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4 Enabling the Bible to control learning

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The important thing about Christian learning is that the Bible remains in control.

Trevor Cooling

What makes a good Christian teacher? One suggestion is that a well-developed personal spiritual life, and particularly being active in prayer for their students, is what is required. And who would want to argue with that? It is clearly important that Christian teachers should be spiritual role models who care and intercede for their students.

However, alongside that personal spiritual life must be a right understanding of what it means for the Bible to be in control of learning.

Is conflict inevitable between 'self-authorship' and biblical authority?

One of the very influential theories of learning in modern education is constructivism. What this means is illustrated by a recent research project on spirituality and learning where the authors distinguished between what they called 'self-authorship' and 'external authority for learning'. In the latter, learning is controlled by an outsider like a teacher, whereas in the former, learners create 'meaningful knowledge'
for themselves. In the constructivist view, self-authorship defines true learning. For many teachers, learning is only considered to be genuine when it is self-authored, freed from the shackles of external authority. This raises huge questions for Christian teachers who take the authority of the Bible seriously.

Christopher Rowlands and Jonathan Roberts illustrate this constructivist approach to the Bible when they criticise what they call the 'baton exchange' model of learning. Here the Bible is treated as the 'univocal, authoritative text'; the 'final word' or 'court of appeal' and learning is perceived as top-down transmission with success being perceived as students accepting these authorised, authoritative meanings. In contrast, Rowlands and Roberts wish to emphasise the importance of the context within which the text is read as a key influence in shaping what is learnt from the text and the importance of discovering new and radical meanings which may transcend the text itself. Furthermore, in the spirit of self-authorship, they assert the legitimacy of 'sinners' interpreting the text for themselves and deny the need for a hierarchy of approved 'experts in orthodoxy' to ensure the correct meaning is discerned. They therefore champion 'radical' uses of the Bible, as opposed to conservative uses which seek to discern an intended authoritative meaning.

Clive Erricker, a British religious educator and influential advocate of constructivism, defines it as follows:

... what is conceived as 'knowledge' does not and cannot reflect some 'objective', ontological reality because that is unknowable. Human knowledge, as a consequence, reflects the way in which individuals order and organise their experience of the world, using concepts which fit the situations they encounter. A characteristic of human knowledge ... is that it is subject to multiple interpretations or 'constructs' and is controversial or problematic by nature.

Erricker's thesis is that teachers who wish to be fully professional in their approach to learning 'must side with the relativists'. He describes learning as 'constructing and voicing our own fictions within a listening community'. Here Erricker has embraced what is called reader-response theory in his understanding of self-authorship, which, in its crudest forms, argues that it is the reader alone who determines what a text
means; the author is redundant. In this case the biblical text does not
determine its own meaning and a phrase like ‘the Bible teaches’ is seen
as nonsensical since the Bible teaches nothing because it is the readers
who decide what it teaches.

If these scholars’ views reflect the professional consensus, it may
seem that Bible-following Christian teachers have to make an unwel-
come choice between a professional, constructivist understanding of
learning and being faithful to their belief in the authority of the Bible.
They may therefore feel that their Christian instinct that learning entails
accepting biblical authority is in conflict with their professional instinct
to regard learning as entailing pupils ‘authoring their own meaning’.
However, I will now argue that this is a false dichotomy.

How can faithfulness to the biblical text
and self-authorship harmonise?

Part of the problem is our conception of authority. The Old Testament
scholar Christopher Wright has suggested that Christians too easily
interpret this in military terms, where the Bible, so to speak, barks
orders at us. Indeed, it is also common for critics of Bible-following
Christians to assume that acceptance of biblical authority requires this
militarist approach. However, another way of viewing the appropri-
te response to biblical authority is to understand it as faithfulness to
the text. My argument will be that Christian teachers who accept the
authority of the Bible, but who understand that in terms of faithfulness
rather than militarist obedience, will be able to embrace the idea
of self-authorship in learning (although understood differently from
the radical constructivists described earlier who depend on reader-
response theory). The problem, I suggest, comes with the militarist
conception, which entails a ‘baton exchange’ mentality to learning. This
makes outcomes like self-authorship, change in view and acceptance
of diversity of interpretations problematic and means that Christian
teachers think that they must favour a transmissionist or apologetic
approach to learning which aims at persuading their students to accept
the biblical view, rather than adopt one which respects their students
as self-authoring interpreters. In order to explore further this idea of
faithfulness to the Bible as the underpinning for a Christian view of
learning. I have drawn on the work of a number of biblical scholars, who seek to take the idea of biblical authority seriously in their work.9

Anthony Thiselton is one such highly influential scholar in the field of biblical interpretation. His concept of responsible hermeneutics, I suggest, offers a way forward for Christian teachers that enables them to draw on the helpful insights of a constructivist theory of learning whilst remaining faithful to their own commitment to biblical authority. In his view, the authority of the biblical text entails that it 'remains in control,' interrogating and constraining the reader as enquirer.10 Christopher Wright develops this idea through the analogy of making maps. He argues that a map is necessarily an interpretation of the terrain it seeks to represent, which is always drawn for a particular purpose. He comments that a map of the London sewer system would be of limited value to a tourist, because it was created to answer an entirely different need. The tourist would, however, find the famous map of the London Underground railway system of great use, as long as they didn't attempt to use it as a street map for a walking tour. His point is that every map is inevitably a distortion of what is actually there since every map is an interpretation created by a cartographer to answer a particular question and for a particular purpose. It is not possible simply to 'draw a map' to show the terrain as it is. However, returning to Thiselton's point about the Bible remaining in control, the nature of any map that can be drawn is constrained by the nature of the terrain that is actually there. A good map cannot just be a 'fiction' of the cartographer. Similarly, in interpreting the Bible, Wright is arguing that it is the text that ultimately constrains the meaning that is drawn by the biblical interpreter.11 This understanding of biblical authority allows for creativity and diversity as the type of map drawn will depend on the cartographer's interests and the function that the proposed map will fulfil, but leaves the Bible itself ultimately in control. We will return to this point later.

Thiselton explains what hermeneutics is by saying it entails asking, 'Exactly what are we doing when we read, understand and apply texts?' One of his key points is to argue that every reader approaches the Bible with a 'pre-understanding,' which he describes as 'an initial and provisional stage in the journey towards understanding something more fully.'12 So no-one reads the text totally 'objectively.' There is always a (partly) subjective process of constructing meaning or interpretation
which draws on one’s foundational beliefs, reflects one’s cultural situatedness and often reflects one’s own interests. So for Thiselton, self-authoring is inherent in responsible hermeneutics.

For many of the critics of deference to biblical authority, this postmodern insight engenders what is called a *hermeneutics of suspicion*. In a nutshell, this is characterised by a predominantly sceptical attitude which is highly critical of the notion of orthodox interpretations of the Bible, seeing them as little more than instruments of power with which people oppress their opponents by the imposition of certain pre-understandings so as to further their own interests. This was exemplified in the way that the South African Dutch Reformed Church found the justification for apartheid in the text of their Bible. Thiselton does not share this approach to the hermeneutics of suspicion, because, unnecessarily he thinks, it takes cynicism about motive and scepticism about objectivity as the *normative* attitude. Thiselton’s view is that the existence of pre-understanding is simply a fact of life, namely that we all interpret from somewhere; he argues that is not inherently threatening to the enterprise of discovering orthodox biblical truth, but it does have to be taken into account. His fundamental premise is that it is quite legitimate to operate with a hermeneutics of trust or faithfulness rather than suspicion.

What the hermeneutics of suspicion does, however, teach us is the importance of being *responsible* when we read the Bible. Thiselton therefore rejects a wholly fundamentalist or literalist approach by embracing something of the hermeneutics of suspicion. I once came across an advertisement for a Bible which claimed that it was the version which enabled you to know exactly what the original authors meant. No human interpretation, it said, was required when reading this Bible. The presumption appeared to be that it gave the reader direct access to God’s thinking. This advertisement epitomises what I mean by a wholly literalist or fundamentalist approach. Responsible hermeneutics rejects two ideas exemplified in this advertisement. First is the notion that *all* biblical texts should be read as straight transmission. Clearly some are like this; there are for example historical reports and prophetic pronouncements which operate in this way. But many others are not meant to be read in this literal way, for example poems and parables. To read them as literal is in effect to read them in an unbiblical way
because the authors never intended them to be read like that. Second is the notion that the reader is an entirely objective or infallible interpreter so that what they think they read in the Bible must, undeniably, be God’s word. Their meaning is then never contestable. If postmodernism has taught Christians anything, it is that we have to recognise that no-one is entirely objective. We all encounter biblical texts from within a perspective that is shaped by our particular experience of life and our particular cultural context. We are all, to some degree, self-authoring meanings.

For Thiselton, responsible hermeneutics consists of two activities in balance, namely the exercise of the hermeneutics of retrieval and of the hermeneutics of self-suspicion. The former, retrieval, is the task of unearthing the intended meanings(s) of the text and exemplifies two attitudes. First is a respect for the text which means that the reader cultivates humility and careful reading in relationship to the text in order to discern its intended meaning. Central to responsible hermeneutics is the assumption that meanings that can be made of texts are ultimately constrained by the results of the retrieval process. The text cannot be made to mean simply anything. Second is commitment to the wise, critical study of the background context, genre, language, symbols, metaphors, meanings and narratives of the biblical texts. In this way the interpreter seeks to retrieve the intended meaning. The latter activity, the hermeneutics of self-suspicion, entails the reader being ever aware of their, and other people’s, ability to ‘read meanings into’ texts which may do violence to the intended meaning and, sometimes, reflects the reader’s desire to find meanings which favour their own interests. The ability of the Dutch Reformed Church to find apartheid in their Bibles is a salutary warning. Christians are not immune from acting out of self-interest and for looking for reasons to justify that from the Bible.

What is a biblically-faithful understanding of learning?

Thiselton’s notion of responsible hermeneutics epitomises the attitude of faithfulness to the Bible through the creativity that I am advocating. Its significance for an understanding of Christian learning is illustrated by NT Wright’s widely-cited analogy in which he compares living under the authority of the biblical text with the task of writing a final act for
a newly-discovered but unfinished Shakespeare play. Wright asks us to imagine how experienced Shakespearean actors would go about this task. He suggests two significant insights. First, they would seek to be faithful to the authority of the narrative of the unfinished play and to Shakespeare’s wider corpus of writing. Their suggested final act for the play must be justifiably Shakespearean, a concept which acts, appropriately, as an authoritative constraint on the actors’ creativity. Their aim would be to retrieve the intended direction of Shakespeare’s story line. Second, however, they would need to be ‘self-authoring’ in writing the new text and this creativity would inevitably be influenced by their own interests and particular contextual setting and would result in a diversity of final acts for the play. However, in a discussion of the worth of the different endings created by the different actors, judgement would not just be made on the basis of the authors’ quality of creativity but also on the validity of the ending as a faithfully Shakespearean piece of writing.

Wright argues that Christians seeking to live their lives under the authority of scripture face a similar task to these Shakespearean actors. They are seeking to be faithful people of God in ‘the last act’ of the human story by living in the light of the story of God’s dealings with humanity found in the preceding acts as described in the Bible. The analogy affirms acceptance of the Bible as authoritatively God’s word, but replaces the literalist, militaristic conception of obedience to and transmission of commands with creative faithfulness to the Bible as a shaping narrative. Wright describes the skill involved as ‘improvising’, which he argues entails creativity within the constraints provided by the biblical shaping narrative. The task of Christians in their modern contexts is ‘to be conscious of living as people through whom the narrative in question is now moving towards its final destination’. In other words, it entails a constructivist, learning relationship with the text, but one which proceeds under the constraining discipline of the text in order to be faithful to its authority. This, I suggest, illuminates the concept of self-authorship and rescues it from descent into reader-response theory. If we accept the notion of responsible hermeneutics as outlined by Thiselton and as reflected in both Christopher Wright’s and NT Wright’s work, then there is creative harmony between the concepts of self-authorship and biblical authority which maintains an
appropriate balance between retrieval and self-suspicion. It is worth quoting Thiselton on Jesus at this point:

When he says: 'He who has ears let him hear' (Mark 4:9 [RSV]), Jesus means neither 'Make whatever you like of this', nor 'The meaning is fully determinate; it is cut and dried.' He invites a responsible judgement from hearers that may involve a series of revisions of understanding. Hermeneutical understanding... frequently entails long processes of listening, patience and even openness to transformation.17

A Christian concern for self-authorship means that the teacher must pay close attention to the quality of the interaction that is taking place between the Bible and the student. Christian learning is therefore a hermeneutical task. It is the process whereby Christians self-author meanings as they seek to 'write' (i.e., live out) the last act of the story of God's relationship with humanity through interpreting the biblical text in ways that respect its constraining authority. Faithfulness does not consist solely in reiterating past interpretations. New meanings can emerge as new questions are addressed to the text, new insights are discovered through critical scholarship and old interpretive paradigms are rejected if they are deemed not to be properly faithful to the text. The task has been described as creating 'forms of life that correspond to the biblical text in contemporary cultural contexts.'18

The role of Christian teachers is then to nurture responsible hermeneutics in themselves and their students. This should certainly happen both explicitly in Christian Studies and implicitly across the curriculum.19 That makes a purely baton-exchange, 'transmissionist' approach inadequate. We can agree with the constructivists that self-authorship is essential. Where we part company is if they insist on adopting reader-response theory which seemingly insists that self-authorship means people can make the Bible mean anything they want it to mean. Respect for the authority of the text means that meanings are always constrained; the Bible is in control.
ENDNOTES

1 Peter F Jensen, 'Is there such a thing as Anglican Education?' in Journal of Christian Education, Vol. 52(2), 2009, pp. 7–18.

2 R Deakin Crick and H Jelfs, Spirituality, learning and personalisation: exploring the relationship between spiritual development and learning to how to learn. Report for Advisory Board on phase 2, Graduate School of Education, Bristol University, Bristol, 2011, p. 5.


8 See my chapter 12 in this book.


10 For example, Anthony Thiselton, Can the Bible Mean Whatever We Want It to Mean?, Chester Academic Press, Chester, 2005 and Hermeneutics: An Introduction, SPCK, London, 2009, p. 8.


12 Thiselton, Hermeneutics: An Introduction, pp. 4, 12.

13 See Goldsworthy, Gospel-centred Hermeneutics for a discussion of some of the critical skills involved in this retrieval process.


15 See also Christopher Wright, 'The ethical authority of biblical social vision' in Jubilee manifesto: a framework, agenda & strategy for Christian social reform, Michael Schulte & John Ashcroft (eds), IVP, Nottingham, 2005.
16 Wright, "The ethical authority of biblical social vision", pp. 91–93.
17 Thiselton, Can the Bible Mean Whatever We Want It to Mean?, p. 17.
19 See www.whatislearning.net.au for an approach to developing a distinctively Christian curriculum which derives from this aspiration.