

**LEARNING FROM TEACHING:
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE
LIGHT OF JAMES TORRANCE**

Jeremy Begbie, Ph.D.

**Thomas A. Langford Research Professor of Theology,
Duke Divinity School, Duke University**

jeremy.begbie@duke.edu

Abstract: *James Torrance's teaching style was in many ways outdated, and out of tune with current fashions. It is argued here that he was in fact embodying a pedagogical wisdom thoroughly in keeping with the shape and basic momentum of the Christian faith, one which ought to give us pause for thought in the current educational milieu. This is expounded in relation to his enactment of the gracious givenness of the gospel, his avoidance of totalising systems through focusing on a cluster of pivotal themes, the way in which he inspired his learners, and the sheer consistency between his professional and domestic life.*

Those of us who were fortunate enough to encounter James Torrance as a teacher will never forget the experience. By the time I sat at his feet in the late 1970s, he had developed a distinctive style of lecturing. His tweed jacket bulging at the pockets under a chalk-brushed academic gown, a battered green copy of the New English Bible at his side, he paced energetically between blackboard and handwritten notes, regularly removing his glasses to look you directly in the eye and press a point home. This was a teacher utterly immersed in his subject, and utterly determined that we were similarly immersed. He was, quite simply, captivating.

Countless teachers (including this writer) owe not only their discovery or re-discovery of the gospel to him, but their belief that teaching this gospel could be an exhilarating and fruitful vocation. There was a kind of irresistible momentum surrounding him, an unstoppable succession of teaching and learning, learning and teaching which continues to this day.

As far as his teaching method was concerned, in many respects he was out of keeping with the dominant trends of his time. Certainly in today's academy

he would come across as distinctly outmoded. There was no visual material (apart from some pivotal diagrams), relatively few handouts (again, apart from the diagrams), no explanation of learning goals or outcomes. Most noticeably, the dominant mode was the lecture — a communicative tool under sustained attack today by educational theorists. Copious research is cited to demonstrate both the supposed ineffectiveness of solo lecturing and its many dangers — in particular, the way it encourages a belief that teaching chiefly consists of the “downloading” of data, the communication of information, and the way it can foster a “top-down” authoritarianism, a lack of attention to the integrity of the learner. For James, lectures were always lectures, not open discussions or group exercises — quite literally “chalk and talk.” Seminars tended to consist largely of him speaking. And he generally taught on his own. Even in more relaxed one-to-one conversation, though immensely gracious and patient, he could not resist enthusing about what he had just been discovering or reading, always eager to explain, elucidate, persuade. He was a lecturer to his core.

And yet I want to suggest — admittedly against most contemporary fashion — that a refreshing wisdom was being exemplified in James’s practice as a teacher, a wisdom which ought to give us pause in the current educational milieu, and from which all aspiring theological teachers today would do well to learn. At the heart of this wisdom lies an extraordinarily basic yet crucial truth: that the *way* in which something is communicated is inseparable from its material content, that the process of teaching is to be determined at every point and in every way by the subject-matter in hand. This does not mean for a moment that insights from modern educational theory are to be shunned *a priori*, but it does mean insisting that whatever is being taught cannot be conveyed in ways that are alien to its nature. “The nature of the object prescribes the mode of knowing” — James used to quote John Macmurray’s aphorism frequently, in order to press home his conviction that epistemological access to the gospel was shaped from beginning to end by the content of that gospel. Just the same, surely, applies to pedagogy. The nature of the gospel prescribes the mode of teaching. That James embodied a kind of teaching thoroughly in keeping with the shape and momentum of the gospel is, I think, undeniable. It is by no means the *only* practice that could so, but it is nonetheless one worthy of sustained attention from those today who are called to teach the “faith once delivered to the saints.” I offer reflections on four characteristics of his practice.

The Truth Within?

I recall vividly once asking James about his “philosophy of education.” It was a pretentious question from a raw undergraduate, but as always he answered graciously. He pointed me to the first pages of Søren Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*, a text which he later went on to teach in a series of remarkable seminars. Here the question from Plato’s dialogue *Meno* comes to the fore: “can the Truth be learned?” If we already possess the truth, we cannot properly be said to seek it. If we do not possess it, then we do not know what it is that we seek.¹ The Socratic (and idealist) response to the dilemma is to insist that we already know what we pursue; nothing irreducibly new is or can be learned. All knowledge and thus all learning is finally a form of recollection (*anamnesis*), an unearthing or bringing to light of what is already immanent in our minds. All teaching reduces to a form of midwifery — the teacher brings to birth what lies within. Thus, as Murray Rae summarises it, “the teacher is merely incidental, and bears no essential relationship to the truth learned . . . [and] just as the teacher is accidental, so too is the historical occasion in which the truth is recollected.”² For what matters eternally is the idea or truth gained, not the person who conveyed it nor the event of its delivery.

As we might expect, James led us through Kierkegaard’s withering exposure of the theological bankruptcy of this outlook, its drive towards an atemporal, ahistorical Christology and its reduction of human learning to self-discovery. But no less important, he also embodied in practice the implications of Kierkegaard’s rebuttal. If it belongs to the very character of the gospel that its truth does not reside within us as an endowment waiting to be actualised — it both is, and *needs to be given*, through a divine initiative of unconditioned, unconstrained grace — then those who attempt to teach it can never see themselves as mere midwives, mere elicitors of what is already “there” in the depths of some supposedly primordial human nature. In Kierkegaard’s words, “if the learner is to acquire the Truth, the Teacher must bring it to him.”³ To be sure, this is not to be used as a justification for any and every form of lecturing, and certainly not of the type that is, in effect, monological and manipulative — unconcerned with the particularities of the context and condition of the learner. But it is to recognise that theological teaching will have at its heart

1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 11.

2 Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard’s Vision of the Incarnation: By Faith Transformed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 7.

3 Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 17.

the dynamic of a disclosure of something intrinsically novel, something whose origin is quite extrinsic to the world's possibilities, a *kerygma*, a declaration whose material content is discoverable only by being oriented to an action we did not and could not generate: the self-communication of God in Jesus Christ. It is hardly surprising that many spoke of the boundary between preaching and teaching being blurred in James's classes: that is as it should be.

More than this, and even more disturbing, Kierkegaard continues: "[the teacher] must also give [the learner] the condition necessary for understanding [the Truth]."⁴ This will inevitably grate in the contemporary educational climate. The view that God's action in us threatens our dignity, diminishes our freedom, is a myth that dies hard. My colleague at Duke Divinity School, Stanley Hauerwas — another hugely influential teacher — addresses the matter with characteristic punch:

As a way to challenge such a [liberal] view of freedom, I start my classes by telling my students that I do not teach in a manner that is meant to help them make up their own minds. Instead, I tell them that I do not believe they have minds worth making up until they have been trained by me. I realize such a statement is deeply offensive to students since it exhibits a complete lack of pedagogic sensitivities. Yet I cannot imagine any teacher who is serious who would allow students to make up their own minds.

"Learner-centred education" has become something of a mantra in recent times. There is something enormously important about the sentiment it represents, not least the danger of ignoring the skills and capacities of the learner, and thus indulging in a kind of oppression. However, this proper concern must not be confused with the assumption that a learner is immune to sin, intellectual or otherwise, or that apprenticeship to a teacher — someone who inhabits tradition and is radically re-shaped by it — is unnecessary.

In order to respect the learner, after all, we need to have some conception of what kind of animal this learner actually is, what is in his or her best interests. It is notable that James never did anything to imply that his students were wholly sanctified, or that "grace" was merely to be added to a spiritually intact, pre-existing "nature," or that we already possessed the requisite conceptual equipment to "make up our own minds." For him, the criteria for the recognition of revelation *as such* were assumed to be built into the event of revelation itself. God's self-gift in Jesus Christ is designed to enable the transformation, the *metanoia* that is required to learn the gospel. Bluntly put: it took a crucifixion to make theological education possible, and it takes the Spirit to make it actual

4 Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 17.

within us. Theological teaching which attempts to side-step all this can hardly be described as being “sensitive to the learner” — just the opposite. To care for the learner is to care that their humanity flourishes, and if we believe that in the last resort we are learning through the action of the One who alone has made our flourishing possible, then learning by its very nature will be a process whereby we will be re-centred outwards — turned “inside out” by the Spirit to share in the humanity of Christ. We will not be left to ourselves at any stage — intellectually or in any other respect. We will be re-made — not only *once* we *have* learned something, but in order *that* we can learn anything in the first place.

Less is more

It is something of an irony that for many years James was a professor of systematic theology but that in several important senses his teaching was anything but systematic. For example, if “systematic” is taken to imply the strict deduction of truth from a logical axiom or principle, then the term is quite inappropriate. He was famously opposed to what he saw as the revived Aristotelianism in some Calvinist schemes of salvation, in which a strict, symmetrical arrangement of light and darkness flows inexorably from a divine and inscrutable decree. He was all too aware of the danger of some Procrustean imposition of pre-existing rational forms on the substance of faith, an appeal to a supposedly neutral, ideologically pure “reason” to which even the gospel is to conform. Or again, if “systematic” is interpreted as connoting an all-embracing comprehensiveness, then we are working with the wrong category. James certainly believed in the limitless application and scope of what he taught — nothing was “out of bounds” if Christ was indeed Head not only of redemption but of the whole creation. His style differed markedly from what some might see as a more English way of doing theology, where the short essay becomes the favoured genre, and truth is, so to speak, “inched towards” rather than conveyed in large, all-embracing sweeps. James could paint in bold colours and with very broad brushstrokes. Nonetheless, there were large areas of theology about which he said surprisingly little — creation and eschatology, for example. He was not in any sense a “totalising” thinker.

On the other hand, for him theology and theological teaching were anything but disordered, haphazard or arbitrary enterprises. Consistency and coherence mattered. It was a consistency and coherence, however, that arose not from an axiom or principle but from the impress of personal reality, together with all that was bound up with that reality: Jesus Christ, God-with-us, God as one of

us, the very climax and *cantus firmus* of the Scriptural text. Christ is the one in whom all things find their coherence, the one in whom our humanity has been assumed and is, so to speak, “re-systematised” as we are united to him. I once heard Rowan Williams being asked what he wanted today’s ministers-in-training to learn more than anything else. He replied “I want them to sense the pressure out of which Christianity burst.” That is what James gave us: a sense of the explosive but glorious pressure of the gospel which erupted in the redeeming presence and activity of Jesus Christ. The coherence of his teaching flowed from the coherence of that pressure.

This gave his teaching an extraordinarily lucid appeal, not the appeal of a closed aesthetic system but the open-ended appeal of the logic of grace, the *ratio* of a divine hospitable movement enacted in a Person. Hence the gravitation in most of James’s research and writing towards soteriological themes, energised by a Christological core: the priority of grace over law, the distinction between an unconditional covenant and a conditional contract, the continuing vicarious humanity of Jesus, the giftedness of trinitarian worship. Hence also his distrust of the discrete stages of the traditional *ordo salutis*: “first justification, then regeneration, then sanctification” ...etc. For him, as for Calvin, these were all inseparable and overlapping aspects of union with Christ, something which the tidiness of popular quasi-narratives of salvation could easily obscure.

This fairly radical focus released him (and his students) from that all too common anxiety of trying to cover everything. There were many questions and issues he simply never got around to addressing, and it never seemed to cost him any sleep — something I found immensely liberating as a student. Bound up with this was a refreshing freedom from the tyranny of trying to read everything. Though he possessed a large library, the books that accompanied him in teaching were relatively few, and although he kept up with major journals, he never gave the impression of frantically trying to keep track of every development, every article, every conference, every new fashion. There was a sort of quiet confidence that if the news of the triune God of grace was caught and celebrated in depth, the things that mattered would unfold in their own way and in their own time.

Inspiration

At the risk of gross generalisation, one of the differences I have discovered between academic teaching in North America and Britain is that the ability to carry instant appeal and magnetise an audience will tend to be regarded positively in the United States, to a far greater extent than on the other side

of the Atlantic. In the UK those who generate large attendance at lectures or catch the attention of the media will tend to be distrusted, quickly suspected as being superficial, lacking the kind of weight that speaks of serious scholarship. There is also a significant stream of educational theory that is deeply wary of the individual teacher: indeed, I have often heard it argued that there is something intrinsically more Christian about team-teaching, for it models a collaborative dynamic, prevents the self-aggrandisement of the charismatic “star,” encourages the virtues of modesty, co-operation and mutual support.

The concerns here doubtless need to be heard. The pernicious effects of being immersed in an ever-widening celebrity culture have been well rehearsed by many, not least in the Church. Christian educationalists rightly warn of personality cults, blinkered perspectives, inexperienced learners being manipulated by devious rhetorical moves. However, speaking to students over the years about their theological education has made me wonder if there is not something important to be learned from those places that readily encourage the distinctiveness of particular teachers and their gifts. I have often been told, for example, about the importance of a teacher being given “space” to expound and develop a particular perspective, even if it might provoke vigorous disagreement.

In this light, I would suggest there is a place for rehabilitating the category of *inspiration* if we are to think about the role of the theological teacher today. It is almost impossible to think of James without using the language of “inspired” or “inspiring.” I have no wish to recommend a recovery of what James used to call “rugged individualism” — something he rightly attacked frequently. But perhaps we need to recover a truth well grounded in the New Testament: that there will always be some who are particularly gifted to lead others in ways that we would naturally call “inspiring,” and, moreover, that such a gift needs to be recognised, and given room to flourish.

This could well be developed in relation to a rich, trinitarian pneumatology, a doctrine of the divine Inspirer, the Holy Spirit. I can only sketch some of what this might involve. When we speak of a theological teacher as “inspired” or “inspiring,” what is it we are trying to say, and what *ought* we be trying to say, theologically?

First, and perhaps most obviously, we are speaking of a momentum of *attraction*. It belongs to the Spirit’s particular ministry to stimulate and generate in us a curiosity, a desire to learn, a keenness to “go with the flow” of the teacher. This attraction should not, of course, terminate on the teacher — this is just the danger of personality cults — but through the pull of the Spirit move us on to that endlessly attracting and attractive giving and receiving of Father and

Son, opened out to us in the humanity of Christ. (There is much talk of “desire” in theology today, especially in relation to the Spirit; perhaps rather more needs to be said about the Spirit’s appealing, attracting power, the other side of human desire, so to speak.)

In addition, second, we are probably speaking of a strong sense of the *wanting to be where the teacher is*. In the presence of those teachers we call inspiring, we are likely to want to inhabit their world, get caught up in what they are caught up in, excited by whatever is exciting them, even if we cannot grasp or understand it at the time. Jesus prays: “Father, *I want those you have given me to be with me where I am*, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.” (Jn. 17:24) Christ himself is the “place” where, as Calvin expressed it, our salvation is “comprehended,” contained; and he is the one who inhabits the trinitarian “space” into which we are invited. When we are inspired by a theological teacher, we are being “placed” by the Spirit to be where Jesus *is*: to be with the risen, human Son in the presence of his Father.

Third, in the presence of an inspiring teacher, there will be a sense of the *inexhaustibility* of the subject-matter in hand. The learner is left with a sense that there is always more to learn, more to discover, more to indwell, and — just as important — with a sense that this “more” is not paralyzing (like the sight of an impossible mountain to climb) but endlessly enriching and life-giving. This picks up on our earlier discussion of systems. I have learned much from teachers who have given me clear-headed schemes which, for example, enumerate all the biblical “data” on a particular topic, but I have gained rather more from those, like James, who make it very clear that any truth known now is but a minute fraction of the whole, a mere foretaste of what is to come, and that even in the eschaton there will always be “more than we can ask or imagine.” Again, pneumatology emerges as crucial here: for it is the Spirit whose generative movement in us engenders a sense of the limitlessness and freedom of God’s ways with us, of the gospel’s breadth and infinite possibilities, and at the same time assures us that entering and exploring that limitlessness will be, although demanding, always life-enhancing, a taste of the eternal abundance to come. Fourth, an inspiring teacher will likely leave us with the impression that *nothing can be quite the same again*. The term “life-changing” is no doubt over-used today (like “game-changing”) but it is hard not to use some such phrases when thinking of James’s teaching ministry. To the extent that a Christian teacher is caught up in the transformative momentum of the Spirit, and that person’s capacities are indeed being re-constituted in the image

of the Son, then to be “inspired” by such a teacher will mean that in principle there is no part of our lives that will not be changed.

This opens the way for a final reflection.

Language and Life

Lord, how can man preach thy eternall word?
He is a brittle crazie glasse:
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace.
But when thou dost anneal in glasse thy storie,
Making thy life to shine within
The holy Preachers; then the light and glorie
More rev'rend grows, & more doth win:
Which else shows watrish, bleak, & thin.

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one
When they combine and mingle, bring
A strong regard and awe: but speech alone
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,
And in the eare, not conscience ring.⁵

Here George Herbert (1593–1633) bears witness to the sheer absurdity of preaching, but also to its wonder. Frail and transient language gains a holy and persuasive power when God’s life radiates through the life of the preacher. The old English prayer book turns this into a prayer: “Give grace, O heavenly Father, to all bishops, pastors and curates, that they may both by their life and doctrine set forth thy true and lively Word.”

I recall vividly an evening when James was poring over a two-volume thesis of which he was the external examiner. This vast corpus of erudition was written by a young scholar named Anthony Thiselton, and was later to appear in print as *The Two Horizons*, one of the most influential books in theological hermeneutics of the last century.⁶ Key to that dissertation was the work of the philosopher

5 George Herbert, “The Windows,” in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 246–47.

6 Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980).

Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose insistence on the integration of language and “life-setting” was only just beginning to be felt in theological circles (especially in the evangelical arena). Wittgenstein made much of the embeddedness of all language in “forms of life,” social patterns of thought and behaviour of which we may be only tacitly aware, but without which language could not function and without which it can never properly be understood: “to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life (*Lebensform*).”⁷ The content, logic and force of language are inextricably bound up with conventions, traditions and habits into which we are born and which shape us at every turn.

It has often struck me that one of the things that made James so convincing as a teacher was the conspicuous consistency between what went on in the lecture room and the “forms of life” a visitor would find in his house. The language of dogmatics in the classroom was never (to pick up another Wittgensteinian term) a “private language” but rather one interwoven with a *Lebensform* he had learned through his devoutly Christian upbringing, many years of pastoral ministry, and decades of worship and prayer, and which he exemplified perhaps most obviously and strikingly when at home. Hospitality, patience, attentiveness, generosity, trust — these were the marks both of the covenant of grace he so lucidly expounded in words, and of the domestic life he embodied. “Doctrine and life” did indeed “combine and mingle” as the life of the triune God shone “within the Preacher.” And even now, this brings “strong regard and awe.”

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1953), ¶19.