

A Radical Proposal for Training Pastors

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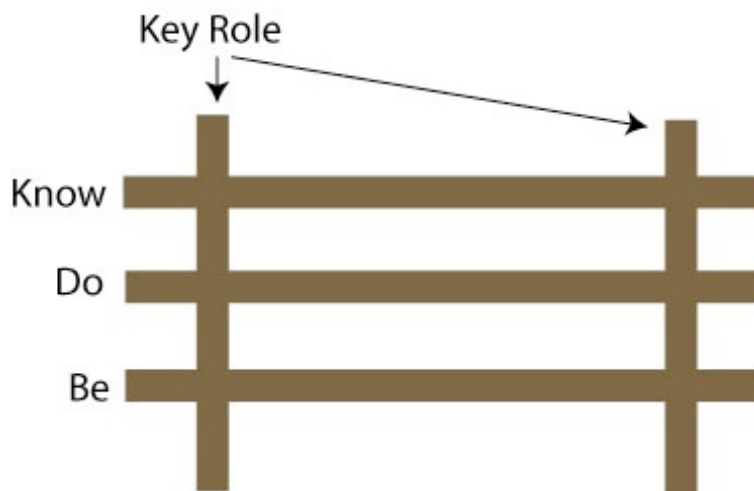
The Integration of Knowing, Doing and Being

I propose that pastoral training needs to integrate quality academics (knowing), contextualized ministry experience (doing) and personal/community growth (being). The biblical model, as I see it, is as follows: you can't really know unless you obey. And in fact, the more you obey, the more you understand. The psalmist says he understands more than the elders because he obeys God's Word (Ps. 119:100).

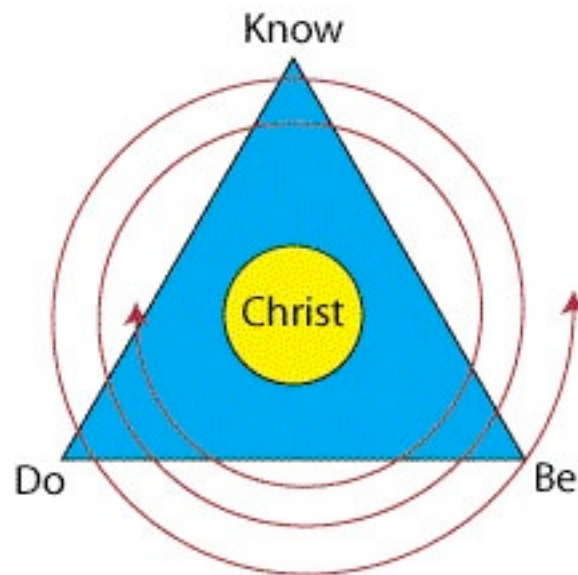
However, you can't really obey unless you love. That's what the Pharisees tried to do. They even tithed from their garden. But Jesus said it was all outward. They forgot about love and faithfulness. And in fact, the more you love the more you understand.

On the other hand, you can't really love unless you know the truth. Otherwise you might love the wrong things.

If these three elements—knowing, doing and being—are three rails of a wooden fence, then the primary task of the trainer is not the communication of concepts or practical skills but rather to be the fence post that connects the three. What I am proposing is not just *talking* about the integration of knowing, doing and being, but actually working together in ministry and getting involved in the life of the pastoral candidate.



Ultimately it's the Holy Spirit who connects these three so they are integrated around Christ. The following diagram shows a kind of spiral movement that occurs when these three are integrated around Christ: knowledge leads to greater obedience (doing), and obedience leads to greater understanding. Knowledge leads to love (being) and love leads to greater knowledge. The result is that what we know doesn't remain in the mind but actually influences how we go about ministry and our spiritual growth. These, in turn, increase our understanding.



However, I believe the Holy Spirit usually accomplishes this integration through people acting as “fence posts.” This means taking the time to invest in people so they can see in our words, our deeds and our character how the three fit together.

In our ecclesiological tradition, we tend to act as if the transmission of biblical concepts were enough. We give information, then simply expect the person to apply it. Sometimes we are so focused on delivering a quality curriculum that we forget the priority of helping people make the connections. Without this key element, our training programs will be less effective than they could be.

Covenantal Training

I have called this kind of training that seeks to integrate our knowing, doing and being around Christ “covenantal training.” It is similar to what the Lord asks of parents in Deuteronomy 6. In the

context of loving Him above all (being), parents are to show their children how His words (knowing) apply to everything they do (doing). Training is not a neutral, scientific activity to which Christians can simply add spirituality. Our training of church planters and pastors is not complete or effective unless what they know is increasingly consistent with what they do and with who they are. This is a spiritual activity.

My use of the phrase “integrated around” refers to the Biblical notion that people are always looking for a meaningful life. We can’t help but look for meaning because we are made in God’s image. In a fallen world, the way people look for meaning is through idols. That is, they privilege some aspect of creation and try to integrate everything else around it. The only alternative is to integrate all of life around Christ.

What’s So Wrong with Traditional Training?

I’m not suggesting it’s always wrong to draw away from ministry into an academic setting to focus for a while on academics. This traditional method can be especially useful for people who already have lots of ministry experience and are trying to answer some questions. Furthermore, the Lord graciously uses all kinds of less than perfect methods—thankfully!

However, as a steady diet, I believe the traditional training program has some important drawbacks. In the first place, it is unlikely that graduates will actually know how to pastor or plant churches. Secondly, it is likely that these graduates, not knowing what to do, will fall back on the method they learned in their traditional training program: the transmission of concepts. This often creates an organizational culture in the church that to visitors seems to say: the more you know, the more spiritual you are. It tends to promote dependence on our good doctrine more than a dependence on Christ, which is idolatry.

Balance vs. Covenant

The model I am proposing is not a balance among *knowing*, *doing* and *being*. We are so used to various types of balance models in our culture, that many people will probably find it easy to interpret what I am saying through the balance model lens. However, the balance

model ends up being the mean between the extremes—which often means a mediocre program. On this view, a high-quality academic program will inevitably be watered down if you try to include practical training or spiritual growth. To include two or three of the elements that I am proposing would mean not doing justice to any of them.

Even if you made the program three times as long so as to include practice and growth without lowering academic standards, just trying to balance the three leaves you open to interpreting them primarily through the lens of your culture and its idols. Biblical concepts that are not applied and internalized by the power of the Spirit are likely to be co-opted into the predominate cultural perspective. For example, theology might become a source of pride and division, while practice might be controlled by pragmatism and be used to become famous by planting large churches.

The covenantal perspective on training is quite different. On this view, high quality academics abstracted from real life tends to end up in distortion. People may become very sharp in their ability to communicate the concepts they have learned. But do they really understand what they are saying? Do they understand enough to be able to make effective use of these concepts? Has their study transformed them in a way that enables them to have kingdom impact? Are they understanding the concepts through the lens of an unexamined cultural influence? Have the concepts made them more like Christ?

The solution is not lowering the academic standards by making room for a practical track. The solution is integrating *knowing*, *doing* and *being* around Christ with the result that they *enrich* each other. The key here is what I have said above: true knowledge requires love and obedience. Love and obedience within a cultural context open your mind to see things that you couldn't otherwise see. Love and obedience not only accompany understanding, they enrich it. This is why covenantal training requires more than adding a practical track and a spiritual growth track to an academic track.

Implications for Cross-cultural Missions

The negative effects of such training is especially visible in cultures—like those of Latin America—that place a high value on good relationships. When we design training programs in Latin America that over-depend on the transmission of concepts, we tend to attract counter-cultural Latin Americans. These are often people whose personality never did quite mesh with the expectations of Latin cultures. They, in turn, tend to establish churches that have a foreign ring to them, and are unlikely to be able to reach out to most people in the culture.

The kind of training that privileges “knowing” and even “doing” over “being” is one of the root causes of the challenges we face as missionaries in Latin America and other “being” oriented cultures. It’s one thing to lead out with knowing. That’s our gift in the Reformed tradition. But it’s another thing to so privilege knowing that we disregard the biblical spiral of growth. That kind of privileging is idolatry. We end up imposing our cultural idols on them. They either reject them, or they “convert” from their cultural idols to ours.

A Radical Proposal?

Is this a radical proposal? For most of our US and ecclesiastical culture, it probably is. We are heirs to Plato and to the Enlightenment, and both of these made an idol out of the important *knowledge* element of the model I have described. In some ways our training systems are formed on the foundation of that idolatry. Thankfully the Lord is merciful and still uses our less than biblical training methods to form godly men and women. Many times this is due to the fact that godly professors go beyond what the system calls for and actually take time to invest—beyond the transmission of concepts—in those being prepared for ministry.

The modernist emphasis on *knowing* and *doing* is no better or worse than the postmodern emphasis on *being*. Leading out with one of the other is not a problem. Idolatry that interrupts the covenantal spiral of growth is a problem. So the solution is not to replace the idolatry of knowing and doing with the idolatry of being. Rather, the covenantal spiral of growth is the answer. Where you

begin on that spiral is determined by contextual needs and leadership gifts.

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