



## Transcriptions

### Priorities for Research

Ted Ward

**Annotation:** *Christian Education Conference, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, 1985.* This address is a follow up to Sources of Knowledge where he discusses the nature and scope of the field of Christian education (see Audio Archives). In this address Ted Ward looks specifically at the role of research in the field because of his belief that it is an integrating activity.



Today we're going to look specifically at the role of research within all of this because research is potentially one of the more significant integrating agents. I think Chick already told you in synopsis what it is that I'm going to talk about today. He did it in a very few deft words that were well put when he said that we really have no category for research. I submit that when he puts his finger on the reason for the *no category for research* among evangelicals as being one in which we really aren't sure we want to know for sure what really is out there or what really is happening in our work, he is painfully close to what I find to be the truth.

Now this is not an ailment exclusive to Christians, lest we go into some kind of paranoid depression. It is something of the human state to be blithely ignorant whenever possible. As a matter of fact, the psalm that we sang this morning is a good one to shake up the saints. Just a little bit of data from hymnology can absolutely ruin your day in church. J. Edwin Orr picked this little melody up. As a matter of fact, it's a Maori melody and if you know anything about the Maoris you know that they are the southern-most of the Polynesians. And the culture patterns of the Polynesians are all very much in common and the forms of ritual and relationship are very, very

consistent among the Polynesians. And what we celebrate today in Hawaii is one of those streams of that same culture. As a matter of fact, what we have just sung is a Maori hula. Now that is not a joke; that's a fact. And that sort of fact distresses people and people will come to you and say, please, don't tell us things like that. There is, among God's people, occasionally a fervent desire not to be informed. Therein lies the rub.

The Scripture is clear that God is the God of revealing. God is not the God of obscuring. When God obscures, He does so in a manner that man can more diligently inquire. He does not hide from us infinitely. He hides from us so that we may be exercised in our discovery. So that in the process of exercising ourselves as inquirers, we become reciprocal of what God is in revelation. One of the ways to understand humankind and the uniqueness of human personhood in contrast with animal forms—the great contrasts between fifth- and sixth-day creatures are really remarkable to examine—but one of these is that the curiosity of the cat and of other of the fifth-day forms is basically a pointless curiosity as a kind of an entertainment. The characteristic curiosity of the sixth-day creature is a purposive curiosity that goes into infinite dimensions in order to discover such abstractions as purpose for life.

We study in order to fulfill ourselves as human beings. We are honoring our Creator when we behave in such a way as to respect our intellectual capacities just as surely as we respect our Creator when we develop any aspect of our personhood (physical, emotional, social) and through the development of our personhood as created human beings, we glorify our Maker. To neglect any aspect of the human characteristic is, in its way, an insult to the Creator. If we recognize this, then we must follow with one additional concern and that is that whatever we do, whether it is in the area of physical development or intellectual development, or whatever; we do so in the humble recognition that whatever we grasp is grasped, whatever we attain is attained, whatever we learn is learned, incompletely; always incompletely because there is more out there. There is more to the revelation than we will ever grasp. But this should give us no particular excuse to honor ignorance.

If you are familiar with the major religious streams in human cultures, you are aware that not all religions are concerned about the development of understanding. But, clearly, Christianity is strong in this attribute. We do not build monasteries so that we can engage in sound making of mediation which has no intellectual content. We are people who historically have been found building libraries, building universities, building colleges and schools and seminaries. From time to time, I will criticize something of the establishments that we have created in the name of Jesus Christ in that sometimes they constrain rather than enhance the work of Christ in the world. But, nevertheless, I respect and I honor the academic communities, the pursuit of understanding, the general proposition that the human being was made as an inquiring creature to learn, to develop, to become. All of this, of course, does not mean that we cannot and should not criticize our cultural forms. Indeed, we should. And it is partly the difficulty of criticizing our institutional forms that brings us to this particular theme this morning. Because, as a matter of fact, we are not the world's best community of people, as evangelical Christians, to even criticize ourselves. There are communities that are much more effective in self-criticism and communities that grow more substantially because of their self-criticism. I think we are insulating ourselves, in many instances, from some of our best growth potential.

I'm going to speak about science this morning and I need to define my terms to some extent. As I see science, I'm talking about orderly inquiry into that which can be seen; that which can be, if you please, empirically assessed. We do not ask of science questions in the realm of *ought*; we

ask of science questions in the realm of *is*. We ask what *is* the case, rather than what *ought* to be the case. As a matter of fact, science in our time is rather seriously overrated. There is a tendency to assume that science can do anything. And if scientific technologies have caused any social problems, then what do we do? We turn to those very same technologies to solve those problems. And, of course, we know that this is a rather endless cycle in which problems and their solutions beget yet deeper problems. So, for example, in the whole area of nuclear energy and atomic weaponry, we take but one step after another in a rather endless and really pointless exercise of attempting to fend off with one move that which we created with the last move. And one wonders where such escalation may end. Nevertheless, science and technology is an extension of this respect of the Creation, and I would argue as a Christian by extension, and a respect of the Creator.

Unfortunately, the fields of science have largely been dominated by experimentalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are several reasons for this that are beyond the scope of this lecture but, suffice to say, that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was pretty obvious that in physics and biology and several other fields that speculative scientific theory-building would not be able to sustain without experimentation. In other words, human speculation can only go so far. At some point, you need to take speculation and put it to some kind of an experimental test, otherwise you have no theory; you have only speculation.

As an unfortunate consequence of that preoccupation the emerging years, the formative years, of the fields of social science in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were heavily affected by the models of inquiry common in biology, particularly, and the whole idea of experimental psychology got its start very, very early. And, as a matter of fact, for many people today the word research connotes the idea of experimentalism. I would argue that experimentation is but one form of research. There are others and I would like to parse for you a very simple model, parsimoniously attempting to identify with a kind of lowest common denominator viewpoint that there are basically three kinds of research inquiry in social science, at least, which ultimately embrace most of what we do as researchers in social science; and which can be, as a matter of fact, rather easily understood, even by a relatively generally-educated layman.

I refer to three modes of research: descriptive research, experimental research, and evaluative research. Unfortunately, the greatest of these is experimental research in the minds of many. But I feel that, for the field of education and especially today Christian education, there is an even greater need for descriptive research. Descriptive research, the first of these three modes, is concerned with describing, at a very rudimentary level, what really is there. The whole idea of descriptive research is to get into the action context of a human transaction, or a human behavior, and understand what it is that's going on. In other words, what the variables are, how they seem to be behaving, and try to understand these variables, if possible, to such a level of clarity that one can begin to hypothesize the relationships among those variables.

So we would argue, then, that the purpose of descriptive research is to understand a given phenomenology. To understand the parameters of a given social context—a given human context. And, by the way, when I use the word social as in *social* context or *social* science, you can virtually replace the word social with the word human. Because, as I see it, social science, in the applications that we're concerned about within Christian education, is concerned with the study of the human being; the human as person, and the human in his community contexts. Again, as in yesterday's remarks, the Creation story does not end with an Adam on the scene as a product of God's deliberative process of creating an image in his own likeness. But the creative process of the sixth

day goes on to extend that person (Adam) into the family (Adam/Eve) and the proposition that God makes that “man should not be alone” is itself a social declaration; a creation with society in mind. And what we have today as *society* is the extension and the interference of the effects of *the Fall* upon the formation of that society that God created in the first place.

Now the fact that it is *under sin* should make us no less interested in it because it is the stuff of being about the business of the King. The King is the king of a kingdom, and the kingdom is a kingdom of people. And as we serve in the service of Jesus Christ, we serve people. Therefore, our stuff as Christians is people. We, therefore, should be extremely interested in whatever it is that we can know about people and their contexts; hence, the concern for understanding that comes by the reflections upon data in the environment—data in the creation disciplined to the overarching propositional frameworks which come from our theological grasps of the Word.

The descriptive research that we desperately need today is research that will make us more informed about what really is the human condition. The human condition in the various communities in which we operate and live and function, and the relationships among those communities; and, most especially, the relationships of serving people, sometimes called leading people, and those that we are, in fact, serving.

Now what is descriptive research? Descriptive research is anything from a survey that asks people to tell what is going on in their life, or as they observe life, right on through the more exotic sorts of things that are involved in observational studies; in sometimes called participant observations where, as a role-player in a situation, we are also studying that situation with some degree of scientific precision. So, then, the descriptive realm is a fuzzy realm of inquiry, but an absolutely essential one because a great mistake is made when we experimentally hypothesize relationships without having adequate information about how those relationships lie in a given ecology. In other words, it is not feasible to build experimental studies where no descriptive work has been done.

I love the British phraseology on some things. You know, the British actually speak a form of English which is not too hard to understand and, in some occasions, their English is terribly colorful. And some of my British science friends talk about descriptive research as being the activity wherein you muck about in the data. And, you know, you just get it right up to your knees and you muck about in the data. And when you get all done, you say, hey, this is what it's like out there. And that knowing of what it's like out there on something other than a personal impressionistic level is certainly something that we could use. And I'll try to define that a little more precisely later.

Experimental studies usually follow from good descriptive work because good descriptive work usually concludes with some propositions which can be whipped into testable hypotheses. But we really aren't in a position to build theory about human behavior and society until we have testable hypotheses put to test, just as surely as speculation is speculation in astronomy, so as speculation is a speculation in human behavior.

It may be well-advised, it may be wise, it may be, as was the case with Einstein, a very, very dramatic breakthrough in the understanding of the universe. But, as you may know, Einstein toward his last indicated that one of the things that he had intuited into his model—his mathematical model of the universe—has what's called a cosmological constant in it. And I don't want to get into the mathematics of that but, suffice to say, that in his last ten years Einstein spent about as much time

talking about his own foolishness in defining that *cosmological constant* into his model as anything else that he talked about. The second rival was the hazards of atomic energy, but he was fretfully looking back on his own career and saying, I made a terrible mistake by assuming that the creation was done; that however the universe came to be, it was there and it was unchangeable and that matter could not be taken away or added. And, as a matter of fact, Einstein, in his last ten years, was thoroughly convinced that experimental evidence showed rather that his cosmological constant was a flaw in his model. And when it was put to experimental work in astronomy, it was discovered that what he had plugged into his formula on the basis of learned experience was, indeed, wrong.

Much of what we plug into our theory on the basis of non-tested hypotheses about what it is that is the work of Christ in a church may turn out in the case of careful analysis and careful experimentation to be just dead wrong. Now God does not preserve us from all error. We may pray to that effect—and I suspect that most of us, as scholars, are constantly praying to that effect—but God does not always answer that prayer in a non-humiliating way.

Einstein said that what had driven him to put in the cosmological constant was a presupposition that the universe was constant; therefore, he kept making calculations showing that the universe was expanding. And he knew that could not be, according to his presupposition, so he put the cosmological constant in so that his model of the universe would never expand.

Well, we know today that the universe is actually still being created. And those of you who want to put all of Creation back in the first book of Genesis are going to have to have a very long first chapter of Genesis because our God is still creating. Now, in the beginning, God created. I believe that fervently. But I believe that what God did then, God is still about because God is the unchanging God as God has been in the business of creating.

Now how do we really go, then, into social science that makes sense for Christian education? We go not just to descriptive work, but we go on into experimental work. And we put certain key things of consequence; key variable relationships of consequence and moment to the experimental test.

The third model of research, the third form in this parsimonious three, is evaluative research which usually takes its methodology from one or the other of the first two. But it adds a very crucial element that neither the other two carry and that is that it puts evidences against a subjectively arrived at criterion. For example, when we test students in a classroom, we then may get objective scores on a test. Now we can declare that you made an 82, fella, and that becomes an irrefutable truth; but what isn't irrefutable is that 82 is good or bad. That is very subjective and it's usually somewhat vested differently in the mind of the instructor and the student. But it is, as a matter of fact, a very subjective kind of thing. So most evaluative processes are, in fact, a mixture of concerns for objectively-arrived data and subjectively-arrived criterion. Hence, the term evaluative research and the necessity to use a methodology to increase objectivity that is either experimental or descriptive in its mode.

Our motives in research are rarely well-advised in the motive of proving something. I would regard several pieces of languages, distinctly layman's language: I want to do some research to prove that. And then what follows is this person's pet theme. I want to put some research together to prove that. The proper frame of reference for any researcher is the rather open-minded inquiry that says, I don't know, I need to know. I don't know, I need to know. Therefore, what we do in

research should be carefully focused on things that we need to know. Not just things that, yeah, we don't know it, but who bothers? What is the average height of a telephone pole in the state of Michigan? Well, there is an answer to that question and, as a matter of fact, it can be determined with great precision. Using Michigan as an ideal telephone pole height, how does Illinois stack up? Well, we could go on and on and suggest that it's possible to invest your life in trivia. As a matter of fact, all you've got to do to prove that is look at Masters' theses. Now, not here! Not here! You see, I'm from another context, alright?

I'm deeply concerned that what we do in research be done with an honest mind to discover, to learn, to identify and establish at some level of competence something that has some worth and significance in terms of informing our judgments and our decisions. Research will not make judgments for you, but it will give you a basis of evidences that allow you to make better choices. And that's a relationship that needs to be very, very clearly maintained.

Now it helps, I think, to see something of the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity in the mind of the researcher. Generally, laymen say, well, research is supposed to be objective, isn't it? And, of course, that's true—it's at least more true than not true—but the thing of it is that it's only a half-truth. In general, the model of inquiry that is typical in many of the sciences today and almost universally true in the social sciences is a five-faceted model in which we try to put three kinds of intellectual activity down in sequence.

The first in which we explore and define a problem. So problem definition is usually the first major intellectual activity. What is the question? Why is the question an important question? What sorts of presuppositions does the question represent? And, Are those sound? And, Is this a question that if answered, would have some kind of generalizability and some kind of validity beyond the immediate context of the one study? These are the things that we generally put as first matter of attention. Second, we go to the literature and explore as thoroughly as possible the precedents that specifically shed light on the problem that we're studying so that we're not operating in a vacuum of knowledge, nor are we operating in a frame of reference that promises to re-discover the wheel. The third thing we do is to identify and carefully describe a procedure of inquiry that is really apt to produce new knowledge. And that becomes the third kind of human endeavor. The fourth is to map out the kind of analysis that we can do with reference to the data that we would get out of the second; so, the analysis function.

And then the fifth function is the drawing of conclusions. Now, I'd like to make a very sharp difference between drawing of conclusions and simple summary. A lot of people mistake that last function of research when they simply re-capitulate and re-state and synopsise what they have found. As a matter of fact, findings are evidences that can be seen; but conclusions are the meanings of those findings written into them, or read into them, by the frame of reference of the researcher.

Now what this really says is that the points of subjectivity that are the greatest in research—and they're very important, they're virtually indispensable—are in the first and the fifth of those mental processes. What we do is kind of enter the world of research, subjectively, saying, I have some interests. I have some concerns. My concerns drive me to some questions and I really fervently want answers. Now that kind of subjective framework is absolutely appropriate as we enter the research process. Similarly coming up out of the research process—out of this arid exercise of objectivity—we come back into the real world of the subjective/objective mix in that last section of human thought in the research cycle in which we say, these evidences have such and such meaning.

Now if you understand that process, you can see why it's possible for Christians to look at research done by secular persons and say wow, that's bad stuff! Now what we're usually saying, it's bad stuff on the basis of the presuppositions that underlie either the defining of the problem or the spelling-out of the conclusions. Do you follow me? We need to be much more clear about the data as a separate question. Were the data gathered with a respect for truth? If they were, they're worth looking at.

Now I would suggest that what we need to build in a competent Christian education program within an institution of repute, such as this one, is a skill in all students to be able to appropriate data regardless of source—to get second-hand or first-hand whenever possible—whatever is responsible and represents honest inquiry. And there are ways to assess that. Whatever people are finding out in the way of data, we should know about it and we should look at it.

Christians do themselves a terrible disservice by creating their own universe. God did not put us into this world to be a totally separate community with no interaction with the whole of the rest of the universe. God put us in as part of the whole to minister to that whole. We are the *salt* and the *light*. We are a functional part of the whole. We should not identify a separate corner of the universe in which we will go and bury our talents. We need to learn how to appropriate data from appropriate sources. Secondly, we need to learn how to compare the contexts and the presuppositions that underlie the research problem statements. And that is possible to learn to do so that we can actually tap into the vast and expensively-derived contemporary database about human nature and human society. I am very, very weary of having Christians draw themselves out of that and say I won't look at it.

The saddest case that I have ever encountered—and, by the way, Chick—many of the students that I've dealt with over the years have been Christians. My secretary is a very remarkable Christian; a Lutheran pastor's wife and she's been with me for many, many years. And we were doing a calculation the other day; we were kind of buttoning things up, and we came up with 83% of the graduate students that I've worked with over these years have been evangelical Christians.

And in working with these people, I have encountered relatively few shockers, but I'll tell you the one that was the worst. It was a minister's wife—and the minister is a widely known minister whose been notorious in the state of Michigan for a very fervent stand; high view of Scripture among Lutheranism. His wife, as a master's student with me, was virtually fetishist about literature. She would not touch a book until someone assured her that it had been written by a Christian. So help me! I don't know how she ever handled the Yellow Pages. But, as a matter of fact, she was a force behind the Christian Yellow Pages. I think that was so that she could use it. It was a sad situation because she had isolated herself too much from databases.

We need, then, a skill of re-interpreting data from presuppositions and perspectives that are significant from our Christian community. What do we really need to know more about? Let me give you an agenda of concerns and, over time, I would hope that many of the doctoral students in this institution would pick up on different parts and pieces of this. I identify just four facets of a needed research base in Christian Education.

First of all, we really don't know much about spiritual development. Now spiritual development, apparently, has certain symmetry with other aspects of human development. For example, when the Scriptures talk about spiritual development, the Scripture writers use metaphors

that quite often are drawn from the physical development realm. For example, we use metaphors of nourishment, metaphors of hygiene, metaphors of exercise; and drawn out of the physical and then extrapolated to the spiritual. Now I submit that that's the beginning of a model. But we need much, much research to discover how that model really operates.

Spiritual research, or research on spiritual matters, is extremely difficult because I would argue that a Pauline definition of faith is basically a non-empirical function. You can't have evidence of things not seen and put it purely in the empirical realm. You see what I'm driving at. And I think this is one of the reasons why I have a lot of trouble with the best research we've got today, which is Jim Fowler's stuff. And Jim Fowler, dear man, with an unfortunately low view of Scripture, nevertheless, tries his best to get hold of faith somehow in an empirical manner. Well, I've got my problems with that. I further have problems with the whole idea of the fruit of the Spirit as being accessible. I think we have to be very cautious about how we use empiricisms to get at the whole matter of faith development.

But, on the other hand, we can at least do some model-building with reference to the nature of spiritual development; and I think we have to. We're encouraged to do that, at least, by three separate writers, given your view of Hebrews. Paul and Peter, for example specifically, and the writer of Hebrews, use *milk* texts; the milk texts—the three of them in the New Testament—that puts spiritual development very squarely in the metaphor of the nourishment of milk. And the whole question of staging is also implied there in terms of youth-staging and maturity-staging. So we have staging and the relevance of the physical metaphor justified in Scripture. And from there on, my goodness, that's like opening the floodgates. And from there on it's exciting because that suggests all sorts of things.

Second area we need careful research in—and I think, at this point, nothing but descriptive research—is the examination of our nurturing communities. There are three key nurturing communities: the family, the church assemblies, and the educating institutions. Now there're other contexts that we can spin out over time, but we just absolutely must know more about what's going on in those communities: how they function, and how they malfunction. I would just feel utterly hopeless about the matter of getting a better hook, handle, on pastoral theology if I didn't have clearer data than I've got that I know exists today on the nature of today's communities of Christ. Some work that I've been doing in the National Association of Evangelical Task Force on the Family really is very distressing because what I'm finding is pastors who are saying, listen to this: Yes, our families in our community of faith are breaking down almost like they are in the secular society, but what do you expect? I expect more than that, thank you just the same. Then they're saying: Yes, people come to me with their family stress problems and, no, I wasn't necessarily trained to do any helpful work along this line, but I do it pretty well. But they're still breaking down at the same rate in the secular society. I'm getting that kind of stuff out of empirical data on pastors in evangelical churches. The first big Task Force Report that we reported in Los Angeles last month had as its last line, does this pastor really want to be helped. I'm distressed.

I don't think we've taken a look, for example, at—and this is the third area—pastoral competency. Now this is a distressing one for institutions that are presuming some things about pastoral competency, at least among their own graduates. And, of course, it's always very, very easy to exempt one's own graduates from general criticism. It's true of others, but not of us. It's true of other graduates, but not of ours. It's a problem for other denominations, but not ours.

Well, let me just tell you that, as a matter of fact, I can show you in the data that the Evangelical Free Church of America is better off in a couple of categories of our inquiry than any other denomination. And I've shown this to some of the denominational leaders with some degree of enthusiasm. But I've also warned them not to take any false comfort from it because these are little edges on what is otherwise a fairly massive problem.

We have desperate need today for a better understanding of pastoral competency and for the empirical examination of the dissonances between pastoral expectation and parish expectation. The people of God are expecting something different from what they're getting, and it isn't all to the good. Depending on which study you use and what particular database you use—and this is so hard because different kinds of databases come forward from different denominational structures and different kinds of studies and I can't make any sense out of it. But the best I can make out, new pastors last in churches less than 1.8 years. New pastors last, in their first assignment, less than 1.8 years, and more than two-thirds of those are asked to leave. What's wrong?

And then the fourth category where we need research and where a lot of exciting things are beginning to happen is in the whole matter of leading, the activities of leading. You say, well, why don't you go ahead and say it: leadership research? Because I think that's one of the most exciting things that's happening: the *leadership* sank. As a matter of fact, the more learned view of leadership today argues that *leadership* is not the right way to look at it. *Leadership* presumes a lot of constants. Leading is an infinitely variable matter. For example, if you take a look at all the characters in the panoply of Scripture who clearly, in one way or another, are leading because God is using them to lead; and you look at all the common denominators and you say, okay, I've got to be able to find out the personality type that really is the kind of leadership God wants. And you throw Moses and Joshua and Gideon and Peter and a few other characters in the same pot and you say, well, I guess that didn't work very well. Let's try something else. Pretty soon you discover that leadership has one common denominator. Biblical leadership comes down to being Jewish. And even there you have to put an asterisk and a footnote or two.

We're asking a different question today partly because of the very excellent work of one of the best reviewers of this research, Stogdill.<sup>1</sup> We're understanding that the new era of inquiry into leading will not really use the word *leadership* as if it were a constant; but use *leader* and *leading* and look contextually at what means leading. Now I think that the more you have in the way of cross-cultural and international perspective, the more you're able to grasp that. For example, in many cultures one is not a leader unless one is also somewhat aged.

There is a language in Africa where the transliteration for theological seminary is “place where little boys go to get big heads.” Literally! Because the whole idea of turning out of an institution people who will then lead the church as young people is absurd to these people. There are many things about contextual leading that we can know about and understand to a higher degree than we do today, and we need research that will move us forward.

We are in a threshold, as I see it, of the more effective use of information and data to deal with questions and issues in the building of God's work in this world. We should be cautious with all

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Bass. *Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research & Managerial Applications*, 3rd Edition. New York, NY: The Free Press, 1990

this because science, in any form, has its limitations. I could use as a backdrop for today any number of choice texts out of the Proverbs. And I'm tempted to do that; I could virtually shoot you a machine gun load of proof texts. But I want to read a few, partly for their humor value, in conclusion:

Proverbs 25:8: "What you have seen with your eyes"—very empirical. "What you've seen with your eyes do not hastily bring to court. For what will you do in the end if your neighbor puts you to shame?" We need a recognition of the humble sort that whatever we can do in the empirical realm will still have to stand other kinds of tests. And I think supremely that the test of the community of faith stands above an empiricism. And then in the same [chapter], the second verse: "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings." And back in Proverb 22, verse 3: "A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty." That's what I'm talking about. Are we prudent or are we simple? I put it to you.

Let's pray,

God, may we be wise because our eyes are enlightened by the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God in our hearts and lives. May we be passionately concerned about the things of truth. May we respect you, Lord, as the Revealer. May we appropriate the modes of revealing that are there for us. May we do so with humility. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.