

78 Learning from Tim's research

My Tim is now setting up as a consultant to international schools, and he's also planning to do a PhD. It all relates to helping schools grow, develop and improve, with particular reference to the international equivalent of OFSTED [please don't switch off, this is relevant!]. I've been proofreading the papers he's presented to schools and at international conferences, and I'm really thrilled and fascinated to see how there are such strong parallels between his (secular) educational thinking and my thoughts about faith and how we grow in our relationships.

I questioned in [77] whether it was possible for Christians to learn from some of humankind's increased knowledge about how the world works and about how humans function best and to apply that to our faith journey. And why not?! Can we learn anything from educational thought?

One obvious strand from education – and we don't need to wait for Tim's PhD research – is the need for positive reinforcement: children grow and develop better if we can tell them positive things about themselves and not keep pointing out their failings. OK, educationalists will argue about whether exams are a good thing or a bad thing, but we can all agree on the need for positive affirmation, rather than concentrating on exam results, whether they have passed or failed.

More than that (and this *is* part of Tim's thesis) children need to understand that they are an important part of the school community – each and every one of them – regardless of what they can actually 'achieve'; it's about accepting who you are and moving on from there, growing and developing.

Tim takes it further and says that the whole school must be a learning community; he suggests that if the children AND the teachers AND the parents are not actively learning, then it is not a good school. So it's not about reaching certain 'standards' – whether that's the school passing OFSTED, or the children passing exams – it's about whether they are growing, whether the whole community is moving forward, and growing *together*.

In other words, it's all about relationship! I find it a thrilling vision of what a school could and should be. It's not about, 'Have we passed the test?' (OFSTED or exams), but rather are we a community, in **relationship**? And this again links with my thinking.

And this is why I think it's so important that we develop our emphasis on the positive aspects of the good news that I mentioned in [76]: reconciliation, redemption, acceptance, forgiveness, defeating evil, satisfaction for sins, restoration, rebirth and adoption.

Yes, we (and schools) need to be realistic about sin (though they wouldn't use that term!), but if we want penal substitution to be our primary way of presenting the good news then we will have to keep reminding people about our sinfulness and failure. And that God is too holy to accept us because of our sin, and that will punish us God unless we believe in Jesus. That's hardly 'positive reinforcement', is it? That's why I'd rather present the good news in the more positive and affirming ways that the Bible provides.

And again, if we concentrate on penal substitution, then once people accept their sinfulness and believe, the danger is that they stop there and say 'Great, I'm saved!' and don't go much further. To avoid this, we have to lay stress on discipleship: we need to read our Bibles (and there's never enough time, as we all know) and pray (and we never seem to do enough) and witness to friends

and family (and again we don't do that) and so it can all too easily become guilt-based, rather than relationship-based.

If instead of starting from sin and punishment, we start from relationship, then some of the other things can more easily follow – we want to read our Bibles and pray because we know that develops our relationship. Certainly, things changed for me when I 'discovered' the Trinity and found that the Christian faith really *is* about relationship. Since then (as a statement of fact, not as bragging), I have never studied the Bible so much or talked to God so much (I put it that way because I confess that I still don't do much intercessory praying) or talked to other people about my faith – the last to a fault, probably!

This stress on relationship started for me when I began to challenge the predominance of penal substitution in our thinking, and I when realised the importance that faithful questioning was a positive thing to do. And this idea of faithful questioning has parallels in Tim's work. The way he expresses it is that a school should be a research community. In other words, it's OK for anyone to challenge the way things are done and to ask if there's a better way. People can take these ideas seriously and examine how they do things, but they have to be asking 'faithfully' (my word, not Tim's); that is, they must be asking for the good of the community, not as a negative, destructive challenge to authority.

Tim is trying hard to see how they can make OFSTED into a way of helping schools to grow and develop and move forward, and not just be a distraction from the 'real work', undertaken in order to 'tick the boxes'. Otherwise there's a real danger that schools just pass the OFSTED test and then stop growing and developing their community, their relationship.

And Tim's a million miles from seeing schools as places where teachers find the answers and teach the children what the answers are. People certainly used to think that it was the church leaders' job to study the scriptures and then teach us what to believe, and how to behave. Could that even still be how we think?

Don't get me wrong, I still think that sin matters, sin spoils lives, and that there is ultimately a heaven/hell type decision, but are there ways we can have a bit more positive reinforcement in our churches?

Answers on a postcard, please.

Paul Bev. 26.6.19