Understanding people: ministry to all stages of life

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Understanding People
Ministry To All Stages Of Life

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Understanding Human Development

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Welcome to the journey! Prepare yourself for exciting insights and challenging thoughts. While each remaining chapter in this volume will address a specific age level, this chapter will discuss the process of development, the periods of development and conclude with an overview of three problems or dilemmas regarding human development. Grab your Bible and let’s begin.

Process of Development

Every adult was once an adolescent. Every adolescent was once a child. Every child was once an infant and toddler. Every infant was once a single male sperm that joined with a female ovum or egg. Young adults have children to rear. Senior adults have children and grandchildren to enjoy. Adults can leave a legacy of secrets and truths about life’s journey. They can also share the treasures they have discovered in their own personal life journey and from the great guidebook for all humans, the Bible.

While there are many variations in the smaller steps of individual development, the ultimate journey is predictable for all human beings. Our Creator, God, designed the pattern from the very beginning of time (Genesis 1:26). In His creation, the Creator reflects His intentions and purpose. God said that mankind was to be made in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). The universe is the result of God’s creative design and handiwork; however, the crowning act of His work was the creation of male and female. He declared them “very good” (Genesis 1:31): to Adam and Eve, the first parents, God gave
the purpose of being fruitful, increasing in number, filling and subduing the earth (Genesis 1: 26–28).

Humans alone were the recipients of the breath of God. All created beings were made from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7), but mankind alone is a living being with an immaterial part that responds to and finds its completion in God. God’s mandate of care and supervision was not given to the trees or the animals, but to the man and his “completer.” Humans are valuable because God created them with the highest degree of correlation to Himself. Further, to mankind alone came the instructions to manage and care for the earth. Finally, God pursued an intimate relationship, with mankind alone, of walking and talking daily.

Development meant growth in God’s original design. Adam and Eve were to work and keep the garden. When Eve and then Adam violated the instructions of God by eating the one fruit that was forbidden, they caused the curse of God on Satan, themselves and ultimately all the earth. Death and decay are the result of the sin of mankind (Genesis 3:14–19). These effects will be reversed one day in the future through God’s redemption of not only mankind, but the heavens and the earth as well, and He will then create a new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1). Until then we live in a world that progresses in development but is ultimately heading toward physical death.

From the world of developmental psychology, we learn that the growth process is a complex intertwining of three identifiable processes: the biological, the cognitive and the socioemotional components. The biological processes involve physical changes in individuals including inherited genetic codes from parents, brain development, height and weight changes, motor skills, and hormonal changes throughout the life span. Cognitive processes involve changes in the way an individual thinks, gains knowledge and expresses that knowledge through language. Socioemotional processes include those changes that describe the varied ways individuals build relationships with each other, develop and express emotions and develop their unique personality. A good way to visualize the interaction of these processes is to picture them as intersecting and overlapping circles.

For the Christian trying to understand the complete process of development, the spiritual domain must be added. No discussion of development is complete without the spiritual dimension of one’s life. This domain interacts with and influences the other three described above. An individual cannot fully develop until he is developing in his spiritual relationship with God. For the Christian, the spirit comes alive in the process of redemption; for the unbeliever, the spirit lies dead but is in need of rebirth. Luke 2:52 reinforces this idea with its terse summary of the development of Jesus as a human stating that, “Jesus grew in wisdom [cognitive] and stature [biological] and in favor with God [spiritual] and men [socioemotional].”

Each of the four domains has a primary corresponding theorist from whom much can be learned. As Psalm 19:1–6 indicates, much can be learned about God by studying His creatures and His creation. While Scripture always stands as the final word on any theory, much can be known of God’s most complex creation, man, from a careful and scientific study of human behavior. From Jean Piaget we learn much regarding the patterns of development in the cognitive domain. From Erik Erickson’s eight stages of developmental growth we gain helpful insights regarding the socioemotional development that all individuals pass through over a lifetime. Lawrence Kohlberg opens windows of insight into the ways that humans develop in their moral decision making skills. Kohlberg’s three levels and six stages of moral development strongly parallel Piaget’s cognitive developmental stages. Finally, from James Fowler comes a description of the stages of faith development. Fowler proposes that at each age level the nature and description of how one believes changes and matures.

In subsequent chapters, each theory will be brought to bear on the particular stage of development being discussed. Building a Christian perspective of development involves always choosing to use the principles of Scripture as final judge and jury when considering theorists’ claims. When man’s theories move outside the boundaries of God’s revealed truth in the Bible they will be amended accordingly.

**Periods of Development**

Even though human development is more like a seamless garment than a quilt of many individual pieces, for the purpose of investigation we will be subdividing the life span into smaller descriptive segments. The three larger categories of the human life span under which the many small segments are clustered are childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Popularly used divisions include: prenatal (conception to birth) and infancy (birth to twenty-four months), toddlers (two years to three years), preschool (four to five years), early childhood (six to eight years), preteen (nine to eleven years), early adolescence (twelve to thirteen years), middle adolescence (fourteen to seventeen years), later adolescence (eighteen to twenty-one), early adult (twenty-two to forty), middle adult (forty-one to sixty-five), and senior adult (sixty-five plus).

While in current times we have subdivided the life span into the three categories of children, youth and adults, for much of recorded history and even in many cultures today around the world there have been only two. There were only two biblical age distinctions: chil-
dren and adults. In Judaism, a twelve year old male was given a bar mitzvah and became a legal adult. In a similar manner, once girls experienced their first menstrual period they were considered to be a woman and the father began to arrange a marriage. Scripture describes these two age divisions in 1 Corinthians 13:11 when it explains, “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 put childish ways behind me.” One was either a child or an adult. In many ways this approach helped individuals take their place more easily in the adult world. Surely there was some hesitation on the part of the novice adult but the advantage was that they were treated like an adult with the appropriate responsibilities and privileges that accompany such status.

In viewing life this way, childhood becomes a time of preparation for the responsibilities and privileges of adulthood. Adolescence serves as the bridge of transition between the two: childhood and adulthood. Around the world, this simpler two segment orientation still dominates the growth process and cultural perspective. However in the highly industrialized cultures of the world, the bridge of transition between childhood and adulthood becomes elongated into a temporary and sometimes permanent destination. We call this phenomenon adolescence. Stalled on the bridge, many adolescents are lingering between the freedom of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood. Many of the problems associated with youth are the result of postponing adult status and responsibilities for teens.

**Problematic Considerations of Development**

While much is fairly straightforward in discerning developmental stages and phases, some issues continue to be troublesome for scientists. We will briefly present the issues with the desire that you engage in classroom discussion regarding your perspectives and observations on these matters.

**Nature vs. Nurture**

This discussion has been raging for centuries and promises to continue to do so in the future. The discussion centers around two key questions: Which is more influential in the growth and development of persons, their hereditary blueprint (genetic makeup) or their environmental circumstances? Which is primary and which is secondary?

Ultimately the answer is a matter of emphasis. The two are so closely linked that it seems nearly impossible to isolate one from the other. Nature and nurture each contribute significantly in the formation of every individual. Surely the nature of a person’s parents influence many things about their physical makeup, their racial features, their ultimate height, their eye color, their intellect, and even some predispositions to certain diseases. Much of our physical appearance can be traced to our lineage. On the other hand, nurturing factors and forces definitely influence development by assisting or hindering individual growth. The nature of one’s nutrition, the availability and quality of health care and the exposure to diseases contribute much to the individual’s final development. Improper nutrition, inadequate health care, multiple calamities, along with prenatal and childhood diseases, can likewise hinder or stop proper growth. In addition to the physical elements of an individual’s growth, nurturing influences of family, peers, school, community, government, media and culture add individual and collective influences to a life’s formation.

Development is both an internal and an external process. The internal growth is largely a function of heredity at work. The nurture aspects are often initially felt externally by the individual but eventually bear evidence in both internal and external ways. There are myriad of forces outside a person that impact what and whom one becomes. Urie Bronfenbrenner emphasizes an ecological approach to the study of development. His schematic is similar to the layers of an onion each of which contributes its own influences upon the developing person. Closest to the center and having the most profound influence are the microsystems of the family, the peer group, one’s religious setting, classroom or workplace. Brofenbrenner’s next layer includes the mesosystems that connect the microsystems. As the family and religious setting interface, the Sunday School teacher and parent interact to work together for the spiritual growth of a child. As the classroom and family interact, the teacher and parent strive together to maximize the child’s educational progress. Exosystems come in the next layer and influence the mesosystems. Exosystems include school systems, medical institutions, mass media, and community makeup. Their influence is important but exerts less impact than that of microsystems. The final or outer layer of the schematic includes those macrosystems which impact and formulate the individual indirectly. Cultural values, social conditions, economic patterns, political philosophy, and natural customs comprise the most distant layer and provide the context in which growth and development take place.

An example of Bronfenbrenner’s model can be seen in the following fictional but possible scenario. A child is born into a postmodern relative culture of the new millennium. Amid the multicultural city of Metropolis, he grows up in the inner city projects. Historically, his
is a time of political liberalism and dominance of the the country's highest government officials. While it will be years before he understands any of these influencers on his growth, each will nonetheless influence the person he will become. Furthermore, if that child is raised with much access to violent video games, is initiated into a local gang, is educated in an underfunded deteriorating public school with poorly trained teachers, his life will reflect those influences. Finally, if that child is born into a single parent family on welfare with an absentee or noninvolved father, his chances of growing up to love and serve God seem all but impossible. However, if into this child's life enters an Inner City Impact parachurch ministry that seeks to service the child, his education, his peers and ultimately his soul with the good news of Jesus, that child has a fighting chance to grow up to be a full individual. He begins the journey as he establishes friendships with caring adults, learns better study habits, and forms healthy friendships outside of gangs. Additionally, if he hears the truth of the gospel, and is challenged toward salvation, he has the opportunity to choose Christ as Savior and Lord of his life. All this begins with his Inner City Impact counselor. Ultimately, he can become involved in the family of God through a local church. Through that church family, this child can build a healthy relationship with a caring godly adult male who models to him what a man of God acts like. Many are the systems that influence this child and his development. Despite all the disadvantages of the surrounding systems of this child's development, he becomes a fully developed and functioning adult because of the influence of Christian education in his life.

This is good news for the Christian educator. While some developmental boundaries are set because of heritage, others can be influenced by godly parenting, interaction with a faith community, and biblical training of God's timeless values and principles. In fact, Christian education can actually reverse some of the negative impact of social environmental formation. Moses rightly reminds parents in Deuteronomy 6 of the key role they play in the spiritual formation of their children. Parents were first to internalize the commandments into their own hearts and then to impress them upon the children everywhere and anywhere they could. Even though sin has deeply scarred and impaired man's perception, God's word can restore right thinking and right living to the one who chooses to learn and live its truths.

**Continuity vs. Discontinuity**

The second debated issue in developmental circles is whether development is a series of small incremental steps or big jumps of growth.

Is it a set of stairs or a gradual incline? Do you awaken on your second birthday to find you have acquired an entire vocabulary fit for making sentences overnight? Do you walk into preschool to discover you now have new powers of learning that you previously did not possess? When you awaken on your thirteenth birthday, have you miraculously become a teenager? When you turn sixty-five does your body automatically kick into the declining mode readying you for the next life?

Is growth a gradual increase in quantity of intellectual, socioemotional, and biological changes or is it ultimately a qualitative process in which different and distinctive kinds of growing take place? Are there distinct stages or is the process of growth and development so incremental that it happens without one noticing the progression?

Understanding people is ultimately understanding the answers to these questions. Yes, we grow in such small increments that at times we are unaware of the changes taking place. Remember your grandmother's "My how you've grown" greetings? Remember how you resented that greeting? You were not aware of the subtle changes taking place even though you lived inside the body and mind that were changing. But Grandma, having not seen you in a while, could detect the qualitative as well as quantitative growth you were experiencing. Grandma had the big picture while you were lost in the day to day micro changes that were at work in you.

So is development essentially quantitative (more of the same kind), or qualitative (of a different kind)? The answer is that both are true. You are making small changes as you grow and develop, but you are also experiencing some changes that are so profound the essence of your person changes forever. This book endeavors to focus on both kinds of growth.

The implications of quantitative and qualitative growth among learners in church educational settings will be introduced in each domain of development for each age level. In the outset, let us set the stage by saying that we must learn to adjust our teaching so that as students change and develop, our strategies will be the best suited to them at each particular stage of their lives. At the same time, we must also plan for bigger changes in ministry focus as students move from children's ministry to youth or adult ministries.

**Descriptive vs. Predictive Formation**

A final area of discussion, within the developmentalist perspective, revolves around how predictive the early influences are on the life of a growing individual. Do those influences provide a description of the child or a prescription of what they must become? Can the natural processes be interrupted or refocused?
Will either neglect or over parenting cripple a child for life? Does an alcoholic prenatal environment limit the potential outcome of a child's ability to learn and be fully developed? Do children reared in war zones become emotionally and socially crippled for life? Some developmentalists believe that a child will never attain optimal growth unless he or she has experienced a warm, nurturant care giving in the first year of life. Fortunately for Christian educators in the church and home, another perspective is that children remain malleable throughout development and that sensitive care giving received later in life is just as important as earlier sensitive care giving. So we are not robots whose existence is programmed and predetermined by specific events, but we are living human beings whose formation has many influencers. We are not doomed but redeemable!

Conclusion

Development is normal; it is God–given and is similar yet unique in each individual. Life is precious and to be cherished. Much can be learned by keen observational skills, reading appropriate literature, and searching the Bible for insights. Life span is divided into three major sections: childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Each individual experiences growth in biological, cognitive, socioemotional and spiritual ways. The more one knows of the developmental pathway the better equipped one is to accomplish ministry in the life of students.

Notes


Discussion Questions

1. Identify and explain the significant contributions of the following developmental theorists: Piaget, Erickson, Kohlberg, and Fowler.

2. Name the two major divisions of life that scripture outlines and compare with that the three segments that modern culture outlines.

Application Activities

1. Collect recent stories from newspapers or magazines that indicate human life in childhood, adolescence or adulthood.

2. Identify two practical ways the family, school, church, peer group, and society can influence the development of a person.