seen as desirable, it is in practice impossible to define its nature. He argued that Christians are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, they look at what the Bible says specifically about education, but find that it is far from easy to make the application to education in our different historical and cultural context. On the other, they find themselves deriving general moral principles from Scripture which are too broad to determine any specific educational consequences. We will expand on

² Hirst, 1971.

³ Hirst, 1971:305. On the question of whether there is a Christian perspective on mathematics see recently Howell & Bradley, 2001.

⁴ See also Hirst, 1976.

⁵ See Hirst, 1993; Thiessen, 1990 and chapter 1, note 13.

each of these points, and supplement Hirst's arguments with some examples.

In search of specifics

If we want to teach in a way that is faithful to the Bible, an obvious first step is to look closely at what the Bible says about education. Here, however, Hirst saw difficulties.⁶

The first problem we find is that the Bible does not in fact have much to say about many present day educational practices and concerns. Look in a biblical concordance and you will not find entries under headings such as examinations, teaching methods, truancy, or even schools. This seems to limit what can be argued directly or conclusively from the biblical text. Consider the following range of arguments, all of which have been put forward on the basis of the Bible:⁷

1. The Bible does not mention schools, but places educational responsibility in the hands of parents. Christians should therefore reject the schooling paradigm and turn to home education instead. It is parents who are called and authorised to educate children, and it is not the place of the state or the school to usurp this role.
2. The Bible does not mention schools because the school institution as we know it did not exist in its day and culture. As time has passed, and industrialisation has progressed, the amount of specialist knowledge which children must acquire has increased dramatically. Our situation is therefore quite different from that of ancient Israel. Schools are now necessary. We should continue to heed the biblical injunctions for parents to nurture their children in faith and godly conduct, while accepting that other aspects of education need to be undertaken in schools by specialists, who need not be Christians.

⁶ Hirst, 1971:306.

⁷ Adapted from Weeks, 1988:3-5.

3. The situation has changed as described in 2 above, but we should look for the underlying educational principles in the biblical passages addressed to parents and apply these to new forms of teaching and learning such as schooling. Schools as we know them were not around then, but if they had been, the same principles would have applied. Schooling is now needed, but it should be Christian schooling, biblically grounded and carried out by Christian teachers as an extension of the parental task.
4. There were village schools, synagogue schools and pagan schools in New Testament times, and there are no instructions in the New Testament for Christian parents to withdraw their children from such schools. We must therefore assume that the children of converted parents continued to attend them, and that this was not considered a problem by the believing community. This suggests that we would be justified in adopting the same attitude towards today's secular schools.

Our present concern is not to decide which of these arguments is right. The issue at stake is the fact that all of the arguments claim consistency with the Bible, and that it is not easy to see how the Bible could be used to decide conclusively between them.⁸

This example highlights the difficulties involved in arguing from silence. What if we focus on those aspects of education which the Bible does deal with, such as the teacher-learner relationship? This may get us further, but it will not, Hirst argues, remove the historical and cultural gap between our educational setting and that portrayed in the Bible. We cannot simply transfer practices from the Bible to the present day. Should biblical Christian educators (Hirst might have

⁸ Weeks (1988:4), who only lists arguments 2-4, suggests that Deuteronomy 6, with its concern that the whole life of the child be surrounded with the truth that springs from God's revelation, decides the issue in favour of argument 3 above. It seems, however, to be equally compatible with 1 (which Weeks does not list), and it is at least open to debate whether it is not compatible with 2 and 4 given a strong Christian home context. See further Hill, 1978; Weeks, 1980.

asked) wear sandals and teach on mountainsides, or teach learners in groups of twelve?

To get round this difficulty, Hirst argues, Christians end up trying to abstract more general biblical principles from the cultural particularities of the text. This leads to endless debates over interpretation. Christians continue to disagree over which principles should be derived from the biblical text and over how they should be applied in the present-day situation. If the Bible leads so many different Christians to different conclusions, must we not suspect that it is not really the Bible that is the determining factor?

Problems with principles

There is, Hirst argues, a further problem with general principles derived from Scripture: they are not sufficient to yield any specific educational recommendations. Consider an example which may help to illustrate Hirst's point. Suppose a Christian school declares its commitment to the principle that each individual child should be loved and affirmed since he or she is made in God's image. Such affirmations are common in Christian school mission statements. Suppose also that this school is engaged in reflection on its assessment practices. It is not too hard to imagine the following arguments being pursued:

1. One problem with exam grades is that the exams tend to take over the whole process of teaching and learning. Pupils soon work out that what is really important is what's on the test. Some of our wider educational goals get pushed into the background, or even undermined, as we become fixated on what can be tested in an exam. The need to cover the exam syllabus and to push pupils towards better grades leads to time pressure, which prevents teachers and learners from exploring points of interest further. Valuable learning time is spent on exam coaching. And why do we put up with this? Exam grades are mainly for apple-sorting; they are there so that society can decide who to put in which jobs rather than for any genuinely educational reasons. The grading system places pupils under stress, and tends to favour pupils

with certain kinds of gifts. Those who are not good at writing exam answers get labelled as failures, whatever other talents they might have. If we really love the children and see them as made in God's image we should not follow secular education – we should be radical and do away with grades.⁹

2. Grading on the basis of exams may have its weaknesses, but it does give an indication of who has done the work and of what their aptitude for it might be. If pupils leave school without the grades and qualifications which our society requires, employers and colleges will not take them seriously. They may not be able to get into the field to which they feel called – how could it be loving to leave them unequipped for the society in which they will have to live and serve? If we love the children in our care we will provide them with the opportunity to earn the certification that they need to flourish in this society.

Once again, the point here is not whether these arguments are right or wrong, but rather the role played in their construction by the biblical principle. There seem to be two problems. The first is that the biblical principle does not in itself tell us what to do. In order to have this kind of discussion we need to draw upon our experience of pupils and exams, on psychological ideas about the kinds of duress which children might suffer, on ideas about the society in which they live, on theories of exam-based assessment and what it can or can't show, and so on. It seems to be these varied sources that provide the grist for the argument. The biblical principle looks as if it might be more like the finishing touch than the foundation.

This leads to the second problem, which is that the principle seems compatible with opposite courses of action, in this case keeping exams or abolishing them. It does not determine the decision one way or the other. If a biblical principle can point in two opposite directions, then how can it be maintained that the Bible has any distinctive contribution to make to education?

⁹ For a version of this argument put forward in connection with a "design for a biblical Christian school", see Adams, 1982: 115-124.

All of this leads to the suspicion that appeals to biblical principles might be little more than a rhetorical overlay, taking decisions arrived at on other grounds and lending them an aura of divine authority. This suspicion was voiced in vigorous terms (in a publication which appeared the same year as Hirst's article) by Alasdair MacIntyre:

Injunctions to repent, to be responsible, even to be generous, do not actually tell us what to *do*...Christians behave like everyone else but use a different vocabulary in characterising their behavior, and so conceal their lack of distinctiveness ... All those in our society who self-consciously embrace beliefs which appear to confer importance and righteousness upon the holder become involved in the same strategies. The fact that their beliefs make so little difference either to them or to others leads to the same concern with being right-minded rather than effective.¹⁰

The charge is that Christian rhetoric is used not because it adds any substance to our educational ideas, but merely because it makes them seem more important and makes us feel that we must be in the right. Such accusations, even if they are far from the last word, ought at least to lead Christian educators to some serious self-examination.

Misreading the Bible?

Hirst's misgivings emerged from reflection on the nature of education. A further set of misgivings emerge from reflection on the nature of the Bible. Perhaps the Bible is simply not intended to tell us how to carry out education. If so, then it would be no mark of disrespect for the Bible if we left it out of consideration in educational discussion, any more than it would be a sign of flouting the highway code if we did not consult it when baking cakes. To read the Bible as offering educational recommendations may be to misread it.

Examples of such misapplication of the Bible are unfortunately all too common. One of the authors recalls being in a school assembly

¹⁰ MacIntyre, 1971:24.

in a British secondary school in which one of the senior staff read out John chapter 3 verse 16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son”. He proceeded to use this verse to make some point about obeying the school rules, leaning sternly over his lectern for emphasis. Evidently the appeal to the Bible was vaguely intended to add force to his message. However, what was memorable was not the actual point he made, but rather the sheer incongruity of the use to which the biblical text was put.

Misgivings about the use of Scripture to make educational points have been put in various ways. Some have argued that the Bible is about salvation rather than education, and that we should read it in accordance with its own central concerns. We should recognise that “the Bible is not primarily a pedagogical book. It therefore does not contain any well-developed theory of education”.¹¹ If the Bible does not address a particular issue, then to try to make it do so is to distort it and deceive ourselves.

Others have argued that while the Bible does address all aspects of life, it does so from a particular angle, with a particular interest in our ultimate commitments.¹² So, for example, where the Old Testament describes the reigns of successive kings of Israel and Judah, it does so with a primary focus on whether they did good or evil in the eyes of the Lord, and not with the interests of the historian. Therefore some kings who had long and historically significant reigns are passed over quite briefly, their cultural achievements and foreign policy left unexplored. We should not, then, expect the Bible to directly address the details of a particular discipline, even though it might say something about its ultimate context.

In similar vein, Roy Clouser describes and criticises what he calls the “encyclopedic assumption”. This is “the view that sacred Scripture contains inspired and thus infallible statements about virtually every conceivable subject matter”.¹³ It leads, Clouser argues, to a misguided search in the pages of Scripture for data relevant to every

¹¹ Velten, 1995:68.

¹² Olthuis, 1979, 1987.

¹³ Clouser, 1991:94. Clouser does in fact believe that Christian faith is relevant to all disciplines, but he sees this relevance in terms of fundamental presuppositions (see chapter 3) rather than detailed disciplinary information.

discipline. The search is misguided because the Bible was never intended to be an encyclopedia, and many of our questions are ones which it never intended to address.

This line of argument seems to suggest that the difficulties described above in applying the Bible to education arise because we are trying to make the Bible do something which it was never designed to do. This view is quite compatible with a high view of biblical authority – indeed it may be motivated by a high respect for the Bible and a desire to avoid distorting its message by bending it to our own ends.

It should also be noted, however, that these arguments leave us with some interesting questions. If we accept that the Bible does not simply tell us what to do in present day educational settings, or that it focuses on questions of ultimate commitment, or that it does not offer information on all subjects, does it nevertheless impinge upon educational reflection in some other, more adequate way? The authors cited in this section are concerned to guard against misuse of the Bible, but they would not see the Bible as having no connection at all with present day thought and practice. Are there better ways of understanding the relationship?

The Bible in the classroom

For those who begin to find the mounting objections daunting, there might seem to be some consolation in noting that the Bible remains itself an important object of study in educational settings. Studying the Bible is important for understanding not only the Christian faith, but also Western culture, which it has pervasively influenced. Many episodes of history, such as the Reformation, and many works of literature, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, cannot be understood without reference to the Bible. Controversies concerning human origins involve frequent appeal to the Bible. For these and many similar reasons, knowledge of the Bible remains an important ingredient in education, and the Bible may therefore still enter the classroom as an object of study.

This is indeed an important aspect of the Bible's relationship to education, but the consolation which it holds for those who hold the Bible to be God's word must be qualified. The Bible's influence upon culture has been a complex affair, and the myriad borrowings of

biblical language, themes and imagery in Western culture have by no means always been particularly faithful to the biblical text itself.¹⁴

Moreover, even where this caution is noted and taken into account, the use of the Bible as educational content does not in and of itself imply that education is being *guided* by Scripture. Insects are also commonly part of the content covered in schools, and a particularly enthusiastic entomologist could no doubt develop materials liberally sprinkled with pictures of our six-legged friends. It would hardly follow that insects had authoritatively shaped the educational process. Including the Bible as content, or even liberally sprinkling worksheets with Bible verses, is no guarantee that the education offered is in any substantial sense ‘biblical’.

Some have in fact argued that once the Bible passes from the hands of the believing community into the hands of the educator, then it passes into educational jurisdiction and must be subject to educational interests, rather than education being subject to the Bible. The claim is that the educational use of a biblical text is not the same as its use in the church context, and the interpretive concerns of the believing community should no longer hold sway.¹⁵ The central concern is how the text used enhances the pupil’s learning. If it fires his or her imagination and leads to a piece of writing which would be regarded as entirely heretical by the believing community, that may, it is argued, still be a highly successful educational outcome.

Anyone who is uncomfortable with the idea of the Bible being at the mercy of current educational ideas and fashions is returned to the question of what it might mean for the wider educational context to be faithful to Scripture – what would be a *biblical* use of the Bible in education? Considering the use of the Bible as content returns us to the very question with which we started.

Just a long-running delusion?

We have surveyed various difficulties which have been raised concerning the effort to connect education with the Bible. We have seen it alleged that we must choose between general principles from which

¹⁴ See Clines, 1997:31-54.

¹⁵ See e.g. Grimmitt, 1987, 1991 and, in response, Cooling, 1996.

little of substance follows and biblical specifics which are of dubious applicability to our present context. It has been suggested that the Bible may in any case not be designed to answer those educational questions which happen to be important to us in our particular context. Furthermore, the appearance of the Bible as an item of educational content is no guarantee that its role is an authoritative one. And yet Christian educators past and present have maintained that education must be illuminated by “the effulgent word of God”,¹⁶ that “biblical truth infuses every aspect of the Christian school’s practice and curriculum”.¹⁷ Is this really no more than a long-running delusion? Or is there more to the relationship between the Bible and education than the arguments surveyed in this chapter would suggest? We believe that there is in fact a lot more to the relationship than even many of its Christian supporters suspect; the remaining chapters of this book are devoted to an exploration of the positive possibilities for linking the Bible fruitfully to the everyday design of teaching and learning.

¹⁶ J. A. Comenius, writing in the 17th century, cited from Keatinge, 1967:240.

¹⁷ Vryhof, Brouwer, Ulstein, & VanderArk, 1989:26.