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From Sacred Text to Educational Context

John Shortt

Introduction

Evangelical Christians profess to take the Bible to be supremely authoritative for life and thought. This paper¹ is concerned not with the much-researched area of reasons *why* we should do so but with the rather more neglected area of *how* it functions authoritatively in our thinking and living².

The paper focuses on the links between the Bible and a particular cultural activity, that of education. This is of importance not only to teachers and parents but also to those concerned with the teaching programmes of local churches or theological colleges and, indeed, to all of us. Education is not simply something that happens to us in the context of the school, college or university or at a particular stage in life, that of being a pupil or a student. Learning is, or should be for the disciple of Christ, a life-long process. Intentional activities designed to bring about learning can take place in any context including, but not limited to, those of home, church, school and workplace.

The ways in which the Bible can be related to education should also be of particular interest to Christians concerned with what has come to be termed 'faith-learning integration' in any discipline or cultural activity. There are likely to be counterparts in our attempts to relate the Bible to science or economics or politics or whatever to the ways proposed here for the move from Scripture to education.

A Rope of Different Strands

How can the Bible actually function as a 'foundation' or 'source' or 'authority' for education? In what sense can a modern school or a lesson in science or a theory of teaching or learning or an approach to home or church education be properly described as 'biblical'? What kinds of relation are there between the Bible and present-day educational concerns?

Attempts to answer these questions typically look for a single paradigm answer. Many Christians give central importance to the kind of person the teacher *is*, rather than on what is done in the classroom or other educational context. The important thing is, they say, that 'the Word should become flesh in us'. It has been commonplace among other Christian educators to give central place to the process of moving *deductively* from what the Bible teaches to educational conclusions. 'The Bible says .. *therefore* we should ..'. The central emphasis here is on deriving conclusions for practice, for what we *do* in education.

However, these are but two of a number of different approaches or strategies by which the Bible can be fruitfully brought into relation with the processes of teaching and learning. These approaches all belong together, overlapping and interrelating, intertwined as the different strands of a rope rather than existing as a set of separate, *alternative* ways of coupling the Bible and education.

Two familiar approaches

The first of the more familiar approaches brings the idea of incarnation to the fore. The Bible has a great deal to say about the kind of people we should be. Many Christian teachers, therefore, focus their attention on their being shaped by their ongoing interactions with the text of the Bible. The emphasis is on personal piety and virtue so that they may be the 'fragrance of Christ' wherever they go³. This emphasis is evidently a very important biblical one. It ascribes a central place to relationships between teachers and learners. A recent advertising campaign reminds us that 'nobody forgets a good teacher' and what we remember most about a good teacher is usually the impact of that person's character.

The danger with this emphasis is that it can be taken to be all-sufficient. Teaching biblically may be reduced to being a nice person in the classroom, and the possibility that what the Bible says has implications for what we teach and how we teach it may be neglected. However, the emphasis on personal virtue and the character of the educator is, in spite of this, of central importance. Recent studies point to a link between virtue and learning so that, for example, some degree of humility is a precondition for learning⁴.

The second more familiar approach moves by deduction from the statements of Scripture or from basic beliefs derived from the Bible to conclusions for educational practice. Our basic beliefs about the nature of reality, including human nature and relationships, can have an impact on our thinking about educational issues. The Bible addresses itself to many of these basic questions and this means that central biblical beliefs can have a major role in informing reflection on education. This is often taken to be matter of the logical *deduction* of educational implications from these biblical presuppositions. However, it is important to note that pure deduction is not the only possible relationship between basic Christian beliefs and education practices. For example, biblical presuppositions may commend or permit rather than require certain practices and they may exclude others. They may function in the manner of a 'filter' rather than the 'pump' of logical entailment.

Even when we add moves of these kinds, a danger with this whole approach is that we may neglect the significance of the wholeness of both our belief structures and our educational practices. There may be less formal relationships between patterns of belief and practice. Classroom methods and techniques may be *patterned* as a result of a teacher being shaped by a whole set of beliefs rather than following a particular strand of biblical teaching. This gives prominence to the role of the teacher as a responsible agent who can creatively pattern educational practices.

Biblical metaphors for education

One way in which this patterning relationship can take effect is through metaphors. Certain metaphors can pervade our beliefs and influence our practices in an area of human activity such as education. They can generate different patterns of belief and practice and they therefore function far more centrally than would the mere literary adornments they are sometimes taken to be. A helpful example comes from Lakoff and Johnson's classic work on metaphor⁵ where they point out that, in the western world, we see argument and debate as warfare. We 'win, lose, attack, defend, shoot down, demolish' arguments. How would the practice be different, they ask, in a culture where the dominant metaphor for argument was dance rather than warfare? It might highlight the role of cooperation, rhythm, turn-taking, reaching a mutually satisfying resolution: these are all elements obscured by the warfare metaphor. Not all metaphors influential in education may be equally 'generative' of helpful outcomes. Christians, for example, may well want to argue that the school is, or should be, sufficiently unlike a modern marketplace to make talk of 'clients', 'consumers', 'products', 'delivery', 'quality control' and such terms quite inappropriate or undesirable. Seeing the teacher as shepherd, as we do in our talk of *pastoral care*, may be rather more welcome.

Similar-sounding metaphors may have very different roots. The Christian educator John Amos Comenius saw teaching as gardening. He derived this from the biblical idea of a garden as being originally God's good creation but corrupted by the Fall and in need of God's redemptive activity. In God's redeeming and

transforming work, the processes of education play a part. We should not therefore leave natural processes to proceed on their own; rather we should actively intervene to discipline and train⁶. This differs quite radically from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's later use of a similar metaphor which saw the teacher's role as a matter of keeping the child in a natural state free from harmful adult influences.

What is a biblical metaphor? It is not simply that the image is drawn from Scripture for there are many metaphors in the Bible which may or may not prove generative for educational practice, e.g. God is a fortress. It is rather that the metaphor and its associated ideas fit well with the Bible. Parker Palmer, for example, proposes that, in place of our western view of knowing as power and mastery, we should see knowing in more biblical terms as loving⁷. Another example is provided by David I Smith and Barbara Carvill when they link foreign language teaching to the biblical calling to show hospitality to strangers and aliens⁸. These are 'root metaphors' with associated networks of ideas that comport well with the Bible.

An approach to linking the Bible with education which is based on metaphor has strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, the fact that metaphors can be heard in different ways by those with different experiences makes their use open to too wide a range of meanings, including, say Rousseau's natural growth, unless it is theologically embedded. Further, their use will not be fruitful unless they are embedded in life patterns. On the other hand, metaphors provide for a broader understanding of how the Bible can impact our thinking than that given by a more deductive statement-based approach. They also provide for the Bible's generation of fresh perspectives by making new connections not seen before.

Teaching as telling God's big true story

Stories surround us in our daily lives; they shape and envision us. They are central to our human understanding in giving meanings to actions and statements in the way that sentences give meanings to words. Our stories are part of bigger and bigger stories and may in turn become meaningful to us in terms of some big story, some meta-narrative.

When people purport to tell *the* story of something, meta-narratives will play a part in the process. For example, if the story of human history and all its little stories are told as 'The Ascent of Man', a particular perspective is being adopted. The title says it all: the story is one of progress ever upwards through the efforts of human beings without recourse to the help of transcendent powers and, into the bargain, it is also likely to be the story told from the perspective of the male of the species!

The Bible comes to us mainly in narrative form and with an implicit big story of creation, fall, redemption and consummation (or some similar set of 'chapter' headings). The story we tell in our teaching can be biblical if there is a 'fittingness' to the big true story of the biblical meta-narrative. This is a matter of the overall shape or contours of the stories rather than of discrete point-to-point comparison of details.

A narrative approach to linking the Bible with education has, like metaphor, the strength of providing a broader and potentially more fruitful way of doing so than a more linear deductive approach. It is more suited to the nature of human understanding and to the nature of Scripture itself. It focuses more on our wholeness and on the kind of people that we are. The biblical meta-narrative has distinct promise for the future of humanity and, when the stories we tell in our teaching fit well with it, it can in its turn provide through the education process a distinctive vision for human life and shape both teachers and learners.

Biblical models for education

The Bible also provides us with models for teaching and learning, in the teachers that it portrays and in the ways of teaching that it exemplifies. Jesus can be seen as the model teacher and, in particular, as an example of a sage teacher, a teacher of wisdom whose teaching was rich with a whole range of wisdom sayings and parables. 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. Another possible biblical model for education comes from the Old Testament Torah. This is

focussed on the community and the way in which the child is presented with a narrative which supplies an orderly, trustworthy life-world.

Not only the Torah but also the Prophets and the Wisdom books provide models of education. They differ markedly and, whereas the focus of the Torah is on a framework of accepted meaning, that of the Prophets is on the critiquing of received understandings and the imagining of alternatives while that of the Wisdom books is on the exploration of the potential and limitations of individual and communal experience. All of these, Walter Brueggemann suggests, can be seen as necessary and complementary dimensions of education⁹. Jesus himself exemplifies all three models and can therefore be seen as the model of models.

Conclusion

One link between the Bible and education not dealt with in this paper is the use of the Bible as educational content, not only in a part of the curriculum focussed directly on teaching the Bible but also in other parts where biblical material appears, e.g. history or literature. This and all of these other ways of relating the Bible to education are themselves interlinked. The more linear approaches are complemented and mutually corrected by those which are more a matter of patterning. Among the latter, narrative and metaphor have much in common with each other. The incarnation and models approaches are also close to one another and, in a way, they both intersect with other links as dimensions of what they are about. And any of them may make use of the Bible as educational content. This diverse range of links both shows the richness of the Bible as a foundation for education and is itself a safeguard against the dangers of exclusive focus on one or two of the links.

REFERENCES

- ¹ This paper is based on research by Dr David I Smith (now at Calvin College) and the writer while they were both based at the Stapleford Centre. The results of this research are to be published in a major book in 2002. Fuller accounts appear in David I Smith, 'The Bible and education: Ways of construing the relationship' in *Themelios* (forthcoming) and, of one of the approaches outlined, in John Shortt, David Smith & Trevor Cooling, 'Metaphor, Scripture and Education' in *Journal of Christian Education* Vol 43, No 2 (September 2000) pp. 21-28.
- ² See an important argument for the importance of the latter question in N. T. Wright, 'How can the Bible be Authoritative?', *Vox Evangelica*, Vol 21 (1991) pp. 7-32.
- ³ This emphasis is to the fore in P May, *Confidence in the Classroom: Realistic Encouragement for Teachers* (Leicester: IVP, '88)
- ⁴ See Mark Schwen, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: OUP, 1993) p. 49.
- ⁵ George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
- ⁶ See M. W. Keating (trans and ed) *The Great Didactic of John Amos Comenius* (London: A & C Black, 1907) p. 57.
- ⁷ Parker J Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).
- ⁸ David I Smith & Barbara Carvill, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
- ⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

For Further Reading

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| Walter Brueggemann, | <i>The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education</i>
(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). |
| Kieran Egan, | <i>Teaching as Story Telling</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). |
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(San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983). |

John Shortt is an education consultant and co-editor of *Journal of Education & Christian Belief*. He was until recently Head of Research at the Stapleford Centre near Nottingham where the research upon which this paper is based took place. He was a grantee of the Whitefield Institute during his time of doctoral research at the University of London Institute of Education (on Reformed Epistemology and Education).