

Formation for Enabling Ministry, Stage 3

Interpreting Aims and Learning Outcomes for Enabling Ministry

Subject-Centred or Life-Centred Learning?

In the previous units in this programme, we have come to recognise that everyday faith, ministry and theological scholarship form separate though related practices. As practices, each has its own tradition and goals, each its own standards of excellence and each is learned in a community of practice. Thus, although there is a high degree of overlap between the concerns of everyday faith and those of theological scholarship, their goals and standards of excellence are not the same. Nor is the very meaning of the term 'theology' the same for these two practices. For everyday faith, theology is a 'habit of the human soul', a cognitive, affective and behavioural response to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, bound up with a 'social imaginary' in which Jesus is Lord of all the spheres of human life. For theological scholarship, theology is a self-conscious academic discipline, which employs the tools of intellectual enquiry to explore the Church's tradition of faith and practice.

It is quite possible for one person to be a member of multiple communities of practice and in the case of Christian discipleship, ministry and theological scholarship, this is almost always the case. Virtually every Christian theologian would also think of themselves as a disciple, as of course would every Christian minister, and some may belong to all three communities. However, the goals and standards of excellence that they pursue as members of one community will be different from those in the other community or communities. Perhaps the most outstanding example of this is the difference between the way Scripture functions in the life of the Church when compared with its place in theological scholarship, an issue the Church is still some way from resolving despite the millions of words written on the subject.

The situation poses a specific problem for subject specialists in ministerial formation. When you engage in the study of your discipline, reading, researching and writing papers, you will be using as your reference point the standards of excellence internal to the practice of theological scholarship. However, when you engage in activities related to ministerial formation, such as designing learning, teaching and marking assignments, you need to be working to a different reference point: the standards of excellence that belong to the practice of ministry. To give just one example, the academic community tends to place most value on the ability to demonstrate understanding by communicating with a specialist audience, the audience of theological scholars. But the most valuable skill for ministry is the ability to communicate with a non-specialist audience. In most cases, this is a far more demanding task, both for the student, who may be asked to design a resource for others in preference to a straightforward essay, and for the tutor marking it. In fact, the prevalence of the standard academic essay as a means of assessment for ministerial formation may be unconsciously intended to make life easier for theological educators rather than to serve the church.

Although the idea of a university originated in the Middle Ages, the traditions and goals that guide the contemporary university date back to the Enlightenment and are usually traced to the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810. Accordingly, since then the work of the university has been guided by the epistemology of the Enlightenment, in which 'real' knowledge is understood to consist of a complex, multi-faceted and inter-related theory. The task of the university is to refine that theory through the work of research, to initiate people into the world of theory-making through a university education and to influence the life of the wider world through dissemination of the knowledge gained through research.

According to this model, 'practice' is the application of theory, from which it follows that knowledge of the theory equips the practitioner for the practice. This understanding is embodied in the architecture of the university in the form of lecture theatres, where students are inculcated with largely theoretical knowledge. In the case of ministerial formation, the assumption that theological scholarship forms the essential knowledge base for the practice of ministry has led to a strategy in which a student's time in college or seminary is seen as the stage at which the theoretical foundations are laid, ready to be built on once the student begins their ministry. One correspondent of mine offered a musical analogy, in which 'ministerial training is perhaps best understood as learning scales, notes and music theory for a lifetime of musical improvisation.'

In fact, her analogy provides an excellent illustration of the fact that practice is *not* simply the application of theory. It is doubtful whether anyone has ever learned music in the way she suggests. Typically, people learn the rudiments of music through learning how to play an instrument. In other words, they first engage in the practice, learning the theory as they go. And this reflects the real nature of knowledge. We now know that the Enlightenment view of the nature of knowledge is a gross over-simplification. Real knowledge is not held in the form of abstract theory but rather in the form of the practical know-how required for participation in practices.

The minister sits at the intersection of three practices: ministry, everyday faith and theological scholarship. One of the principal tasks of ministry is to draw on the traditional theological disciplines, Old and New Testament, Doctrine, Ethics and Church History, to nurture everyday faith. However, these disciplines inhabit the 'high ground' of defined problems and precise answers whereas ministry takes place in the 'swampy lowland' of messy and confusing everyday problems. To be expected to learn the disciplines for their own sake proves disabling for ministry and especially for a ministry whose goal is conceived as enabling everyday faith. Rather, ministers in training need to engage with Scripture and Christian tradition in ways that equip them to enable discipleship and mission.

In other words, their learning needs to be life-centred rather than subject-centred. Ministers learn 'pastoral imagination' most effectively when the horizon of their learning is the practice of ministry. They are not helped when the horizon in view is the purely scholarly pursuit of learning. And as we have seen, this requirement matches the approach of adult education, in which the emphasis is on learning rather than teaching, on practical application rather than storing up knowledge for future use, and in which the learner remains in control of their learning.

The challenge for subject specialists, therefore, is to teach our subjects in life-centred ways, to teach theology as 'habitus' rather than scholarly discipline, in tune with the methods of adult rather than higher education.

Approaching Aims and Learning Outcomes

Many institutions continue to express the aims and learning outcomes of the courses they offer in ways that draw on the traditions of higher education, mixed with the aspiration to equip their students for the practicalities of ministry. In other words, they continue to embody the assumption that the traditional theological disciplines provide the theory required for the practice of ministry.

In the UK, the Church of England's Common Awards programmes are modifications of traditional programmes of academic theology in the direction of application to ministry and discipleship. They therefore occupy a rather ill-defined middle position between the 'high hard ground' and the 'swampy lowlands', between theology as an academic discipline and theology as 'habitus' or 'social imaginary'. This is embodied in the aims and learning objectives of many of the modules, which express *both* a subject-centred orientation to the discipline in question *and* a desire for application to ministry and discipleship.

We will take two of the modules from the Common Awards programme as examples. TMM 1131, Introduction to Christian Doctrine and History, expresses its aims as follows:

- To offer students a broad introductory overview of the history and doctrine of the church.
- To show students how particular Christian theologies exist within their historical, social and cultural contexts.
- To introduce students to theological sources from different periods of Christian history.
- To excite a passion for historical and doctrinal thinking and equip students for further study at level 5.
- To encourage students to begin to integrate critical thinking about doctrine and history into their own spiritual formation and ministerial development.

We note that these aims are expressed in terms of what the teacher will teach rather than what the learner will learn. Moreover, they embody the assumption that ministerial students must first be initiated into the practice of theological scholarship, and even develop a passion for further study, while the ability to apply their knowledge in personal spiritual formation and ministerial development is something to be 'encouraged' rather than the principal purpose of their learning.

This assumption then leads to a subject-centred teaching strategy in which the introductory level of study offers a 'broad overview' of the subject area. In practice, this content-centred approach often means presenting students with vast amounts of detailed information only marginally related to the purpose for which they are training and for which they have no prior context. In the light of the learning in this programme, we can see that this is a poor strategy, entirely inappropriate for adult learning.

The same tendencies are visible, albeit not to the same extent, in TMM 1031, Introduction to the Bible, for which the aims are expressed as:

- To enable students to have an overview of the purpose and content of the Old and New Testament, and representative texts within them, placed within their broader contexts.
- To enable students to become familiar with and evaluate the concepts, principles, methods and tools of modern scholarly biblical interpretation.
- To enable students to consider how these texts might be engaged appropriately and faithfully in the life, mission and ministry of the church today.

- To enable students to recognise and engage with questions and insights for faith raised by this study.

In contrast to the aims for Doctrine and Church History, these are expressed from the point of view of the learner. Moreover, they seem to place engaging with biblical texts in the context of the church's life and mission and recognising the questions and insights for faith that emerge from Scripture side-by-side with acquaintance with scholarly procedure.

Both modules represent a hybrid approach that seeks to retain the traditional subject-orientated approach to the discipline while allowing the importance for ministry and mission of applying the Bible and Christian tradition to issues of life, faith and ministry. However, neither can be said to be well-adapted to equip ministers for an enabling style of ministry.

What then can the subject specialist do if he or she desires to teach in a life-centred way in which the horizon in view is the learners' future ministry? Since there is little prospect in the short term of revising the aims and learning outcomes for the module, the answer is to *reinterpret* the aims and learning outcomes in a way that expresses the goal of enabling ministry. For TMM 1131, this might look something like the following:

- students can describe a variety of ways to draw on the history and doctrine of the church to resource them in the practices of Christian discipleship and ministry
- students develop a passion for drawing on history and doctrine to resource their understanding of issues relating to Christian ministry and the spheres of everyday life
- students gain a sense of the outline of church history and the development of doctrine
- students become familiar with a selection of historical sources from different periods of Christian history
- students can explain the ways that selected Christian theologies exist within their historical, social and cultural contexts

And for TMM 1011:

- students develop the ability to draw on the Old and New Testaments to reflect on issues in discipleship, mission and ministry
- students can recognise and engage with questions and insights raised for the practice of Christian faith by study of the Bible
- students grasp a sense of the overall narrative of the Old and New Testaments and can place representative texts within their broader context
- students become familiar with and evaluate the concepts, principles, methods and tools of modern scholarly biblical interpretation

These alternative lists are not a departure from the official module outlines. In both cases, the content of the original aims has been retained. However, they have been re-expressed to place students' ability to draw on these subject areas to resource mission and ministry, including everyday faith, at the heart of their learning. The order of the aims has been altered to place this ability first, with the other aims serving that over-arching goal. Knowledge of the 'broad outline' of the subject areas has been made to serve the more important goal of being able to draw on a selection of the content with scholarly integrity (with the overview of the purpose and content of the Old and New Testament re-expressed as a grasp of the Bible's 'grand narrative').

It is necessary to make the same adjustment when it comes to the learning outcomes, bearing in mind that students are required to fulfil these to gain their qualification. For TMM 1131, these are as follows:

By the end of this module students will be able to:

Subject Specific Knowledge [SSK 2]

- Investigate and describe competently one or more major areas of Christian doctrine.
- Investigate and describe competently one or more major developments in church history.
- Discuss intelligently some key issues in contemporary Christian thought about these areas of doctrine and history.

Subject Specific Skills [SSS 3]

- Describe how aspects of Christian doctrine and history can be appropriately related to experience and practice in the context of discipleship, mission and ministry.

Key Skills [KS 1, 2, 3]

- Identify, gather and evaluate source materials for a specific purpose.
- Evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches, communicating their findings sensitively and respectfully, showing self-awareness about their own beliefs, commitments and prejudices.
- Carry out a guided task that involves: independent inquiry; management of time and resources; using IT; meeting deadlines; evaluating the task and learning from it

And for TMM 1031:

By the end of this module students will be able to

Subject Specific Knowledge [SSK 1]

- Discuss diverse Old and New Testament texts intelligently and place them within their broader contexts.
- Demonstrate knowledge of some of the underlying concepts, methods and tools associated with the study of the Old and New Testaments.

Subject Skills [SSS 1]

- Identify the context and genre of selected biblical texts, and comment intelligently on their significance for the texts' interpretation.

The Key Skills are the same as those for TMM 1131.

One of the problems in both cases is that some of the aims are not represented in the learning outcomes: in the case of Introduction to Christian Doctrine and History the desire for passionate commitment to the subject area, and in the case of Introduction to the Bible application to life and ministry. Although these may not figure in the final assessment, they cannot be allowed to go absent from the classroom. In adult learning, it is essential both to honour the students' goals (in this case, to be effective in ministry) and to retain an awareness of the ultimate purpose and immediate relevance of the learning. It is necessary, therefore, to teach to the aims, as reformulated in the teacher's mind, as well as the learning outcomes.

Moreover, as in the case of the aims, although the rubric for Common Awards allocates equal value to each of the learning outcomes, the subject specialist who wishes to equip her students for ministry will distinguish between the different learning outcomes *in her own mind*, allocating priority to those that serve the ultimate goal of the learning. In general, this means bearing in mind at all times the ‘So what?’ question: ‘What is the application of today’s learning for ministry?’ and carefully defining the objectives of each learning session and learning task with this in mind.

Learning Tasks for Enabling Ministry

To give an example, suppose the topic for study is the two creation narratives that appear side by side in Genesis 1 and 2. The study of these texts potentially fulfils all the learning outcomes of the module: placing the texts in their broader context, identifying their genre and using appropriate tools to interpret them. But the objectives for the learning session will need to range more widely, encompassing questions about the purpose of the texts in their context and their interpretation for today. They might be expressed as follows:

As a result of this session, student will be able to:

- describe the genre of each of the creation narratives
- explain the purpose of these texts in their contemporary context
- explain and compare the theology expressed in each
- describe how they would draw on these texts to resource Christian discipleship

Using a flipped learning approach, in which students engage with the information content of the session in their own time and class time is used for more demanding levels of learning, the session might be designed along the following lines. One element of learning design absent from this example is timings for each of the learning tasks. This is because these will depend on variables such as the context in each institution and the size of the group.

Task 1: Responding to God the Creator.

An ‘inductive’ learning task to help students become aware of their existing knowledge, feelings and values about the topic.

Make a list of the ways in which you think your life is affected by your belief in God as Creator of the world. If you are now in residential training, extend the list to include the ways your working life prior to training was influenced. How satisfied are you with your list?

Task 2: Responding to the biblical creation narratives

This is the first stage of engaging with the information content of the session, allowing students to bring their existing knowledge and skills of biblical interpretation into play.

Read carefully the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a and Genesis 2:4b-25. What features of these two accounts stand out for you? What differences do you notice between them? What questions do you wish to bring to the learning session? Make full notes on these and any other questions you think may be relevant to bring to the session.

Task 3: Who wrote these texts and why?

Having prepared the ground with the previous two learning tasks, the student is now invited to engage in in-depth study of the topic. The objective is that they are equipped to explain the origin and purpose of the texts in question.

The teacher will specify passages from commentaries and other texts that address these questions. When I was teaching Old Testament to people training for lay ministry in the 1990s, I might have asked them to read Norman Gottwald's The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction, sections 13.1, 13.4, 49.1 and 49.2. Old Testament specialists may like to substitute some alternative reading. You may also decide to signpost the Bible's third creation narrative, those references to the cosmic sea-monster that crop up in passages like Psalm 74, and the perfect miniature summary of Hebrew anthropology that occurs in Psalm 8. Reading alone is not sufficient, however. Students will need some questions for reflection to focus their attention and prepare them for the session.

Make notes on the following:

- What do you find most interesting in this reading?
- What questions does it raise for you?
- How would you summarise the theology of each of the creation narratives? Write a short paragraph for each.
- How would you describe the potential impact of these ways of understanding the world for discipleship in contemporary society?

Task 4 (in the face-to-face session): What are we dealing with?

This task prepares the ground for the detailed discussion of their learning so far by introducing the concept of the 'creation myth' in a way that requires students to work with it in creative ways.

Ask students: 'If you had to give an account of the origin of creation on one side of a piece of paper, what features of the world would you choose to include?'

'What media would you use to do it? Art, poetry, story, scientific description, etc?'

Ask them to discuss the answers to these questions in small groups. Take a sample of the responses from the groups. Ask for observations comparing the class responses to the content and genres of the Genesis narratives.

Task 5: The theology of creation

This task focusses on students' understanding of the texts. It prioritises the purpose of the texts over text-critical issues, so that these are placed in the context of application to ministry.

Ask students to share their summaries of the theologies of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Record the key features of the theology of each on separate flipcharts. The teacher may comment or challenge if appropriate.

Provide time at the end for students to modify their own account of the theologies if they wish.

Task 6: What questions arise?

This task now focusses on the text-critical issues that may have arisen from students' individual study.

Ask students to contribute the questions that their reading of the texts and commentaries raised for them. The teacher may suggest some that students ought to have recognised, thus

ensuring that the text-critical issues are covered. Identify together the key questions or groups of questions. Divide the class into small groups to discuss each of the main questions identified.

After brief group feedback, ask each group, 'How would you go about investigating the answer to that question more fully?' with contributions from the class.

Task 7: What difference does it make to believe in creation?

Having reflected on the texts and drawn conclusions, the session moves on to the fourth phase of the learning cycle: application.

Ask students to share their answers to the fourth of the bullet points in task 3, writing these on the flipchart. After a selection of answers, ask the students to discuss in small groups what points they would make in a sermon on one of these passages.

There are several observations to be made on the design of this learning session:

- The teacher supplies almost none of the information content directly. Instead, she acts as a facilitator of learning, using her expertise in the subject to signpost the most helpful reading and design the learning session.
- The students are in control of their own learning throughout. This is achieved through the use of open questions exploring their response to the information content and encouraging questioning.
- Space is included for students to become aware of their previous relevant experience, in this case the way belief in divine creation has affected their lives to this point and their existing skills in biblical interpretation.
- Space is included for students' affective responses and the personal impact of the learning.
- All four phases of the learning cycle – experience, reflection, conceptualisation and application – feature in the design of the learning session.
- There is plenty of opportunity for students to try out new insights with others and to learn from others.
- All the learning outcomes for the module are fulfilled and the relevance of biblical scholarship affirmed.
- The learning is placed in the context of the major 'So what?' question to arise from the passages in question: 'What does it mean for Christian discipleship to believe in a divine Creator?' thereby creating a direct connection with everyday faith.

In addition to all these points, this session illustrates a way to draw on biblical scholarship to resource everyday faith. The key is to focus on the theology and purpose of the texts in question. As Joel Green remarks, foregrounding the theology of the texts creates a link across the centuries between the writers and compilers of Scripture and the contemporary student, which spans the cultural distance between them.¹ This is achieved without ignoring the way the texts functioned in their original cultural context. In fact, it provides a concrete exemplar of the relationship between biblical scholarship and the way the Bible functions in discipleship and ministry.

The twin insights behind this approach are these:

¹ Joel Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.

1. The reason that any text of Scripture was originally spoken, written or recorded, and included by the editors or compilers in the books as we now have them was to answer the question, 'What is the outward form and inner character of a faithful response to God in our situation?' This means that the Bible may justifiably be understood as theological reflection, taking a variety of different forms. It is traditionally assumed that the earlier of our two creation narratives is part of the 'J' source and was the creation of the wise men of Solomon's court. In that period of confident internationalism and openness to the other cultures of the Near East, one can imagine these scholars collecting the myths of the surrounding culture and rewriting them to reflect Israel's characterisation of God and guide its common life. Likewise, the priestly writers of a later age created a narrative to commend, in Gottwald's words, 'a stable cult in a stable cosmos.' This approach to the Bible as theological reflection demands an account of the situation for which the texts were written precisely to make their theology available in the contemporary context.
2. For most texts, there are indications of what Umberto Eco called the 'model reader'. This is the reader whose interpretation of the text echoes that of the author who originated it (and in the case of Scripture compiled and edited the text). Green suggests that our willingness to put ourselves in the position of the reader to whom the text is addressed is the key to reading the Bible as Scripture: for example, to see ourselves as the 'twelve tribes of the dispersion' whom James addresses, that is God's chosen people in exile and awaiting restoration; the 'exiles of the dispersion' of 1 Peter, 'chosen ... destined ... sanctified ... and obedient to Jesus Christ,' or the reader of John's Gospel willing to believe that 'Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.' Who might the 'model reader' of Genesis 1 and 2 be? Perhaps someone like the writer of Psalm 8, looking in awe at the universe God has made and wondering about the place of women and men within it.

To summarise, the subject specialist in ministerial formation will not approach their teaching role in the same way as they might in the university context. They will not be seeking to induct students into the practice of theological scholarship but rather to make the Bible and Christian tradition available to resource the practices of ministry and everyday faith. This is achieved by reinterpreting the module aims and learning outcomes in a way that prioritises practical application to ministry. In this context, the teacher's authority is not that of the expert inducting students into the pursuit of the discipline, but their skill in facilitating the learning of theology as 'habitus', something that cannot be learned through instruction but only through practice.

David Heywood, February 2023