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*The face of theological and religious studies education in Britain is changing rapidly. In this final article, Bill Campbell, Associate Director of the PRSLTSN in Lampeter and editor of The Journal of Beliefs and Values*

*, gives a personal account of one experienced teacher's adaptation to the new circumstances he has faced.*

The higher education landscape in Britain has changed enormously in the last few decades. Previously, the average undergraduate class had a large majority of students who had very recently or immediately graduated from school — leaving examinations to enter university or college. Gradually, access to higher education has been widened to include entrants with nontraditional qualifications, enabling mature and retired people to enter the system more easily. In recent years, colleges and universities with courses leading to teaching qualifications for state (i.e. public) schools have attracted many more women. The outcome for higher education is a huge increase in part-time and distance-learning students. This represents a great opportunity for religious studies, and these are issues of particular importance to the PRS-LTSN.

Another major change in the student population has been the increasing ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, especially in inner-city areas. It is no longer wise for a lecturer to assume knowledge of the background or family circumstances of a student group. This enormous diversity includes Muslims and Hindus from various parts of the world and divergent strands of faith as well as diverse Christian, post-Christian, and humanist or atheistic students.

I have found that the only expectation I can have of my students is that they be committed to the study of religion, whether or not they might ever wish to practice it. It is an interesting experience to teach Christianity to people of several religions within the same student group. This experience has taught me that it simply is not wise to expect knowledge to be generally shared across the group. Our student groups are now much more diverse in terms of age, culture, and religion.

I have taught Biblical studies for many years to students in university and church related colleges in various parts of the UK and in a diversity of degree programs. I have gradually developed pedagogical techniques to assist delivery of courses. More recently, I have had the opportunity to teach non-traditional students in Open and Distance Learning modes (ODL). This

has meant a considerable rethinking and modification of both my approach and the subject content. I have developed a case study involving the teaching of a module on Paul's letters over a period of twenty weeks. To enable comparison and contrast, I taught the same module concurrently to two very different groups. The first was a normal undergraduate group taught twice each week whilst the other comprised only mature and parttime students taught once per week at a site far distant from the university campus. The following pedagogical reflections originate from my previous experience of teaching, as modified by specific considerations arising from the needs of mature/non-traditional ODL students.

### **Presuppositions and Starting Point**

#### **Presuppositions about our Students and How to Teach Them**

In teaching a "normal" undergraduate class in Britain, one used to be able to assume a certain basic knowledge and skill level, despite the variety of examination boards mediating the transition from school to university. But with nontraditional mature students, where does one start? Should one proceed from the general to the particular, or vice versa?

My decision is normally to start with the particular, providing minimal background information of the first century Hellenistic world whilst concentrating on introduction to biblical texts. Sociologically, Paul may be a first century man, but it is his distinctiveness that distinguishes him religiously. It is on this that I choose to concentrate. Of course, one must study Paul in his historical, geographical and cultural context; otherwise we would be looking at religion in a vacuum, as if spirituality were entirely independent of earthly realities such as religious community, traditions, and political setting. Even in a short course or module, however, it would amount to failure in teaching religion or theology if we succeed only in giving students a good grounding in Hellenism alongside a poor understanding of Paul's letters. The pattern of teaching biblical studies in the UK has broadened considerably in the last thirty years, sociologically, historically, and in interfaith. While insights from areas such as these may be useful to our discipline, as teachers of biblical studies we are not teaching sociology or even ancient history.

### **The Presuppositions of the Students**

Good pedagogy begins where the students are. This means taking account of their presuppositions. Biblical studies, even in a (so-called) post-Christian British context, encounters inherited attitudes towards the Bible. In the case of some mature students with a life-long commitment to the church, the Bible is not just another textbook but a resource for spiritual nourishment, a guide to ultimate values, and perhaps even the very words of God. Other mature students may not share this perspective because they are not Christian. Even if they are,

students may have a negative reaction to Paul's letters because they regard him as authoritarian. Students with feminist awareness may tend to identify Paul with patriarchal oppression, and Jewish students may regard him as an apostate from Judaism.

My response to these presuppositions is to insist on *an historical approach to biblical texts*. I start by asking the students to read a particular letter, noting and perhaps even underlining in the text those verses that refer to identifiable historical places, people, and actions. This exercise attempts to subvert a purely spiritual or theological approach to the text, encouraging critical analysis rather than merely devotion or cynicism arising from inherited assumptions.

"Starting where the students are," in the case of mature students, also means taking into account their previous experience. Even though all human experience in relation to any world religion can be a useful communication bridge, this must be related specifically to the biblical text. Otherwise, one finds the class taken up with long and irrelevant accounts of personal narrative. Personal experience of religion is valuable and has its legitimate role, but it must not prevent a real encounter with the text being studied. The intention in stressing the historical approach is also to point the students toward a literary approach, seeing the letters as narrative, and studying the interaction of the characters within the narrative. More mature students have an advantage here: their varied experience gives them a broader basis for comparison, and an understanding of human relations and emotions.

### Course Construction

In the presentation of any course, a basic decision is whether *quantity or quality* of teaching content is the more important. Too much detail early in the course is counterproductive, especially where the module content is completely new; some students unfortunately think they must remember every detail and then "can't see the wood for the trees." The intention in this module was to give a brief but sufficient introduction to the main issues involved in the study of Paul's letters as Biblical texts. I decided to limit myself to one topic per week, thus dividing the module into twenty constituent parts. This meant that some topics could not be included. I had to think very carefully about my criteria for inclusion or exclusion.

The basis for my selection was that the texts not be studied merely because they are central and significant for Christianity, but also because they have the potential to introduce a methodology of studying other texts that we did not have time to consider in this module. Thus the emphasis was on quality of work done rather than on quantity. Philemon, despite its brevity, can prove to be an excellent introduction to Paul's letters, demonstrating many of the qualities of the longer letters.

In order to assist students towards independent study, I provided summaries of the lectures, and a listing of the relevant Biblical texts. Wherever possible, I limited these summaries to 500-750 words, with an absolute maximum of 1,000 words. The purpose was to provide students with a summary of the main issues substantive enough to introduce them to the topics, but not so detailed as to be too complex. For greater depth of understanding, a very precise but limited reading list was included at the end of each lecture summary.

Surprisingly, despite innumerable scholarly works on Paul, I found none that really suited the type of student and form of teaching I wanted to adopt. Some students come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and many also do not have easy access to good library facilities. I came to realize that one easy way to provide appropriate materials was for me to summarize relevant sections or chapters of books that I knew the students could easily understand and use. I also provided access to articles of my own — in electronic form as well as in hard copy — for which I had distribution permission.

### **Sequence of Lecture Topics**

In view of the fact that students and I met only once a week, the sequence of lecture topics was crucial. If I introduced a particular topic early in the course, I would have had to give a certain amount of explanation that would have been unnecessary had lectures on other related topics already been given. The sequence of presented material also has another significance. To some extent, it determines the model of Paul that one wishes to present (community founder, pastor, charismatic, teacher, theologian, etc.).

Early in the course, therefore, I gave an overview of what we can with reasonable certainty know of Paul's life and activity in the general context of contemporary events in the first century Hellenistic world. This had the effect of stressing historicity, of depicting Paul as a founder of communities, and thus of emphasizing what he did rather than what he taught. It also had the effect of contextualizing Paul's teaching in real life social situations rather than in an historical vacuum.

### **Gaining an Understanding of the Content**

Once provided with some introductory skills and a minimal historical framework, students were ready to study the text in accordance with perspectives already acquired. They now needed to investigate in more detail why a particular text was first created, and for what purpose. In the Paul's case, it is possible to discover from his letters from where they were sent, the reasons for

sending, and even, to some extent, the nature of the audience for whom they were intended. Recommended reading at this point included standard Biblical commentaries with a good historical introduction, so that students were made aware of the interaction between the occasion of the document and its content.

Two major issues arise here. First, a general presupposition amongst students of Christian cultural background is that they tend to regard Paul's statements as theological rather than historical. Second, partly resulting from the first issue, his statements are seen to be of universal application rather than relating to particular communities and contexts. It is important to stress this particularity when people of other faiths are participating in order to make clear that, when Paul offers criticisms, he is addressing his own converts and not adherents of other religions.

By considering Paul's statements in context, students can discover that what he says, to a particular community at a particular moment in its history. This can be aptly exemplified by noting that whilst in the letter to the Galatians Paul says that if they accept circumcision they will sever themselves off from Christ, in Romans he admits that circumcision indeed is of value for those who keep the law. Theology in fact emerges in the form of pastoral advice as Paul reacts to the needs of particular communities. These localized and particular statements do not allow generalization. Popular and traditional attempts to outline Paul's theology have tended to generalize across the particular letters by means of an artificial harmonization. (The presupposition here is that pure theology, being of an absolute quality rather than historically and contextually relative, can never be self-contradictory.)

A basic misunderstanding to avoid is the perception that Paul's statements are capable of universal application. Nineteenth century New Testament scholarship, influenced by Hegelian philosophy, was prone to contrast the universal with the particular — to the lasting detriment of the latter. This had the effect of devaluing Judaism because of its particularity. Incipient anti-Judaism was thus promoted in that Judaism was viewed as a primitive tribal religion and Christianity as the universal religion. Hegelian influence has in fact encouraged a dominant tendency to regard Paul's statements as of universal application, so that what he says in one letter must be in accordance with other statements elsewhere. Students must be alerted to the particularity of Paul's letters in order to subvert this tendency with its resultant anti-Judaism and parallel preference for absolute truth statements.

### **Desired Outcomes**

The intention in the planning such a module was to introduce students to the study of Biblical texts in such a way as to encourage independent learning through the use of limited and

relevant reading. It was also designed to avoid the promotion of simplistic stereotyping. If Christianity is taught in contrast to its Jewish origins, the result is an unwarranted sense of Christian superiority. The strategy employed in the teaching of this module was designed not only to avoid this negative outcome but to prepare students to be tolerant citizens of the multifaith and multicultural society that Britain is today. As a Biblical studies module, it sought to give a brief but basic introduction to a particular group of Biblical texts in such a way that what was learned has real validity, and does not have to be relearned when progress is made to greater depth of understanding.

The approach outlined above is very much my own, developed out of my own experience of teaching. I would very much appreciate the interaction of other colleagues who have developed different approaches or who are critical of my proposals. The Philosophical and Religious Studies Learning and Teaching Support Network exists to encourage such interaction.