
PRACTICING CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

AN INTRODUCTION
FOR MINISTRY

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and James Riley Estep Jr.**


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1

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

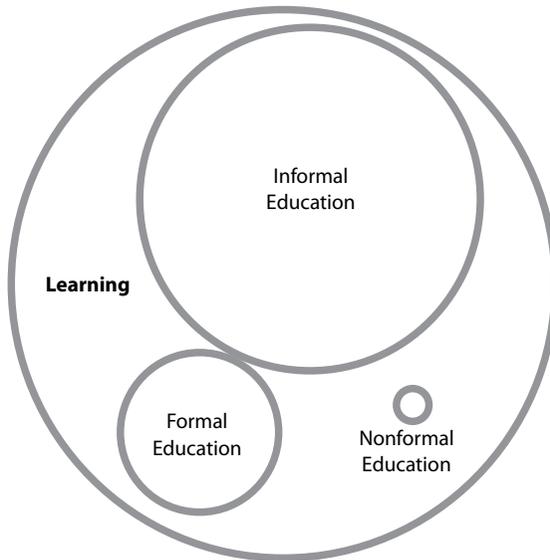
Table 1.1 Spectrum of Education

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.