

Christian Education—Youth Ministry: Balancing Theory and Practice

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Theory, as used in this essay, is a cogent explanation of phenomena based on empirical research, and theory is sound when it is consistent with a careful following of the scientific method and Biblical theology. Sound theory and the Bible are two aspects of God's revelation. Theoretical constructions, based on empirical investigation, are part of God's general revelation (cf. Psalm 19:1-6, Romans 1:18-32). God's special revelation is recorded in the Bible (cf. Psalm 19:7-11, 2 Timothy 3:16-17) and is manifest in Jesus Christ, on whom the whole Bible focuses: He is the one to whom the Old Testament points and the one whom the New Testament explains.

Biblically, theologically, and scientifically sound theory is a significant help to youth ministers, other ministers, and Christian educators as they develop programs and other ministries to serve the Lord in their calling from him. The following essay offers guidance in applying the use of sound theory to these ministries. 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 of the applications as pertaining 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 theory and practice, I've written papers on several other key areas that need to be kept in balance, e.g., [balancing cognitive, affective, and behavioral objectives](#); [balancing others' and our own expectations](#); [balancing the corporate and the individual](#); and [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; 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 theory and practice, why it is so important, and how to do it.

The Significance and Practice of Theory

When done as it should be, empirical theory is based on data gathering that has proceeded according to well-established and recognized procedures in a system called the scientific method. Theory involves much more than what is meant when the term is used on the street (e.g., “I’ve got a theory on this...”), meaning a hunch. A sound theory is very helpful, but the validity and reliability of a theory depends on the carefulness of the research upon which it is constructed.

The scientific method, *when followed as intended*, involves a specific number of steps that typically yield valuable results. Those results do not conflict with the Bible, especially when it is properly interpreted. As in the words of the old saying, “All truth is God’s truth.” There are usually five or seven steps, depending on how a particular writer categorizes the procedures, and whether the subject is social science or natural science (the latter usually having a couple more steps), but generally in social science they involve the following: (1) identification of a problem, (2) review of the relevant literature, (3) statement of the plan for the research, (4) presentation of the findings, the data the plan produces, and (5) an explanation of the significance of the data. The first four steps are mostly objective; the fifth is a subjective account of what the data mean, their significance, and possible applications.

The cogent explanation is a structured framework shaped by the researcher’s philosophy and theology. Theory purports to be objective, but no theory is completely objective. Many subjective decisions enter all of the first four ostensibly objective steps, and the fifth is mostly all subjective. For example, step one involves choices such as which problem to address, whether it is a problem, for whom is it a problem, what makes it a problem, and how to define it. Step two involves decisions as to which precedent literature one will use upon which to base his or her own study, which previous research he or she values as worthwhile, which to include and which to omit, and how to interpret the studies to be used.

Step three includes decisions as to which procedures to follow and how careful the researcher will be in using them, i.e., whether well established procedures will in fact be followed even if they are initially part of the plan. When published reports disclose results of a study that seem strange, a check frequently shows flaws in this third step, e.g., the lead researcher’s decision to cut corners, as by surveying a too small and unrepresentative sample of the population to which he or she wants to generalize. Many scientists succumb to such temptations motivated by fame, fortune, power and other personal goals. They thus avoid engaging in the rigors of the scientific process in order to be the first to publish their findings. Motivations as these frequently cause some scientists to rush to the press with “findings” that appear to contradict previous studies; historic traditions, procedures, and philosophies; common sense; and, most serious for Christians, the Bible and historic Christian theology.

When one then hears about or reads the accounts published in the media produced by such inadequate scientific research, he or she frequently perceives that what is being

reported doesn't fit with what else is known. What does one do, who either lacks a scientific background that would enable him or her to check the researcher's report or doesn't have the time to do so? Compare and contrast the report with God's Word and sound theology. If there is not a match, question the report. The failure to follow established procedures frequently results in what scientists call "self-fulfilling prophecies," i.e., "confirmation" of what they hoped to find but that on close examination the study cannot support. Here also we see a subjective element shaping what should be an objective dimension of the study. The researcher should only hope for finding the truth, not for "finding" a particular predetermined result.

Step four involves such choices as which statistical method(s) to use; which data to report; how to group the data (i.e., which to place first and how to order the rest of the data), and whether to omit any findings, all of which involve values that are not completely objective. This fourth step involves measurable information produced by the researcher's design, but the worth of the data obtained is only as good as the plan and how careful the researcher was in following the plan.

Obviously, the fifth step is virtually all subjective as the researcher informs his or her sponsor(s) and readers of what he or she thinks the findings mean. The most careful research clearly distinguishes the fifth chapter in the report of the study from the first four, and also is candid with regard to the decision-making in the first four sections of the report. Careful and honest scientists disclose their biases up front to assist the reader in his or her interpretation of the study's value.

Furthermore, don't forget to find out how the study was funded and for whom the findings are primarily intended. A strong desire to please the study's sponsor(s)—i.e., the person(s) paying for the research—and its primary users (who also have agendas), frequently enters into how the findings are presented, which desire can either help or hinder ascertaining the truth and its application. These are highly subjective factors that must be considered in determining how much weight to give to any research report.

One of the key principles in the scientific method to establish validity is replication. If the results of a study are true, they should be able to be reproduced by other independent researchers. Peer review is also helpful, but one must keep in mind the politics that operate in all professional circles that sometimes mitigate the search for truth. The list here is lengthy, including but not limited to, peers who have their own vested interests, who like or don't like the primary researcher, and who have either positive or negative biases pertaining to the findings and their implications.¹

¹ For more on the scientific method, see my essay, "[Science: Distinguishing Between Sound and Flawed Science](#)." This and the other hyperlinked documents I've produced are on both my [academic Website](#) and on my [general Website](#). All the documents on both of my Websites are free (I'm not selling anything), and both Websites are safe from scammers, hackers, and viruses.

An Important Caveat

While empirical research that carefully follows the established scientific method is a valuable means of identifying God's general revelation, it contains a built-in temptation we need to avoid. An integral aspect of scientific research is the desire to predict phenomena before they occur. This desire to predict for many is rooted in human insecurity that seeks assurance, reassurance, and often to control as much as possible. From time immemorial people have sought their security in all kinds of sources; those sources that are other than the Creator are idols against which the prophets railed and spoke powerfully (e.g., Isaiah 44). We must emphasize that people must never make science another false idol. Science is very limited;² God is unlimited.

Integrating Theory and Theology in the Practice of Youth Ministry, Christian Education, and Other Ministries

While all of the above is a reality we have to deal with, what are the important values and uses of theory for youth ministry and other work in Christian education? One well known social scientist, Kurt Lewin, did make an important observation when he said that there's nothing more practical than a good theory,³ to which I add "and even more, Biblical theology." To paraphrase Immanuel Kant, *while theory without practice is empty, practice without theory is blind* (and makes one vulnerable to fads). Many ministers, and youth ministers in particular, and Christian educators are highly susceptible to fads and are constantly jumping on bandwagons...and there's a new one rolling into town every year! Some, not wanting to be "out of step with others" candidly admit, at least to themselves, "I don't know where this is going, but I'm on!" The problem is that what "works" at other churches (usually only defined as drawing significant numbers of young people), may have effects counterproductive to accomplishing the church's objectives, including the sanctification of its younger members. Programs that titillate "itching ears" (2 Timothy 4:3), do not produce sanctification that results in mature—including obedient—fruit. (Matthew 7:16-20, John 14:21)

Observe at this point that practice has a vital two-fold application: leadership method and presentation content. Most of this discussion is focused on the importance of the practice of implementing sound theory in the planning and operation of these ministries and a helpful method for doing so. Nevertheless, we must always include in the content of our curriculum and lesson planning the essential Biblical emphasis on God's will that his people not only know his Word (James 2:19-20ff.) but also do it in their daily lives. (Matthew 7:21-23) I have addressed how to effectively implement theory and practice pertaining to the content of curriculum and lesson plans in other documents, e.g., ["Curriculum Development and Lesson Planning: For Teachers & for Teachers of Teachers."](#)

² For more on this aspect of science, see ["Science: Distinguishing Between Sound and Flawed Science."](#)

³ Fred E. Fiedler and Martin M. Chemers, *Leadership and Effective Management* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1974), preface.

Pertaining to leadership method, we can see youth and other ministers and Christian educators making the same mistake many scientists make: cutting corners motivated by personal reasons, e.g., implementing a program just because it is building big numbers in another church, without evaluating that program according to theoretical and theological criteria. One motivation for doing so is when church members, who often attend other successful churches and return to their own church, excitedly exclaim to the minister, youth minister, or Christian educator, “I was visiting (Such and So Megachurch), and they have this really great program...; we ought to do that too!” Maybe that program is good and should be used; but maybe it contains elements in it that are counterproductive to the people’s sanctification and related specific objectives. Often the church leader has already heard of this type of program and has formed an opinion, which he or she can explain to the excited member. Otherwise, the leader can say, “OK; I’ll check into it and see if it would be good for our church.” That’s usually what the member wants to hear; most reasonable people know that there are sometimes one or more significant reasons why a particular program “working” in one place may or may not be feasible, or desirable, in their own church. Taking them seriously affirms them and communicates appreciation for them and their attempt to serve the Lord in this way. So, how can one tell whether to use such an approach to youth or other ministries?

Test the theories you hear and the theory you are developing against the [Bible](#) and [historic Christian theology](#). We should operate within a theoretical perspective that helps us formulate the most effective and efficient approach to our work. We must be careful to employ a Biblical theory. The sounder our theory (i.e., the more parallel it is to the Bible, historic Christian theology, and well established and accurate science) the more effective and efficient we will be in our ministry with young people and the others with whom we work.

For example, careful research in the psychology of human development reveals that adolescents and adults in contrast to children function more on the basis of internal motivation. This theory strongly suggests, therefore, that relating Biblical and doctrinal teaching to the great questions of life⁴ with which adolescents are grappling will be more motivating than teaching without applying the subject matter to the issues that most concern teens today. Teach this and other aspects of parenting to parents, who will be more effective in leading their teens to attend a youth ministry class or program by informing them of the subject matter, emphasizing one or more of the key aspects of which they have much interest, instead of simply, but ineffectively, ordering them to attend.

Thus, when your supervisor, elders, and parents tell you to “Get in there and motivate those kids,” you can’t treat them as children, who respond more to external directives. We need to tap into the deeply felt internal motives that drive our youth’s longings and questions. Understanding this reality, and other findings from careful empirical research

⁴ See my paper, [“Great Questions of Life: Felt Needs to Address in Christian Education,”](#) and [“Curriculum Development and Lesson Planning: For Teachers & for Teachers of Teachers.”](#)

(all part of God’s general revelation and consistent with his special revelation in the Bible), enables us to defend the decisions we make in our program.⁵

Work at integrating sound theory with theology. All truth is God’s truth, and careful science never conflicts with the Bible when it is rightly interpreted.⁶ God does not say one thing in the Bible and then say the opposite in careful science; God does not contradict himself.⁷ We need to develop an understanding of how both interrelate with each other and inform our decision-making in youth and other ministries. This process implies developing an increasing understanding of theology and how this discipline connects with and explains empirical findings.

Regarding the theological and Biblical integration with the scientific dimension of your theory of ministry, consider for example, the Apostle Paul’s ministry with Philemon. The latter’s slave, Onesimus, may have taken something from his owner and run away, an action punishable by death under contemporary Roman law. In his letter to Philemon, Paul wants him to accept Onesimus back as a brother in Christ, due to the changes that have occurred in the slave while he was with Paul. Yet, not wanting to order Philemon to do so, Paul writes appealing to the slave owner’s internal motivation: “although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do...I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.” (Vss. 8, 14) Include theory within the framework of your theology; in fact, shape your

⁵ For other examples of relating theory to youth ministry see my essay, “Balancing Cognitive and Affective Objectives.”

⁶ By “rightly interpreted,” I mean in accord with historic principles of Biblical interpretation as presented in the field of hermeneutics (< Greek, ἐρμηνεύω [hermēneuō], “to interpret”). I do **NOT** mean what is often done today, where Biblically correct interpretation is being replaced by politically correct interpretation; i.e., where people come to the Bible with a presupposition as to what they want the Bible to say on a given subject, so they engage in a practice, colloquially called “Scripture twisting,” in order to make a particular text conform to their bias. I give extensive examples, and explain why God’s Word cannot be handled that way in my e-book, [What Is God’s Will Concerning Homosexuality? Help for Church Leaders and Others to Speak the Truth in Love](#), especially in Chapter One.

⁷ Here is another area of Christian education, youth ministry, and other ministries where we need to be watchful and help others to do so. Pertaining to philosophical matters, we live in an age that is referred to as postmodernism. One of the key tenets of postmodernism is the concept that there is no ultimate authority. Thus, there is no ultimate criterion for truth in this type of thinking—no way to determine what is right and wrong about any matter—therefore, adherents of this philosophy maintain that you can believe one way and someone else can legitimately hold to a view that contradicts yours. They hold that you are both right, since there is no authoritative criterion to rule out one view or the other. One way to address this matter with such people is to begin by referring them to the field of logic. See my essay on logic, called “[Logic: A Primer on Common Logical Fallacies](#).” Examine in particular, and explain to others, “the law of non-contradiction,” which, briefly, means that something and its exact opposite cannot logically be true at the same time. Thanks be to God, the Holy Spirit has enabled us who believe in and follow the Lord Jesus Christ to recognize that we do have an ultimate authority to whom to turn to know the truth: Jesus himself, who said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) Notice the three-fold use of the definite article (the three uses being one of the Bible’s ways of indicating exceeding importance). Further, Jesus did **NOT** say that he is a truth or one of several truths or even a special truth; he said “...I am the truth...,” meaning the ultimate truth: We do have a criterion to guide us, and who will hold us accountable for what we do. What a huge blessing that reality is! Contemplate and discuss the implications.

theory with sound historic Christian theology. Therefore, pay close attention to courses in systematic theology.

Systematic theology is the grouping of the teachings of the Bible by subject and organizing them in a Biblically logical manner that demonstrates their connections and relationships. Take as many theology courses as you can. Systematic theology helps you construct a Biblically based worldview to help young people and others make sense out of life and organize and explain the flow of the Bible and its teaching.⁸

Another example of how theory is helpful in evaluating programs as to whether they should be used in your ministry involves a popular Bible memorization program, which uses a highly competitive approach to engage the students in memorizing the Scriptures. Now I strongly support the importance of memorizing passages of the Bible, especially those that contain the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and those which pertain to issues the children and youth daily experience. However, when one examines this particular Bible memory program over against sound theory, it is questionable.

Our task in church education has been stipulated by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:11-16. We are to help the people develop their spiritual gifts and enable Christ's church to grow,

¹²to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until 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. ¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. (4:12-15 TNIV)

So our students can mature and witness as Paul explains in this text, we need to teach higher level cognition in order to equip the children, youth, and adults entrusted to our care, to “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15 TNIV) What are these higher level mental functions?

Benjamin Bloom has identified a hierarchy of cognitions, a taxonomy of mental activity: rote knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation skills.⁹ Bible memory, as important as it is, is part of the rote knowledge and basic fundamental

⁸ Systematic theology is a very important course to teach in Christian education in both the church and in Christian schools. See the systematic theology course, which is on both of my Websites, and is entitled, [“Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity.”](#)

⁹ David R. Krathwohl, “Stating Appropriate Educational Objectives” in David A Payne (Ed.), *Curriculum Evaluation: Commentaries on Purpose, Process, Product* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1974), pp. 74-75.

information base we require in order to mature in Christ. However, as this theory clearly shows, much more is necessary. If we are to help young people analyze and evaluate the “cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming,” in order to mature and help others come to Christ and mature, to extend and nurture God’s Kingdom, and to most effectively fulfill his calling of us to be his instruments for the redemption of his creation, we must facilitate the youths’ and others’ development of these more complex abilities of analysis and evaluation. We also need to help our students develop and engage in the other cognitive competencies Bloom has identified, so they can mature in, and more effectively witness for, Christ. Doing so goes far beyond simply memorizing the text.

Further, the strong emphasis on competition is questionable. Competition is a favored method of motivation, but those who use it frequently fail to account for its flaws. While some careful use of competition among groups, where fragile egos cannot lose face and suffer ridicule, can accomplish some of our educational objectives, e.g., group cooperation, individual competition is counterproductive to many other important objectives, e.g., the development of perspective-taking that is linked to moral development¹⁰ as well as caring and bonding in community, a vital component of covenant life. Jesus said, “in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.” (Matthew 7:12 TNIV, “The Golden Rule”) Doing so involves perspective-taking ability. When we put our students into competitive situations for much of the precious little time we have them, where they are concentrating and focusing on how they can beat out the others, we are nurturing an inward focus that is counter to the outward focus and sensitivity that facilitates development of the perspective-taking needed for the maturity of which Jesus and Paul spoke.

“But the kids love it!” one youth leader told me as I explained the above about individual competition. “Don,” I replied, “which kids? Have you looked into the eyes of those who’ve ‘lost?’ Further, my guess is that when you were their age, you were always a ‘winner.’” “Yeah, I was,” he admitted. “Now I see what you mean.”¹¹

¹⁰ See the work of Lawrence Kohlberg and others, e.g., John S. Stewart, *Toward a Theory for Values Development Education*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1974, p. 413 ff. I am not recommending everything Kohlberg and Stewart wrote, but they support well what I am saying here.

¹¹ Here is a clear example of how the integration of Biblical theology and theory helps our decision-making. Christian anthropology maintains the Biblical teaching of the essential sinfulness of human nature following the fall of Adam and Eve. Children and teenagers, who have not developed perspective-taking ability, thus are often cruel in the way they treat peers, especially those they see as vulnerable. Can you see how such experiences are counterproductive to their developing and putting into practice the ability to love as Christ *commanded* (John 13:34-35) and which Paul defined? (1 Corinthians 13:4-7) When such cruelty occurs, as teachers we have an opportunity to help them learn this love, but we should not intentionally put our young people, or anyone else, in positions which set them up for painful and counterproductive experiences. Remember also that healthy normal people want to avoid placing themselves in situations where they will experience pain and discomfort of any kind. Educators refer to this as “avoidance tendency.” On the contrary, we want to help our youth and others to develop what is called an “approach tendency,” the association of a pleasant experience that tends to draw people voluntarily to that source for more such experiences.

Bringing together these understandings from the Bible, historic Christian theology, and the strongest of human development theory, the youth worker can evaluate this popular Bible memory program and other proposals put to him or her. In this case, I would opt not to use this program and develop another approach to teach and model the importance of Bible memorization and its higher cognitive uses as well.¹²

Develop the ability to integrate theology and theory into the practical issues you daily face. Use theology and theory as a frame of reference in order to produce the most effective youth ministry, teaching, and other ministry.

The ability to understand and integrate theology and theory with life issues has very practical uses, including the ability to explain to (and where necessary persuade) others, in particular those you serve (e.g., parents) and those to whom you are accountable (e.g., lead pastors, executive pastors, administrators, or councils) in a way that is objective and transcends emotional investments. Your appeal is to principle.

Principle persuades and neutralizes the passions of personalities. A firm grasp of theology and theory and the ability to integrate them into your daily work will help you discern, select, explain, and promote the program ideas that will be productive and accomplish your objectives. Such a grasp will also keep you out of much trouble. People don't like ideas about which they're excited to be dismissed by what they perceive as a personal bias on your part, but if you can patiently and without emotion explain how a certain practice is inconsistent with their theology or other values to which they are committed, including well established findings from careful scientific research, you'll do well and usually they'll appreciate and respect your capable leadership.

Epilogue

A Brief Observation on Nature and Nurture

In youth, teaching, and other ministries you'll need to make decisions that relate to your programming and work with individuals in the light of the most accurate understanding of the nature/nurture issue. Almost from time immemorial this debate has been framed as a question: What has more influence on a person, his or her genetic makeup or the influence of the environment (e.g., parents, teachers, peers, employers)?

¹² One way to do this is to teach the Bible text you want the students to learn, using a variety of common and interesting methods to do so, e.g., writing the full text on a chalkboard, flipchart, or an overhead or LCD projector. Then, write the text again and again eliminating certain words, and asking the group to supply the missing words. Next, using 3 x 5 file cards on which you've written the words of the passage (one word per card), divide the group into subgroups of four and then give each group a stack of the file cards. Now ask the groups to assemble the cards in the correct order when you say, "Go!" The first group to finish with the words in the correct order is the "winner." In this way, no individual loses face and suffers the ridicule of the entire group, yet you've tapped into the natural and internal motivations within humans that produce enjoyment with *intergroup* competition.

Many voices from the natural and behavioral sciences, education, business, theology, and other fields have expressed their opinion, some based on careful research, others on anecdotal evidence, and others on philosophical and/or theological grounds.

Nevertheless, after careful study of the arguments in the above fields and from my own experience in over 40 years of ministry, many in youth ministry, two conclusions seem clear: (1) a genetic predisposition toward some behaviors is very likely, but (2) that predisposition can be altered by nurture, especially by the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the support of the church, the body of Christ. Indeed, the latter is expected, even commanded, by God when such behavior is contrary to his Word as written in the Bible. Furthermore, he will hold us accountable for doing so and helping others to do so.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How can a Biblically-based theory that is consistent with historic Christian theology be a very practical help in youth and other ministries? Give an example.
2. Describe at least one way you can help your students develop the more complex levels of cognition that will enable them analyze, evaluate, overcome, and help others overcome, the “cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.”
3. You are the Minister of Youth at Rising Flame Community Church. A parent of one of the students in your youth group, who is also on the church board, comes to you one day and says, “Guess what?! We were just out in L.A. on our vacation. While we were there we attended this super megachurch, and they’ve got this great program for kids!” He proceeds to describe the program in minute detail, and then concludes by saying, “You ought to do that in our youth program!” What do you say to this parent?