

# 3

## **The Word become flesh**

I recall an occasion early in my teacher training when I was brought up short by the discrepancies between my work as a teacher and some particular sentences from the Bible. I had been enthused by reading some books calling for radically Christian thinking and gripped by their emphasis on being transformed by the renewing of my mind. I entered my teacher training course ready to subject the various theories which were taught to critical scrutiny. In my more arrogant moments I think I even saw myself as some kind of knight in shining armour riding out rather self-righteously in the cause of truth against the secular ideologies lurking in my education lectures.

Then one day I had to teach in a real classroom in a local secondary school. My teenage students were fractious and unimpressed by my unskilled eagerness. As if that were not enough, I also had a bruising encounter with the following text:

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct ...<sup>1</sup>

Around the same time I came across a book which dwelt upon the warning in the epistle of James that "not many of you should presume to be teachers...because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly".<sup>2</sup> The author went on to offer a profile of the Christian teacher based on James' vision of true wisdom, which is "first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere".<sup>3</sup>

In those weeks my first frustrating, fumbling efforts at teaching teenagers tested my ability to remain civil, let alone gentle. Some were unruly, some were discourteous, some were openly keen to test the mettle of the new student teacher. One eleven-year-old boy stripped to the waist while I was writing on the blackboard, apparently just to see what I would do. Many evenings I returned home exasperated and discouraged. Given the yawning gap between my experience and what I was reading (kind to *everyone*? *Never* resentful? *Full* of mercy? Even with *that* class?), it did not take long for my reforming zeal to be humbled. Somehow *living* all of these qualities was a whole lot harder than solving intellectual puzzles; in addition to understanding, I needed grace.

I am sure that some of that gap still yawns, but I also trust that my ongoing efforts to drink from those texts have had some impact on the nature of my teaching. They immediately caused me to reflect on some of the teaching I saw around me. A colleague kept his classes in a state of awed submission which made me envious, but appeared to do so in large measure through the use of biting sarcasm when students stepped out of line. They came to fear the lash of his tongue. *Kind* to everyone? *Full* of *mercy*? These commanding words may not have told me exactly how to teach. They did, however, help me not only to realise that there were some character qualities that I needed to work on,

---

<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 2:23-25.

<sup>2</sup> James 3:1; the book was May, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> James 3:17.

but also to decide that there were some models of teaching which I did *not* wish to follow.

I doubt that these experiences are particularly unusual. They offer a place to start which focuses on everyday attempts by individual Christian teachers to live in the light of Scripture. Christians commonly read the Bible not so much with the aim of extracting useful theories as with the aim of drawing strength and inspiration and being shaped by what they read. They come seeking to make themselves vulnerable to the text, allowing it to speak to them with authority. They are willing for its promises and commands, its stories and images to shape their sense of self, their responses to events, and their interactions with others.

Here we have a first way of understanding the relationship between the Bible and present day education, a way which is likely to be second nature to most Christian teachers. People who read the Bible with a readiness for personal change will find that it has a great deal to say about the qualities which should be evident in their actions and relationships. Over time the Bible may shape their sense of self and of who they should be. If these people are also teachers, then this process is likely to have some impact on who they are when they are teaching. This will in turn affect the educational experience of their students. At this basic level, the bridge between the Bible and the present day classroom is not so much a set of deductions leading to general principles as the *teacher herself or himself*, shaped by interactions with the biblical text. Put simply, the Bible shapes people, and it is people who educate.

### **‘Incarnating’ the gospel**

This approach to the relationship of the Bible to education is sometimes referred to as ‘incarnational’, drawing upon the central Christian affirmation that God has ultimately revealed himself not in a set of instructions or principles, but rather by becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> By analogy, and through Christ’s indwelling, the Christian teacher should aspire to ‘incarnate’ the biblical vision, living it out in

---

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Badley, 1994, 1996. The benefits and dangers of such metaphorical uses of ‘incarnational’ terms will be discussed further in chapter 11.

the day to day interactions of the classroom. The daily process of Christian discipleship is in this way directly linked to growth as a teacher. This is therefore a natural way for many Christian teachers to think about the relationship between the Bible and education.

The strengths of this approach to the relationship between the Bible and education are not hard to identify. At the Bible's end of the relationship, such an emphasis seems to accord well with important biblical emphases. The New Testament is deeply interested in personal renewal, and speaks of believers becoming themselves a "letter from Christ ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts".<sup>5</sup> At the educational end the focus is placed immediately and squarely on concrete classroom realities, growing relationships between teachers and learners, and those daily acts of care which form such a significant part of educational processes. For students, the character of the teacher can play a huge role in the quality of the learning experience.

### Some criticisms

Given these benefits, it may seem churlish to move immediately to some criticisms of 'incarnational' emphases. Criticisms there are, however, and they come from within the Christian community. These are, it should be noted, not criticisms of responsiveness to the Bible's call to love, but rather criticisms of a tendency to take an emphasis on personal character as sufficient and explore no further. There are at least three reasons for regarding a preoccupation with the effects of Bible reading on the individual character of the teacher as inadequate if taken alone.

The first reason has to do with *narrowness*. To reduce the impact of the Bible to the development of desirable character qualities in individuals is to truncate the Gospel, implying that it can transform individuals but has no significance for the wider world.<sup>6</sup> As many critics of overly individualistic forms of pietism have argued, to see the Bible as only addressing individual growth in biblical virtues, and having no contribution to make to our thinking about the content of the

---

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:3.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Kuyper, 1931; Wolters, 1985.

curriculum or the teaching methodologies which currently predominate is to sell the Bible short. Does the Bible have nothing to say about the nature of the world we study or the nature of students or the values of the society for which they are being prepared? Do biblical warnings to seek justice or a renewed mind never entail rethinking what we teach and how we teach it? Teaching Christianly can all too easily be reduced to being a nice person, with little effort to think through broader educational issues. Faith and education may remain largely locked in parallel universes. If personal growth alone is emphasised it seems as if all that the Bible adds to secular education is the hope of having nicer people to deliver it.

This already implies a second danger, that of *complicity*. An overly narrow focus on personal graces would allow for the possibility of a Christian teacher displaying a loving attitude towards students, teaching with patience and humility, and in general exemplifying desirable character qualities while offering a curriculum full of untruths or ideological distortions. Imagine a teacher in Nazi Germany arguing that it is OK to educate learners to serve the *Führer* as long as she is nice to them in class and fair in her grading policies. Then consider how easy it is with hindsight to criticise such an extreme and stereotyped example, and ponder the question of whether our own cultures are free from tendencies against which Christians should protest. Would a pedagogy which refused to offer guidance to students in the name of their complete autonomy be acceptable for Christian teachers if administered in a gentle way, or should those teachers also be thinking Christianly about the nature of the learners they teach? Would a curriculum which taught or implied that human beings are at bottom nothing but a collection of chemicals be acceptable if the teacher were patient and kind? What if the personal virtues of the teacher in fact serve to make the teaching of falsehoods more effective? As Wright puts it, commenting on tendencies to focus narrowly on personal piety, “it would be perfectly possible to believe this ‘gospel’ and go off to work every day for years without noticing that one was building the tower of Babel.”<sup>7</sup>

A third issue has to do with the *underdeveloped* nature of any ‘incarnational’ approach which tries to focus only on the teacher’s individual character qualities. We will dwell on this point at greater length, since it leads us into considerations which will unfold in later

---

<sup>7</sup> Wright, 1992:116.

chapters. A person-centred approach already raises wider questions; really taking it seriously already begins to push us towards wider issues and other ways of relating the Bible to education.

### **Taking things further**

In the first place, we need to ask: is growth in the kinds of personal qualities mentioned earlier simply a kind of private interest, of concern only to the individual involved but irrelevant to the actual teaching and learning? Or is such growth important to the teacher *as a teacher*? If the former, then the Bible is not being related to education at all – its role in the teacher’s life is on a par with her preferring fish for supper on Tuesdays. If the latter, if the Bible’s influence on the teacher’s character is relevant to the way he teaches, then the implications cannot be restricted to the individual teacher’s personal morality. Believing that such character qualities as kindness, humility and gentleness are important to the being of the teacher *as teacher* already calls into question some ways of understanding teaching and learning.

There are, for instance, influential modern visions of education which view teaching as essentially a technical affair. The goals of learning should on these views be carefully defined in terms of empirically measurable behaviours; teachers must be trained in the correct techniques for reaching those goals, and provided that the teacher follows the techniques correctly and in the right order then the goals of learning will be achieved with the requisite efficiency.<sup>8</sup> This attempt to scientifically codify teacher and learner behaviours and to understand teaching as the rigorous application of a method, a “routine of efficiency”,<sup>9</sup> does require of the teacher a certain discipline and diligence. It suggests, however, that more interpersonal virtues such as gentleness and kindness have little to do with learning. They may on occasion make the classroom a warmer place, but provided the teacher follows the right techniques the required results will follow in any case.

This vision of teaching as efficient technique can be contrasted with a view of education such as that of Parker Palmer, who argues

---

<sup>8</sup> On this view of teaching see Davis, 1999; Dunne, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Ong, 1958:225.

that it is “the human heart that is the source of good teaching”.<sup>10</sup> Palmer suggests that:

good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections between themselves, their subjects and their students... the connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts – meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.<sup>11</sup>

This approach seems to cohere better with a vital concern for the teacher’s spiritual and moral growth, and its points of tension with the more technical view reveal how such a concern begins to compel us to move beyond a focus on the individual teacher towards a particular understanding of the teaching and learning process.

Once this process of reflection begins, it can lead to more detailed adjustments in pedagogy. I found myself involved in just such a process some years ago when I began to consider how a concern for honesty might affect the conversations I had with students in French lessons.<sup>12</sup> Since the rise of communicative approaches to foreign language teaching, it has become common to use personalised questions and activities for language practice – questions such as ‘where do you live?’ or tasks such as ‘describe a recent vacation’. It is also common to encourage students, especially in exam situations, to invent details if they can’t remember the foreign word for what they want to say. The point is to say some French, the argument goes, not to explain your family history. It’s role play, not real communication.

The trouble is, a lot of communicative language teaching presents itself as a direct rehearsal for real communication. Students are often asked questions in the foreign language which are apparently direct requests for personal information: What is your name? What kind of music do you like? Where do you live? And so on. The New Testament urges that “each of you should put off falsehood and

---

<sup>10</sup> Palmer, 1998:3.

<sup>11</sup> Palmer, 1998:11.

<sup>12</sup> This example is explored in more detail elsewhere, see Smith, 1997; Smith & Carvill, 2000:

“speak truthfully to his neighbour”.<sup>13</sup> One day I began to ask myself whether belief in the importance of honesty was consistent with encouraging my students to make up personal information when telling the truth was more difficult.

When I discussed the matter with colleagues, they raised objections to my scruples: should students not have a right to keep their own affairs private in the foreign language classroom? What if I asked what a student’s father does and the father in question was absent or in prison? Was I not confusing what everyone knew was role play with the real thing? And would I not disadvantage weaker learners if I insisted on the truth, making it harder for them to say anything at all?

### **The complexities of classroom communication**

It quickly became clear that the issue was more complex than I had at first imagined. However, I also noticed that it was not uncommon for students to ask, ‘it’s OK to lie in French, isn’t it sir?’ when they were working on activities which included the giving of personal information. Observing students carrying out language tasks encouraged me further to think that they often interpreted those tasks as genuine communication. I came to doubt whether they were as clear as their teachers imagined about the distinction between mere role play and genuine personal communication.

To cut a long story short, I began to make changes in the way I taught in order to make the distinction between truth and simulation more distinct while still protecting students’ privacy. I began, for instance, to present certain writing activities in terms of a choice between personal communication or fiction. If I asked students to describe their family I would tell them that they could choose to describe their own family, in which case they should use all the resources available to find out how to do so accurately in French. Alternatively, they could write a fictional piece about an invented family, being as creative as possible. I also began to teach them linguistic strategies for politely deflecting unwelcome questions, an item

---

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 4:25. Baker ascribes to the early church “a basic ethic which views the demands of God to be embedded in believers’ hearts and tested by every word they speak to their neighbours” (Baker, 1994:59).

which had not been on our syllabus.

The point here is that what began as reflection on personal integrity, in particular on the importance of honesty, ended in adjustments to my syllabus and teaching methods. A basic conviction that it is important to tell the truth even when it is inconvenient to do so turned out, when thought through over a year or so of teaching, to have implications for how I taught French. I became convinced that to value honesty for myself while teaching in a manner which undermined it was inconsistent.<sup>14</sup>

It was suggested above that an approach to relating the Bible to education which focuses only on the teacher's personal growth and the development of particular individual virtues is too narrow. It captures one essential side of Christian faith, namely a trust in God reflected in warm-hearted daily living, but it neglects the necessary complement of reflective beliefs. Examples like the ones just discussed suggest, however, that even this potentially narrow approach contains the seeds of wider issues, that if an 'incarnational' approach is really taken seriously it must lead to serious reflection on issues of curriculum and pedagogy. Commitment to a particular vision of human flourishing can lead to changes in how we teach. The next chapter will illustrate and develop this contention further, moving us towards a second way of understanding how the Bible can affect education.

---

<sup>14</sup> For a similar example in relation to science teaching, see Cartwright, 1999.