



# Education That Makes a Difference<sup>1</sup>

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Ours is a sojourn of development. What education we have opportunity to get makes a difference in how we approach that journey of development through this life. The sort of education in which a Christian participates has important bearing on his or her spiritual development. You must take responsibility for the substance and quality of your own education.

As part of the sector of middle class North American Christianity that values higher education, we have been socialized to accept formal education as it is made available to us. I suspect that in this chapel group something greater than 80 percent are not yet taking responsibility for their own education. You are here in response to a number of signals from various people who suggest that this is the way to go. But at some point in life you will have to take responsibility for your education because it will not be completed when you receive your diploma.

Ultimately the way you continue to educate yourself and to take responsibility for your own life-long learning will have more bearing on what you are than the four years you spend in college. This is but a piece of a foundation and quite often the last one provided by the dictates, mandates, structures, and socializing processes of others. From here on you're on your own.

## Varieties Of Educational Experience

What experiences are having the most effect on changing you? After you reflect on this, I will give you the rank ordering that generally shows up in collegiate groups I've tallied. Highest on the list usually is *interpersonal relationships*. The second thing that usually shows up as having tremendous changing effects are *experiences in serving others*. Then comes *travel*—not necessarily international travel but travel regionally. *Reading* usually is next, followed by classroom experiences. And then *prayer* is listed or something associated with the devotional experience of quiet time and involvement with God in direct communication.

As you look at this list I would urge you to recognize that all of those experiences have the potential for everyone of being education that makes a difference. Education should not be seen simply in terms of signing up for courses and going to classes. When you take responsibility as a person who has moved through formal education and are making your own choices and decisions about your education, don't neglect any of those experiences. They are very potent change inducers and thus valuable in fulfilling your educational objectives.

## Where Is Education Taking You?

Now let's talk about the direction of change that is occurring in your life. Are you moving into bondage through your educational experiences or into liberty? The Apostle Paul talks a lot about categories of bondage, and this is a very important issue if we are going to be fulfilled as human beings. When we live either in the bondage of law or the bondage of flesh, we are less than whole persons.

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I call your attention to Galatians 2:1-5 where there is an incident of legalism summarized by Paul. One of the things that can happen to educated people is that as they move themselves into bondage, they move others with them. They use education to trap themselves in legalism and legalistic requirements, failing to go on into total freedom of servanthood to the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is also the bondage of the flesh described by Paul in Romans 8. If we are indulging ourselves in those things, even educationally, that are exalting of the flesh, we run the risk of moving not toward freedom but to more bondage, the bondage of the flesh. “Head trips”—intellectual exercises in which we exalt ourselves and build ego-satisfying experiences through our learning—are themselves potential movements into more bondage to the flesh. In I Peter 2:16 we are encouraged to act as free men, free people, as indeed we are, having been bought by the blood of Jesus Christ. And we are to be bondslaves of God, which is true liberty. For those of us who are in it and enjoy it and see it for what it is, we know that bondage to God is a bondage to holiness, not enslavement.

Educationally, what sorts of experiences are open to you? What possibilities are in your life ahead? I’d like to identify a trilogy of educational forms within any society: informal, formal, and nonformal.

Informal is that process of just living and learning by what is commonly known as “mother’s knee” or the school of hard knocks—that socialization process that comes about because a person lives in a particular society. Informal education is non-deliberate, whereas nonformal education is deliberate: it has a place and time. When we talk about formal education, it can be defined as a ladder-like structure by which we move from step to step; stage to stage, and every stage justifies itself in terms of making us ready for the next one.

In the years ahead, formal education is not your only option. One major option after your formal education is non-formal education: setting up for-yourself deliberate agendas of learning and becoming involved with others in study groups and projects to continually stretch yourself. This is one of the things we especially need to consider since our experience as Christians should be communitarian involvement with others.

### **Three Types of Emphasis**

As evaluative criteria for the kinds of educational experiences to look for, whether formal or non-formal, I’d like to identify three models or paradigms of educational emphasis.

The first type of emphasis is sometimes called the classical, where *knowing* is the big issue. *Doing* is a subordinate function and is assumed somehow to come out of the knowing, and perhaps in the long run all of that has something to say to one’s *being*. This exalting of the knowing, as if knowing is somehow adequate to produce the doing, is certainly not very Christian. If we find anything in New Testament injunctions and exhortations, we certainly find encouragement to keep our act together. Don’t let your mouth go off in one direction and your feet in another. Be as concerned about the doing as you are about the knowing.

The second type of emphasis is sometimes called technological or pragmatic education, and our society is getting increasingly full of it. A lot of argument rages around this model because technological education is regarded as rather impoverished from the standpoint of the liberal arts philosophy. It sees knowing as important only as knowing allows for doing—not a highly Christian orientation to learning unless one is learning to sew, learning to shoot a basket, learning to drive a car, or something else that has short-term technological application. Certainly in terms of the whole of our lives and the core of our educational experiences we should be looking for other kinds of education.

The third type of emphasis can be described with an ancient Greek word, *praxis*: knowing and doing are inseparable. Through doing one has the experience of knowing and through knowing one has the potential of doing, and through all of that comes the “praxis cycle” of experience and

reflection on experience. The focus is on the changes of the *being*; and responsible being regulates the doing.

Although there are values in each of these models for different sorts of purposes, we should particularly seek out good praxis experiences. This suggestion is based on the Epistle of James, where we read of a relationship between knowing and doing that is Christian.

### Three Instructional Processes

You should be able to identify and appreciate three different instructional processes. *In put* is the first of these. A lot of sermons are of that sort. We get information. When you read you get information. Though you may not be interacting with it very much, you may be getting' fairly straight communication. But if you're alert, you can usually find that interaction with input is possible and sometimes coupled to opportunities for dialogue and conversation.

The second sort of process is sharing. Sharing is when any knowledge, idea or skill that one has received or developed is put into action or put into a verbal form in which it can be communicated with other human beings. Some of us may not think of that as being learning. We'd rather have the professor or preacher give us input rather than to take the effort to share with each other. We may be getting an impoverished view of learning; the fellowship of the body is intended to be a sharing community, not only of physical goods and "bearing one another's burdens" but sharing in terms of edifying one another through our collective experiences.

A third process—which I especially urge you not to demean or avoid—is the *reflection* experience. While it is probably the most foreign to much of what goes on in Christian education, an understanding of oneself and one's familiarity with one's own characteristics is important for Christian growth. In James 1:22 the distinction is made between those who are *acting* on their Christianity and those who are just absorbing Christian knowledge. "Prove yourselves doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves." Be alert: this is not a distinction between Christians and non-Christians but a description of two categories of Christians.

"For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like" (James 1:23-24). That is disinterested in getting in touch with themselves. They are not taking advantage of the feedback that exists to get a clearer picture of who they are and where they are headed. The crux of this passage is not that people look at the mirror but at *their face* in the mirror. They are criticized not because they forget the mirror but because they lack interest in what they saw in the mirror—their face. In contrast, those who are not only hearers of the Word but doers are those who are interested in getting a clearer picture of themselves.

Growth in self-awareness, or the development of a reflective capacity to see oneself more clearly and to get more in touch with oneself as life progresses, is the crucial difference between a Christian who is passive and one who is active. These are the forms, types and functions of education I urge you to look for.

One negative word. Never be satisfied with education that simply teaches you a labeling system so that once having categorized a person or idea you walk away and say, "I know where he or she is at" or "I know where that idea came from."

We need Christians who know how to grapple with difficult ideas if we are ever to come into the fullness of life as truly free Christians. May we not use our educational experiences for further bondage but may we discover through them true liberty and the excitement that comes in servanthood of our Lord Jesus Christ.