

**World View: To Transmit or
Transform?**
or
**Helping Students See Through
Stained Glass**

Dr. Bruce P. Powers
Professor of Christian Education
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, North Carolina

What are the dominant forces in the lives of students? Is it the external influences such as parents, peers, community, church, school, clubs, and the various forms of entertainment?

Then, again, what about the internal pressures that come from one's hopes and dreams about life? one's goals for achievement? the concepts of right and wrong? the need to be appreciated and valued as one is? the response to crises, and to successes and failures? and how one chooses and imitates heroes and mentors?

As new students come to the campus for higher education, what has molded their perception of themselves and of the world? And how will they adjust to the multitude of new influences that you know will challenge the boundaries of their previous experience? Given the dynamics of our time, I have come to view our response to these questions as the number one issue in Christian higher education.

In seeking answers and trying to develop an overall strategy, I have become convinced that we are not dealing with good or bad, or even right or wrong in a student's background. Rather we are confronted with a student's perception of reality or world view. The issue is: what happens in the interaction between one's adolescent world view and the enlarged view of reality encountered in higher education? My approach to this issue begins with an analogy: looking through stained glass.

THE STAINED GLASS IMAGE

What do you see when you look through stained glass? Pretty color? As long as you do not look for detail and can simply enjoy the gentle reflections of color, a stained glass image can be an enjoyable experience. And so it is for some religious professionals and for some students. They master the image of gentle reflections, avoiding detail and enjoying the good feelings of soothing colors.

What does stained glass have to do with one's world view? It creates problems with recognition: seeing clearly who is involved, what issues are at stake, the decisions that must be made, how to go about presenting the challenges of the gospel, and the potential costs and benefits of seeking to influence people.

Stained-glass vision can prevent students from seeing themselves and the world clearly. New experiences are judged by categories and values acquired through previous experience. If students neatly insert new knowledge and experience into previous categories, they gain a sense of achievement and feel in control of their lives. If something does not fit, there is a dissonance and they either have to reject the new or find some way to relate to it. In either case,

lots of stained glass makes it easier for students to put dissimilar items into existing boxes or to claim clarity in the midst of ambiguity.

As students move in ever larger circles of experience, they must continually process new information and re-process previous perceptions. If there is a high level of stained-glass vision, students can avoid the tension this usually produces. Information and perceptions can be eased into existing categories so as to maintain equilibrium. Different views of reality -- as perceived by others -- can be ignored or handled easily by placing them in a *not-acceptable* category.

Stained-glass vision can also prevent students from seeing us clearly. We often are viewed as religious professionals, the experts who must look, be, and act in a certain way. For some, we can do no wrong. For others, everything is fine as long as the colors they see are warm and pleasing; but if we are not exactly the right shade or if we clash with the decorating scheme they think is proper, they reject us and find another expert who can help them enjoy religion.

DISSONANCE AND ONE'S WORLD VIEW

A student comes to college from a unique setting in which there are acceptable patterns for thinking, acting, and believing. These patterns have provided cohesion in the student's environment, served as standards for right and wrong, and offered to each person who accepted them an identity, or sense of belonging. This background provided indoctrination into the values, beliefs, and ethics/rules of the student's formative community.

Persons who have experienced indoctrination in the best sense will know what is valued in the beliefs and practices of their community and church, will have responded to the encouragement to profess the beliefs

and participate in the practices of a local congregation, and will have formed a good base for beginning a *personal* journey into Christian discipleship.

Dissonance, and any resulting change in one's world view, usually comes in rather small doses as long as a person remains under the primary influence of a particular family/community environment. So the greatest challenge to one's existing world view normally comes when leaving home for the first time.

Whereas previous learning has been directed primarily by parents, church leaders, school teachers, and other authority figures, future growth will depend largely on one's own capacity for making personal choices and developing skills for interpreting and responding to the world. When students come to the campus, many of them have the first real opportunity to test, evaluate, and personalize their inherited world view.

It is precisely at this juncture that campus ministers can fulfill one of their major functions: assisting students in dealing with dissonance so as to facilitate spiritual and intellectual growth.

THE PROCESS OF GROWTH

The majority of students, those who enter directly after high school, usually face two primary phases in their development: *reality testing* and *making choices*.

The process of *reality testing* starts whenever persons are exposed to the larger world of places, ideas and experiences. But dissonance, and subsequent testing, increases greatly in college as students are faced with the challenge of using the knowledge, attitudes, and skills acquired earlier. If they are successful in relating previous experience to current experience, there is reinforcement that contributes to

making the new learning a personal, self-chosen principle; thus dissonance is lessened.

If previous experience and current experience do not mesh, dissonance increases and students must try to make dissimilar answers fit by rationalizing, or by trying to relearn in light of new information.

What usually happens is that as a student is exposed to the broader dimensions of work, society, education, different cultures, and historical perspectives, there is a gradual disillusionment as the person becomes aware that parts of his or her past are inconsistent with present experience. In this phase, the student finds out what makes sense and what does not. For things that do not make sense, one must have support and encouragement for finding new answers.

The next phase, *making choices*, comes into focus as students begin to realize that whatever choices are made must be personal, and that every choice has consequences. Whereas the previous phase exposed inconsistencies, now those inconsistencies must be resolved.

I recall from my student days two very distant urges--or pulls--during the transition to this phase. The first was to reach out and grab many of the new ideas and ways of doing things which promised easy, even radical, answers to my questions.

The other feeling came a bit later, probably in response to my easy acceptance of some answers which were quite different from those of my childhood. This urge was the opposite of the first--to grab the answers I had always known and to hold very tightly. I was struggling to meet a very basic human need, *security*. I was uncomfortable in the tension of not knowing exactly what, why, when and how about my faith, my church life, my vocation, my family, and my future.

My growth point came when I realized how both these pulls were working on me, that they existed side by side, and that they were a natural part of the maturing process. The question I faced was: Do I succumb to *either* pull? Each was an answer, an easy answer. But I realized that both represented viewpoints held and decisions made by others. They were not mine. I decided I would have to endure the tension--the pulls from these two directions--and begin to make *my* choices.

This decision led to the first testing point. When I made choices, I would have to take the consequences. I could no longer blame others; my church, parents, teachers, and ministers no longer had the responsibility.

For many people, this phase is another type of conversion. Whereas one's initial profession of faith is an act of accepting that to which others have testified, this phase focuses on reaffirmation as one consciously chooses from a variety of alternatives, many often quite attractive. The earlier decision was more *when* to affirm publicly one's identity as a Christian and as a participant in the community. This experience is more drawn out, and focuses on choosing *what, how, and why* a person believes and lives.

The process of developing, testing, and clarifying personal choices is a significant time of maturing for the Christian student. It is during this phase that personal commitment is refined and a person establishes the critical essence that comprises faith. For some, the decisions are momentous and the consequences radical--a type of "Here I stand; I'm proud of it!" For others, the decisions may result in reaffirming those beliefs and practices that have been passed on from others.

Either direction can be a growth step, as long as the person examines, tests, and freely chooses what, how, and why he or she will commit to God.

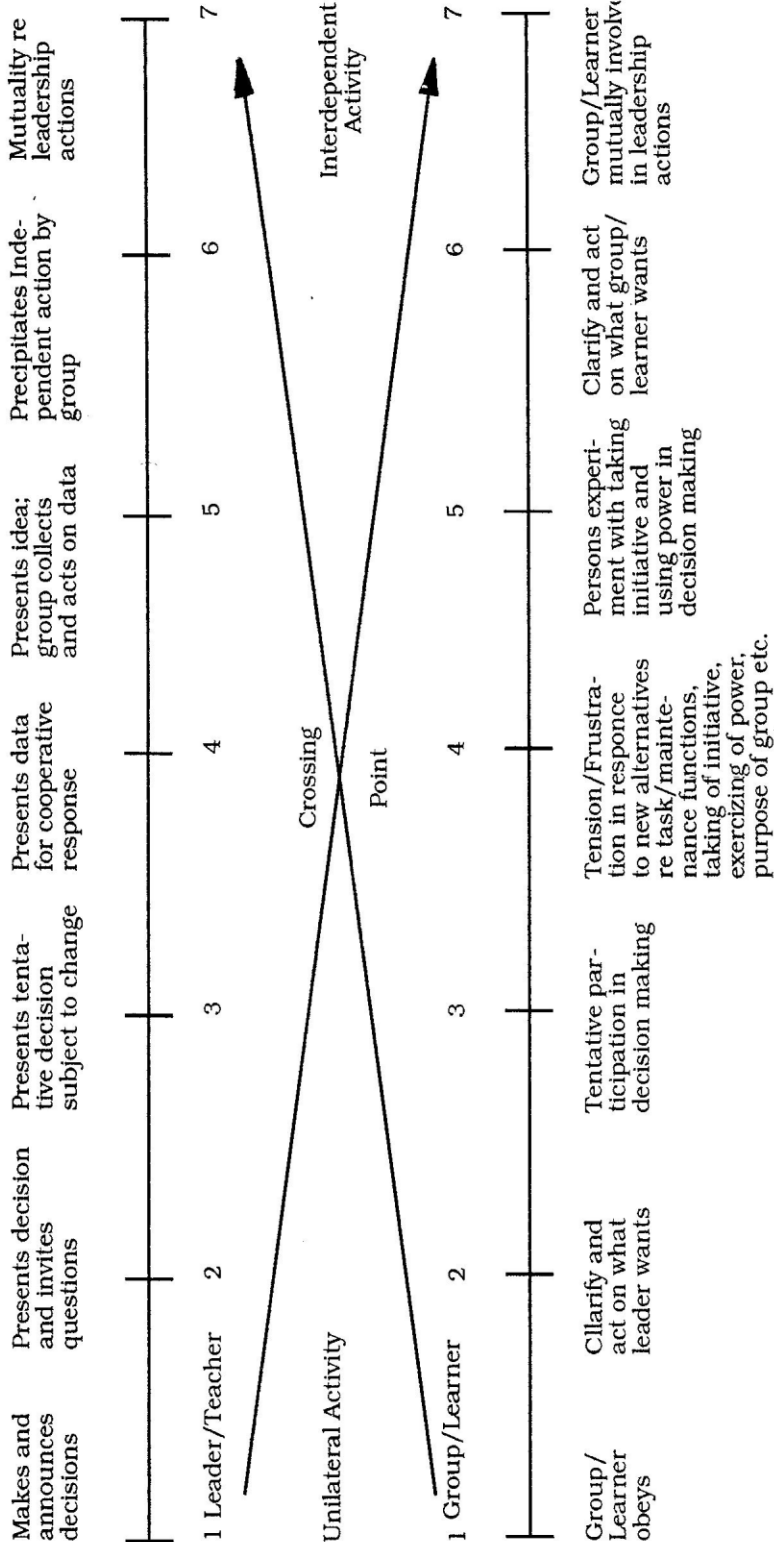
THE ROLE OF CAMPUS MINISTERS IN DEVELOPING A WORLD VIEW

We, too, can have stained-glass vision. Images can be kept soft, fuzzy, pretty, and safe. The result for students can be a religious experience that reinforces and nourishes one's inherited view of the world. In something like a spiritual wading pool, students can come to believe they have experienced the depth of knowing and relating to God and the world. However, there is little basis for critical assessment and development of personal competence, given the emphasis on feeling good and secure.

The other option is to have clarity about our role as campus ministers. That role, it seems to me, is more process-oriented than content-oriented. We need to have and speak/teach from personal convictions; but ultimately we must remove ourselves from the authority position and provide appropriate means whereby students can become engaged in the process of *reality testing* and *making choices*.

The process through which students move to an enlarged world view requires caring leaders who understand that the stimulus for learning is God-given. But, also, there must be a servant conviction among leaders/teachers concerning their role as intermediaries in the educational process.

As shown in Figure 1, leaders must gradually adjust their control so as to create an appropriate level of dissonance. As students participate in the process, they will come to a *crossing point*--the threshold for personalizing their experience. It is at this time that the opposing pulls are strongest, and there is risk of



THE PROCESS FROM DEPENDENCY TO INTERDEPENDENCY

Figure 1

retreating or of grabbing for an easy answer. In the presence of a supportive environment that says "Searching is okay!" and "You can do it!" students gradually move to assume responsibility for their own decisions. In the process, they gain knowledge, attitudes, and skills that further their growth in areas important for young adult development, such as those cited by Arthur Chickering in his widely-read book on college students, Education and Identity.

CHOOSING A STRATEGY

I want to summarize in an unusual way, by proposing four strategies one might consider in response to this issue of The Campus Minister. What is your choice?

1. EDUCATE--Provide need-level learning opportunities to assist students in evaluating and enlarging their world view. In this approach there are no boundaries on one's response to his or her learning experiences. Rather, the desire is to free persons to integrate human experience and personal competence so that each individual may act with freedom and responsibility in all dimensions of life.

2. NEGOTIATE--Seek agreement on and provide that which is acceptable. As a proponent of higher education, you know that a student must examine inherited religious views concerning God, Jesus, Creation, Church, Sin, Salvation, etc., in light of the views and experiences of others. The desired result is that students will develop personal interpretations and commitments consistent with those agreed upon or within the accepted limits for your situation.

3. PLACATE--Focus on fellowship, activities, church-related Christian service, and personal evangelism. Avoid discussions of theological, philosophical, and ethical issues. Give major attention

to deductive Bible study and to religious support groups. Encourage students to maintain a spiritual outlook on life.

4. VACATE--If you determine that your values and commitments will be compromised and that the situation will not change, seek another situation that comes closer to matching your world view.

ENDNOTES

1. I realize that many persons also experience ambiguous impressions during their formative years, thus have no consistent patterns. Yet, this is precisely the point: what they have experienced has served as indoctrination and gives them a world view that influences all present experiences. See my article, "Perspectives on Faith Development," A Church Ministering to Adults, Jerry S. Stubblefield, ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986) p. 129f.

2. If there are not appropriate means for searching, or a student is unable to deal with ambiguity, he or she may regress into previous indoctrination or become dependent on a strong leader who gives answers to perceived problems. Thus, dissonance is lessened and the student learns to cope by being submissive. For help with this type of situation, see Unholy Devotion, by Harold Russell.

3. Chickering identifies seven developmental vectors important for young adults: Achieving Competence, Managing Emotions, Become Autonomous, Establishing Identity, Freeing Interpersonal Relationships, Clarifying Purposes, and Developing Integrity. For interpretation of these, see Arthur W. Chickering, Education and Identity (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1969).

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