

**Christian Education and Youth Ministry:
Balancing the Corporate and the Individual**
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A key to successful living is to keep in balance the many variables in life that are good. In well over 80 years of living, and over 60 as a teacher of God's Word and other subjects, I observe that it is not easy to keep these variables in balance. Overemphasizing favorite matters, 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. The people whom God has called us to serve, need to hear the whole counsel of God, not just the matters we like most to address and discuss.

This essay offers guidance in applying the Bible, historic Christian 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, either directly or principally, applies to all the Lord's ministries.

Nevertheless, a key component of all ministries in order to be effective, 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 the corporate and the individual, 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 others' and our own expectations](#); [balancing two key dimensions of leadership: initiation of structure and consideration](#).

American culture has historically had a strong individualistic dimension. This orientation is seen from the beginning of the United States in its Declaration of Independence, which holds the truth that is “self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹ The applications of that axiom of the equality of all individuals have been extensive, pervading virtually all aspects of society.

The basic concept that all human beings are created equal is important and has Biblical support. For example, all humans bear the image of God, which gives every individual

¹ [“Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,”](#) National Archives: America's Founding Documents. (Accessed 11/13/2023)

the inherent right to be valued and respected.² Further, since that right comes from God, and God is not going away, that right cannot ever be taken away from the humans he has created in his image.

However, this basic Biblical doctrine has been misunderstood and misapplied in many ways. First, is the misapplication itself: Just because all people are created equal in their personhood that bears the image of God, does not mean their values are all equal.

Second, is the errant rationale: the concept of the equality of humans is mistakenly applied, by flawed reasoning, to many other contexts. Looking carefully at the rationale used for these applications, reveals the use of several common logical fallacies. Two examples are readily seen in the attempt to extend the principle that all humans are created equal to their value systems. Doing so commits the logical fallacy of using words without proper definition. This is why the term, created equal, should be defined, and the definition should include bearing the image of God which all humans have, thus giving us all inherent equal value specifically in personhood. Thus, no human being is inherently superior, or inferior, to another. The person is created, not his or her values. Values are developed, and they are shaped by many factors, including especially this one: The definition should also include the Biblical reality that since Adam and Eve disobeyed God and sinned in so doing, sin has corrupted the perfect human nature God originally created, which explains the individual and relational disharmony—and the inequality of values—in the world, which reality prohibits extending equality of personhood to equality of values and behavior.

Such errant reasoning also commits the fallacy called the fallacy of ambiguity: division. This logical error is illustrated by the analogy that if a certain company is very important, therefore any specific individual in that company must be important. Likewise, just because every human being is created equal, it is illogical to include that their values are ipso facto of equal worth and benefit.³

American individualism jumped to warp speed when the post-World War II Baby Boomer generation arrived on the scene in the middle of the 20th century. Impressed with their size (at that time they were the largest generation), they focused so much on themselves and their generation's values and activism that they, *notable examples to the contrary notwithstanding*, referred to themselves, and came to be known, as “The Me Generation.” Thus, they considered only the current time and what they thought and did as important and ignored the past and future, even succeeding in getting academia to remove some key requirements pertaining to the study of history.

² For further information on the meaning of the image of God, 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.](#)”

³ For further information on logical fallacies, see “[Logic: A Primer on Common Logical Fallacies](#)” on both of my Websites: <https://fromacorntoak12.com/> and <https://seelyedward.academia.edu/research>.

For these and other reasons (including the importance of people in God’s sight as revealed in the Bible [cf., e.g., Matthew 6:25-26; 10:30]), the emphasis on the individual in the American ethos, as well as in other cultures affected by individualism, must be addressed, and especially corrected—being brought into accord with God’s Word—in Christian education and youth ministry. But we need to broaden our perspective.

Though individuals bearing God’s image are very important, so also are the corporate entities they form. Examples of such entities include God’s covenant in Christ with his people, the visible manifestation of which is the true church, i.e., those branches of which remain faithful to God, his Word, and his will. Other corporate entities are government, which is also established by God (Romans 13:1ff.); businesses; and many other organizations.

In Christian education, including youth ministry, and other Christian ministries we need to maintain a balance between attention to individuals and attention to corporate needs. Don’t neglect the individual, but always place the individual in the context of the corporate/covenant.

Keep the corporate and the individual in balance. Remember how Jesus kept his focus on the covenant people as a whole, i.e., he didn’t allow himself to be drawn off course and mitigate his ministry that he came to do (cf., e.g., the account of his conversation with the Canaanite woman [Matthew 15:21-28, especially v. 24], but he did attend to the needs of the individual [e.g., v. 28; cf. also his parable of the shepherd who left the 99 to find and restore the one lost sheep. [Luke 15:3-7]).

Highlight the great hymns of the faith, e.g., “Holy, Holy, Holy;” “Trust and Obey;” “Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus,” and the good contemporary songs,⁴ but in a covenantal context. Balance the hymns, songs, and psalms with those that have lyrics written in the first person singular as well as in the first person plural. Singing only songs about “I,” “me,” “my,” “mine,” play into, emphasize, and reinforce the individualistic mentality that focuses on oneself, minimizing the broader Biblical perspective and command that includes caring for, loving, others. Both emphases are needed: the individual and the corporate.

⁴ Be very careful in your selection of music, which is a powerful way to teach. One reason for its significance is due to its balance between the cognitive and affective dimensions of human learning. Since music has such a strong ability to affect learning, we must be careful to make sure the theology in the music is consistent with the Bible and historic Christian systematic theology; some is, but much is not consistent. For more on the importance of music and the need to be careful in its use, due to cognition and affect, see these resources: [Worship: A Course on Worship in the Christian Church](#); [“Curriculum Development and Lesson Planning: For Teachers & for Teachers of Teachers;”](#) and [“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.”](#)

Music about the need to accept Jesus as one's only Savior and Lord (e.g., John 14:6; 3:16; Romans 10:9), is good to offer with lyrics in the first person singular. Such singing facilitates understanding and making a personal commitment to Christ Jesus.

Similarly, when we are teaching and preaching about the vital social and emotional as well as spiritual needs people have that are met by the church, select music addressing that subject and written in the first person plural. Human learning research and other sound social science reveal the reality that the human need to belong is one of the top needs people have.⁵ The church, being the very body of Christ (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:27), is designed by God to meet that need.

As soon as possible learn the name of each person in your area of ministry and use it regularly, including when you see him or her in other settings and with adults. Don't ignore the young people when they are with their parents or other church leaders. Also work at learning the names of his or her parents and other key church leaders.

Call people who are older than your parents by a title of respect, such as Mr., Mrs., Dr., Rev. unless and until they invite you to call them by their first, or another, name. In our impersonal society titles are a sign of respect. In smaller settings, such as a small town or a church, where people all know and regard one another, titles aren't as necessary, but especially as a young person, it is important to show respect in order to receive respect.

In youth and other ministries, meet with each member of your group individually over the course of the school year, if possible. Try to come to know the student. Ask the following questions among others (including the usual demographics):

1. What do you most like to do?
2. What do people tell you you're good at doing? (Add anything you've observed.)
3. Do you read the Bible and pray every day?
4. Do you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead? (Romans 10:9; explain what Lord means, specifically that we are accountable to him.)
5. For those students who show gifts of ministerial leadership: Have you ever considered youth, or another, ministry as a profession?
6. Is there anything you'd like to talk with me about while we're together.

⁵ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, Second Edition. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970).

7. Always conclude your meeting with prayer for the student and his or her family, especially including any concerns the student has mentioned in your conversation(s) with him or her. Ask God's help for any needs the student has expressed or implied while talking with you.

Ministering with Problem Children and Other Persons

If a student is disrupting the group, you must address this situation, even removing the student for a period of time if necessary. The church youth group or Sunday school is not a public school that has to take everybody. Involve the parents at a certain point if needed.

A youth leader who fails to address and correct the situation of a student disrupting the group as a whole, will receive the disrespect and, if it goes on long enough, anger of the group, for groups do not like their time wasted; they reason, individually if not corporately, "I didn't come here for this distraction." In certain circumstances, some or all of the group could become concerned for their safety. As one of my former students wrote in a paper on this subject, "It is important that the individual is dealt with, because it can really affect group dynamics."

A story. Here is one way to help both the individual and the group.

I was working at a camp one summer, and it wasn't long after I started that I heard the other leaders talking about dreading a particular week in July when "the Deacon" would be coming. "The Deacon" was a nickname they gave to one early adolescent boy who was a terror; the nickname was chosen because he was 180 degrees away from a church deacon.

The dreaded week arrived and so did "the Deacon." I don't know what human planning was instrumental in "the Deacon" being assigned to the group for which I was responsible, but there he was, and it didn't take him long to test me to see how I'd react to his first obnoxious act.

I've long forgotten what he did, but I'll never forget what I did. I brought him close to me for the remainder of the group session, and then I brought him close to me afterward. I sat down with him on an old dead tree that had fallen. I first asked him what he wanted me to call him, since I'm aware that many people don't like their nicknames, especially when they are given to them by other people. He told me he hated that nickname, and he'd prefer to be called by the name his parents gave him, George. From that point on I always called him George.

I talked a lot with him throughout the week he was with us; I came to know him, where he was from, what he liked and didn't like, what his hopes and dreams were. We talked

about how he might work at achieving those hopes and dreams. He followed me around like my shadow. In the early morning when I'd leave my cabin, he'd be there already.

He knew I cared about him, which earned me the right to be heard regarding his behavior. I talked with him about why he acted the way he did and helped him see that it actually produced the opposite results of what he was hoping to accomplish: recognition, respect, and inclusion, belonging.

By midweek the rest of the camp staff couldn't believe the transformation; George was acting very differently. Thanks be to God! It wasn't about me; anyone can do what I did, with God's help.

As we seek to help the individuals in our groups according to their needs, they'll often respond as George did. Sometimes they require more help from professionals with special education, other resources, and the added time to give them, but in many cases, and with God's involvement, they'll begin to mature and do well if we give them some individual attention at the time they need such care.

Above all, pray to the one true God—our triune God—for his help. (James 5:16) He's the only one who can change human hearts and minds. Pray before, during, and after times together with an individual who needs our special care. Attend to him or her for his or her sake—and for the sake of the group—"speaking the truth in love." (Ephesians 4:15; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7)