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"Maddix and Estep give us a carefully crafted text that hits just the right chords for teachers, pastors, and Christians called upon to disciple others. It concentrates on the important things, yet it avoids overdosing the beginner. You will be shocked at the amount of good stuff these pages contain! Most importantly, *Practicing Christian Education* delivers as advertised, introducing the reader to the leading theories and best practices of this crucial ministry."

—Mark H. Heinemann, Dallas Theological Seminary

PRACTICING CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

AN INTRODUCTION FOR MINISTRY

Mark A. Maddix
and James Riley Estep Jr.


Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Maddix, Mark A., 1965– author.

Title: Practicing Christian education : an introduction for ministry / Mark A. Maddix and James Riley Estep Jr.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Academic, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016051182 | ISBN 9780801030963 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian education. | Teaching. | Theology—Study and teaching. | Education (Christian theology) | Church work.

Classification: LCC BV1471.3 .M25 2017 | DDC 268—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016051182>

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17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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The Value of Christian Education

C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* speaks to the value of Christian education. In fact, it speaks to the absolute necessity of education in the Christian faith. He speaks of approaching the complexities of modern life with "boys' philosophies" and a "child's religion." Embracing a simple faith works for a while, but when we're faced with the complexities of adult life, the basic, underdeveloped, rudimentary teachings of childhood don't seem to adequately respond to life's reality. Lewis further observes, "Very often, however, this silly procedure is adopted by people who are not silly, but who, consciously or unconsciously, want to destroy Christianity. Such people put up a version of Christianity suitable for a child of six and make that the object of their attack." In other words, Christian doctrine is complex and some are unwilling to study and embrace its complexities.¹ Sound familiar?

Decades later, John G. Stackhouse echoed the same concern in his *Evangelical Landscapes*, wherein he stresses the importance of Christians knowing and living their faith. He observes, "Evangelicals used to be accused of being 'biblicistic' and even 'bibliolatrous' as they reflexively referred any problem of life to a Bible text. That accusation can rarely be leveled anymore, and it is not necessarily because evangelicals have become more theologically sophisticated. Many instead have become just as ignorant of the Bible as anyone else."² However, he later comments,

This is the work of theology, and it is work every Christian must do: learning what God has said and learning how to say it for oneself in one's Christian community. The ignorance of the general public about the fundamentals of the Christian faith is regrettable. The ignorance of churchgoing Christians about the fundamentals of the Christian faith, however, is scandalous. Christians are somehow expected to think and feel and live in a distinctive way, as followers of Jesus, without being provided the basic vocabulary, grammar, and concepts of the Christian religion.³

How can someone have a genuine walk with Christ—be a *Christian*—if they do not know the faith, value the faith, and know how to practice the faith? *They cannot!* Stackhouse cautions us against trying to be a Christian in the absence of knowing Scripture, while C. S. Lewis calls us to be continuing students of Scripture, not settling for a faith suited only for a child. *Christian education* is the church's response to the need for a growing, vibrant, practical faith. It is like electricity. No one notices it until it doesn't work. We often do not value education until we realize we are ill prepared or unequipped to give a faithful response to life's challenges. We are not talking about Sunday school, small groups, or Bible studies. These are forms or programs of Christian education. So what is Christian education itself, and why is it so vital?

What Is Education?

Education can be described as an activity of teaching, something parents, teachers, pastors, and institutions *do*. Some may focus on the learner, defining education as a *process* or becoming educated. Others define education by the finished *product*; what did you get from school? An education. It can also be defined as a discipline, the content studied. Thus we can say that education is the study of subjects. It may be too simple, but in fact, all these different definitions have one element in common. *Education results in learning*. Wherever learning is occurring, education is occurring. But not all education is the same; it's not all about classes.

The concept of education exists along a spectrum, as depicted in table 1.1. The spectrum goes from formal to nonformal to informal education, and shows the learning associated with each type of education.

What happens when this is confused? Don't let the terms confuse you. For example, Sunday school is not really a "school," or at least it shouldn't be. Schools are institutions of formal learning, with the assumption that if students are in the fourth-grade class, they have already been through the first- through third-grade classes. However, Sunday school cannot make this

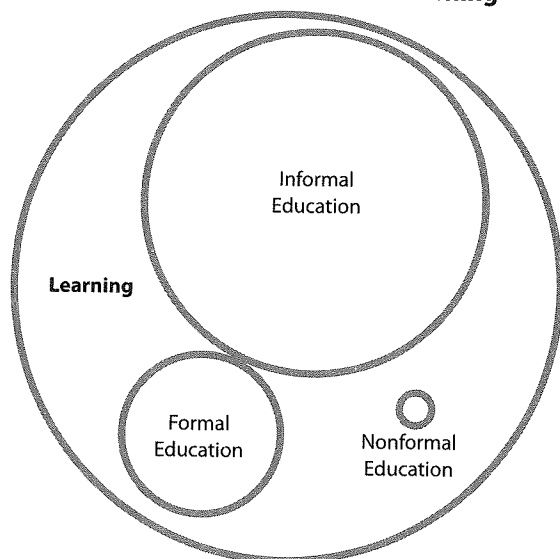
Table 1.1 Spectrum of Education

Formal ←	Nonformal ←	Informal
1. Intentional instruction	1. Intentional instruction	1. Typically unintentional
2. Overt curriculum	2. Overt curriculum	2. Hidden curriculum
3. Structured organization	3. Semi-structured organization	3. Unstructured
4. Institutional	4. Noninstitutional	4. Society/culture based
5. Low immediate application	5. Immediate application	5. Immediate application
6. Typically long-term	6. Typically short-term	6. Lifelong
<i>Schooling</i> ; attending a Christian school or university	<i>Seminar</i> ; receiving training for ministry or participating in a supervised internship	<i>"School of hard knocks"</i> ; life experience, personal engagement with culture and society
<i>Example</i> : Progressing toward a bachelor's degree and passing the prescribed four-year sequence of courses at a Christian university	<i>Example</i> : Taking a four-session training program for teachers at church to develop teaching and improve classroom-management skills	<i>Example</i> : Learning when to bow your head, be silent, or stand up in a worship service based on the example of others
<i>Church-based program</i> : Bible institute	<i>Church-based program</i> : Adult Bible fellowship, small groups	<i>Church-based program</i> : Socialization, opportunities to build relationships

assumption. Sunday school should have more of a nonformal approach, with an emphasis on immediate application. When it comes to learning, these three forms of education serve different purposes, all necessary. Figure 1.1 illustrates this. The larger circle is "learning" in general; it's what we "know." Informal education contributes the most; however, we often don't realize it. We learn much of our morals, dispositions, cultural assumptions, and social conventions from informal learning, picked up as we go through life or become members of the church. Formal education is the second-largest circle, primarily because of the duration of formal learning. Consider that a student in college spends an estimated eighteen hundred hours in the classroom and a projected thirty-six hundred hours in study, preparation, and completing assignments for class, all within a four-year period of time. Formal education also tends to be larger, broader in scope, and typically tiered in sequence of study from basic to advanced studies. However, the smallest circle, nonformal education, focuses on a topic of immediate application, a targeted learning delivered by a targeted means.

What kind of education does the church need? Which one should it utilize? Practicing Christian education calls us to use all three forms of education. Practicing Christian education at its best intentionally makes use of all three to promote the formation of faith. Also, some educational initiatives can combine

Figure 1.1
Educational Contexts and Learning



Based on George R. Knight, *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), fig. 2.

for maximum effectiveness. Consider your Christian college or seminary experience. It is a formal learning environment, but learning also occurs through supervised ministry experiences/internships (nonformal), as well as learning from the campus ethos and relationships formed (informal). Church camp is more nonformal, with a focus on immediate application and short duration, but is also indeed informal in its learning. When participating in the life of the congregation, we are learning through socialization (informal education); but when we get involved in serving within the congregation, we are often trained through a seminar or workshop (nonformal education). Practicing education in the church involves formal, nonformal, and informal learning.

Why Do We Need Christian Education?

George Gallup and Jim Castelli conclude, "Americans revere the Bible but, by and large, they don't read it. And because they don't read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates."⁴ Stephen Prothero affirms the continuing presence of religion, particularly Christianity, in American culture and Western civilization. However, he raises an alarm regarding Americans' virtual ignorance of religious content, even among those who are active

participants in an organized religion. Who is to blame for this failure of religious literacy? As many evangelicals charge, in this instance the removal of religion from the public school curriculum is one of the main culprits. However, Prothero readily identifies a second culprit: *Christian education!* He notes that churches themselves have failed to instruct their members in their faith's basic tenets.⁵

Ignorance of the Bible's content among everyday Americans is even more pronounced. Only 50 percent of adults in the United States can provide the title of one Gospel, and most cannot recall the first book of the Bible.⁶ Barna Group has made some disturbing revelations about Americans' grasp of Bible content and their changing perception of the Bible:⁷

- 60 percent of Americans cannot name even five of the Ten Commandments
- 82 percent of Americans believe "God helps those who help themselves" is a Bible verse
- 12 percent of adults believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife
- Over 50 percent of graduating high school seniors thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife
- A large number of respondents to one survey indicated that the Sermon on the Mount was in fact preached by Billy Graham
- Four out of ten believe that the same spiritual truths are simply expressed differently in the Bible, the Qur'an, and the Book of Mormon

The church faces a devastating twofold problem: a simultaneously expanding and shrinking gap between it and the culture. First, the gap between the church and culture is *expanding* due to society's ever-increasing ignorance of biblical content, which poses a significant challenge to the church. Second, unfortunately, the gap is likewise *shrinking* because the church is also becoming less knowledgeable about the Bible and significant matters of faith. *Not* practicing Christian education is *not* a viable option. It endangers our mission not only to "go . . . make disciples" but also to teach them (Matt. 28:19–20). We cannot expect people to have a vibrant faith, nor the church's health and vitality to be advanced, in the absence of an intentional, holistic approach to practicing Christian education.

What's the Point?

Education is not just Sunday school; it is bigger than that. Also, education may be more complicated than commonly thought. Likewise, education is

serious ministry for Christian educators. Christian education forms an environment wherein believers are instructed, equipped, and nurtured for a life of faith in the real world.

Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe an *educated* Christian in a church context?
2. How would you define or describe *education* in your church?
3. In your congregation, where does formal, nonformal, and informal education occur?
4. How would you explain the value of Christian education in two or three sentences?

Suggestion for Further Reading

Mayr, Marlene. *Does the Church Really Want Religious Education?* Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1998.

2

Biblical Principles for Practicing Christian Education

The Bible is not a theology textbook, nor is it a God-given “user guide for life,” as if it were all arranged systematically and sequentially, with an alphabetic index. Essentially, the Bible is a story. A true story, but nonetheless it is a story, laid out in narrative, expounded on in poetry, reflected upon in epistles; it is the story of God’s people from the time of creation to the birth of the church to the consummation of creation. However, it is not just a story for story’s sake, or for its entertainment value; rather, it is a story with a unique purpose. As Romans states, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (15:4). This story was given to teach us. Notice Paul’s affirmation of the practical nature of the God-breathed story: “All Scripture is breathed out by God *and profitable* for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17, emphasis added). Scripture isn’t just any story; it is God’s story given by God to his people, the church, and part of the story is about teachers, teaching, learning, places of learning, and reflections on what we need to know. For Christian educators, as we endeavor to be “equipped for every good work,” the Scriptures play an integral, irreplaceable role for practicing Christian education. The Bible gives us insight into the educational practices of God’s people throughout its story, from which principles for today’s Christian educator can be gleaned.

The Bible Explains *Why* We Are Practicing Christian Education

Why education that is Christian? Educating God's people is a fulfillment of God's divine imperative to teach. Why do we teach? Because God commanded it in his story. The Old and New Testaments are replete with examples of the commitment of God's people—faithful men and women, families, communities, congregations, and nations who were dedicated to fulfilling God's call to teach others. For most of us, the divine mandate might be sufficient, but it still begs the question, Why did God command us to teach?

Teaching God's story is a catalyst for conversion and the formation of a distinctively Christian faith. Biblical instruction's purpose is the formation of the individual and the community with a distinctively Christian faith. A holistic Christian faith is the vital objective of Christian education. Without Scripture, conversion and faith are generic rather than focused on the God who revealed/inspired the Word and redeemed/transformed the individual. This is why teaching the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament, included foreigners who were living among the Hebrews (e.g., Deut. 31:12; 1 Kings 8:41–43). Scripture is relevant to our spiritual lives before conversion, during conversion, and throughout our walk with Christ.

The earliest educational mandate given by Moses expresses the essential nature of godly instruction for faith formation, especially for children, in Deuteronomy 6:4–9. After affirming the essential theology of the Hebrew community (vv. 5–6), Moses then identifies the means by which the community will transfer its faith to the next generation (vv. 7–9). Many of Judah's national spiritual revivals were predicated on the teaching of God's Word. Jehoshaphat (eighth century BC) sent court officials, Levites, and priests "to teach in the cities of Judah. . . . And they taught in Judah, having the Book of the Law of the LORD with them. They went about through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people" (2 Chron. 17:7, 9). Centuries later the catalyst of Josiah's sixth-century-BC revival was the people's "hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the house of the LORD. And the king stood in his place and made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant that were written in this book," to which they were faithful all the days of his life (2 Chron. 34:30–31).

In the New Testament, Jesus's Great Commission isn't *just* about evangelism ("Go"); it's also about making disciples ("teaching them"; Matt. 28:19–20). Christian education—the ministry of teaching—not only responds to

the mandate of Jesus to teach, the command of the Great Commission, but also sustains the rationale that it is vital for the faith formation of the believer. This is true for not only the individual but the group as well. Luke summarizes the earliest Christian community as having "devoted themselves *to the apostles' teaching* and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42, emphasis added). Christian education facilitates the formation not only of personal faith but also of a faithful community of believers.

The Bible Itself Is Formative in Our Students' Lives When We Practice Christian Education

While the Bible is not the only source of spiritual nurture, it is indeed given to us as a formative element in our walk with Christ. The lyric to a simple child's song, "Jesus loves me, this I know, *for the Bible tells me so*," sums up the matter. Without the Bible, we could not know who Jesus is, properly experience his love, or do what he wants us to do. We can proclaim WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?), but we can really do this only once we know WDJJ (What Did Jesus Do?). Biblically speaking, learning and teaching are inseparable. Nothing bears this out more than the fact that in Hebrew *lamad* means "to teach" and is in the active voice, while "to learn" is in the passive voice. The concept of teaching/learning is indivisible—two sides of the same coin.

Scripture's formative influence on our lives is not only for the mind but for the whole person. When instructing Timothy about dealing with the false teachers in Ephesus in 2 Timothy 3:14–17, Paul urges him to be different from them: "But as for you . . ." (v. 14). But how? He tells Timothy to think differently from them, to be "acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation" (v. 15). Paul then affirms the divine authority of Scripture ("All Scripture is breathed out by God" [v. 16a]) and the practical nature of Scripture for life transformation ("profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" [v. 16b]). Why is this crucial? "That the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (v. 17). The Bible is foundational to practicing Christian education because it is formative for our minds, our lives, and our vocation. Remember the impossibility posed by John Stackhouse? "Christians are somehow expected to think and feel and live in a distinctive way, as followers of Jesus, without being provided the basic vocabulary, grammar, and concepts of the Christian religion."¹

The Bible Even Tells Us *How It Is to Be Used* in Practicing Christian Education

Lecture? Object lessons? Storytelling? Streaming video? No single teaching method is prescribed or described as the sole method of instruction in the Bible. Scripture presents a continuum of teaching/learning methods designed to meet the needs of the individual and the situation. This spectrum extends from the more teacher-centered, fixed content for indoctrination to the more student-centered, process-oriented method of instruction, such as Job or Ecclesiastes.² In fact, perhaps the only restriction about how the Bible is to be taught isn't methodological, but is the instruction found in 2 Timothy 2:15: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, *rightly handling the word of truth*" (emphasis added). The integrity of the content is always to be affirmed, regardless of our chosen teaching method.

The diversity of teaching methods is evident throughout the Old Testament, such as in the teaching methods of the prophets.³ It is definitely demonstrated in the book of Proverbs alone, wherein the vocabulary for teaching/learning ranges from the more passive, teacher-centered learning methods (listening, obedience, observance, assimilation) to the more active, student-centered approaches (understanding, mastery, searching, pondering).⁴ This same continuum is in the New Testament as well. The vocabulary used in it to describe learning reflects methods ranging from the more teacher-centered, content-oriented approaches (e.g., "instruction," Eph. 6:4; "instructed," Acts 18:25; "instruction," 1 Cor. 10:11) to those that seek the deeper levels of learning beyond the mastery of content (e.g., "understand," Eph. 5:17). Perhaps the most distinct portrait of the variety of teaching methods employed in the New Testament is in Luke 24. Jesus's encounter with disciples on Emmaus Road includes discussion (v. 14), probative questions (v. 17), challenging ideas (vv. 25–27), modeling learning objectives (vv. 30–31), and direct instruction (vv. 33–35).

The Bible Identifies Who Is Supposed to Be Practicing Christian Education

Teachers have always existed within the community of faith, taking a diversity of forms, titles, and roles among God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps the only teachers common to both testaments are God (Isa. 3:8; Job 36:22; Exod. 35:34; Titus 2:11–12; 2 Cor. 6:1; 1 Tim. 2:3–4) and the faith community. God instructs primarily through his acts of grace and

revelation, teaching through word and deed. While often unacknowledged, the faith community itself also serves as a teacher. For example, in the Old Testament, the festivals, placement of worship sights, and activities of public assemblies all had educational implications (Deut. 4:14; 6:1; 26:1–19; 31:39; Josh. 8:30–35; 2 Kings 2:3; 4:38; 5:22; 2 Chron. 17:7–19). In the New Testament, participation in the church reinforced the formation of faith through exposure and involvement in the community (Acts 2:42–47). Additionally, the place and function of the teacher is valued as a gift from God (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:27–31; Eph. 4:7–13, 29–32; 5:15–20; 1 Pet. 4:10–11).

However, within the people of God some individuals have been committed to the teaching ministry. In the Old Testament, the *family* had primarily educational responsibilities for its children (Exod. 12:26–27; 20:4–12; Deut. 4:9–10; 6:6–7; 11:19–20; 29:9; Ps. 78:3–6; Prov. 1:8; 6:20) and was even intergenerational (Deut. 4:9–10; 11:19–20; Exod. 12:26–27; Ps. 78:3–6). Early in Israel's history the *prophets* arose (Jer. 8:8; 9:13; 16:11; Mic. 6:8; Isa. 8:3–16; 42:21–24; Zech. 7:12; Hos. 1:3–9)—starting with Moses, who was the exemplar for all future prophets (Exod. 18:20; 24:12; Deut. 4:14; 6:1; 31:19)—as well as the *priests* (Deut. 22; Pss. 27:31; 40:8; Hag. 2:11; Mal. 2:6–9; 3:11). Other groups assumed instructional roles in Israel, such as the *sages* (Judg. 14:12–14; 2 Sam. 13:1–22; Prov. 3:3–11; 10:8; 12:15; 13:14; 14:2; 28:4–9) and, later in Israel and Judah's history, the *scribes* (Neh. 8; Jer. 8:8; Ezra 7:10–11).

In the New Testament, in addition to God and the faith community, the apostles became the initial teachers. As Jesus's former students, they assumed the task of teaching through instructing, preaching, and writing. Acts depicts the apostles as completing Jesus's mission (Acts 1:1) by making disciples for Christ (Acts 14:21). Doctrine assumes a crucial role in the church through the apostles' instruction (Acts 2:42; 5:28; 13:2; 17:19). As the church expanded, both numerically and geographically, pastors and teachers were selected for newly planted congregations. Teaching is a vital facet of leadership in the church. The ability to teach is an essential quality of leadership (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). Paul further affirmed that the church should let "the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). However, the Bible does more than just tell us that teachers teach. Practicing Christian education requires us to know the kind of person who can teach the people of God.

Perhaps the most stellar example of a teacher within the community of faith is Ezra. He was in exile in Babylon, one of many Jews who found themselves in Babylon following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. However, he was given the daunting task of restoring the faith of God's people upon their

return to Judah around 428 BC. Scripture states, “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). This verse provides a glimpse into the kind of person suited to be a teacher in God’s Kingdom. First, Ezra was a devotee: he “had set his heart.” We can make the application here that teachers have a heart condition, a motivated conviction that is not determined by externals. They are reliant on God, love students, and serve in the church.

Second, Ezra was a student of God’s Word: “to study the Law of the LORD.” In Ezra 7 he is described several times as a scribe who was learned in the Scriptures, so much so that his learning even commanded the Persian king Artaxerxes’s respect (7:6, 11, 21). A Christian teacher must be one who knows God’s Word as well as one who is capable of “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15c). Good teachers start out as good students.

But, third, Ezra was also a disciple: “and to do it.” It is not enough to know the Word. Teachers must apply it to their own lives—practice it—before they stand before others and teach it. In regard to practicing our faith, the book of James states, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (1:22). The experience of discipleship is crucial for teachers, since without it they may be accused of hypocrisy; and yet with it they can readily identify with the struggles of faithfully living for Christ and provide practical advice from their own walk.

Finally, Ezra was a teacher: “to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” Teachers have to teach, and Ezra taught the people. Nehemiah 8 gives an ample description of Ezra as a teacher, as one who publically read and expounded from the Book of the Law, “from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law” (Neh. 8:3). Education isn’t an impersonal activity; it requires teachers.

The Bible Describes the Occasions When We Are to Practice Christian Education

Christian education doesn’t take place just in a classroom, on Sunday morning, scheduled so as not to interfere with the worship service. This notion, while common, is too restrictive and obstructs the potential for instruction in the church. Previously we discussed the teachers in the Bible and the wide span of educational venues in which they taught, guided, trained, and discipled believers; so it should be clear that Christian education can occur anywhere, from a dungeon to a palace, and anytime, whether in the afternoon at an

Ephesian school borrowed by the apostle Paul (Acts 19:9), in conversation on a road to a nearby city (Luke 24), or through everyday life encounters in the home (Deut. 6:6–9). Scripture does not impose when or where education can or cannot take place; but it does implore us to teach others, to pass along our faith when given any opportunity.

The people of God introduced new means of education, adapted the practices of other cultures, and even removed obsolete means as deemed necessary. The Hebrews, as a people, grew from being a family to an ethnic group, a tribal nation, a monarchy, and eventually an exilic people group with some returning to reclaim their nation. These changes shaped the way in which they educated; the institutions of education had to adapt to the people’s changing needs. For example, the rise of the monarchy was a catalyst for the formation of royal court education, scribal schools, and the production of Wisdom literature. However, with the collapse of the monarchy, the first two of these went away, with only Wisdom literature remaining. The exile and return of the sixth to fifth centuries BC served as yet another catalyst for the birth of an educational venue unmentioned in the Old Testament yet frequently encountered in the New Testament—the synagogue. When you major in Christian education you’re not majoring in Sunday school, or small groups, or weekly Bible studies; the Bible affirms a wide array of educational opportunities presented for God’s people.

Conclusion

Why are we even concerned with biblical foundations for Christian education? Ultimately, the response to this question lies in the very affirmation of Scripture as the revealed and inspired Word of God (1 Cor. 2:10–13; Rom. 3:1–3; 2 Tim. 3:15–17; 1 Pet. 1:10–12, 21; 2 Pet. 1:20–21; 3:2, 15–16). As believers in Jesus Christ, we make the same affirmations Jesus made regarding Scripture (Matt. 5:18; 22:29; Mark 7:8–9; 12:24; John 17:17), affirming its trustworthiness and truthfulness. The Bible is the cornerstone of our own faith and the faith of the church, the primary textbook for all of us.

Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe your own use of the Bible, personally and in ministry?

2. In your spiritual walk, how has the Bible been a catalyst for your formation as a Christian?
3. Given the biblical foundations, how have you perhaps limited or minimized your understanding of Christian education?
4. How would you summarize this entire chapter in one paragraph?
5. Given the description of Ezra as a devotee, student, disciple, and teacher, how would you rate yourself in these facets of your ministry? What could you do to improve on them?

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Theology for Practicing Christian Education

Most people have a theology. They have presuppositions and beliefs about God. These beliefs are often shaped from personal experiences or formed from their faith heritage. In many of these cases their beliefs about God—or their theology—are not well informed. They have not studied theology in a formal context. Studying theology is never to be viewed as an abstract exercise in gaining information; rather, theology is very practical. Theology provides the processes to ensure that our teaching, preaching, and ministry remain faithful to the gospel. Theology not only is the content of Christian education but also shapes and molds the life of the Christian educator and the assumptions that inform education that is Christian; it even shapes the practicing of Christian education. In fact, theology actually tells Christian education what it is *supposed* to be doing. ✕

Our understanding of theology—what we believe about God—plays an important role in shaping our faith and our view of Christian education. What we believe about the Triune God (Father, Son, and Spirit), human persons, sin, redemption, the church, and the end times influences the practice of Christian education. This chapter provides an overview of the primary theological doctrines and their relationship to Christian education.

Revelation

Theology is the study of God. It is the “queen of the sciences.” We study God in order to gain an understanding of how God reveals himself to humanity. We

admit that it is impossible to fully understand the revelation of God, but we have been given significant sources to understand God. One of the ways the Triune God reveals himself to us is through God's revelation. God reveals to humanity both through *specific revelation* (the Bible) and *general revelation* (creation). We study the Bible and creation as a means to explore truth because we believe that in these two sources we can find all truth.

One of the primary resources in understanding God is the Bible. We read and study the Bible in order to understand how God relates to his people. We believe that the Bible is divinely inspired or "breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16) and provides all that is necessary for our understanding of salvation. The Bible is a book that was inspired by God and conveyed through humans. In other words, God speaks through the Bible, and theology is the response of intellectual attentiveness and moral obedience that God's Scripture demands and deserves.¹

God also reveals himself through *general revelation*, or *natural theology*. We learn about God through creation. As we gaze on a beautiful sunset or receive a wet kiss from our dog, we are reminded that God is speaking to us. This is why it is important for us to understand how God made humans and the created world. We study all disciplines, including psychology, sociology, biology, science, and the humanities, because they provide a greater understanding of God's nature. For example, the social sciences are an investigation of God's created order and can aid in our understanding of general revelation.

We believe that in Christian education we must understand God's truth through both specific and general revelation. Our understanding of the sciences and theology informs the content and methods of Christian education. We believe that both specific and general revelation reveal God's truth, and that "all truth is God's truth." In other words, we do not see a conflict between what God has revealed in Scripture and what we learn from the sciences, because both testify to the nature of God (see chap. 5). Practicing Christian education calls us to embrace all of God's truth in its entirety, regardless of the source.

Theological Methodology

There are varying interpretations of the content of the Bible. Some view the Bible primarily as a source of propositional knowledge—a book of facts that is often disconnected from real life. Others view the Bible as a book of historical accounts that can be separated from contemporary life. Although each of these has merit, we believe that the primary content of the Bible is the *narrative or story* of God. This narrative leads the readers to understand

the nature of God and what God has done *to* and *with* humanity. Since Scripture is a narrative, it doesn't provide answers to all of life's questions. It is not a sourcebook or cookbook with recipes, but instead is a story of God's redemptive history.

Christians approach the Bible in a variety of ways. Each Christian denomination interprets the Bible and applies it to faith in a particular way. All of them are seeking to understand God's truth as revealed in Scripture. Everyone interprets the Bible through a set of lenses shaped by their experiences and their particular church denomination or tradition.

One approach to theological understanding, attributed to Albert C. Outler, is called the *quadrilateral*.² He developed this view from the theology of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. The quadrilateral is a theological methodology to determine whether something is true theologically or doctrinally. It consists of the following sources: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The quadrilateral provides significant insights into biblical interpretation. The following is a brief summary of each source of the quadrilateral.

Scripture: Wesley was a man of one book—the Bible—and believed that Scripture was the primary source. He followed the Reformers' view of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) by placing the authority of Scripture above the other sources.

Tradition: In referring to tradition, Wesley believed that we should look to the early church fathers in the development of doctrines and beliefs. Tradition provides a basis to see how Scripture has been interpreted through the centuries.

Reason: When interpreting Scripture, it is important to use human reason in making decisions about theology and doctrine. This doesn't mean that you can reason yourself to God, but it does mean that you should think critically and question the Bible.

Experience: It is important for people to experience their faith and to confirm that experience with Scripture.³

Christian educators view the Bible as the primary content of teaching; therefore it is important to interpret Scripture appropriately. As Christian educators lead Bible studies, preach, and teach, it becomes important to utilize the quadrilateral as a framework to properly handle "the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). As the Holy Spirit guides us, we can properly understand God's specific revelation to help others grow in their relationship with God. Practicing Christian education is an interpersonal activity between the teacher, student, and the God-given Word.

Triune God

One of the primary doctrines of the Christian church is that God is one essence and three persons, or *hypostases*—the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit as one God in three persons. These three persons are distinct and of one nature. So when speaking about God, we must first begin with understanding the Triune God.

The Triune God is in relationship with Godself. Many scholars believe that the three persons of the Trinity are in a *perichoresis*, or “circle dance.” This is referred to as a *social trinitarian view*. Within this circle dance, God communes with Godself, bringing a sense of joy, freedom, and intimacy to the relationship. This relational approach to the Triune God provides a model for a relational approach to Christian education, one that centers on the interconnectedness of humans and all of creation. In this sense, God is *immanent* and thereby engages in relationship with his creation. The relationality (*immanence*) and the holiness (*transcendence*) of God are simultaneously at work. God is holy and exhibits a holiness that is radically different from humanity. God is transcendent as a wholly other God. God’s relationality models perfect love. The three members of the Godhead are in perfect relationship and express holy love toward one another. This means that God’s relational love toward humanity extends out of the very being of the Trinity. While the Trinity describes the essence of God, aspects of the Triune God give insight into the nature of God’s character.

God the Father

God is the First Person of the Trinity and is our heavenly Father. As Father, God is distinctive within the Trinity. God as Father is a metaphor to describe God’s relationship to humanity in a personal way. Just as a human father is to care for and love his children, so God the Father is concerned about caring for and loving his creation. God is holy love and remains loving to all of creation. God offers love for humanity and desires communion with creation.

God created all of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), which shows that the world’s existence emerges from a gracious God. God also created humanity in his image and likeness (*imago Dei*). Because they are created in God’s image, humans have a special and privileged place in God’s creation. This special relationship between God and humanity was not completely severed by the fall of humanity. As Christian educators, we must recognize that our students are created in God’s image and that we are to value them and recognize that God is working in their lives.

God as Creator is a reminder that God continues to create and make things new. As humans engage in God’s redemptive work in the world, both humans and creation are being restored and redeemed. For Christian educators, this is a reminder that God is creating through our faithful teaching. It also shows us that education is more than transmitting information; it is also fostering students’ ongoing creative imagination.

In understanding the character of God, the following attributes have been used to describe how God relates to the world.

- Omniscience: God knows all things
- Omnipresence: God is present everywhere
- Omnipotence: God is all-powerful
- Goodness: God is good
- Immutability: God is changeless
- Sovereignty: God is over all creation
- Justice: God works for good
- Holiness: God is pure and loving
- Righteousness: God is just and good

What we understand about the character of God influences our theological foundations of Christian education. For example, since we believe that God is holy, the goal of education is that we embody a life of holiness, by God’s grace, and that through our modeling and teaching, others would embody the same life. In other words, our goal in Christian education is, by the grace of God, to help persons live a life of faithful discipleship.

Jesus Christ

The Second Person of the Trinity is Jesus Christ. The study of Jesus Christ is called *Christology*. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and consisted of both humanity and divinity. We refer to his birth as the *incarnation*. His *atonement* reflects what he did for all of humanity and creation. It is through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus that we have the opportunity to be forgiven for our sins. He modeled for us self-giving love expressed through a life of service and death on the cross. This is best expressed in the *kenosis* (emptying) hymn of Philippians 2:1–11. Jesus “emptied” himself of power and became a “servant” or “slave” (*doulos*, v. 7). He became human and dwelled among us, taking the form of a slave.

Jesus is the God-man. He is both human and divine. Throughout the history of the church, theologians have sometimes placed a greater emphasis on either his humanity or his divinity. In either case, Jesus is both fully God and fully man.

Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity. The theology of the Holy Spirit is called *pneumatology* (*pneuma* means “breath”). Jesus promised that after he ascended into heaven he would send an advocate or helper (John 14:15–31). John says in verse 26, “but the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” The Holy Spirit represents the personal activity of God and Jesus Christ in the world today. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that persons are convicted of faith and drawn to God. When a person is converted they are born again of the Spirit.

The power of the Holy Spirit enables Christians to live as faithful disciples. Christians are able to embody the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22–23) by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works in the context of the body of Christ to bring about unity in the body (Eph. 4:3) and to enable the body of Christ to utilize its gifts (1 Cor. 12:1).

The ministry of the Holy Spirit includes direct activity with human persons in the life of the church and in the world. The Holy Spirit enables humanity to bring about the redemption and restoration of all creation.

Anthropology (Doctrine of Humanity)

God created male and female in his image and likeness (*imago Dei*; Gen. 1:26–27). God created humans to be in relationship with him and with each other. We are social beings who desire companionship. God created humans to have a unique relationship with him and to be God’s ambassadors on earth. Because we are created in the image of God, we represent God.

But through the sin of Adam and Eve, our first parents, humans became fallen. This means that humans broke relationship with God by their disobedience. Some theological traditions refer to this fallenness as total depravity, a condition in which the image of God is completely destroyed and humans do not have the capacity to respond to God. Other traditions (including the authors’) believe that the image of God was distorted and yet humans have the capacity to respond to God. This means that there is still goodness in all of humanity. We, the authors, also believe that one of the primary goals of

salvation is the full renewal of the image of God, which reflects Christlikeness. This is possible only by God’s grace and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Because of the fall of our first parents, sin is inherited from them. Every person is in a state of sin and needs the redeeming work of Christ in their life. Sin is to be understood in relational terms, as a breach between humans and God and between one another. Sin negatively affects a person’s relationship with God, with others, with oneself, and with the earth. It is through holy love that sin is cured.

As Christian educators, we are to recognize that since all persons are created in the image of God, they have the capacity to grow, learn, and develop. This means we need to respect all persons and to value them as God’s creation. It also means our role is to partner with God in their redemption by loving them and providing accountability. Humans are social beings created for relationships. Practicing Christian education is indeed a relational ministry, whether it is with children, adolescents, or adults, with new believers or old believers. The educational avenues we provide for social interaction and fellowship are important.

Soteriology (Doctrine of Salvation)

Since humans are fallen, we need to be redeemed and restored to the image and likeness of God. This can take place only by the saving grace of Jesus Christ. The study of salvation is called *soteriology*. We believe that we are saved by God’s grace because of the death of Jesus Christ. His self-giving love expressed through his life, death, burial, and resurrection provides the means for us to live holy lives. When we ask God to forgive our sins, we are justified and adopted into the family of God. This is called *justification*. This is forensic/judicial language to convey that Christ saves us from the guilt of sin and restores us in God’s favor. We are also made new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), or regenerated. Through regeneration we are changed and transformed, or made new in Christ. We are adopted into the family of God, which means we have been saved from separation from God. We now have a restored relationship with God and with other Christians.

Once we are justified by faith, we grow in God’s grace as we move toward a holy life, or *sanctification*. Sanctification is the ongoing process by which we are being conformed to the image of God (Christlikeness). Sanctification is a deeper commitment to love God and neighbor fully. To be a sanctified person is to be *set apart* or *made holy* through spiritual growth in Christlikeness by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. It requires our faithful and obedient response to God’s grace in our lives, which helps us grow toward maturity in

faith. In this regard, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live out God's mission in the world by loving God and others.

Ecclesiology (Doctrine of the Church)

The study of the church is called *ecclesiology*. The Greek word *ekklesia* means "congregation" or "the assembled." A variety of terms are used to describe the church: "the people of God," "the body of Christ," or "the fellowship." What is the primary purpose of the church? Why should we attend a local church? Can we be Christians without a connection to the local church? These are important questions about the purpose of the church.

There are three primary purposes of the church. First, the church is a place where believers gather to grow spiritually through their relationships with each other. This takes place through small groups, fellowship, and being present to each other. The church is a healing community, a place of love, acceptance, and hospitality. As people engage in close relationship with each other, there are opportunities for confession, healing, and community. Second, the church is where we worship God, hear the gospel, and receive the sacraments. It is through the Word (preaching) and the Table (Communion) that believers are challenged and empowered to live out God's mission in the world. For most churches, the preaching of the gospel is central to worship, while for other churches, the proclamation of the gospel includes both Word and Table. Some denominations practice Communion weekly, while others practice it less frequently. In either case, Communion provides not only a remembrance of Christ's life and death but also healing and spiritual growth for believers. Third, the church is missionally engaged in the world, offering hospitality, justice, and the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. As the church gathers for worship and its members are present to each other, it provides what we need to be God's witnesses in the world.⁴

Christian educators play a significant role in helping to nurture faith in the church through small groups, worship, and mission. The Christian educator can work to ensure that the practices that take place in church reflect its primary purposes. Practicing Christian education isn't just about classrooms, lecterns, and content; it's also about acts of worship, praise, and devotion.

Eschatology (Doctrine of End Times)

The study of the end times is called *eschatology*; the word *eschaton* means "last" or "end." Eschatology has to do with the hope in Christ and the end of

God's story. *The end times* has three important theological meanings. First, *end times* refers to a timetable of events that mark the end of the world as we know it. The end is marked by the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment. In other words, eschatology reminds us that the universe as a whole and our individual lives are limited.

The second meaning of eschatology is probably more significant because it focuses on God's goal for the end of creation. In other words, what do we believe God's intentions are with creating the world, and where will it all end up? As we read in Revelation 22, God the Creator will create the world anew. God will bring about a new heaven and a new earth. All things will be redeemed and restored.

Third, closely associated with the second meaning of eschatology, is that God has a vision of shalom. We find ourselves between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ, in the "already/not yet" Kingdom of God. In this sense, the Kingdom of God is present through the coming of Jesus Christ and through God's continual working through Christians by the Holy Spirit. But the fullness of the Kingdom is not realized until the end. Therefore, eschatology includes our participation with God's mission in the world to bring about the healing of creation, or shalom. As we engage in God's mission in the world, we bring the Kingdom of God today. This is why we work to see the Kingdom come today, but we look with great hope for the final coming of the Kingdom of God.⁵

As Christian educators we must teach these meanings of eschatology and provide an educational opportunity to engage in God's redemptive work today. This can include mission trips, engagement with justice issues, compassion ministry, caring for the elderly, and a variety of service projects.

Theology and Practicing Christian Education

There are a variety of approaches to understanding how theology relates to Christian education.⁶ We believe that theology provides the primary *content* for Christian education, that theology is a *reflective process* that deepens our relationship with God, and that theology is an *integrated practice* with Christian education. Practicing Christian education requires us to explore each of these.

1. *Theology as content*: We agree with those who believe that Christian education serves as a vehicle of theological doctrine. This means that theology is the primary content, and Christian education provides the

processes and methods to communicate the content. The goal of this approach is not to transmit information as much as it is to see persons grow and develop in Christlikeness.

2. *Theology as a reflective process:* We believe that Christian education serves not only as a vehicle of theological doctrine but also as a reflective process that deepens our understanding of God. For example, what we believe about the Triune God affects how we understand our relationship to God and to others. In other words, our understanding of the Triune God helps us grow in our relationship with God and others. The goal in understanding theology is that it provides an informed approach to our Christian lives.
3. *Theology as an integrated practice:* We believe that theology and Christian education are integrated. The integration of the social sciences (general revelation) with theology (specific revelation) provides the basis for Christian education to be Christian. In essence we believe that theology and the social sciences are complementary with the goal of Christian education.

It is important that the Christian educator understand these important relationships between theology and Christian education, as they help the church live out its mission to develop faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

What we believe about God impacts our relationship with God and others. Theology is not an end in itself; rather, it is a process that helps us deepen our relationship with Christ. In other words, theology informs how we practice our faith. Our understanding of God's revelation as both general and specific provides a basis for our understanding that "all truth is God's truth." We can see the complementary relationship between Scripture and the social sciences and how it applies to Christian education. Our understanding of a theology of the church that includes believers gathering for fellowship, hearing the Word proclaimed, and participating in the holy sacrament of Communion affects how we educate in the context of the church. And ultimately, it affects how we engage in God's redemptive mission in the world.

It is important for the Christian educator to properly understand theology, since it is the source of teaching and instruction, and to properly understand how theology and the social sciences are integrated. With this proper understanding of theology, the Christian educator can provide the necessary foundation to help others grow in Christlikeness.

Reflection Questions

1. Why study theology? Why do Christian educators need to understand the doctrines of the church?
2. How do both specific and general revelation affect our understanding of Christian education?
3. What can we learn about relationships from our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity?
4. What are the primary purposes of the church? What is the Christian educator's role in ensuring that these purposes are being achieved?
5. What are the various meanings of eschatology? What are the practical implications of eschatology for Christian educators?

Suggestions for Further Reading

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- Lodahl, Michael. *The Story of God: A Narrative Theology*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 2008.
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- Seymour, Jack, and Donald E. Miller, eds. *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1990.

2. What is your congregation's corporate memory? In what ways are the congregation's beliefs, values, and faith tradition being passed on to the next generation?
3. What is the lectionary and the Christian calendar? In what ways can you incorporate the lectionary curriculum into preaching and worship?
4. What is the significance of practicing Communion regularly? In what ways does it form faith in believers?
5. In what ways are infant and adult baptism practiced in your congregation?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Foster, Charles. *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994.

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10

Christian Formation

Everyone talks about spiritual formation, but few take the time to actually define or describe it. We might quickly quip, "Becoming more Christlike!" But what does that mean? Feeding five thousand, walking on water, raising the dead? All kidding (and a bit of sarcasm) aside, if we don't define and explain what we mean, it not only leads to misunderstanding but also isn't solid enough to be useful for practicing Christian education. When we speak of spiritual formation in a specifically Christian context, we are really addressing the daunting questions, What does it mean to be Christian? How does someone become more Christlike? Notice that there is a significant difference between *becoming* a Christian and *being* Christian; they are two different, but related, issues. If our ultimate purpose is the transformation of people into the likeness of Christ, then comprehending and valuing the process of Christian formation is essential to practicing Christian education.

What Does the Bible Say about Becoming "More" Christian?

Scripture often uses imagery—metaphor—to capture the idea of spiritual formation. It tries to capture what may be nebulous and abstract for most people by using familiar pictures and experiences. For example, the Bible often employs the image of fruit to depict growth in Christ (John 15:1–16; 1 Cor. 3:6–7; 2 Cor. 10:15; Gal. 5:19–23; Eph. 2:21; 4:14–16; Col. 1:10; 3:10; 2 Pet. 3:18). Paul instructed the church at Colossae "to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, *bearing fruit* in every good work

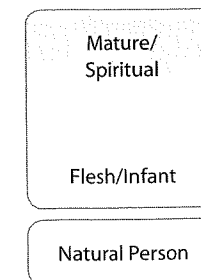
and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10, emphasis added). All too familiar to us, Paul’s “fruit of the Spirit” itemizes the resulting fruit in the life of the believer (Gal. 5:22–23). Conversely, Jude describes the false teachers infecting the congregations of Asia Minor as “*fruitless trees* in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted” (Jude 12, emphasis added).

Another commonly used metaphor in the Bible is physical growth—growing from an infant to maturity (1 Cor. 2:6; Eph. 4:12–13; Phil. 3:15; Col. 4:12; Heb. 5:14; James 1:4). “Like newborn infants,” urges Peter, “long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may *grow up* into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Pet. 2:2–3, emphasis added). The author of Hebrews uses the same metaphor, even including an educational thrust to his assessment of the readers’ spiritual life: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:12–14).

More so, the Bible may even provide insight into the phases of spiritual formation. As previously mentioned, Scripture does use the imagery of physical growth to describe Christian formation, but it also describes the progressive phases of the formation process.¹ First Corinthians 2–3 is the clearest example of this formative process. While Paul refers to the Corinthians as “brothers” (2:1; 3:1), he also describes three spiritual states in which humans exist. He describes some believers as “the mature” (2:6) or the “spiritual” person (2:13, 15; 3:1), while others are “people of the flesh, as infants in Christ” (3:1), depending on their ability to accept and discern the Spirit’s teaching. He likewise describes one who is outside of Christ as “the natural person” (2:14).² Figure 10.1 illustrates the three phases of Christian formation as described by Paul.

Conversion is the transition point from the natural to the spiritual infant in Christ, and then over time the believer grows into a more mature, spiritual person—more Christlike. The actual pattern of transformation from the fleshly infant in Christ to the more mature, spiritual person is informed by our particular theological tradition—specifically the doctrine of sanctification. For example, the traditional Reformed position calls for a smooth, progressive process of Christian formation, growing from an infant to a more mature believer. Others, such as some Wesleyan traditions, affirm a second work of grace, indicating a more defined transition point between the infant and the mature in Christ. Basically, what you believe about sanctification can

Figure 10.1
Paul’s Phases of Christian Formation



cause you to “shade” the illustration differently. But the simple fact is that Christian formation is a matter of transitions, from natural to flesh and from flesh to mature.

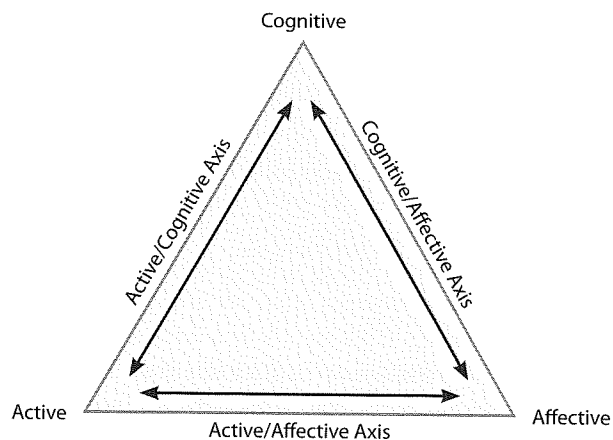
A Model for Christian Spirituality and Formation

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). God’s words to Moses are later quoted by Jesus as the greatest commandment (Mark 12:30), and he added “with all your mind” to further describe the function of the soul. Spirituality that is Christian is perhaps expressed essentially as the love of God expressed and nurtured through the heart (affective), soul/mind (cognitive), and might (active). The second greatest commandment explains that our strength is to love not just God but also our fellow human (Mark 12:31). We see these same three points when the first gospel message was heard: “Now when they heard [cognitive] this they were cut to the heart [affective], and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do [active]?’” (Acts 2:37). The Christian life is not just a life of the mind, or the heart, or of service to God and others; it’s all three.

The late Dr. Ted Ward (1930–2016) described Christian spirituality as a triangle. As with any triangle, it consists of three corners and the lines connecting them, forming points and axes.³ Figure 10.2 illustrates the Ward triangle model of Christian spirituality.⁴

In Ward’s triangle model, one’s relationship with God may reside in one of the triangle’s corners, but is more likely to reside along an axis, the line connecting the corners. “Are you spiritual?” The answer could reflect the corners of Ward’s model. “Yes, I attend three Bible studies a week, go to

Figure 10.2
Ward Triangle Model of Christian Spirituality



the local seminary for a Bible seminar, and read Christian books.” *Cognitive spirituality* emphasizes the life of the mind, focusing on Bible study and theological reflection as a means of forming a distinctly Christian worldview and intellectual perspective on life. “Yes! I spend time in prayer every day, fast weekly, read the Bible devotionally, and go on spiritual retreats every year.” *Affective spirituality* concentrates on the inner person, the shaping of the believer’s values, identity, and piety; it focuses on the spiritual disciplines and worship as means of formation. “Yes, I volunteer in the local homeless shelter and serve as a sponsor in the next-generation ministry, and also work at church camp in the summer.” *Active spirituality* emphasizes service within the church and the community, embracing the principle of James 2:14–18, that faith without works is dead, focusing on acts of service as an expression and means of demonstrating devotion to God. All of these are biblical expressions of the Christian life, not only individually but corporately. Since the church is indeed the individuals constituting it, congregations, denominations, and even theological traditions reflect these commitments.⁵ God does not want heartless, sedentary Christian intellects. He does not want believers to be ignorant and inactive but full of Christian devotion and piety. God does not want mindless, ill-motivated Christian service. What does God want? “You shall love the LORD your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *might*” (Deut. 6:5, emphasis added; cf. Mark 12:30; Matt. 22:37).

How does this aid the Christian educator? We now possess a model of Christian spirituality that is not only biblically and theologically sound but

also practical enough to inform almost every aspect of the education ministry. It is simple enough to use in congregations, not just universities and seminaries. Immediately you should have noted the parallel between this model of Christian spirituality and the learning domains mentioned previously in this book. This is no coincidence. Rather, it demonstrates that the education ministry of the church can foster Christian formation. It shows that Christian education must become more comprehensive in the church if it is to encourage and nurture Christian formation in believers and the congregation. ←

Principles of Christian Formation

What kind of transitions and transformations are occurring in the process of Christian formation? What changes are occurring? Perhaps the most obvious is moving from an egocentric life to Christ-centric living. While Christian formation may compel us to transition along a wide variety of fronts,⁶ fundamentally it is the transition from living for one’s self to living for Christ. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23; cf. Mark 8:34; Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Luke 14:27). In the words of John the Baptist, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). This is not a denial of our person but the denial of the world’s grasp on our lives and placing ourselves willingly into the hands of Jesus. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

The personal “ownership” of faith is another part of Christian formation. Writing about Christian formation along the life span, John Westerhoff describes the process as transitioning from a child’s experiential and affiliative faith, which is entirely dependent on the parents’ faith, mimicking their beliefs, disposition, and practices, toward the searching faith of an adolescent, which eventually is owned by them; it is their faith, not their parents’, pastors’, friends’—theirs.⁷ It is as Paul writes to Timothy: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well” (2 Tim. 1:5). Christian formation occurs when we move from affirming the faith because others do to owning our faith because we choose to, not just because someone else does.

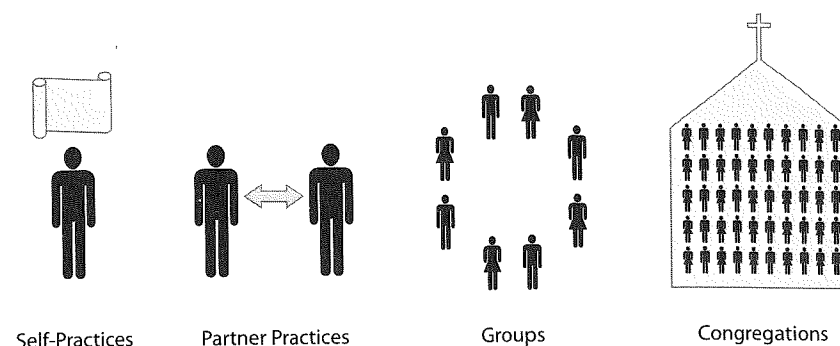
Christian formation is a human phenomenon. Earlier in this chapter we spoke of how Paul described the formative process as growth, even occurring

in stages, from the natural to the immature to the spiritual (1 Cor. 2). Before conversion, it is Spirit versus spirit; but with conversion the formative process becomes his Spirit with our spirit. It is not an automatic maturing of the believer but one that takes time. Desiring to see the Galatian believers mature, Paul wrote to them as a parent: “my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you!*” (Gal. 4:19, emphasis added). It occurs within us, over time, and as such is a human phenomenon. While you don’t need to accept his theory in total, James Fowler captures the psychological dimension of faith as a human experience.⁸ As such, faith is not just supernatural but resides within the context of one’s psyche.

Living through knowing about God and knowing God marks yet another transition in Christian formation. Our relationship with God is based on knowing God, but it does not stop with knowing about him. We do need to know *about* God; that is without question. If we do not know who God is or what God does—if we lack a basic theology—then it is impossible to genuinely come into communion with him. But our relationship must grow beyond the factual information about him into a loving relationship with him. James reminds us that even the demons know who God is and, given their lack of relationship with him, respond accordingly (2:19). James also speaks of Abraham, one who not only knew about God but knew him, and he calls Abraham “a friend of God” (2:23). While we cannot know God without knowing about him, it is unfortunately possible to know about God—to affirm an orthodox theology—but never really know him. Christian formation demands we know about him and then some.

Relationships are the vital component in Christian formation. “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17). In the Thessalonian correspondence, Paul twice urges his readers to “encourage one another and build one another up” (1 Thess. 5:11; cf. 4:18), even providing specific instructions regarding encouragement (1 Thess. 5:14). Christian educators often make the error of assuming that programs bring about Christian formation; the more programs, the more complex and diverse our formative opportunities. Actually, it is not the programs themselves; rather, it is the relationships within the programs that foster Christian formation.⁹ It is not the number of programs in which people participate but the deepening relationships within the community of faith that facilitate Christian formation.¹⁰ Jim Wilhoit’s *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* (see “Suggestions for Further Reading”) reminds us of this. He writes to counter the wave of individualism that has taken over spirituality, focusing on the church as God’s intended environment for forming Christians in community with one another.

Figure 10.3
Formative Ecologies



Facilitating Christian Formation

How do we practice Christian education as a catalyst for Christian formation? It can provide ecology, an environment that spurs on formative process. Christian formation occurs within four contexts, four ecologies that grow the Christian’s relationship with Christ, illustrated in figure 10.3.

Self-Practices

These are practices that can be done by oneself, just you and God. Such private spiritual practices establish a daily routine of encountering God on a personal, One-to-one level. The four most commonly practiced are prayer, fasting, solitude, and devotion. Some believers have combined these by practicing the medieval discipline of *lectio divina*, as previously discussed in chapter 8.

One could combine this medieval practice with a more modern one: journaling, the private practice of recording one’s prayers, thoughts, and perceptions as a means of capturing them for later review and reflection. In addition to this, there are more practices and guides to routine prayer than *lectio divina*. Changing one’s actual physical posture in prayer is one way of breaking out of the rut of standard prayer practices. The Bible speaks of numerous prayer postures, such as prostration (Num. 16:22; Josh. 7:14; 1 Chron. 7:1; Matt. 26:39), kneeling (Dan. 6:10; Luke 22:41; Acts 9:40; 20:36), kneeling and sitting at the same time on the heel (2 Sam. 7:18; 1 Chron. 17:16), bowing the head while standing (Gen. 24; Exod. 4:31), and standing (Gen. 18:22; 1 Sam. 1:26; Neh. 9:2, 5; Job 30:20; Mark 11:25; Luke 18:13).

Partners as Formative Contexts

Christian formation occurs in communities of all sizes, and the beginning, the most basic community, is that shared by a duo (team of two) or perhaps a triad (team of three). Jannette Bakke identifies three forms of one-on-one relationships that foster Christian formation but require a more mature believer.¹¹ Table 10.1 summarizes her understanding of these three formative relationships.

Table 10.1 Bakke's Chart on Formative Relationships

	Agenda	Process	Helper Role	Goal
Discipling	Set by the discipler	Instruction	Transmitter	Learning incorporation
Mentoring	Chosen by the mentor	Development	Coach	Improvement
Spiritual Direction	Revealed by the Spirit	Noticing, listening, praying	Prayer, listener	Christlikeness

While there remains a subtle difference between the three, the common element is that it is the relationship that facilitates the formative process, guiding the believer to a more mature faith and deepening relationship with God and his church. Another common practice within these three relationships is the act of confession. Yes, we confess our sins to God (1 John 1:9), but James urges believers, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). This requires us to share our lives with one another—with a trusted, mature believer—to receive support, encouragement, and counsel about living the life of faith.

Groups as Formative Contexts

In what possible context could Christians learn about God, experience him in the relationship of the church, and be mobilized to serve in the congregation and community? Groups, ranging from small to midsize, are an environment conducive to Christian formation that can accomplish all three desires. Small groups, also called *cell* or *life groups*, and midsize groups, often called *classes*, *Sunday school*, or *adult Bible fellowships* (ABF), are excellent platforms for two formative practices done in community—in relationship—with one another.

- *Group study*: We must first know *about* God before we can truly know him. Engaging the biblical text, topically or exegetically, with other

believers forms a communal context for fostering both cognitive and affective Christian formation.

- *Group service*: A growing faith in Christ is both indicated and nurtured by service to others. We do not serve alone but in the company of others, fostering the affective and active dimension of Christian formation.

Why not have just small groups, or only classes (or midsize groups)? It is not a matter of either/or but both/and. One without the other creates an incomplete ecology. Why? Are they not essentially the same? Actually, midsize groups, such as Sunday school or Bible studies, provide a relation-building step between attending worship and participating in a small group, and an opportunity for community building. They likewise provide a better opportunity to exercise the gift of teaching than small groups, as well as a greater potential for deeper levels of study. Likewise, they are easier to mobilize for service groups than individuals.

Congregation as Formative Context

As discussed in the previous chapter, congregational formation provides a basis for our faith development and spiritual growth. Susanne Johnson speaks of the church as an ecology for Christian formation. She notes that it provides general guidance through what it is and does, and then more specific influence through group involvement and one-on-one guidance until the "church becomes a community of lived faith."¹² And Jim Wilhoit argues that Christian formation is not just an individual, private, and personal phenomenon; it is also a corporate, shared, and collective experience that is part of living within the community of the church. Luke captures the essence of this community experience in describing the early Christians: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

When practicing Christian education, don't forget the educational value of the worship service as formative Christian experience. It is through the worship service, and other large, whole-congregation gatherings, that we are slowly, routinely formed into "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet. 2:9–10).

Conclusion

Why are we practicing Christian education? Various reasons can be presented, but ultimately it is to engage the process of Christian formation so that, like the apostle Paul, we can say that we are “teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28). If Christian formation is facilitated best in the holistic nurturing environment of the church, then practicing Christian education is like serving as the Environmental Protection Agency. Practicing Christian education is the means of providing what is necessary, under the right condition, for the formative process to engage and growth to occur.

Reflection Questions

1. Given the Ward triangle model, in what corner(s) and/or axes is your Christian life most present?
2. How does the Ward triangle model apply to your congregation? How might it foster Christian formation more holistically?
3. Which of the four environments of Christian formation does your congregation emphasize? How does it provide a holistic environment for spiritual formation? Where is it lacking?
4. What can you do to engage the process of Christian formation in your own life? What environment could you engage more significantly?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Botton, Ken, Church King, and Junias Venugopal. “Educating for Spirituality.” *Christian Education Journal*, 1NS (Spring 1997): 33–48.
- Downs, Perry G. *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.
- Hawkins, Greg L., and Cally Parkinson. *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.
- Wilhoit, James C. *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.

11

Developmental Theory

We constantly observe people growing and maturing, whether it is an infant who is learning how to walk or a child becoming a teenager. We watch as children develop new ways of thinking and understanding the world as they enter into adolescence. We view adults who move from the energetic years of young adulthood to the more stable years of midlife. These are examples of the development and growth that take place in a person’s life. The physical growth of a person is much easier to see, but we can learn from developmental theories about how persons grow socially, intellectually, and spiritually. To help persons develop spiritually requires an understanding of all aspects of the human person. This raises the question, what can we learn from developmental theories to understand how people grow? We can also ask the important question, how can we help people grow spiritually? And, how do people learn and grow at different levels of their development? Practicing Christian education with respect to persons of different ages and life stages requires us to embrace insights from the developmental theories. This chapter seeks to answer the questions of how people grow through predictable stages of development and how this growth relates to learning and spiritual development.

Developmentalism

Paul writes to the Corinthians, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (1 Cor. 13:11). This is a great observation but doesn’t give a lot