



Foreword

Nurture That Is Christian: *Developmental Perspectives on Christian Education*¹

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Rudiments for Educational Theory that is Christian

Education, for the Christian, is grounded in God's mandates to parents and to the church, the community of faith. The task of facilitating spiritual development is more apparent in biblical mandates than is the general task of helping people learn. Thus the Christian educator must start from a somewhat different vantage point in the selection and refinement of theory. Theory for Christian education must not simply explain and inform cognitive learning processes; it must be comprehensive enough to deal with the unity of personhood, ranging from physical attributes to the spiritual uniqueness of humankind.

Reflections of the Creation

Development is part of the creation story. As God, by his Word, brought the universe into being, he set into place the processes by which this creation would bear testimony to its Creator. Thus God put in place elaborate processes of continuous change, maturing, and re-creating. Life itself is represented by birth, development, and death, all in interlocking cycles.

Only the underlying structure, the patterns of development, and the cycles remain constant; all else changes. The creation is not static; it is dynamic. The earth, the astronomical universe, and the atomic elements which underlie it all are in constant process of change. Nothing stands still.

Life is best described in motion. Change and movement are fundamental to the God-given nature of life itself. Not all change is godly change, of course, but the evidence in both the *natural revelation* (God's universe, comprehended scientifically) and the *special revelation* (God's Word, comprehended theologically through faith) points toward God's intentions as the source and explanation of the unfolding, developmental, stage-by-stage nature of things. The very pattern of the Bible shows God revealing himself in ever more specific and intimate details. The picture in Scripture is in stages, a virtual developmental model of conceptual communication. Thus Christians can recognize this same activity of God in the sequence, stages, and patterns of human development. God's internal consistency can rightly be celebrated in the developmental view of human life. Every developing person is capable of communion with God because of the created characteristic of God's own "breath" within, signifying a spiritual essence within the flesh and blood. In addition, in all the other attributes of humanness, God's hand is revealed in the unfolding developmental processes. Thus, human development can be interpreted as a reflection of the image of God. (Genesis 1:27)

Emphasis on Spiritual Development

For the Christian educator, the calling is to *facilitate spiritual development* and whatever other matters of learning and development are supportive of that end.

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Christianity is a religion of the book. God has chosen to communicate with humankind most explicitly in this book. God's people are expected to read and thus become intimately involved with God's revelation. It is far too easy, therefore, for Christians to think of the maturing of spirituality as a matter of reading and cognitive acquisition.

In much of Christian education, schooling imagery and cognitive motives tend to overwhelm the Bible's own emphasis on experience, acting upon truth, and the more celebrative, commemorative, and emotional qualities of God's involvement with humankind—especially as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The sad habit of “keeping school” in the church seems to be blindly rooted in the assumption that schools have better answers to the questions of educational strategy and logistics.

In recent years, developmental theory has provided some respite from this delimiting habit. Developmental theory is being accepted not only because it suggests a more humane and interactive way of understanding teaching and learning in the cognitive sense, but it seems to offer a better way to understand spiritual development, as well.

As a field of academic study, Christian education has gradually come to accept developmentalism as its theoretical base. As the intellectual quality of literature and research in the field has increased, the importance of a sound theoretical base has increased. Judging by the surging mainstream of academic literature in the field of Christian education, the choice has settled on one variation or another of developmentalism, largely because of the compatibility and consistency between its presuppositions and the essential foundations for the field in Christian theology.

Biblical studies and Christian theology set criteria for the conceptual and methodological shape of the field. Christian educators can pick and choose among the contending educational theories, but in order to be responsible to both the academic rubrics and the theological tenets, the choice of theory must be in harmony with the rudiments of Christian values and ideation. For example, *operant conditioning*, with its roots in behaviorism and mechanistic philosophy, can hardly be considered an acceptable base of educational theory for nontherapeutic education of normal learners. Its presuppositions about the nature of humankind and its legitimization of imposed will cannot be reconciled with the scriptural base of Christianity. Developmentalism passes this test rather well, especially if Christian definitions and supernatural components of the person are recognized alongside the inherent naturalism from which developmentalism springs.

Understanding Learning: Three Major Options

Presuppositions about the nature of learning exist explicitly or implicitly in every plan for teaching. Understanding of the theory of education brings these more clearly to the educator's attention. How one views learning has much to do with curricular designs and the choices of educational procedures. Although the literature on teaching and learning suggests many detailed variations, three different basic views of learning lie at the bottom of things:

Learning as Acquisition of Knowledge

Among the most ancient and revered of all views of learning is the belief that to learn is to gain knowledge. The simplicity and evident truth of that little idea have driven the educational processes of the world for centuries. The image of the human mind is that of a storage compartment. The function is that of acquiring, sorting, labeling, and storing for precise and prompt retrieval; forgetting results from leaks in the storage system or from poor labeling systems and misfiling. The task of teaching, then, is to organize and present information in a logical and memorable form.

Learning as Acquisition of Responses

A nineteenth-century contribution of the emerging field of psychology and its stepchild, professional education, was the notion that what really defines learning is the process of connecting

certain responses to certain stimuli. When presented with a given task, the mind responds in a given way; this connection is accepted as evidence of learning. The task of teaching becomes a matter of conditioning learners to respond in specific “correct” ways to specific tasks or questions.

Learning as Construction of Knowledge

In recent years, the study of human perception and the function of the human brain has led in the direction of the expanded understanding of learning. The learner is now seen in terms of discovering, building, and reorganizing. The learning process is not just a matter of input and filing or mechanical connections; it is better described as a matter of the learner’s building of unique images of truth (more precisely, building one’s grasp of truth,) as a matter of construction and discovery. The learner always looks at the outer world through a filter system: worldview, cognitive orientation, and affective coloration. The learner makes meaning of new interactions and new experiences, weaving new material and old into insightful reorganizations. The perceptual grasp of anything new is always constructed of bits and pieces of previous experience and understandings. Thus teaching is helping learners process the meanings of new experiences and deepened awareness within deliberate nurture of the connections between old and new. Such teaching facilitates the learner’s own constructive capabilities of seeking insightful meanings.

Beyond the basic choice among these three views of learning, the educator must adopt or form a view of how learning relates to the whole of human life and experience. Questions that must be answered range widely: Why do some people learn more than others or more easily than others? Why are motivations so different among people? What are talents, and why do they seem unique and individualistic? Granting that there are individual differences of great importance, is human commonality of similar or greater importance? Is learning more an individual function or a social function?

Beyond these questions, which Christian educators share with other educators, are unique questions that arise out of concern for spiritual development: In what ways does spiritual development depend on a base of knowledge? Does spiritual development depend in any way on mental development? In what ways does spiritual development differ from or go beyond other manifestations of the human development process? What is the function and task of education in the matter of spiritual development? What roles can educators, parents, and other members of the Christian community play which will contribute to spiritual development?

Criteria for Theory in Christian Education

Theory provides guidance for the practical processes of human endeavor. In education, theory provides a basis for judgment about what is appropriate and inappropriate for learning. The Bible is not a book of scientific theory. Its purposes are quite different: The Bible is God’s major means of revealing the being and the activities of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the universe. It provides the authoritative means for human beings to know God. But it presumes that God’s created universe will be studied in its own terms and that the findings from evidences in any and all particulars in that universe will be understood in light of the creational presuppositions and godly values revealed in the Bible.

Thus, for the Christian, sound theory is especially important. In the discovering and organizing of truth about the nature of the human being as learner, for example, theory is the expression of the structure, the principles, the patterns, and the nature of things. Indeed, this use of *nature* expresses the gift of the Creator that enables human beings to name, understand, and communicate with one another about the way things are—a gift of the I AM. (Exodus 3:14)

The Christian criteria for theory demand that all inferences about the nature of things be drawn with careful respect for the natural evidences. Further, the interpretative function within theory-building must be thoughtfully informed by data about God’s purposes and values as revealed

in the Bible. The failure to develop theory that is faithful to revealed evidence and consistent with the attributes, motives, and intentions of God is ultimately idolatrous. Whether in the derivation of theory from research evidences or in the application of theory to educational practice, the Christian must recognize that he or she walks on holy ground. These matters of research and intellectual inquiry are as intimately related to truth as the very fingerprints of God in His wondrous creation. The neglect of truth is an insult to God.

Popularizing Developmentalism

Although developmental theory is not new, its popularity within Christian education has been accentuated within the past twenty years. Two circumstances seem to account for the timing:

First, Christian education as a field of practical ministry has been concerned very little with matters of theory, especially theory that does not derive directly from theology and ecclesiastical matters. It has been a highly traditional field, feeding itself by eating away at its own roots. But with the emergence of social science over the last hundred years, the field of Christian education has found it more difficult to maintain its aloofness from the disciplined study of human characteristics. One by one, leaders within religious education have come to see the value in paying attention to “outside” data. A long chain of scholars represents this long and arduous campaign to bring a developmental perspective to religious education and to integrate theological and scientific understandings: Bushnell, Coe, Havighurst, LeBar, Richards, and Wilhoit, to name a few.

Second, as the research of Lawrence Kohlberg burst upon the scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s, religious educators of all sorts took notice. Many say, or tried to see, in Kohlberg’s view of the nature and formation of human conscience a glimpse of the development of faith and spirituality. Kohlberg was clearly taking a developmental view of something much closer to the spiritual categories than had the typical cognitive researcher. The prospects for useful developmentalism were eagerly sought.



As with any popular movement, people tried to read into the excitement whatever they chose. Some saw in Kohlberg’s work a sort of master paradigm for the understanding of faith development; James Fowler has suggested an example of such a paradigm. Others have fallen into a widely yawning trap as they searched for spiritual gold among the artifacts of a highly cognitive model. Others thought they saw both poor methodology and exaggerated interpretations. But the parade of Kohlberg’s followers grew longer, and suddenly far more Christian educators were taking research seriously. The impetus for innovation often emerges from strange sources.

When enthusiasm is based on an incomplete understanding, reactions can turn sour very quickly. After news of Kohlberg’s apparent suicide, a quick chill fell across the particulars of “the Kohlberg model.” But the corner was already turned; never again will it be academically respectable to deny the importance of social science in the understanding of faith and spirituality. The concepts and models are still emerging. Certain matters are becoming clearer. No one has the picture altogether fully formed as yet, but the future of theory for Christian education seems sure to be an informed synthesis of theological rudiments and scientific evidences.

A Model for Inquiry: Toward a Theory of Spiritual Ecology

Perhaps the most important characteristic of developmental theory is its capability of relating widely to the whole range of human attributes. In effect, developmentalism is a *meta-theory* that explains the connections, similarities, and contrasts among particular developmental theories, each

of which explains components of the whole. The acceptability and utility of developmental theories derive largely from their relatedness to one another and their compatible fit within the larger picture. As a meta-theory, developmentalism suggests new possibilities: not only can we see moral development and faith development through this filter, but we can imagine more precisely how *spiritual development* might look if it were to come more clearly into focus.

Arising from the study of biology, the concept of ecology has provided a significant set of presuppositions about the creation. Referring to the more theoretical use of the term, rather than its popular use as political activism to save an owl or a whale or “to clean up the environment,” *ecology* refers to the interdependence of each component in the creation with respect to each other component. The basic presupposition is that everything functions within an integrated whole—no individual component or system exists without reference to what exists around it. By extension, the concept suggests that any organism or system within the universe is internally interrelated—every part is joined together in such a way as to affect each other for mutual better or worse.

As human behavior has been intensively studied throughout this century, more and more evidences about the nature of the human being, individually and in social relationships, have been accumulating. There are many ways to organize these findings, of course, and any list is sure to slight some categories and exaggerate others. The following list is flawed in this respect, but it does constitute a useful taxonomy:

Physical Development

In which the human body is studied from conception to death, revealing the unfolding in a sequenced pattern of the genetically grounded components of the person’s physical reality.

Intellectual Development

In which the development of the mind is assessed through all sorts of mental measurements and technologically instrumented studies of the brain and the nervous system. Matters range widely from physical characteristics of the neural processes clear across to the outcomes of a spelling test in the third grade.

Emotional Development

In which the human emotions emerge and develop through self-discipline and responses to social interactions. This category encompasses many of the most distinctively human of all attributes: the capacities for empathy, perspectivism, emotional response, and profound long-lasting psychosocial effects of emotional experiences.

Social Development

In which a human is traced through the stages of interaction with other persons, revealing patterns which are remarkably common across cultures and across widely diverse human groups. The models and paradigms which emerge from this field of research show remarkable structural similarities to other aspects of human development.

Moral Development

In which the cognitive aspects of moral choice are seen as a subset of intellectual developmental patterns. Perhaps more will be discovered about the emergence and formation of the unique human characteristics that are summarized in the general term “conscience.” The remarkable human capacity to make judgments of right and wrong is clearly more than just the intellectual accumulation of rules. Kohlberg opened this window of inquiry, but he did not until later in life recognize the closely related issue of connections between moral judgment and moral behavior.

Conclusion

These five human developmental domains raise sound key issues: How do each of these empirical aspects of the person relate to each other? How does development in one aspect or characteristic relate to the others? To what extent are these aspects related to the ecological whole of a human life?

Most important, how does each relate to the non-empirical phenomenon, *spiritual development*? A developmental perspective invites the educator to see each human life as a unique person emerging through common aspects that can be observed, measured, and evaluated, yet in essence a human soul, a soul with spiritual reality at core, alive through God's redemptive grace or else spiritually dead in sin, unregenerate. (Ephesians 2:1)

This model suggests questions about how the five empirical aspects may each serve as input and output functions to and from the spiritual core. Classical Christian education has no difficulty in seeing how intellectually grasped matters may serve as input and output to spiritual development, but is there not similar value to be ascribed to each of the empirical aspects?

Encouragement and Warning

Christian education is rapidly developing into a knowledge-using and knowledge-generating discipline. As the quality of our questions matures and the unity of faith and learning is more fully appropriated, we will have need to learn the arts of gentle and orderly change. Those who lead, shape, and inform Christian education carry a stewardship of the highest sort. We report to the people of the church—the community of faith in Jesus Christ. Vast change will be needed as we take biblical truth and scientific evidence more seriously. But we dare not become arrogant in the process. We cannot force change. Our Lord did not. He wept over Jerusalem even as he held himself accountable to the Father.

Developmental emphasis in the practice of Christian education and an intellectual and philosophical grasp of developmental strategies, concepts, and modes of inquiry promise a significant period of increasing knowledge. We should strive toward this end. But there are dangers. We can readily fall into fads, especially if the special insights of this or that person become overdramatized. Human understanding, even at its best, always is incomplete and flawed. We seek knowledge and understanding, but our posture and stance should demonstrate humility and commitment to one another as colleagues in a community of learning and faith.

Knowledge can be used as a power tool. We should not do this. Knowledge can be used to intimidate people. We should not do this. Knowledge can become an end in itself—to be worshiped as those who have been blessed with insights admire themselves in a mirror. We must not do this. We must acknowledge that wisdom begins with knowledge and leads us to the fear of the Lord (Job 28:28,) and to ongoing development of the whole person in Christ. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

FOR FURTHER READING

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