



## Transcriptions

### A Christian Perspective on Kohlberg

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**Annotation:** *John Wesley College, Michigan, early to mid 1970s.* Ted Ward distinguishes between teaching and therapy in the context of Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of development. He describes the stages and points out a problem with Kohlberg's typology by introducing a particular Christian perspective.



[Opening sentence unclear]. Please notice to the left we have made a distinction between teaching and therapy [he is referring to a chart]. Teaching is appropriate for normal development; therapy is appropriate for stalemated development. I would warn college-level people not to treat level two people as if they needed therapy. But there's nothing abnormal about a college-age person still being at level two. You are helping at the crucial transition years between level two and level three; but don't approach it as if it were pathological. Now if you still got people that are at level one, you have a pathological problem.

Now let us examine the difference between teaching and therapy. First of all teaching. The tasks of the educator are to stimulate inquiry, to stimulate verbalization, to ask why. Now what are these words? Stimulate inquiry: To encourage curiosity, to encourage seeking, to encourage investigation. Stimulate, encourage, enhance, excite. [Unclear] The same thing with reference to verbalization: One of the things that makes the human fully human is the capacity to use language. And it is something that we so often neglect. We assume that everybody can do that. But you know yourself that you've often said, "I'm not sure really how to express how I feel!" Maybe we all need help and stimulation with reference to our verbalization. The capacity to put in words, and share, and to be shared with is part of the bag of the educator.

Then the educator, in teaching, asks lots and lots of “why.” Parents get tired when kids ask “why” questions. We’ve speculated that actually kids would be helped if parents asked “why” more often! Instead of blocking the “why” questions with, “Because I said so and that’s it!” Why don’t we ask why more often? Help people look at structure, and it is why questions that cause people to look at structure. To provide experiences wherein moral issues are examined. Now this does not necessarily mean that we pose a lot of artificial or canned moral dilemma situations for people to analyze. Here’s one of the mistakes that the Kohlberg followers have made. Kohlberg himself makes it in some of his instructional material. He assumes that in doing this “to provide experiences wherein moral issues are examined” it is possible to accomplish this by handing out today’s moral dilemma from a list or from a file drawer full, and say, “today we are going to talk about this one.” Kids turn off to this after about the third case. Why? Because the real moral dilemmas of life are crowding in on their thinking, and they’re not working on those; they’re working on somebody else’s canned moral dilemmas. Every one of us confronts enough moral dilemmas in the course of a day that we ought to be able to have some experience working on those.

One of the reasons that John Stewart and others in examining the deeper implications of Kohlberg’s work have argued that what the school ought to be is a moral community, a just community. And what that really means is not that the school ought to be utopian, but that the school ought to be a place where people are constantly working on the quality of justice in that environment. They ought to be constantly working on moral issues in that environment, attacking them, working on them, finding ways to make a more just environment. John Wesley College could be an eminently just community. Not as a utopian-status achieved, but as a process dynamic of people searching for, exploring together, ways to facilitate justice. Do you have such a purpose? Indeed it is godly. Why not? Your God is a God of justice. Is this a community of the seekers of justice for all people?

And then to dialogue. I define dialogue in an odd way, but if you think about it, it’s not bad. To dialogue is to do more than talk together. It’s to listen responsibly. Not just to listen, but to listen responsibly. The role of the educator is to listen responsibly. To explore disequilibrium states with the disequibrated. How different this is from what has been talked about in terms of inducing disequilibrium. I believe that it is really unnecessary, if not counter-productive, for the educator to induce disequilibrium. In the first place, disequilibrium occurs on its own whenever a learner gets to the place where what he has always held becomes inadequate to deal with a new problem. How does he encounter the new problem? He encounters the new problem because of the richness of the environment, the transaction, the dialogue; and the disequilibrium occurs for various ones of us at various moments. Piaget calls it disequilibrium when all of a sudden things don’t quite fit what we’ve always assumed. It’s at this moment that the kid, the adult, the whoever says, “You know, I am really shaken. I have always believed that  $x+y=z$ , and since last night, I really don’t know. I really don’t know what I believe.”

Here’s where the trouble occurs. The parent who hears that, or worse yet, the pastor who hears that, or the teacher who hears that, comes rushing in and says, “Whoa Charlie! Let me help you. What you ought to be believing is . . .” What we try to do sometimes, ill-advisedly, is to cause a re-equilibration to occur before the disequilibrium is thorough. Piaget has observed that there is such a thing as a false re-equilibration. When a person becomes re-equilibrated with an answer that seems to satisfy him, he becomes falsely re-equilibrated. Sure he might lose that unsteadiness, but he has not reorganized himself at any kind of a gain over where he was. What happened? He shakes loose very soon, and when he shakes loose, he may shake loose with an even greater frustration.

What does an explorer of disequilibrium do? (1) He legitimizes being disequilibrated. And says, in effect, “That’s okay not to know where you stand since last night. I’ve been there too. In fact, Charlie, if you stop and think about it, there are probably other things like that that you are similarly uneasy about today.” And Charlie responds, “Yeah, I guess there are.” Pretty soon you co-explore and you find out that the jungle is full of murky spots, and the disequilibration heightens. This is where Piaget’s work becomes so important, because, as he says, if the disequilibration becomes high enough, the person doesn’t have anywhere to go but up. He can’t go back, and he can’t stay where he is. And he re-equilibrates at a new stage of development. That’s the name of the game. And it isn’t necessary for the educator to be standing around with the first-aid kit ready to slap on a plaster every time a kid says, “I’m uneasy.” Instead the educator is bought into the communication world of the youngster in such a way during the good times; but when the bad times come, the communication lines are there, and the problem becomes shareable, and the disequilibration becomes legitimized. And it’s okay to not be sure. And little by little that uncertainty, that un-sureness becomes explored, and the light gets shed into the corner, and the alternatives become clearer, and a new stage emerges. That’s a developmental concept of values development. But it’s that particular understanding of the role of the educator that Lawrence Kohlberg is absolutely unable to come to grips with. A great mystery to us, but there’s a big problem in his own perception as an educator.

I will show a little more here because I believe it to be extremely important and eminently biblical: the one who stands alongside, or to use the Greek, the Paraclete—a definition of the Holy Spirit in terms of God’s dealing with us. Have you ever heard the analogy of the sick whale? You know that when great whales are travelling in huge pods, and one falls sick and becomes unable to keep up, you know what happens? Two others are dispatched and swim alongside and pull that one along. There it is. The follower alongside, standing alongside, being with in the development process. The role of the educator in development.

Now a few propositions about the role of the educator in therapy—and that is where you’re sure that you’re dealing with a case of stalemated development. And I would argue that if we’re dealing with Christian young people at the college age, and we’ve got some clear-cut level one characteristics—inability to get outside self as a source of authority—we’re dealing with pathology. Here’s where I think it’s appropriate to do some confronting, and to challenge inconsistency. I think Jesus did it. I think he knew when to do it, and I think he used it judiciously, and he didn’t always force the answer, but he did the job. Occasionally he induced some disequilibrium. Remember the time the rich young ruler came to Jesus? That’s a clear-cut example of level two: “Tell me what I should do.” Jesus asks him, “What are you in to?” “Well I’m really into the law.” “Great. Fine. All you’ve got to do is sell what you have and give to the poor.” “Why would I have to do that?” In effect, Jesus says, “Because I’m in authority. You’ve already said so, and you’re into authority. Let’s be consistent with this. You called me ‘great teacher.’ I’m in authority. You’re in a culture that respects the great teachers, the rabbis, and this one has just told you to go and sell all that you have and give to the poor, but you say ‘no.’ Are you consistent? Are you sure you’re really into authority?” The guy leaves. Jesus had induced disequilibrium. See it? Jesus didn’t force the question on him. He let him go out into the night. He had induced disequilibrium. Maybe we should let more people go out into the night after we’ve just induced some disequilibrium. Sometimes our evangelical and evangelistic fervor causes us to force the question because the person may get run over by a train on the way home from church. Perhaps we ourselves need to do more trusting, to let God move in people’s lives after we’ve done rudimentary things such as challenging inconsistencies, confronting, and inducing disequilibrium.

We've postulated that what Kohlberg is looking at is a naturalistic phenomenon; that Kohlberg, as would be true with any scientist looking responsibly at the natural creation, and has seen something that God has put there. In effect, all that Kohlberg has seen on a naturalistic plane, all he has seen is that the human being moves through three stages: In his grid diagram, people are on this path. He hasn't answered the question very thoroughly to my satisfaction. What is the goal of all this? Where is it heading? Apparently it's headed toward some greatest good, it's headed toward some view of societal goal, it's headed toward some anthropos. As the humanist would say, "Man is the measure of all things." "Man in the great fulfillment of man as determinist." Now as a scientist again I must admit to you that what he's doing seems to be a responsible inquiry; but I suspect that he's only seeing a horizontal dimension of something that also has a vertical dimension. That in the Christian perspective we have such a thing as spiritual development; and that the reality may be closer to this: that there is in God's plan a beginning point for man, and a goal for man that is in a god-likeness or a theos, not an anthropos; and that the acts of this may be even as it was said of Christ as a child: "He grew in favor with God and man." And these are not antithetical. It is not antithetical to grow in favor with God and with man. They are parallel.

Kohlberg ultimately appeals his case for the centrality of justice. To a humanistic philosophy and to the aspirations of a democratic society, and since Kohlberg does not adequately deal with the source of values, or with the developmental function of obedience (and you recognize obedience to be a crucial biblical issue), and the whole question of source to be our basic element of presupposition: God as source. These are significant shortcomings in his presuppositional framework, from a Christian point of view. Therefore, a biblical perspective that adds to the understanding of source, and human beings' orientation to source, is necessary to complete the model of value development. We cannot stop with Kohlberg. We must go on and add the issue of source and the issue of the human beings' orientation to source. Thus re-examination of Kohlberg's findings in biblical perspective suggests that the three levels are better explained as three stages of orientation to source of values. Now this is not Kohlberg. What we would contend is that it is not a distortion of his findings; it is an alternate view of conclusion.

Level one: self has source. Level two: recognition of the externality of source, the model-ness, the out-there-ness, the law-ness. And level three: incorporation into oneself of the principles from the external source so they become internal and liberated. And scripturally, we find oodles of commentary of this sort, such as, "not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts" (II Corinthians 3: 3). And also, Kohlberg's model is constructively augmented, not destroyed, not even harmed. It is constructively augmented by a biblical view of man's response to authority. Three levels of response to authority can be seen as inherent in the three levels of structural development. Level one: response to authority as response to forces which are seen as punishing or rewarding. And by the way, that is a level of response to authority. That's where we all start out in life; and that's where God starts his dealings with people. Two: obedience as response to authority in respect for that authority and the worthiness of its being. Now Kohlberg made a terrible mistake and he admitted it when he called one of the sub-stages of level two "the law and order stage;" as if somehow law and order explained it. Of course, what he meant was, in his benign and kindly manner, he was thinking of the goodness of law and the loveliness of order; but he was heard as referring to George Wallace. He didn't mean that, and he said he didn't. He should have used, and he admits that he should have used, and says that he should have used, originally, not "law and order" but the "beauty of orderliness achieved through law." That's the "out-there-ness," the highest form, really, of level two. It's the acknowledgment of the beauty of the "out-there-ness" of law, the collective expression of all the best that we know, collectively. And again we are not a

nation of men, we are a nation of law. The beauty of that is supposed to infuse even our political philosophies. Level three: response to the principles seen as essence of authority willingly even eagerly as appropriate in a relationship with law.

Further, we can see two basic biblical exhortations: the exhortation to obedience and the exhortation to trust as the keys to deliverance from a pathological stalemate. Respectively at the hurdle from level one to level two and from level two to level three. Now I offer for your consideration this model: Level one in terms of orientation to source of authority is an orientation of assuming self to be authority. At level two, orientation to source changes to the recognition that authority is external to self. These are consistent with Kohlberg's findings. These are Christian, but they are consistent with his findings. And at level three, authority is incorporated into self as principles from outside having been or become internalized sources. This is eminently Christian and is faithful to his findings. Now enter these two key biblical propositions, and suddenly the whole thing becomes clear what goes wrong from level to level. The only way one can get outside assuming self to be authority is to become obedient. But the only way one can become truly liberated from the "out-there-ness" of authority is through Christ.

What is a response to authority at level one? In its response to force, authority is that which I am forced to accommodate. In level two, it is the response of respect for models and law. By the way, models here means people. In level three, the response to authority is as to principles—willingly, even eagerly, incorporated into oneself; and consider how obedience delivers us from that forced response into a respect response. But consider how trust delivers from the legal and modeling limitation into an internalization and return to a self-generating source.

I think the little hymn "Trust and obey" has it in the wrong order; but it comes out a little more poetic that way. But if you'll examine the Scripture, the obedience texts are primarily addressed at early stages of development. The trust stages are addressed at the higher stages of development. Consider this little homely thought: You're standing at the top of a ladder. I'm standing at the bottom of the ladder. It's a tall ladder and I say, Jump. And you say, Not on your life. There's no way that I going to jump. If I jump I'm going to hurt myself because you are incapable of catching me. Level one. No obedience, no trust, no jump. Level two. Jump! OK, if I gotta. If you say so. But if you drop me it's your fault. Level three. Jump. You want me to jump? I'll jump. You wouldn't want me to jump if you couldn't catch me. Trust. Consider Christian development. Not on your life, God. No way. OK, if you say so, I will. You wouldn't have asked me to if you couldn't have . . . Eminently Christian, and highly consistent with what Kohlberg finds in terms of the normal human growth of moral judgment.

Another thought that becomes a little clearer in the light of this is how we answer the question of what sorts of things we do to influence people through various stages of their development. The question of course is this one. What is it that determines whether something is a moral force, or a discipline, or a control? What determines whether it is moral force or not? That's a question we always have to ask as parents and educators. We say, Okay, I've got to do something about this. You know. The problems the dean of this college has to confront once or twice a month. I've got to exert some kind of moral influence, or discipline, or control. The issue is, what determines whether or not it is moral influence. Let me suggest this model, which begins to have a number of practical implications for us in terms of making educational decisions, or making parental decisions. [At this point he describes a chart which is not available. But it is clear what he is referring to in what follows.]

People in level one are most apt to be responsive to what mode of moral influence? Rewards and punishments. People who are in level two of moral judgment are apt to be most responsive to models and examples. People who are in level three are most apt to be responsive to dialogue and transactions. Now the reason why the distribution doesn't sharply change at each of these major lines is simply because people at this level are capable to responding to models and examples, to some extent. In fact, even small children are capable of responding, in a limited way; but they can make some response even to dialogue and transaction. As Piaget points out, we never lose our capacity to respond to rewards and punishment. But it becomes much less important to us; it becomes much less significant in the whole pattern of our moral, ethical being than do these other functions if truly we have developed to this stage. Now please understand about stage three. Kohlberg points out that level three is exclusively an adult level. He has not found children in level three. In fact, he has not found adolescents in level three. So when we're talking about level three, we're not even talking about the typical John Wesley students. I suspect that one of your problems is the level two to level three trust problem. Therefore, it could be that trust development is one of the things you might want to work on within the Christian community.

Dialogue and transactions are the key tool of level three; but models and examples are still important for that person making that transition, and to some extent, rewards and punishment hang in there too. So we say, "Okay, if you look at the total distribution of a person at about that transitional stage, he's getting pretty responsive to dialogue and transitions. He's still cuing primarily on models and examples, and if people aren't setting decent examples for him, he's probably going to get all turned off. Occasionally you may need to revert to rewards and punishments.

The danger comes when we take people who really are at level two and treat them only in terms of rewards and punishments. Or if we take the few people who have just broken through into level three and treat them in models and examples and at the end of it, that's just like putting a clamp on the whole thing. The only problem I've got with Larry Richards, whom I feel to be an excellent guidance person in the field of Christian education, is that he puts a terrific emphasis on models and examples, as if that were the top of the scale. I don't think it is. I think dialogue and transactions go beyond models and examples. It ought to be brought in for more of what it's really worth. Dialogue speaks primarily to verbal interaction; transaction speaks more to a totality of experience, the doing of things together, within a context about which dialogue can occur. So transaction is a more comprehensive word. Interaction speaks too much as if you and I are interacting. We're talking about larger scope than that. Dialogue quite often means you and I are talking. But we're talking about a larger scope than that. Not just intimate, but experiences. The kinds of experiences you create, for example, when you go places with your students. Those are transactional. Those are very important. In fact, at this stage, at this transitional stage, those dialogues and transactions are more important than the examples you set.

This somehow liberates us from an old-fashioned notion that is really rather fallacious—that is that our children are limited to be no more than we are; that our students are limited to be no more than we as teachers are, because they can live up to the examples we set. This produces an awful lot of parental neurosis, even educator neurosis, because you see all the flaws of your children as being a reflection of bad modeling that you've set. Get liberated from that! People cannot only live beyond your model; they can fail to live up to your model because that's not the whole ballgame! Again, if it were, you would be locked into a behavioristic view.