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DAVID HEYWOOD

A New Paradigm for Theological Education?

In this provocative article, David Heywood argues that the approach underlying much theological training is inappropriate, owing too much to the university and not enough to the challenges of ministry. He calls for a wide-ranging shift in the way training is conceived, away from an academic model towards a vocational model.

The death of a paradigm

Scarcely ever is a dominant paradigm overthrown simply as a result of dissatisfaction. Only when a new and more credible paradigm emerges is the previously dominant paradigm abandoned. Despite a growing awareness of the problems of Newtonian physics, the scientific community had to wait until the emergence of relativity theory before its shortcomings could be corrected.

In the same way, long-standing dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of theological training has not been enough to displace the academic or university model by which it is governed. The problems of what Lesslie Newbigin called the 'Babylonian captivity' of theology by the universities have long been recognized. Laurie Green recalls how as a young man he discovered that 'doing' theology meant reading large numbers of books. 'The clear message was that if I managed to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest all these volumes then I too would be able to sit in smoke-filled studies and debate the various theological arguments and points of view that were being propounded there. This, they told me, was what "doing theology"meant.'[1] In a sermon at the heart of academia, in Great St Mary's, Cambridge, in 1986, Robert Runcie said, 'Much of the dissatisfaction [with theological education] that currently exists comes from the belief that present patterns of training are either too academic or at least are too influenced by University models.'[2] In the following year the seminal ACCM 22 report expressed concern that, 'The need to satisfy 'ACCM requirements' may lead to a preoccupation with the academic to the exclusion of other central concerns, e.g. prayerfulness and leadership.'[3] In contrast to an overly academic approach leading to an over-emphasis on intellectual development, the authors of the report looked for a 'wisdom or godly habit of life', through which aspects of a candidate's spiritual development, such as prayerfulness, could be integrated with practical skills, such as leadership, all based on a thorough understanding of Christian faith.[4]

1 Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology*, Mowbrays, London 1990, p 3.
2 Robert Runcie, 'Theological Education Today', quoted in ACCM Occasional Paper no 22 (ACCM 22), p 9.
3 ACCM 22, para 12.
4 ACCM 22, para 46.

The report further pointed out that the academic paradigm was deficient in regard to both content and method. In regard to method, 'Little is said in the GME syllabus about educational method,' and as a result, 'Too much emphasis has been placed on the presentation and assimilation of information by lectures, with little use of methods which may bring more reflection, e.g. seminars or tutorials.'[5] In regard to content, it is the conventions of the academic paradigm leading to a 'bewildering variety of "essential" subjects' which 'lie at the roots of the present difficulties of theological education.'[6] Furthermore, the report pointed out, 'The rationale of theological education in the Church of England has never been made fully explicit.'[7] This seems to imply that the academic paradigm was adopted by default on the assumption of university-educated church leaders that no other was either possible or more desirable.

Dissatisfaction with the academic paradigm has reached a stage at which colleges and courses feel justified in experimenting with a broadening of the syllabus and a wider variety of methods. Throughout the country attempts are made to put in place a type of training which will give more attention to the practical and spiritual aspects of training. In 1995, ABM Ministry Paper 10 on proposals for mixed-mode training in the Church of England reported that the demand for change arises in part from 'the growth of confidence in practical theology, and a questioning of adequacy of traditional academic theology for ministerial education'.[8] What is lacking is a new paradigm to give direction and coherence to the kind of changes which are needed.

However, in *Anvil* 15.4, Bob Mayo reported on the presence of a new type of training existing side by side with traditional theological education at Ridley Hall, Cambridge.[9] This is a new degree course in Applied Theology and Youth and Community Work. According to Mayo, the course includes the words 'Applied Theology' in its title to distinguish it from the type of theological study which is 'solely concerned with the acquisition of information'. The key principle behind the course is that 'Christian theology is defined by application', rather than by the internal structure of the academic discipline. This principle translates into a 'praxis' methodology in which the methods of mentoring and role-modelling, discussion and debate predominate over the authoritative handing over of information. The culture of the course is to be 'interactive' and 'peer engendered' and the students to be 'creators' rather than 'consumers' of theology.

The training paradigm this new course appears to be searching for is vocational rather than academic. In vocational training, both content and methods are determined not by the internal structure of a particular academic discipline, but by the demands of the role for which the students are being trained. Mayo cites legal training as a possible comparison. He might also have referred to the training of teachers, doctors and nurses. The presence of a new course, structured along vocational lines, side by side with traditional theological education is potentially both a challenge and an opportunity for the church. It offers a comparison between two modes of training and the possibility of assessing two contrasting paradigms.

5 ACCM 22, para 15.
6 ACCM 22, para 42.
7 ACCM 22, para 21.
8 ABM Ministry Paper 10, p 4.
9 Bob Mayo, 'Training Youth Workers at Theological College', *Anvil* 15 (1998), p 287.

In fact, it may eventually pose the question, 'Is the vocational paradigm more appropriate than the academic for training not only Christian youth workers but also Christian clergy?'

The sources of dissatisfaction

To understand the dissatisfaction with the academic paradigm, we need to examine it more closely. The picture evoked by Laurie Green of smoke-filled rooms lined with scholarly tomes in which abstruse concepts are debated by erudite and learned men is an overstatement, but contains more than a hint of its principal features. The defining characteristic of the academic paradigm is that its content and methods are defined by the internal structure of the discipline as it has developed over the course of its history. The student of theology comes to be initiated into the world of theology, to become immersed in its characteristic methods and ways of thinking. She learns to read the Bible in its original languages, to apply the methods of biblical criticism recognized as valid by the academic community; she is given an overview of the divisions of doctrine or systematic theology and taught how to carry out deeper enquiry into selected topics; she encounters certain phases in the history of the church and is introduced to the history and principles of its liturgy; and so on through all the several sub-disciplines which make up the study of academic theology. The method of her initiation is to sit at the feet of established experts, either by hearing lectures or reading books and in this way soak up the required knowledge. Lectures are supplemented by seminars and discussions through which she learns the appropriate methods of debate and skills of criticism. Her present and previous experience of the church and Christian faith will count for very little; it may very well be treated as childish and inadequate, leaving her with a vague sense of loss or leading her on to an attitude of superiority. Questions of the relevance to actual situations of what she is learning will be treated as secondary; immediate application is to be suspended for the sake of learning to be at home in the complex interlocking structure of the discipline itself. The outcome of the academic paradigm is people capable of handling questions of great complexity and thus providing a rich resource to the church as it grapples with issues of theological truth.

Hitherto the unspoken assumption behind theological education has been that the way to prepare men and women to apply theology to their ministry is make them theologians. However, the level and persistence of dissatisfaction with the outcome suggests that the academic paradigm is failing to produce the goods. Zoe Bennett Moore summarizes its failings as conservatism, elitism, authoritarianism and inappropriate detachment.[10] Problems like these emerge inescapably as the down-side of the search for truth within the canons of a single discipline. The high premium on expertise means that no one may qualify to make an authoritative contribution without submission to the wisdom of previous generations. The knowledge and methods of the discipline are so well established that they can only appropriately be taught to new students by authoritative handing down. And finally, expertise and standing in the discipline is attained through increasing abstraction

10 Zoe Bennett Moore, 'Christian Education and Ministerial Education', *British Journal of Theological Education* 8 (1996), p 5.

from experience. The student's initiation aims at equipping her to handle increasingly abstract questions, which, in a field so vast, are usually to be found only in relatively narrow specialisms. Far from equipping the student to relate theology to experience, the more rigorous the academic study required of her, the more likely it is to lead her in the opposite direction.

It is worth quoting at length a passage from Gerald Collier, summarizing the shortcomings of the academic paradigm, especially as applied to theology:

> A common criticism of tertiary education is that students acquire a lot of 'book-learning', but little skill in using this learning in everyday life. Prominent industrialists, for example, have declared that many graduates fail to match up to the demands of industrial jobs ... And indeed Christian workers in the field sometimes claim that the study of academic theology not only divorces one's thinking from the problems of the communities one is supposed to serve, but channels one's intellectual effort toward books and speculation.
>
> Book-learning has always tended to diverge from the demands and experience of daily life; but this tendency has been enormously increased during the twentieth century by the extraordinary explosion of knowledge ... Most of the problems which the academic world deals with are generated and solved within the subject disciplines themselves. The careers of teachers in tertiary education today depend more and more on their achievement in research, and on the reputation they gain among senior fellow workers in other institutions and other countries. Thus teachers have become more and more preoccupied with research, and students have become more and more intimidated by the volume of knowledge crowding into their syllabuses.[11]

Collier's criticisms hint at an even deeper drawback of the academic paradigm in the life of the churches. People tend to teach in the way they have themselves been taught. The minister who has experienced theology as a subject to be authoritatively handed down is likely to present it to her congregation in the same way. If her own experience has been treated as irrelevant in the process of Christian formation, she in her turn may well discount the experience of her hearers. Unprovided with tools by which to apply to experience the theology she has so diligently set out to learn, she may be unable to help others to explore their faith or to apply it in everyday experience. The effect of the academic paradigm on clergy as learners may be equally deleterious. As Gerald Collier points out, students trained in the academic paradigm frequently fail to learn higher order skills such as self-directed learning, invention, communication skills and, crucially, application to new situations. 'One of the most frustrating things in ordination training', writes Michael Williams after sixteen years experience, 'is seeing people pass through a two or three year programme of studies where they enjoy the debate, relish new ideas, learn new skills, but after six months into ordained ministry they revert to the same set of beliefs and ministerial practices that they had on day one of the course.'[12] The question to be asked is whether the failure of students to transfer what they have learned on their courses to the world of ministry is the fault of the students or of the manner of their training.

11 Gerald Collier, *A New Teaching, A New Learning*, SPCK, London 1989, p 18.

12 Michael Williams, 'Theological Education and Ordination Training', *British Journal of Theological Education* 8 (1996), p 22.

Adults learning

The shortcomings of the academic paradigm are emphasised by comparison with the fast-growing study of adult learning. Increasing job dislocation and consequent need for retraining, the growth in the number of women joining the work-force, growing recognition of the need for keeping skills up to date and a greater accessibility of training opportunities are leading to a significant increase in the number of adults making use of formal learning situations geared explicitly to their needs. Meanwhile within the Church of England, more and more dioceses offer Bishop's Certificate or equivalent courses in Christian understanding and flexible training schemes for a variety of lay ministries. In both the secular sphere and in Christian training outside the colleges and ordination courses, training tends to be based on the recognized ways in which adults learn best. As long ago as 1982, ACCM Occasional Paper 11, 'Learning and Teaching in Theological Education,' was prepared by a working party made up both of people involved in ministerial training and in adult education in the Church of England. Its central section, 'The Learning Process,' reads like a brief inventory of what ministerial training could learn from its lower-status cousin, including observations such as, 'The primary question a teacher must ask is not, "How do I teach?" but "How do people learn?"' and, 'The conventional order in which material is presented in many books is seldom the best order for studying it.'[13]

Increasingly, lay training, represented by such teachers as Yvonne Craig and Liz Varley, recognizes the place of the 'learning cycle' in the teaching and training of adults.[14] The four elements of the cycle are:

- *Experiencing:* seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, interacting with others, leading to...
- *Reflecting:* taking note of things that seem significant; questioning why things happened in just the way they did; considering consequences and implications; all of which leads to...
- *Conceptualizing:* working out explanations; using ideas to make sense of observations and reflections; developing general principles; leading to...
- *Action:* testing out the implications of a new understanding; trying out new approaches; making experiments. Action is the source of new experiences, and so the cycle continues.

Learning experiences typical of adult education pay attention to each of the phases of the learning cycle, giving participants the opportunity to experience, reflect, draw general conclusions and apply their conclusions to experience in the form of plans for action. In comparison, learning events typical of the academic paradigm consist of only one or at the most two phases of the cycle. The knowledge passed on from professor to student consists overwhelmingly of concepts. The reflecting phase of the cycle is included where these concepts are adequately illustrated, but rarely is the student given the opportunity to develop concepts of her own through reflection on experience or to test them in action.

13 ACCM Occasional Paper 11, October 1982.

14 Yvonne Craig, *Learning for Life*, Mowbrays, London 1994. Liz Varley, *Catching Fire*, Bible Society, Swindon 1993.

Adult educators emphasize the importance of the students' existing experience as a resource for their own and others' learning. Jenny Rogers relates the experience of a teacher trainer:

> My most enjoyable classes have always been with the mature women students who want to take up teaching after rearing their families. They simply will not accept pat theories and glib statements about child development because all the time they are asking, 'Did my children do that?' or 'Was that true when my children were four?' Whereas a twenty-year-old will write it straight down in her notebook, the mature woman always pauses to weigh and consider against her own or other people's experience. She always sees the 'ifs' and 'buts'. In these classes, by relating the students' experience to the general view, I feel we finally create a tremendously lively and complex view of child psychology. They bring a depth and humour to rather dry theories which young people could never attain.[15]

Again, effective learning takes place through experience. Rogers again:

> Imagine that you are a non-driver and you want to learn how to drive. There are three methods open to you: to go to a lecture where a tutor tells you how to do it, to watch a skilled driver at work, or to practise in a real car with a teacher at your side. Would you have any hesitation about which method to choose?...
>
> Ask yourself, as a test, what sticks in your mind as the outstanding pieces of learning you accomplished at school... college or university. My guess is that you are unlikely to nominate sitting at the feet of a 'great teacher'. It is far more likely that you will immediately remember your part in a particular school play, a project, a trip abroad, an experiment you conducted on your own... all of them active pieces of learning where you were in the centre of the effort.[16]

Without an understanding of the specific learning needs of adults, it is easy for teachers in the academic paradigm to feel bewildered by the mature students who come to them for ministerial training. But if these students are to learn to relate theological truth to their own experience, to create 'tremendously lively and complex' views of the world in which they are to minister, it is vital that these learning needs be fully addressed.

A vocational paradigm

The evidence suggests that the academic paradigm is failing to produce ministers with the range of skills required to relate their theology to experience and help others to do the same. The inherent weaknesses of the academic model as a mode of learning suggest why this might be the case. The fact that the academic paradigm was adopted uncritically without a theological rationale further suggests that the time is ripe for a reappraisal. To return to ACCM 22, the report set out a series of questions, the answers to which were to form the basis for any proposal for a training course:

15 Jenny Rogers, *Adults Learning*, 3rd edn, Open University Press, Milton Keynes 1989.

16 Rogers, *Adults Learning*, pp 40f.

- What ordained ministry does the Church of England require?
- What is the shape of the educational programme best suited for equipping people to exercise this ministry?
- What are the appropriate means of assessing suitability for the exercise of this ministry?

Reflection on the connection between the first two questions reveals that the report calls implicitly for a vocational paradigm of training. The defining characteristic of the vocational paradigm is that the scope of the training is governed by the requirements of the profession or vocation for which the students are being prepared. An educational programme designed specifically to equip people to exercise ordained ministry must, therefore, be a vocational programme. Furthermore, the report defined the requisite outcome of ministerial training as 'a wisdom and godly habit of life' through which intellectual, spiritual, moral and practical aspects of ministry would be integrated.

The vocational paradigm aims at practical knowledge, not at the trivial level involved in knowing, for example, how to organize oneself for a wedding or funeral. The practical knowledge involved is the whole 'How to...' of exercising Christian ministry. Like teachers and nurses, clergy are trained for a specific vocation, requiring a range of professional skills. But the education of nurses and teachers involves far more than training in appropriate skills. Nurses receive a grounding in anatomy, physiology and pharmacology, become conversant with public health legislation and learn to understand institutions. They are taught how to co-operate with related specialists, such as physiotherapists and occupational therapists, and encouraged to work out care plans for their patients by seeing them as whole persons. Teachers must have a thorough grounding in child development and philosophy of education as well as their chosen subject area. As well as teaching technique, they learn the use of resources and classroom management. Their course may also include the history of education and comparison between the education systems of different countries.

All this is comparable to the way a course of training for the ministry includes everything from theology and church history through biblical studies and spirituality to preaching and the conduct of funerals. The vocational aspect of ministerial training is no more limited to how to prepare for a funeral than nursing training is limited to making beds or teacher training to preparing a lesson plan. What is of fundamental importance is that the various elements of ministerial training, the intellectual, spiritual and practical, be organized vocationally, with the aim of producing competent practitioners. As Michael Oakeshott observes, '"Practical" knowledge cannot be learned or taught prior to the activity itself but only acquired by practice in the activity. [In the sphere of public action] what has to be learned is not an abstract idea or set of tricks... but a concrete coherent manner of living in all its intricateness.'[17]

What would be the effect of the vocational paradigm applied to theological training? First, in regard to its methods, the amount of lecturing would be drastically reduced. Since the vocational paradigm aims at producing practical knowledge, the

17 Michael Oakeshott, quoted in Collier, *New Teaching*, p 16.

mere handing on of information would take a secondary and very much a servant role. As Bob Mayo points out, 'a two hour lecture on the philosophy of education and the doctrine of atonement will not prepare a youth worker to demonstrate the range of skills and awareness needed to start a conversation with a group of young people on the basis of some casual contact at a bus stop.'[18] But this is a commonplace in adult education. The traditional lecture is most useful in passing on straightforward, non-controversial information; confirming beliefs or reinforcing attitudes; and persuading the almost persuaded. Where these are required, talks or lectures have their place. Where people need to be stimulated to thought or reflection, inspired to action or challenged to rethink their attitudes, other methods will be more appropriate. The immense amount of time freed by the drastic reduction of lecturing would be used in the vocational paradigm for methods which enable the learners to reflect on and draw conclusions from their own experience, such as brainstorming, questionnaires or discussion; immerse them in deliberately structured experience, such as games or role-play; or give them experience on the ground, such as practical placements. Reading and other methods of taking in information would be carefully related to the other activities of the learning cycle to ensure that conceptualization is firmly tied in to reflection and action.

As regards content, in the vocational paradigm this would be firmly tied to the demands of ministry. According to ACCM 22, these are an intelligent grasp, both intellectual and spiritual, of the fundamental features of God's activity in the world; an intelligent grasp of the polity and life of the church and the abilities necessary to build up its ministry; and an informed knowledge of the affairs of the world.[19] The report also expressed the view which appears to be on the way to becoming the church's official position: namely, that the task of the minister is to 'animate' the corporate ministry of the church by 'focusing', 'collecting' and 'distributing' it in the service of God's activity in the world.[20] ABM Policy Paper 3a on the Criteria for Selection for Ministry lists the following tasks of the minister: prayer; communication of faith; leadership; teaching and preaching; pastoral work; exercise of authority and giving of counsel; conduct of worship; and administration.[21] Leaving aside the question of whether one person can reasonably be expected to perform all these tasks adequately, it is noteworthy that none of them derives from the internal structure of the discipline of theology. None of them could be expected to emerge as a by-product of the academic study of theology. Rather, a training course intended to equip students with these skills must focus on teaching them precisely these skills and helping them to integrate them into a 'wisdom or godly habit of life'.

The content of training offered in a vocational paradigm would be organized around the requirements of these tasks and skills. A 'unit' of training might focus not on a given theological topic but on a particular area of ministry. An example might be death. This unit might encompass both what Christians and what people in contemporary society believe about death; the process of bereavement; the pastoral care of the bereaved; the liturgical structure of the funeral service; the conduct of a funeral service; and the possible outline of a local church's ministry

18 Mayo, 'Training Youth Workers', p 291.
19 ACCM 22, para 38.
20 ACCM 22, para 29.
21 ABM Policy Paper 3a, October 1993, p 56.

to the bereaved. It draws on observation of contemporary society, systematic theology, liturgy, and skills of pastoral practice, education and leadership. Another unit might centre around initiation, and might include the theology of salvation; the theory and practice of evangelism; the history and *raison d'être* of confirmation; the doctrinal and pastoral pros and cons of admitting children to communion before confirmation; the history of baptism and baptismal liturgy; issues around baptism preparation and baptism policy; and perhaps an outline of a local church's ministry to the families of the newly baptized.

A third unit might centre on the skills of leadership, identified as an important task of the ministry but rarely addressed in theological training. It might include skills of teamwork, management and delegation; vision building and working to a vision; and would clearly include a study of power, so integral to Christian faith and yet rarely recognised as a distinct division of Christian theology or even ethics. For a final example, the skills of teaching and communication, as well as being explicitly required as elements of the course, might also stimulate a study of Jesus as a teacher and lead to reflection on a variety of practical and theological questions: Is God disclosed to us through authoritative teaching or by grappling with experience? Are people natural learners - will they look for God on their own account or do they need carrots and sticks to get them to learn? Should we be training people for the church as it is or the church as it might become? Do we want people to fit into roles and fulfil the needs of ministry or to challenge and question inherited ways of doing things? Is our role to pass on the riches of Christian inheritance, the Bible and tradition or is it to help people discover God in just relationships, risk-taking and caring community? Should Christian education be helping individuals on their personal spiritual journey or should it help to build the church as a loving, serving community?

Things can only get better

An old and failing paradigm whose time is past is rarely superseded on the basis of disappointment and disillusionment alone. What is required is the opportunity for comparison with a new and potentially more effective paradigm. That is why the experiment at Ridley Hall has such potential importance for theological training. Based on insightful methods and firm commitment, there is every reason to believe that Bob Mayo will succeed in producing youth and community workers well taught and well able to apply theology to the problems and situations of young people in the third millennium. But if so, how long will it be before someone in a position of influence points out that what applies to youth workers applies equally to ministers of all kinds? Like youth and community workers, the ordained church leaders of tomorrow will need to be practitioners of a variety of skills. They too will need to be able to apply their theology, to challenge congregations to work out their faith in their home and work situations. Could it be that they too will need a vocational rather than academic training? I, for one, wish the new course every success, not only because it will produce the youth workers we need for the next century, but because it may demonstrate, in the heart of academia, a more effective way of training all the church's ministers.

The Revd Dr David Heywood is vicar of St Paul's Edensor, Stoke-on-Trent, in the Diocese of Lichfield