

# Ten quick questions

Dr John Shortt is a former ACT Director and has organised and spoken at various ACT conferences over the years. He will be the keynote speaker at the forthcoming National Conference for Christian Student Teachers and NQTs. John is the co-author of *The Bible and the task of teaching* (2002, The Stapleford Centre), co-editor of the *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* and Travelling Secretary for the European Educators' Christian Association ([www.eureca-online.org](http://www.eureca-online.org)). In this article, he answers ten quick questions asked by Rupert Kaye.



**John, as EurECA Travelling Secretary, what do you perceive to be the biggest challenges faced by Christians working in education in Europe?**

Two stand out for me as challenges for all Christians and for Christian educators in particular. The first is the new atheism that is being promoted with such fundamentalist zeal by Richard Dawkins and others. If they say things often enough and loud enough without being challenged, people – including the children and teenagers we teach – will end up taking what they say as ‘gospel’. The second is not unrelated even though it is a challenge from within rather than without. It is the widespread dualism in the thinking of Christians that separates spiritual from secular, private from public, and tells us that

most of life and thought is unaffected by our Christian perspectives. We would be horrified to be termed ‘atheist’, but it can amount to a practical atheism in which our working lives – in the classroom as much as anywhere else – are effectively a matter of the practice of the absence of God.

**What can organisations like EurECA and ACT do to help Christian teaching assistants and teachers make a difference?**

I think we need to counter this dualism by promoting a wholeness of Christian life and thought. Our Christian beliefs do make a difference and they make a difference to everything – even the teaching of Mathematics (as some of us tried and, I think, succeeded in showing in the work we did for the Charis Project). Too few of us stop long enough to think about why we are doing what we are doing and, as a result, we fail to question the whole implicit framework that constrains our classroom practice.

**How can Christians be less constrained in the classroom?**

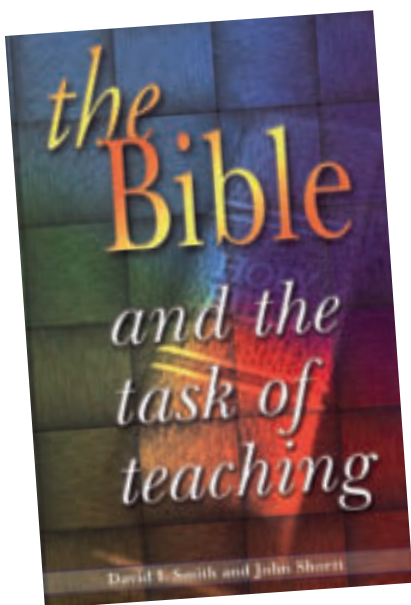
Christian beliefs make a difference to *what* we teach, but it does not stop with the curriculum. They also make a difference to *how* we teach (ie our classroom approaches) and *why* we teach (ie our aims and motivations). But it should not stop there. My favourite writer of books for teachers, Parker J Palmer, says that the most important and most neglected question is the *who* question. Who are we? Who do we teach and how do we relate to them? And, ultimately speaking, whom do we serve? The answers to these questions should transform the way we see ourselves and perceive our roles in education. The Word has to become flesh in our daily living and our relating to those we teach.

**If you could give one piece of advice to Christian students training to teach what would it be?**

I think I would say, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest books like *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of the Teacher's Life* by Parker J Palmer. How I wish it had been about when I was a student-teacher in Wall Hall College of Education, searching desperately for anything I could find that related Christian faith to teaching! Another book I would heartily recommend is Kieran Egan's *Teaching as Storytelling*, because I wish I had known as a student teacher how important story is to us as human beings, and to us as teachers of whatever subject – as it was to the Great Teacher himself.

**What have been the key highs of your career in education?**

Well, it has been a varied career, starting with work as an EFL teacher at a language school in Cambridge – amazing really because my Irish brogue was rather more pronounced then than it is now, and it must have stood out among my teaching colleagues who were generally Cambridge graduates. I then spent a year and a bit in an Asian community school in Mogadishu in Somalia (then a much more peaceful place than in recent decades), followed by a four-year BEd course (a very thorough preparation for life in the classroom) and seventeen years teaching Mathematics in a Buckinghamshire grammar school. Then, if you still count it as part of a career in education (I do!), I went to work at Stapleford House for about nine years, since which time I have been a wandering teacher across Europe (and a visiting teacher at Calvin College in the USA). Every one of these was a ‘high’ in its own way and I would not want to have missed any of them.



*The Bible and the task of teaching*  
(2002, The Stapleford Centre, RRP £9.99)

### **What were the lows?**

The time in Somalia was a tough time in many ways, not least because there was a military coup while we were there and we were told that it would be best for us to leave once our visas expired. I am not sure I want to call it a 'low', but it was not easy for my wife and me.

### **What was your PhD about?**

It was about Reformed Epistemology, but don't let the word 'Reformed' put you off. I would class my theological position as being broadly reformed but not in any sense that puts it outside the boundaries of evangelicalism. I was looking particularly at some characteristically reformed themes, eg the basicity of belief in God, the effects of sin on our thinking and knowing, and the witness of the Holy Spirit to the Scriptures, and working out how these are significant for our approach to education.

### **What were the conclusions of your PhD?**

I think one of my main conclusions and lasting convictions was that we know God intuitively through the inner work of the Spirit of God confirming to us the truthfulness of

what he says to us in the Bible. At base, it is not a matter of external arguments and evidences although these are not unimportant. In education, logical analysis can too often leave little place for intuitive knowing and the whole area of imagination and creativity. If I were writing this thesis again today, I think I would write it in a different mode, one more appropriate to the post-modern world in which we now live, rather than the modernist mode in which I worked at the time, but the central themes and conclusions would be more or less the same.

### **What is your favourite book in the Bible and why?**

I think it must be Ecclesiastes – because of the way it wrestles with the human condition. Here we are 'under the sun', trying out every way we can to find meaning and in every kind of activity we find meaninglessness. But all is changed when we remember our Creator in the days of our youth – or at any time in our lives.

### **What are your favourite hymns and why?**

There are so many! I like the best of both ancient and modern and I think both can be

truly worshipful. I like *How Great Thou Art* because I particularly associate it with my early Christian experience in the 1960s and also because it exults in the world that God has made (and I am just a country boy at heart). I like *Amazing Grace* (in spite of its ungrammatical 'we've no less days!') because God's grace is truly amazing and it found a wretch like me. I like *Dear Lord and Father* (in spite of its use of 'mankind!') because a lot of our worship and a lot of our living (and those of the children that we teach) is so full of noise and activity, and we need God's 'still dews of quietness'. And then there is *In Christ Alone* (to provide one 'modern' worship song) which says so much to me because I have no other hope for life and death. I guess one from the last three decades is about right in proportion to three from the preceding centuries! Oh, there is one more and that is *The Servant King* because I know I need to learn and relearn how to serve. I think this one is likely to be still around in decades to come when many others have been long forgotten.

■ Rupert Kaye





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