

**A Prophetic Witness to Christian Higher Education:  
Faith-Learning Integration in the Field of Ministry and Missions**

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At first glance, the task of integrating the Christian faith into the field of Ministry and Missions seems either trivial or unnecessary. After all, isn't the content of the faith already at the center of a discipline devoted to training men and women to serve as full-time ministers in the church? Sometimes faith integration does come naturally in our discipline. For example, it would be difficult to find a professor or student of Christian ministry who did not know that all ministry activities should be done in Christian love as modeled and taught by Jesus. Yet beyond such easy integrations, at least three major challenges remain.

First, the academic discipline of Christian ministry is interdisciplinary, drawing especially on theology and the social sciences, but also on other disciplines ranging from history to business. Professors of Christian ministry need to show their students how to weave together this diverse material to inform sound ministry practice. They must do so without doing violence to any branch of human knowledge, but also without allowing unbiblical assumptions or truth claims to stand. As a result, the faith integration process becomes even more complex and challenging than usual, and requires professors of Christian ministry to modify the reigning paradigm of faith-learning integration.

Second, students come to us not only with a weak grasp of the Bible and theology, but also with an unreflective, pragmatic approach to ministry. This mental paradigm poses a challenge to the professor who wants students to be more discerning about the many fads that come and go in the popular ministry market of books, magazines, and seminars. Despite the obvious connections between theology and our discipline, we must work hard to convince and equip students to become practical theologians.

Finally, the field of Christian ministry faces both internal and external tensions regarding its identity and place in Christian higher education. Internally, the field seems to be in an identity crisis as professors of Christian ministry debate the nature and direction of their field. There seems to be real danger of fragmentation or at least of competing intellectual centers that make it difficult to send a clear message to students. Externally, the structure of the liberal arts university and the attitudes of some faculty

in other disciplines force professors of Christian ministry to grapple with how well our mission and intellectual commitments fit into the reigning paradigm of Christian higher education. The strengths of the modern research university have clearly improved the field of Christian ministry by pushing us to draw on insights from many disciplines and by inspiring us to pursue a more rigorous and comprehensive research agenda. But the benefits of this creative tension between the ideals of the modern university and those of the field of Christian ministry go both ways. At its best, the field of Christian ministry can serve as a prophetic witness to what Christian higher education might become if it achieved more integration across the curriculum and between the intellect and the other dimensions of the human person.

### **Challenge #1: The Dominant Faith-Learning Integration Paradigm**

Despite ongoing debates and diversity of opinion among Evangelical Christian scholars, there have emerged in recent years the outlines of what might be described as a dominant paradigm of faith-learning integration. The architects of this paradigm assume that academic disciplines normally operate using methodological naturalism. As a result, religious beliefs and practices are either ignored or unwelcome in most disciplines, except as objects of study to be analyzed using naturalistic methods and assumptions. Thus the task of faith-learning integration is to bring the insights of an intellectual discipline into constructive dialogue with the intellectual content of the Christian faith. At times the Christian scholar will discover points of agreement between the two bodies of knowledge, at other times apparent contradictions will emerge that need to be resolved in some way. Christians operating under this reigning paradigm attempt to create intellectual work that is informed by Christian perspectives but that remains accessible to all scholars in their field because it plays by the rules of the discipline. In some exceptional cases, Christian scholars may redirect or reconstruct a field of knowledge along lines suggested by their theological convictions (Hasker, 1992; Holmes, 1987; Litfin, 2004; Marsden, 1997). Pedagogically, professors at Christian colleges strive to equip their students to think about the subject matter of their discipline in light of God's revelation. Christian faculty members also hope their students will achieve an intellectual integration of knowledge across the disciplines in light of Christian faith (Holmes, 1987; Huntington University, 2005b). The phrase "Christian worldview" is sometimes employed to describe the

content of the faith that is put in dialogue with other bodies of knowledge, and sometimes used to describe the overall shape of the Christian mind which integrates all the branches of human knowledge in light of faith (Colson and Pearcey, 1999; Holmes, 1987; Naugle, 2000; Walsh, 1992).

As an interdisciplinary field that arose out of the marriage of theology and educational theory, the field of Christian Education or Religious Education (now called “Ministry and Missions” at Huntington University) does not quite fit this dominant paradigm of faith-learning integration, although many of its elements can be constructively applied with some modification. Unlike most modern disciplines, the discipline of Christian ministry does not marginalize the content of the faith, but gives it a central place. As a result, scholars in the field of Christian ministry do not typically need to justify their use of theological insights, although they may still run into trouble if they try to speak to audiences from the opposite end of the theological spectrum. But theology does not necessarily dominate this inter-disciplinary field because by its nature the discipline draws on insights from many realms of human knowledge. On the one hand, this ongoing mix of multiple academic disciplines with theology is beneficial because it makes faith learning integration almost inescapable. On the other hand, professors in our field do not have the option to “play by the rules” of one discipline while occasionally incorporating theological insights. Which set of rules would we follow?

Even though the discipline of Christian ministry is inherently theological, naturalism can still enter through the back door as professors and students draw on knowledge from other disciplines. Compounding this problem is the fact that professors in the field do graduate work in a variety of disciplines and have varying levels of graduate training in theology. So both professors and students have their work cut out for them as they must do many little integrations of faith with material from many different intellectual disciplines. One difficulty that arises from this situation is that the professor may not know the other disciplines well enough to competently apply their insights and play by their rules. Another danger is that professors and students might too easily accept the insights drawn from another discipline without fully analyzing them in light of the faith. At other times, the temptation is to accept only those insights that confirm preconceived notions and too quickly reject those that don’t fit the individual’s theological understanding. At a more basic level, some students need to be convinced that learning from other disciplines really is valuable for their ministry preparation.

## **Addressing Challenge #1:**

### **Adapting the Dominant Faith Integration Paradigm to an Interdisciplinary Course**

I face the challenge of adapting the dominant faith-learning integration paradigm to an interdisciplinary field every spring semester when I teach Contemporary American Youth Culture. The goal of the course is for students to understand why teenagers behave as they do, particularly why their collective behavior takes the forms it does. In order to explain such a complex reality, I draw on psychology, sociology, media effects research, and theology. Together we attempt to integrate insights from all of these fields to create a picture of adolescent behavior that will help youth ministers become more effective in helping young people come to faith and grow in Christ.

I begin the course with a unit on the media and its impact on adolescents since most people think of this topic when they hear the phrase “youth culture.” We discuss definitions of “culture” and “youth culture” developed by anthropologists and other social scientists. We study H. Richard Niebuhr’s typology from his classic work *Christ and Culture* and use it to categorize different ways Christians use the media (Niebuhr, 1951). Most of my students easily grasp the idea of “Christ against culture” as it applies to media use and can give many examples from their experience. They also easily understand the “Christ of culture” concept, but they typically miss the many ways that we all adopt this approach in our media use. The “Christ above culture” and “Christ and culture in paradox” categories are typically much harder for my students to grasp and apply, and in fact, I too find them less useful for most practical applications. Whatever their theoretical salience, these two categories don’t help us identify or evaluate particular Christian practices for media use. For this reason, I tend to use Niebuhr’s categories as modified by Philips and Okholm (2001) in their book *A Family of Faith*. They eliminate “Christ above culture” and replace “Christ and culture in paradox” with the “conversionist model” in which Christianity influences society primarily by converting individuals who then act as leaven in their various roles and vocations. Although most of my students have been formed in this “conversionist” paradigm, they are typically most attracted to the “Christ the transformer of culture” model. One of my tasks becomes pushing them to grapple with the distinction between the “conversionist” and “transformationist” models. An activity is only operating in

the “transformationist” mode when Christians are working to transform the systems or structures of society. If an individual is just “playing by the rules” of their profession and witnessing by example, that is not the transformationist model, but rather the conversionist model.

Teaching this course has alerted me to the strengths and weaknesses of Niebuhr’s typology of Christ and culture, a typology which has influenced both my thinking and the broader conversation about faith-learning integration. Niebuhr provides a helpful starting point for thinking about the issues involved in faith-learning integration because he shows us a range of possible theoretical approaches to the interaction between Christian theology and the myriad elements of human life and culture. But in practice, Christians tend to pick and choose from among his categories, depending upon which element of culture they are addressing, and his typology does not provide much help for discerning which situations allow for a “Christ of culture” response and which might demand a “Christ the transformer of culture” approach. In addition, Niebuhr structured his categories to favor the transforming approach and to devalue the “Christ against culture” approach. This bias in the typology reinforces some weaknesses in my students’ thinking about Christianity and culture. Sometimes they are too quick to label any Christian activity as transformative, when in fact many ministry practices are merely creative adaptations to culture designed to entice more people to attend church functions. At the same time, they devalue taking a stand against culture and teaching young people to live a truly countercultural way of life because this strikes them as too separatist and not transformative. The result is the predictable mix of Christianity and youth culture vices that we see in many Christian youth ministries, a syncretism that inhibits lasting spiritual impact on the lives of young people. As John Howard Yoder has argued in his critique of Niebuhr, it may be that one of the best ways to transform a culture is to live in Christian communities whose distinctive way of life provides a prophetic witness against the culture’s sinful ways (Stassen, Yeager & Yoder, 1996).

At this point in the course, my students tend to vacillate between overly positive and overly negative views of media and their effects, and in that way, they reflect the larger American Evangelical culture. Next I have them read a relatively optimistic textbook chapter on media effects that draws exclusively on the “uses and gratifications” model (Arnett, 2001). In class, I present other more sobering theories of media effects such as priming and persuasion. For each model of media effects, I note the strength of research findings supporting that type of effect and we discuss examples. In light of the

relatively modest claims made by most media effects research, we discuss the overblown rhetoric found in many church circles regarding the impact of media on youth. My students learn to take a critical stance toward such rhetoric. At the same time, we discuss the possibility that media effects research may not be able to measure the spiritual impact of immoral content on teenagers. We face together the theological imperative implied in Philippians 4:8. If God calls us to think about pure and noble things, then it is wrong and spiritually harmful to flood our minds with immoral sounds and images, even if dramatic, direct behavioral effects cannot be proven by the methods of the social sciences. Thus, although we “play by the rules” of media effects research to critique irresponsible talk about media corrupting teenagers, we also use theological and biblical insights to remind ourselves that important aspects of reality lie outside the boundaries of social science media research. In order to teach this material on media effects responsibly and avoid the pitfalls of interdisciplinary faith-learning integration, I worked my way carefully through a textbook on media effects (Bryan & Thompson, 2002). I have also attended conference sessions on media effects and continue to read literature in that field.

As the course progresses, I continue this pattern of many “little integrations” of faith with the content of particular disciplines. As we discuss each area of adolescent development and culture, we evaluate developmental theories in light of biblical theology. For example, when we study identity development, we evaluate Erik Erikson’s idea of “autonomy” as well as James Marcia’s four identity statuses from a theological point of view (Arnett, 2001; Muus, 1996). According to these key architects of identity theory, healthy development includes a period of questioning of values and beliefs and results in an individualistic state of “autonomy.” But in light of the biblical witness, is this time of “moratorium” truly necessary or spiritually healthy? Is the goal of Christian identity an individualistic independence from God and others? Is “autonomy” a modern American cultural value, rather than a Christian character trait? Discussing questions like these helps students see that while the psychological concept of identity helps us understand an important process that really takes place in adolescence, such concepts must not be accepted without passing them through the filter of biblical theology. More positively, I provide students with a list of biblical concepts I call “Theological Resources for Identity Formation” (Appendix 1). We use this document to launch a discussion about how youth ministers can contribute to Christian identity formation in the lives of adolescents.

Even the selection of textbooks in this course is designed to model interdisciplinary faith-learning integration and to give students guided practice in that process. For each topic of adolescent development and culture, we read two different textbooks that use contrasting methodologies and assumptions to arrive at divergent portraits of youth and their culture. Most recently I have used Chap Clark's book *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*, an ethnographic study of a high school in southern California, and Jeffrey Arnett's *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: a Cultural Approach* (Clark, 2004; Arnett, 2001). Clark takes a generally pessimistic view of the current state of teenage culture, finding a "systemic abandonment" of youth by adults. In contrast, Arnett, like most authors of adolescent psychology textbooks, tries to emphasize normal, healthy and "resilient" adolescent development. We read these two texts side by side and discuss their differences with regard to sexuality, peer relationships, identity, and other key aspects of adolescent development. This approach provides a perfect opportunity to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative research methods as well as the way an author's goals and assumptions shape his or her conclusions. As a Christian author who writes his book for a general audience and leaves his advice to youth ministers in an appendix, Clark also provides the class an opportunity to experience and evaluate the reigning paradigm of faith-learning integration. We typically conclude that while Clark may be right that many teenagers feel hurt and abandoned, there are many others who do not feel that way and so we cannot proceed from the assumption that every teenager fits his profile. We also find that by relegating ministry applications to an appendix, Clark makes it more difficult for his readers to know what to do about the problems he identified in his research.

Ideally, my students walk away from the course better prepared to know what to do with the next compelling but overstated portrait of teenage life that they read. They learn that they must do their own ethnographic work by getting to know the youth to whom they are ministering and must not rely exclusively on qualitative research done by other people in other parts of the country. Most of all, they learn that to be a youth minister is to operate at the intersection of many different branches of knowledge and that each of those branches of knowledge must be used responsibly. For their final project, students research a youth culture problem area and create a training presentation that could be given to parents or youth ministry volunteers. Their presentation must use both social science research findings and biblical theology. In this way they practice the interdisciplinary approach to youth culture that we have used in the

course. One student recently used his presentation on suicide to train volunteer youth workers at the church where he was serving for his PRIME internship. The volunteers who attended the session told me they were impressed with his grasp of the material and found his presentation challenging and informative.

### **Challenge #2: The Dominant Student Paradigm**

Ministry and Missions students typically arrive in my classroom with a low level of theological literacy and a pragmatic, individualistic approach to ministry. In the most comprehensive research ever done on the religious lives of American teenagers, sociologist Christian Smith (Smith & Denton, 2005) and his team of researchers found that most teenagers are extremely inarticulate about their faith. Even teenagers who are heavily involved in religious activities and who say faith is very important to them seemed unable to say much about the content of that faith. To them, the biblical vocabulary was a foreign language that they seldom used in interviews. When asked why religion was important to them, most answered that God helped them with their problems, particularly by helping them deal emotionally with those problems. While there are exceptions, many of the freshmen in my Foundations of Christian Ministry course or in my Understanding the Christian Faith course fit this portrait.

If biblical and theological illiteracy was the only problem, the solution might simply be to send them over to the Bible and Religion Department to be brought up to speed, and indeed we do require our students to complete nineteen credit hours of Bible and theology courses. But even if we could require an entire Bible major in addition to our ministry courses, the problem of unreflective pragmatism would still remain. When presented with a ministry case study and asked what should be done to improve the situation, students in my Foundations of Christian Ministry course typically leap immediately to tinkering with different techniques that might address the problem. Seldom do they pause to reflect upon biblical or theological principles that might be relevant to the situation. Usually there is an implicit theology behind the pragmatic action steps they propose, but this theology is simplistic and rarely if ever brought into their conscious deliberations. On more than one occasion, my students in Foundations of Christian Ministry have asked regarding our study of biblical principles for ministry, “Why do we have to study this stuff?” To them, all that need be known about ministry is the imperative to love others. Simply be nice to people

and compile an effective bag of tricks, they believe, and one will be ready to make a difference for Christ in the world.

Unfortunately, such pragmatism is rampant in the world of Christian ministry. Many popular ministry books play fast and loose with materials drawn from other fields like psychology, history, sociology, or business. There is a marked tendency in Christian publishing for authors to seize on techniques or ideas that seem to “work” or to be compatible with their own predilections, while ignoring both complexity and competing theories. For example, a telling moment in the documentary series *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* occurs when host Randall Balmer asks a pastor from Willow Creek Community Church if the church’s heavy use of business terminology causes him any discomfort. The pastor replies that he is totally comfortable with it because the church has not “tampered with the timeless truths of the faith” when they have described their “target marketplace person” as someone to whom they must market a “product” (Norridge & Balmer, 1992). As this example suggests, it is crucial for us to help our students become critical thinkers who can examine such ministry practices more carefully.

As if theological illiteracy and pragmatism did not pose enough challenges to faithful Christian ministry, students also come with an individualistic faith and understanding of ministry. The goal of ministry for them is to love individuals and help them come to Jesus. They do not know that God intends to create a people, a body, a new humanity and that this corporate purpose is part of salvation. For them, the church exists to help individuals grow in faith, in a similar way that a health club exists to help the individual lose weight. Even worse, they sometimes view the church as an institution that does more harm than good by hurting people and getting in the way of their individualistic spiritual development. Similarly, they see baptism as an optional way for the individual to express how he or she feels toward God, not as a rite of incorporation into the body of Christ.

## **Addressing Challenge #2: Communal, Applied Theology**

In order to address the challenges posed by the dominant mental paradigm of Huntington University freshmen, I have adopted a communal, applied theological approach in both my Foundations of Christian Ministry and Understanding the Christian Faith courses. In Foundations of Christian Ministry, I shape the course around training students to apply biblical principles of Christian ministry to case studies. Three foundational questions provide the framework for the course: “What is the church?” “What does it mean to be a Christian?” and “What is Christian ministry?” I intentionally begin with the church, because I want to encourage my students to realize that the purpose of Christian ministry is to build up the church, not just bless individuals. Over the course of the semester, as we learn about and apply theological concepts like “the people of God,” “fellowship,” and “shepherd,” students realize that God’s plan is for them to build up the church, to contribute to His plan of salvation—a project that includes creating “a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14).

This emphasis on the church as the object of God’s plan and love is not simply a response to my students’ individualism. Rather, it comes from my formative years as member of an ecumenical, intentional Christian community movement called the Sword of the Spirit. From leaders of that movement, most notably Stephen B. Clark, I came to believe that individualistic Christianity is seriously deficient and does violence to the witness of Scripture. Clark asserted that Christians should live a different way of life than the commonly accepted patterns in society, including different customs and standards for key areas like courtship, roles in marriage, use of the tongue, and child rearing. But what Clark added to this common idea was a conviction that in modern America, a distinctively Christian way of life could probably only be achieved at a high level by intentional Christian communities of men and women who explicitly covenant themselves together to share a common way of life (Clark, 1972, 1984, 2003).

As a result of living for eleven years in intentional Christian communities and sitting under Clark’s teaching, I have come to believe that the biblical ideal of Christian community should be central to ministry practice and faith-learning integration. Jesus came not just to save individuals, but to create a people, a new Israel, a new humanity drawn from all races and nations (Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Ephesians 2:14-16). Becoming a Christian and getting baptized is not just a transaction between the individual and Jesus, but it is an incorporation into the church (1 Corinthians 12:13). Christian growth cannot happen apart from the body of Christ, which connects the individual to the life of Christ (1

Corinthians 12:7, 14-26; Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 2:16-19). As I tell my students, if you cut off your finger, it will not live for long, and the same is true of the individual believer and the church. But Christian community is more than a means to an end; it is of cosmic significance. The church is the “fullness of him who fills all in all” and is described as the body and bride of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23, 5:22-32; Colossians 1:15-20). The church is intimately and permanently connected to the king of the universe, the second person of the trinity. As such, it is infinitely valuable, and not simply an optional resource for individual spiritual development.

When confronted with apparent conflicts and contradictions between Christian faith and other realms of human life and thought, I habitually ask, “Will this idea or practice strengthen biblical community among followers of Jesus or weaken it and in what specific ways?” Another helpful question is, “Does this idea or practice promote a communal or an individualistic understanding of faith, ministry, and the kingdom of God?” For example, one of the dangers of the business terminology and the management techniques that have come to dominate some quarters of the church growth movement is that these ideas and practices do nothing to counteract the individualistic consumerism that is one of our culture’s vices. Individualistic consumers find it difficult to behave like members of the body of Christ as described in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12.

The way this plays out in class is that students read Scriptures and textbook material on different biblical descriptions of the church—for example, “the body of Christ.” We then apply that material to a case study of an interracial church that is experiencing tension between its white and African-American members. If members of the body are supposed to have “the same care for one another” (1 Corinthians 12:25) and all races are “baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13) what are the implications for how the people of this church should behave toward one another? We repeat this process in almost every class period, applying foundational biblical concepts to ministry case studies. At the end of the course, students are assigned to groups and are given a ministry case study. They create a team presentation that uses material from the course to analyze their case study and to propose solutions based on biblical principles for ministry. By the end of the course, students have begun to realize what is lost when they skip over the step of biblical study and theological reflection when trying to solve ministry problems. In the process, they have also taken a step forward in practical theological literacy.

One case study that works especially well to help my students see the need to overcome their theological illiteracy, pragmatism, and individualism is called “The Case of the Liberated Leader.” In this case, a youth pastor gets a tattoo, wears an earring, and begins coming to Sunday worship with ragged clothes because he is reaching out to local youth on Sunday morning. Members of the church protest his new appearance. When confronted, the youth pastor lashes out, criticizing the adults in the church. The church fires the youth pastor (Lawhead, 1996). This case study forces students to grapple with their own individualism, their developmental need to explore their identities and be “cool,” and their reluctance to value the church. In order to solve the case, they need to understand and apply the biblical material on freedom, the “weaker brother” and meat offered to idols (Galatians 5:1-13; Colossians 2:16-23; Romans 14:1-15:7; 1 Corinthians 8, 10:19-32). They need to realize that even if the church was wrong in the way it treated this youth pastor, he was not justified in lashing out against others. He also showed disregard for the church and its leadership in the way he unilaterally decided on an approach to reaching out to the neighborhood kids. Because this case study touches so closely on their lived experience and developmental identity issues, it is especially suited to exposing ways that they have swallowed an unreflective, pragmatic, and individualistic approach to ministry.

It is not just ministry majors who need to practice how to articulate their faith and apply it to everyday situations. For similar reasons, I use a similar approach in my Understanding the Christian Faith classes. As we work through a basic set of beliefs associated with historic Christian orthodoxy, we apply each concept to a case study drawn from the Internet. In each case study, a real person is writing about his or her heterodox religious beliefs on our topic for the day. I put the students in groups of 2 or 3 to discuss how the orthodox Christian beliefs on, for example, the divinity of Christ compare and contrast with what the case study author believes. Over the course of the semester, each student writes two papers which build upon two such class discussions. Each student is forced to articulate what orthodox Christians believe on a topic and accurately compare and contrast that view with an unorthodox view. Students tell me that this exercise helps them to explain their faith more clearly and confidently to friends and family members. By articulating their faith and explaining how it differs from similar beliefs, students learn both the content of their faith and how it makes a difference in the real world.

### **Challenge #3: The Christian Higher Education Paradigm**

Does a department of Ministry and Missions belong in a Christian liberal arts university? In some ways, our field does not fit the reigning paradigm of Christian higher education, but the resulting sense of being “aliens” and “exiles” can prove to be constructive for all concerned. The structure of the modern university fosters great advances in certain types of knowledge while inhibiting the development of other kinds. Specialization and a commitment to original research have freed us to dig deeper into narrow aspects of reality and have pushed us to question and test our knowledge more rigorously. But the cost of these successes has been the persistent compartmentalization of knowledge, which operates at two levels. First, by segregating knowledge in isolated disciplines we make it more difficult for the student or scholar to achieve a truly integrated Christian liberal arts education and comprehensive Christian worldview. Second, our conceptualizations of academic knowledge and our standard practices for pursuing that knowledge separate the entire academic enterprise from the other parts of the human person. The first type of compartmentalization is widely recognized in higher education, but seldom overcome. The second type receives little attention, even at a Christian university.

By creating clear disciplinary boundaries and requiring us to test our theoretical models using research, the modern university has pushed the field of religious education to become more rigorous. It was the rise of education and psychology as distinct research fields that helped to spur the emergence of religious education as a separate discipline early in the twentieth century. Systematic study of human development and the processes by which people learn caused some Christian ministry educators to re-evaluate teaching methods in the church and to reject the naïve view that any type of communication of God’s truth was just as effective as any other in actually producing well informed and mature Christians. Since that time, interdisciplinary research has characterized the field of Christian education. Professional organizations and journals in our field continue to push rigorous research and interdisciplinary thinking. As associate editor of *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, I am currently involved in the ongoing process of raising the bar for research in our field. Our profession remains deeply committed to research, and this commitment owes much to the influence of the wider world of higher education.

The reigning paradigm of higher education also pushes the field of Christian ministry to grapple with its own disciplinary identity and to resist the temptation to become a mile wide and an inch deep. Over the last 25 years, in an attempt to communicate a mission and identity broader than just training directors of Christian education, many Christian Education departments changed their names to Educational Ministries. More recently, new departmental names have proliferated as specialties like youth ministry have asserted their independence and as new ways of conceptualizing the field, such as “spiritual formation,” have emerged. Some seek to recover “Christian Education” as the center of this fragmenting family of subdisciplines, others place the center in “practical theology,” while others trained in the social sciences see the discipline through that lens (Erwin, 2006; Lawson, 2005; Setran & Wilhoit, 2005; Starr, 2005). While such ferment can be creative and dynamic, it also raises the possibility of intellectual incoherence or superficiality. The reigning higher education paradigm, by requiring scholars to define the scope and methodologies of their disciplines as precisely as possible, keeps our field honest and keeps us grappling with our identity.

While the reigning paradigm of higher education has undoubtedly strengthened the field of Christian ministry, our work in turn exposes ways in which Christian higher education fails to live up to some of its ideals and suggests possible ways to address those problems. In theory, Christian universities should be better than their secular counterparts at providing a coherent, integrated education because faculty and students share some foundational intellectual assumptions derived from their Christian beliefs (Holmes 1984; Marsden, 1997). Christian universities also typically want to help their students become exemplary followers of Jesus Christ who make a difference in the world. They aspire to educate the whole person (Huntington University, 2005a). But in practice the structures of Christian higher education, which parallel those of other modern universities, sometimes undermine these ideals. For example, Holmes bemoans the fact that too little interdisciplinary thinking takes place in Christian higher education and writes, “Somehow this syndrome must be broken” (Holmes, 1987, p. 56).

There are many reasons for these discrepancies between ideals and reality. Christian faculty members work hard to practice their own disciplines with excellence and to make progress in the difficult task of faith-learning integration within their own fields. Little energy and creativity remain for integrating knowledge across the curriculum. In addition, closely guarded disciplinary boundaries and hierarchies are

very much in evidence even in Christian higher education. One faculty member from a traditional liberal arts discipline once told a colleague in the Education department, “You don’t have a discipline.” A colleague hired to teach Educational Ministries at a Reformed seminary was told while still unpacking his books, “We don’t think much of your field here.” As these examples illustrate, professors of Christian ministry sometimes wonder whether colleagues in other fields really respect their contributions. Meanwhile, faculty reactions to creating interdisciplinary core courses tend to be lukewarm at best. A vocal minority of faculty at Huntington University recently proposed abolishing the Capstone course which is the only course in the curriculum explicitly tasked with attempting to integrate the whole liberal arts curriculum. Some faculty members also resist proposals to integrate spiritual formation into the curriculum or to create more structural connections between the academic enterprise and the student development or campus ministry departments. As these examples illustrate, our values and assumptions as faculty members sometimes make it harder for our students to integrate the full liberal arts curriculum with their Christian faith and their personal lives.

### **Addressing Challenge #3: A Prophetic Witness for the Full Integration of Faith, Life, and Learning**

Teaching the Foundations of Christian Ministry course has forced me to grapple with the diverse nature of our discipline and its potential incoherence. When I first taught the course, I used a standard textbook in the field, *Foundations of Ministry* (Anthony, 1992). This anthology of topical chapters by a variety of professors in the field of Christian education presented me with some teaching challenges. The first few chapters provided brief introductions to important realms of faith-learning integration like theology of Christian education, philosophy of Christian education, and the social sciences and Christian education. While I found these chapters interesting and informative, they were not designed to equip students to be able to engage in the sort of interdisciplinary thinking that the authors modeled. Later chapters treated specific types of ministry like youth ministry, children’s ministry and adult ministry. But these chapters often contained what seemed like arbitrary lists of ministry tips because the authors did not have space to explain how these principles derived from theory or research. Could I in good conscience force my students to memorize these decontextualized lists of ministry principles? Even assuming they

remembered these lists, of what real use would such knowledge be when they faced complex ministry challenges in real life? In short, this textbook tried to cover too much ground and made it difficult to know what the learning objectives of a Foundations of Ministry course should be. The textbook provided a bird's eye view of the landscape of Christian education, but did not help me much when it came to laying a foundation of disciplinary knowledge. But without such a knowledge base, I knew that my students would remain entrenched in their unreflective, pragmatic mental paradigm.

Instead of briefly touching on all the different interdisciplinary connections that are important to our field, I chose to redesign the course to focus on something truly foundational: a biblical theology of Christian ministry. As noted above, in each class period we create a definition of a foundational theological concept, such as “the body of Christ,” and discuss its implications for ministry practice. We use the biblical principles we have identified to evaluate a ministry case study. This skill is not typically duplicated in theology courses, which focus more on systematic or biblical theology without much attention to ministry application. So at least in the Foundations of Christian Ministry course, I solved the problem of disciplinary diversity by narrowing the focus to just one of the many interdisciplinary integration tasks that must take place in our field.

Throughout the Foundations course I make a point of noting that sometimes other types of knowledge will be needed to effectively address the challenges posed by a particular biblical mandate or ministry case study. For example, when discussing the biblical material on being “shepherds” in the church, I point out that in order to truly know the sheep and care for them, we will need to know something about human development and culture. I remind my students that our liberal arts core curriculum at Huntington University is an excellent preparation for understanding human beings, building positive relationships with them, and effectively serving them through Christian ministry. As the students see the limits of what they can do to solve the ministry case studies using the biblical material alone, at least some of them begin to believe me about the value of the other disciplines they will study in our university's core curriculum as well as the importance of the interdisciplinary thinking they will develop in other courses in our department.

Over the course of their college careers, it is safe to say that students in the Ministry and Missions Department at Huntington University engage in more interdisciplinary discussions and assignments than

most other students at the university. I have already noted how students in my Contemporary American Youth Culture course learn ways that theories and research drawn from communications, psychology, sociology, and anthropology can impact their youth ministry practice. Such interdisciplinary work is common in courses in our department. Indeed, in order to be faithful to our mission as a discipline, we must mine other fields for their contributions to our core task of preparing women and men to build the church and make disciples. At our best, we model the sort of interdisciplinary thinking and teaching that Holmes tells us should characterize Christian higher education.

Our discipline also contributes to the wider enterprise of Christian higher education by reminding us all that the knowledge we impart to our students should affect them as whole persons and not merely touch their intellects. After nearly one hundred years of exploring how people learn about God and become better followers of Jesus, one of the core insights that has emerged in our field is that Christian “knowing” must include encountering God relationally and transformatively (Reed & Prevost, 1993). Even the demons know who Jesus is, but they do not know him as a disciple does (James 2:19). In this respect, our field parts ways with some Christian higher education experts, like Arthur Holmes, who insists that “faith is neither a way of knowing nor a source of knowledge” (Holmes, 1987, p. 18).

In the Bible and in Christian theology, faith includes several elements. First, it involves assent to particular truths about God (Ferguson, 1996; Smith, 2001). Acceptance of these truths is regarded as essential for being saved. For example, in Romans 10:9-10, we are informed that those who believe that God raised Christ from the dead will be saved and in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul reminds us that those who reject the bodily resurrection of Christ are living an empty, futile religion. The implication for modern faith-learning integration is that all such efforts must affirm the tenets of the apostolic faith as presented in the New Testament. A Christian scholar simply cannot legitimately “discover” new knowledge that shows that Jesus Christ is not God or that he did not rise from the dead. These biblical examples also show that even knowledge of the “facts” of the faith does more than just furnish the intellect with information; it also affects the individual’s relationship to God and eternal destiny.

Second and perhaps most centrally, biblical faith includes trust in God and Christ for salvation (Ferguson, 1996; Smith, 2001). Entering through this door of saving faith into Christ does indeed create the opportunity for new types of knowledge (1 Corinthians 2:14-16; Ephesians 3:18-19). Faith does not

exclude other forms of knowledge, nor should it shut down intellectual inquiry. It does not insure that the Christian will be smarter or have better judgment than the unbeliever in all circumstances and about all subjects. But it does mean that there are some things that a believer can grasp and accept that an unbeliever cannot. In particular, the Bible makes it clear that knowledge of God is an interpersonal and spiritual reality that effects who we are as whole persons (Phillips, 2000; Schultz, 2000). Through faith we accept and experience truths that contradict the wisdom of this world, such as the fact that victory comes through the cross and that those who mourn are blessed by God (1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Matthew 5:3-12). While there is much to be learned by exploring the complex relationship between faith and reason, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that *both* relational trust in God and rigorous use of our intellects are needed to fully enter the most important realities of human life.

Third, Christian faith includes ongoing trust in God to strengthen and help the individual grow in holiness and reach the reward of eternal life (Hebrews 11:32-40). Faith enables the Christian to become faithful, that is, to become the sort of person who can persevere in obedience to God through the trials and obstacles of life (Galatians 5:22; James 1:2-4; 2 Peter 1:3-8). Relational knowledge of God also opens the possibility of learning wisdom, the ability to apply God's truth properly to the particular situations of life (Bullock, 2000). A reverent relationship with God makes it possible to gain the knowledge that will help us do the right thing at the right time: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). As an applied discipline, we especially prioritize helping our students learn such wisdom. But all of us in Christian higher education need to remind ourselves that the knowledge we seek to impart to our students should help them live as faithful and wise disciples of Jesus in the particular circumstances of their lives. True faith-learning integration must address issues of character and way of life, not just intellectual matters.

While many Evangelical Christians would agree with the above definition of faith, professors in the discipline of Christian ministry differ from some other Christian scholars in that we try to shape our teaching to reflect this definition. We do not agree with those who either in theory or in practice reduce faith-learning integration and other aspects of education to exclusively intellectual activities. Unlike some colleagues in other disciplines, we are not content to leave the spiritual formation of our students to the campus ministry department. We see the need to educate "head, heart, and hand"—the cognitive, affective, and practical skill domains—as part of educating the whole person to become a full time ministry leader.

As professors of Christian ministry we push ourselves and our colleagues in other disciplines to recognize the reality of what we are doing when we are teaching. The human beings we meet each day in class bring their whole persons into the classroom and either learn or fail to learn course content as whole persons. To pretend that the intellect can be isolated from the will, emotions, and relationships with God and others is to operate from a false perception of reality that can lead only to weaker education.

My colleague Luke Fetters and I took up the challenge of integrating the intellect with the whole person by redesigning the Understanding the Christian Faith course to reflect more holistic and biblical definitions of “faith” and “knowledge.” We believed that a course called “Understanding the Christian Faith” that is taught at a Christian liberal arts university should include spiritual formation. As Jesus said, “anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own” (John 7:17). Similarly, the psalmist wrote, “I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts” (Psalm 119:100). It is impossible to know the Christian faith as it is intended to be known without seeking God.

An article by John Coe of Biola University provided both theoretical justification and practical help for constructing assignments involving spiritual disciplines. As he perceptively notes, if we allow the separation between spirituality and the classroom to continue, we not only limit the holistic impact that course content can have upon our students, but “we are implicitly teaching them that it is possible to be a successful student without a life of prayer” (Coe, 2000, p. 103). Coe argues that by attending to the spiritual formation element in our educational process we become more faithful to the ideals we proclaim in our mission statements and educational philosophies. Even more significantly, perhaps, he notes that by helping our students encounter the material in our discipline as whole, spiritual beings, we reduce the danger of turning our disciplinary knowledge into an idol and making it the master, rather than the servant of faith.

We adapted Coe’s approach to create a unit on spiritual formation with which we begin the Understanding the Christian Faith course. We discuss what the Bible teaches about spiritual growth and learn about various spiritual disciplines. We also discuss how spiritual growth is a life-long journey, and instruct students about the typical stages in that journey. We discuss the seven elements of a Christian conversion as defined by Gordon Smith and explain how full conversion is necessary for spiritual growth

(Smith, 2001). Drawing on the work of Robert Mulholland (1993), we have the students take the Meyers-Briggs personality assessment and show them how to choose spiritual disciplines, or particular ways of doing spiritual disciplines, that fit how God has made them. All of this interdisciplinary work culminates in the “Spiritual Practices Project.” Students write a spiritual autobiography and identify one spiritual discipline that fits their personality and the current stage in their spiritual journey. We make it clear that even those who do not consider themselves to be Christians can participate in this activity by choosing one practice that they think will help them explore the spiritual element of their lives and seek God. Each student commits to practice their spiritual discipline twice a week for six weeks and keep a journal of what they are learning. We make it clear that students will only be graded on their diligence in practicing the discipline and their thoughtful reflection on the process.

Many students are thrilled to receive help with their spiritual growth. Some discover for the first time ways to pray, read the Bible, or perform other spiritual growth practices that actually work for them. A few students are troubled by the idea of being required to practice spiritual disciplines for a class. They don’t object to doing the practices, but they worry that the class requirement makes it impossible for their practice to be authentic or spiritually efficacious. I welcome these concerns and we discuss them at the beginning of the project. I explain to the students that these feelings come in part from the mental barriers that we have constructed between our academic lives and our personal, spiritual lives. There is no reason in principle why a spiritual practice that is done for a class cannot be as genuine as one spontaneously chosen outside a class. The problem arises from the fact that we have all been taught that we are supposed to keep our relationship with God separate from our intellectual work.

Another way that we break down the barriers between the intellect and the other parts of the human person is to require service learning in many of our classes. In my Foundations of Christian Ministry course, each student chooses a ministry in which to volunteer at least once a week for six weeks. I meet with each student individually and we work together to find a place to serve that fits their sense of calling and ministry interests. We also discuss specific learning objectives that they will pursue during their project. For example, youth ministry students often serve with the local Campus Life and work toward the goal of becoming more comfortable talking to middle school students about God. Students who are uncertain about their calling and are struggling to pick a major often use this project as a time to discern

God's will for their lives. Each week the students write in a learning journal in which they reflect upon what they are learning through their volunteer ministry experiences. They must also draw on outside resources that will help them pursue their specific learning objectives. Every student must use some material from the class as one of their resources. They must also choose other resources such as books, interviews with experts, and seminars. Through this service learning component, students experience the process of connecting classroom and service in a way that enhances their education. Here again, some students have worried that their service is not authentic when it is required for a class. I discuss these concerns with students in class and one-on-one, raising similar points to those mentioned above. From their very first class in the Ministry and Missions Department, students are challenged to erase the artificial and often harmful boundaries between their service and academic lives.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus said prophets are often without honor in their home towns. The Old Testament prophets called by God to stand a bit outside the system and speak his word often found themselves unequal to the task. Those called by God to train men and women to be ministry leaders find themselves straddling the boundaries between intellectual disciplines and transgressing some of the established norms of Christian higher education. Although we might be tempted to escape these tensions, we should instead embrace them as sources of vitality and creativity for ourselves and our colleagues in other disciplines. As a field, we must not back down from the difficult work of being rigorously interdisciplinary. But we must also not shy away from speaking prophetically to our colleagues and our institutions, calling them to greater faithfulness in educating whole persons for the kingdom of God.

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## Appendix 1

### Theological Resources for Identity Formation

1. The Image of God (Gn 1:26-31; Mt 22:15-22)
2. God's purpose: a people of his own (e.g. Ex 19:5-6, Titus 2:11-14, Ep 1:3-14)
3. Jesus' call: "deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me"
4. Individual Identity images from the New Testament
  - Servant, minister, steward, slave
  - Son, daughter, child of God
  - Brother/ sister
  - Disciple (follower, student, apprentice)
  - Light, salt, ambassador, messenger, witness
  - Temple
  - Body part
  - Branch
  - Brick in the temple
  - Citizen
  - Saint (holy one)
5. Corporate Identity images:
  - Family of God/ brothers & sisters, household of God
  - Body
  - Priesthood
  - Holy nation
  - Temple
  - Flock
  - Kingdom of God
  - Church (assembly, called together)

6. Process images for the Christian life:

Birth, infancy, adulthood

Walking

Learn, follow, imitate Christ

Suffering, crucifixion, death

Obey / keep commandments

Grow up into Christ

Body & its parts

Vine & branches, fruit, grain, rooted

Clothed with/ “put on” Christ (& put off old self)

Athletic training/ running

Baptism/ submersion/ pouring

Built on/ building on Foundation of Christ (construction/ architecture)

Enlightened, healed of blindness

Waking up

Filled with/ baptized in Holy Spirit

Purify (by smelting process, by sacrificial offering on your behalf, by your effort)

Coming out from among

feeding on / tasting the Lord & his goodness

working/ workmanship

tending/ caring for the flock

feeding, caring for fellow servants

serving, “washing the feet of the saints”

Bearing one another’s burdens