



Ted Ward on Formation and Development¹

Ted Ward

To help people develop or to do it for them, that *is* the question. Thank you for your letter. Yes, I suspect our views on leadership training, development, formation are comparable, and apparently we are sensitive to some of the same misuses and apparent misunderstandings. Let's start with your reminder that this problem of terminology is largely a tempest in a teapot until people trade their mental capacities into a helping of mush in order to sound up-to-the-latest.

One of my mentors from the dark ages put it to me this way: "When you are the principal person being cited as the source of some weird and wonderful innovation in language, be sure it is wonderful, not just weird."

No, I really don't see the advantage of using the term "formation," unless it is important to take one's vocabulary from the Roman Catholics. The major issue, for me at least, is to try to get as close as possible to what we find Jesus doing, never mind the words a particular translator may choose.

I think you may find that there is quite a common use of "formation," especially in the literature of ministry preparation and development of the "clergy". In fact, "training" and even "spiritual formation" are commonly used in a directive and controlling context. This is my major concern. Certain words just plain smell of control. Others suggest or denote support and flexible partnership. My quick test is to put one of the main action verbs used in describing leadership up against the term you are wanting to test, and see how well it fits.

To perform this exercise first set up a series of terms using Nurturing at one end and Causing at the other. Decide for yourself: where would you put these verbs? stimulate, shape, guide, support, tell, control, form, encourage, explain, show, accompany. Test your line-up by first checking to see if you are carefully thinking how each term tends to be used in common conversation. Never mind the scholarly definitions.

Next, try out each term using one of your spiritual words together with it. In other words, does "spiritual development" fit better with "control" or with "accompany". Ask yourself, how does the Bible illustrate it? Work through the whole list—be sure to add some words you commonly think of—not just mine, and perhaps you will find that some of the importance of "development" will stand out in contrast with "formation." Maybe, maybe not. Try it yourself.

Personally I find that my favorite word, development, has less likelihood of being used in a dominative and coercive mode of leadership; and that's why I prefer it. The other reason is that the New Testament and especially the Gospels so often use botanical metaphors to illustrate and explain spiritual growth and maturity. Common sense and practical experience tell you that a plant is what it is. Coming from its seed, it is a red zinnia or a green bean. You can nurture it, encourage it, improve

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its soil, its nourishment, its access to water, to carbon dioxide, to sunlight; but you really can't change it in ways that are inconsistent with what the good Lord set it into the creation to be. Only the Holy Spirit can do that—even with human beings!

Formation is a favorite term today, but to me it is something that the leader does *to* people. Right there I get hung up. I really don't want to change anyone, not even my own sons and daughter. They are what God made them to be. But indeed, I have a role in their nurture, their awareness, their skills of reasoning, their sense of responsibility and their commitment to righteousness. If this is formation, I'll settle for it. But to me, I'll still think of it as being a responsible parent and leading my children through acts of support, encouragement, challenge to include God's Word in their reasoning, and to walk with them as they experience for themselves their walk of life.

Yours in the service of Jesus Christ,

Ted Ward