

Christian Education and Youth Ministry: Balancing Expectations: Others' and Yours'

Rev. Edward D. Seely, Th.M., Ph.D.

A key to successful living is to keep in balance the many variables in life that are good. Even pertaining to such matters, overemphasizing or supplying too much of something that is related to another important value, thus throwing off the balance, can—and often does—produce results that are counterproductive. On the other hand, keeping these entities in balance, typically results in the desired outcomes.

This essay offers guidance in applying the Bible, historic Christian systematic theology, and sound science to an important aspect of ministry. I originally wrote this essay for a course on *Models of Ministry to Youth* that I taught when I was a professor at Calvin Theological Seminary; therefore, I specifically mention several applications that pertain to youth ministry, but everything that follows applies to all the Lord's ministries.

A key component of effective ministry is balancing essential aspects of the various ministries in which the Lord has called his people to serve him. In addition to this essay on balancing expectations, I've written papers on several other very significant elements of ministry that need to be kept in balance, e.g., [balancing cognitive, affective, and behavioral objectives](#); [balancing theory and practice](#); [balancing the corporate and the individual](#); [balancing two key dimensions of leadership: initiation of structure and consideration](#).

Many reasons reveal the need to keep these essential aspects of ministry in balance, e.g., the challenge we have to manage our own favorite emphases; trying to keep other people, especially those to whom we are accountable, on board with us; influences from the literature and popular, but not well thought-through, praxis by peers, such as fads and bandwagons; and other pressures as indicated in what follows. The challenge to maintain balance is compounded by the reality that not all is bad or counterproductive with each alternative—the good in each is needed—and even the good in each can be overdone to the detriment of our ministry's main goal: “to equip [Christ Jesus'] people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (4:12-13 TNIV) So, let us now look at the matter of balancing expectations, why it is so important, and how to do it.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and human nature became corrupted (Genesis 3), God established a number of means of controlling the inevitable destructive effects of sin and facilitating righteousness, justice, and harmony. One of these means was an accountability system that we humans would administer ourselves (under God's auspices [Romans 13]). This accountability system operates in several distinct settings, e.g., government (Romans 13), family (e.g., father-child [Ephesians 6:4]), and employer-employee (Colossians 3) relationships.

Not only is it God's will that we seek to please those to whom we are accountable, most of all by far God, but also in so doing we become assured (especially later in life) that what we've done has contributed to God's kingdom and his world. When we meet the expectations of others—especially those to whom we are accountable and others who are in authority in the church (or any other organization in which we work, a Christian school or a parachurch ministry), including the parents who have entrusted to us their children (who are first and foremost God's children)—we sense what we are doing is valued and considered important. We also obtain the trust of those key people and, through them, others in the church or the organization we serve, which, humanly speaking, gives us social capital, the right to be heard and the opportunities in due time (and not all at once, since it takes time to establish trust¹) to accomplish the objectives of the Lord's calling upon us.

This valuable theological framework helps us understand, accept, and feel comfortable with the accountability to which we are required to submit. Even when injustices occur, our Biblical and historic Christian theology helps us make sense out of what is occurring and to have peace with it. In fact the Bible and historic Christian theology in particular inform us even before we begin a ministry that there will be problems, manifestations of the “painful toil” and “thorns and thistles” (Genesis 3:17-18), which God told Adam he would encounter in his workplace ever afterward, as a result of his sin that has corrupted human nature and will have such negative and far-reaching effects until Christ returns and renews all things.²

Here we see how practical theology is and how helpful, both for us and for our families. This understanding enables professionals in church education to avoid the burnout, distress, and discouragement that lead to the unproductive and notoriously short-term tenure characteristic in this aspect of ministry, especially with regard to those in youth ministry—and in other ministries—in their first two years. For example, when they are confronted with unpleasant administrative tasks such as last minute requests for reports, unkind parents, and hard to reach adolescents, remembering that these are some of the aspects of the painful toil and thorns and thistles God told us would be coming, helps us construct the most realistic understanding of our workplace and any other workplace to which we are tempted to transfer. The grass will not be greener there, and moving is stressful not only for us but for our spouse and children.

¹ This is one reason why it is important to plan on being in one place for a long time. Establishing trust takes time. Trust is essential for establishing relationships. We can accomplish more for the Lord within relationships, which develop the longer we remain where God leads us. This is one reason Jesus told the 72 he sent out to find a house where they are received and stay there and not go from house to house. (Luke 10:7)

² See also Psalm 51:1-5 and Romans 3:23 among many other passages. The Bible is clear that human nature is not essentially good; rather it is inclined to do that which is evil. Even those who are regenerated (to whom the Holy Spirit has given new birth—a new nature, a new mind and heart—which makes saving faith and maturing in Christ possible) function on various levels of sanctification (the lifelong process of growth in Christ-likeness), some of whom are in elementary stages and are thus quite immature even as adults. Therefore, it is very unrealistic to assume that people will or even can consistently function as they should without any accountability.

This perspective and mentality together with God's promise that he will always be there for us (e.g., Matthew 28:20; Philippians 4:4-13) provide the help we need for overcoming the temptation to toss in the towel. God will provide the perseverance for us to finish the race and accomplish his purposes through us. (Philippians 1:6, 3:12-15a) Part of the help he gives us is in perceiving the need to meet the expectations of those to whom we report and as many others we have been called to serve as possible.

Meet the expectations of the Lord.

We need to view our whole ministry, indeed our whole life, in the light of pleasing the Lord first and most importantly (e.g., 2 Corinthians 5:9; Ephesians 4-5, cf., 5:10; Colossians 1:10). If we do that everything else will go well. Throughout our ministry, my family included in our prayers regularly a request for God's help that we would make pleasing him our greatest desire, objective, and accomplishment. Daily reading of the Bible, God's Word, and prayer without ceasing (throughout the day and at one or more special times each day), helps us keep receptive to the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Meet the expectations of our spouse.

We must keep in mind that our spouse—being one with us—shares in our call to ministry, and indeed is a vital part of our ministry. Spouses need to keep in daily communication about how their relationship with each other and with the church is doing. Lovingly listen carefully, welcome and facilitate feedback, and be sensitive to all feelings and concerns. Take immediate action to help resolve issues. Thus, model the marriage that you and your spouse want, and that people need, to see. We can't please and have an effective ministry for the Lord if we are not also pleasing our spouse.

When the normal squabbles in marriage and family life occur, take the time to deal with them that very day, at least by the end of the day. (Ephesians 4:26) Make sure you are spending quality time with each other, according to the expectations of each of you. Take at least one, and preferably two, day(s) off each week, and be sure to take all vacation time you are allowed.

If, on an occasion, you and/or your spouse need to talk with someone older and wiser, or a professional counselor, be sure to do so. That's not weakness; it's wisdom. However, of vital importance, be very careful who you select if you talk with a professional. Many professional counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists have backgrounds, biases, and opinions that are unbiblical, even anti-Christian, deceptive, and misleading. Thanks be to God, there are some counselors who are a credit to their profession. Seek a Christian counselor who is wise and mature; not all who claim to be a Christian are qualified. Check carefully before choosing such help; obtain references from trusted sources.

Be sure to relate daily to any child or children in your family. Not only if you are in—or have responsibility for—youth ministry, in any kind of ministry, your children deserve

and need your careful attention each day. Remember the old adage: children spell love TIME. We need to spend time each day with our own children—where they have our special attention as long as they need it—and have regular times when we can relate to each one separately, doing what he or she would like to do; catching up on how each is doing, including what is going well and helping with any problems; and talking about the near and far future, most importantly his or her relationship with the Lord. (Cf. Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:4-7; Proverbs 22:6; Ephesians 6:4)

We can't meet anyone's expectations, including our own, if we don't start with the Lord's expectations, our spouse's expectations, and our children's expectations. For more help with these vital matters, see the documents on the [Marriage](#) and [Family](#) pages of my [general Website](#). See also the [Church Leadership and Administration](#) page. The Website is secure and all documents are free.

Meet the expectations of key leaders in the church.

Be careful to keep in mind that unless a church leader meets the expectations of key people in the church, especially the one(s) to whom he or she is accountable, he or she will not be able to keep the job and thus be able to accomplish his or her own objectives. It is also important to meet as many of the expectations of the opinion leaders as possible.³

By making sure we do what our job description requires, and as many of the unwritten expectations as we can, we'll build the basic trust, respect, and confidence needed for long-term tenure in the ministry to which we've been called. The longer we're there the more we'll be able to accomplish what we want to do. Each year people will trust us more, and we'll be able to implement more of our programs. We'll also be able to work in other objectives in the context of meeting the required expectations.

We'll also avoid a lot of anger, and its unpleasant expressions, depending on the level of maturity of the one(s) who are upset, e.g., unpleasant meetings to receive corrective feedback and more negative communications from others to whom we don't report, such as back-biting, gossip, nasty notes (usually unsigned and therefore unreplyable), passive-aggressive maneuvers as well as other forms of manipulation, and complaints to those to whom we report. Such activity diverts time and energy from accomplishing ministry objectives. It also makes it difficult to live peaceably with everyone as much as we are able, as the apostle Paul has written. (Romans 12:18)

Meet the expectations of parents.

Many youth leaders forget or haven't learned that God's will is clearly that parents are the primary persons he has put in charge of raising his children in the faith. (See, e.g.,

³ For help in understanding the role and importance of opinion leaders, see my essay, "[Defusing Fear of Innovations: Facilitating Change in the Church.](#)"

Deuteronomy 6:4-7, Psalm 78, Ephesians 6:1-4 among many other passages throughout the whole Bible.) Yes, we need to remember that the youth are not ours, but first and foremost God's.

In ignorance of the above reality, many youth ministers have an adversarial relationship with parents. I've both heard and read them say, "If only I could get these parents off my back I'd have a really great youth program." How sad! These leaders are cutting themselves off from their greatest human resources, whom they should be assisting in the accomplishment of God's plan for the nurture of his children. I'm not surprised to observe that there is a high correlation between those youth ministers who hold to this approach and a short term at the church where they're serving.

On the contrary, where the youth minister sees his or her role as serving parents and the church, supplementing what is going on in the home, he or she typically experiences the accomplishment of his or her expectations, amicable relationships with parents and other church leaders, and the nurture of the young people. This is a classic example of the benefits of obedience. Other positive outcomes include less frustration, less stress, more longevity and the concomitant productivity, and much joy.

Meet the expectations of the young people.

Many Christian education and youth ministers also forget, or have not developed an understanding of, who they are and what they are to do. It is not uncommon to see an identity struggle with youth ministers, especially in the first years of their ministry.

A key part of this struggle is the lack of a fully formulated understanding of who they are as persons and as youth ministers *called by God* to be leaders in his church and in particular of some of his youngest people.⁴ Regarding the former, who they are as persons, full identity formation continues well into early adulthood.⁵ Adolescents and young adults forge their newly forming conceptualization of themselves as adults by incorporating and modifying previous understandings where necessary in the light of their new perceptions, physically, emotionally, intellectually, and (for covenant youth and young adults) in their relationship with God. This identity formation involves personal development and is integrated with career understandings.⁶

Young youth ministers also engage in a concomitant shaping of their understanding of who they are professionally. Largely due to the closeness of their age, and frequently to unresolved personal issues, many fail to distinguish themselves from those to whom and

⁴ For a discussion of the Biblical concept of calling (vocation), see "[Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including God's Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity.](#)" Use the key words, vocation and calling.

⁵ See the work of Erik Erikson on adolescence and identity and Robert Havighurst and Vivian McCoy on developmental tasks of the adult life cycle.

⁶ See Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* Sec. Ed. Revised and Enlarged (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1963), pp. 161-262.

with whom they are ministering. For example, many want to see themselves as the youths' best friend. This is a huge mistake. First of all, that is not the expectation of the youth. Most of them already have a best friend, and those who don't have one want a peer for their best friend. They want their youth minister to be able to relate to them and to be friendly, but most of them don't want an adult as their best friend.⁷ Part of the reason for this desire involves basic needs the young people have.

Teenagers want to look up to their youth minister; they both need and desire their youth leader to be and to act older and wiser than they are.⁸ They want him or her to have the ego strength to draw the line when it comes to what is acceptable limits in youth group activities. Friends cannot draw that line. The line can only be drawn, *and maintained*, effectively by one in authority, and best friends are equals; they do not exercise authority over one another.

Here is where Biblical theology helps. Our human nature, which is inclined to do what is evil, leads young people to frequently test the rules. The youth minister must have solidly incorporated in his or her identity the understanding that he or she is the leader and fully capable of setting rules that are just and being willing to enforce those rules. The students' see this as directly related to their sense of security, one of their basic needs and expectations.⁹

Another mistake youth leaders make is failing to see themselves as called to serve the young people. Youth ministers have a privileged position in the church and in the community. It doesn't take long before they have a battle with their egos still struggling with the natural tendency to sin. This struggle also affects others in ministry to varying degrees. It is easy for the unaware to lose sight of the broad perspective, i.e., who we are (leaders of God's people called by him to accomplish his purposes) and what we are here to do (to serve rather than to be served).¹⁰

Thus, it is very common for leaders of all institutions, including the church, to become self-serving. One way to do a periodic self-check is to ask questions such as these: "How much do I ask people to do something for me instead of my serving them? Am I willing to do whatever I ask someone else to do? Do I take the closest parking spot to the church building?" List the statements that Paul cites in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 as the definition of love (which Jesus commanded us to do in John 13:34-35 and Matthew 5:44) and put a Likert scale (1-5) beside each. Distribute the sheet to those who will tell you the truth

⁷ For other expectations adolescents have of their youth leaders, involving behaviors they like and dislike in those leaders, see Edward D. Seely, "[Behaviors of Peer Leaders, Adult Leaders, Mothers and Fathers as Perceived by Young People Fourteen through Eighteen Years of Age](#)" (Ph.D. dissertation, College of Education, Michigan State University, 1980), p. 180.

⁸ This expectation is also shared by their parents and the rest of the church, including especially the one(s) to whom the youth minister reports.

⁹ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, Second Edition. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), pp. 39-43.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:1-2, 7:17; 1 Peter 2:9-12; Matthew 20:20-28.

and ask them to give you feedback on how you are doing in each of these dimensions of love. If you are married, include your spouse and children; if you are single, give it to your best friend and/or a relative who will speak the truth in love.¹¹

Don't expect to meet all people's expectations.

Be especially vigilant—and intentional—to avoid being liked by and pleasing the world.

Of course we can't please everyone all the time. In fact, we should not even try to do so for the above and other reasons, especially this one: Avoid the desire to be liked by everybody—it's vitally dangerous. Remember what Jesus said: "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets." (Luke 6:26)

We must teach all people we can that the world is opposed to Jesus Christ, indeed to our triune God. Popularity comes at a cost, and the cost can even be eternal destruction, i.e., when it involves wanting to be liked by the world to the extent of identifying with the world and losing the true and saving identity with Jesus Christ, which involves not just words but corresponding deeds that confirm the genuineness of our faith in him that produces the fruit we are to bear in holiness and engaged in the mission to which Christ has called us.

Always remember what Jesus said,

- "Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²²Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" ²³Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:21-23)
- "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12) Luke adds that Jesus also said, "leap for joy."

We can rejoice for many reasons, one of which is that the world's rejection of us is tangible, empirical, and demonstrable evidence from the world itself that we don't belong to them; we have been given affirmation that we belong to Christ Jesus, when such rejection of us occurs due to our identification with and service of our only Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

¹¹ For an example of such a self-check, see the one I made that is in my e-book, [What Is God's Will Concerning Homosexuality? Help for Church Leaders and Others to Speak the Truth in Love](#), Appendix E, p. 419.

This is the message we need to bring in our ministry. We must urge people to value pleasing God and not the world. Emphasize: It's not only OK, it's imperative that our goal is NOT to please everybody; anyone who tries to be liked by everyone is NOT pleasing the only true, triune, God. The world is aligned with Satan and opposed to God. (John 12:31; Ephesians 2:2; Revelation 12:9) Jesus said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome [Greek: νενίκηκα (*nenikēka*), I have conquered] the world." (John 16:33) At the same time, we need to emphasize that not being liked by everyone because of our relationship with Christ Jesus, is a great blessing for us!

- See also such passages as James 2:14-26, in particular, v. 17: "...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead..." v. 20: "...faith without deeds is useless..." v. 22: "...[Abraham's] faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did..." v. 24: "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone."

John Calvin explained the relationship between faith and works well. He said that we are justified not without, and yet not by works.¹²

Scholars in the field of Biblical literature have identified several themes, which they call "major motifs," that run throughout the whole of God's Word, and one of those is the *unity of word and deed*.¹³ Word and deed go together throughout the Bible. In both the original Hebrew (of the Old Testament) and the original Greek (of the New Testament), the word for word also includes the concept of deed. God condemns hypocrisy. See, e.g., Jesus' very strong statement ascribing woe to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees for their sin of hypocrisy. (Matthew 23) It is not acceptable to God when leaders (and others) "do not practice what they preach." (Matthew 23:3)

And you know what? Such hypocrisy is not acceptable either to the church whom we are called to serve. People want to see their leaders honestly and courageously practice, and in so doing demonstrate, the truth of God's Word in action.

Don't make the unwise and unrealistic goal to be liked by everyone in the church.

This goal can easily mitigate and undermine your ministry, your calling from the Lord to accomplish his purposes. Such negative effects on ministry occur in many ways. For example, one huge problem the church has today is the neglect of church discipline (e.g., 1 Corinthians 5:1-5) and admonishing errant doctrine and wrongdoing. (Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12,14; 2 Thessalonians 3:15) Leaders, in fact all others, who want to be liked by everyone, typically cannot correct those who need such feedback.

¹² For a further discussion on this important connection between faith and works with justification, see ["Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including God's Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity."](#)

¹³ For more information on the major motifs of the Bible, see my overview of the Bible course, called [Bible Digest](#). See also the accompanying [Bible Digest Notebook](#).

When the Apostle Paul said he had “become all things for all people,” (1 Corinthians 9:22, TNIV) he didn’t mean he was a chameleon or a superman. He simply meant that he was careful to let nothing turn people off unnecessarily. He tried to demonstrate as much as possible how alike he was with the people he was trying to reach; but he definitely placed limits on what he would do and not do.¹⁴ Some will nicely, and others not-so-nicely, suggest or try to manipulate us to meet their expectations. We should try to meet the warranted expectations of even those who are hard to love, but when we can’t we should not do so; indeed, many times we shouldn’t even try. Remember, e.g., Jesus’ refusal to become involved in a family dispute. (Luke 12:13-14)

When we do turn people down, we should be sure we are doing so for the right reasons. For example, if you give the reason that you have too much on your plate and can’t take on anything else at this point, be sure you are managing your time well. We must maintain our commitments, and we all only have 24 hours in a day. When we cannot meet the expectations of some people, we should in love explain, though not in detail, why we cannot do so and suggest someone else who may be able to assist them.

Youth and other ministers are occasionally asked to do something by church members whom they have impressed or who have developed a high regard for their leader. Before agreeing to do what has been requested, make sure it is not in someone else’s position description or under his or her auspices. It is important to be considerate of others’ turf and not usurp someone else’s prerogatives. If in doubt, ask the other person, whether a staff colleague or a volunteer leader, if he or she minds that you respond to the request.

Meet your own expectations through meeting others’ expectations.

Don’t mistake establishing your own programs with making an impact or a mark on the church. Many church educators, youth ministers, and other youth leaders mistakenly think that unless they rid themselves of what their predecessor, or others who’ve preceded them, did, they will not make their lasting impression. Such an orientation fails to understand many realities.

A couple of the main realities that need to be kept in mind in this regard are these: First, after we leave a church, those who follow will change most if not all our programs. Such change is sometimes very unwise; sometimes it is good; but it will occur. I know it hurts to hear how successors have eliminated what we’ve invested years to build.

The changes occur for a variety of reasons. Sometimes programs are discontinued by those who follow us, because they don’t have the knowledge or other resources to produce them. However, such demolition often occurs with unwholesome and even sinful motives, e.g., hubris and lack of desire to continue what someone else has begun,

¹⁴ For example, he refused to take Mark with him on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:37-41), and he opposed Peter for giving into pressure from the Judaizers (Galatians 2:11-16).

especially if it were successful and the congregation regularly expresses appreciation to the succeeding youth minister, or other minister or staff member, or if it takes a lot of work to produce.

Don't be upset about it. God is sovereign, and he will use what we have done to accomplish his purposes.

Second, and much more importantly, crucially: our most significant impact will be the faithful and loving communication of the Word of God in our words and deeds which the Holy Spirit will make effective. Remember Jesus' admonition: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust [and ministry successors] destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust [and others] do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21)

We are not here to build empires; but we are here to extend and nurture a kingdom: God's Kingdom, God's rule in his believers' hearts and minds. We must invest in the lives of the people God has called us to serve. Programs are only catalysts to facilitating the sanctification the Lord wants to see in his people, young, middle age, and older. (Ephesians 4:11-16) Some programs must change as times change and as the church encounters additional needs.

Let the justification, sanctification and fruitfulness of the youth and others we are called to serve (which includes helping them please God as we've been discussing above) be our main expectation that we are trying to accomplish. We invest most productively as we bear in mind how sanctification takes place. As the Holy Spirit uses the seeds we sow, directly and through others, our people and the others we serve will grow in the Christlikeness that God wants.

Recall how the Apostle Paul viewed the matter: "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:5-9)

If this is our mentality in the church we serve, we won't have to worry about being respected and loved. That will come. And, as always, it's God's love for us that counts most!

For Reflection

1. Why is it important to meet the expectations of others in our ministry?
2. Whose expectations must we be sure to meet, as much as possible?
3. How do we treat people whose expectations we cannot meet? Give an example of a circumstance in which you have had, or can envision having, to turn down someone's idea for what you should do. What was, or what will be, the outcome?
4. What can you do to ensure you will keep and develop your servant's heart so that you don't become self-serving?
5. How does meeting other people's expectations facilitate accomplishing our own objectives?