



## Transcriptions

### Botanical Metaphors of Development

Ted Ward

**Annotation:** *Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX, 1982. Series: Metaphors of Spiritual Reality.* In this second of four lectures on *Metaphors of Spiritual Reality*, Ted Ward defines the spiritual reality of a person as a composite of the whole person revealed in natural attributes. In this regard he notes that Scripture typically uses botanical metaphors for development. The published version of this address can be found in the Document Archives.



The second in this series on metaphors of spiritual reality is concerned with Botanical Metaphors of Development; a topic I suspect that you never expected to hear in this chapel. But I think it makes a good sermon perhaps by a different title. You judge that as we go along.

Every teacher and pastor, every parent, every true friend, indeed, everyone who cares about any other person is involved in the processes of development. Not many years ago, the study of human development was largely left to teachers, psychologists, and pediatricians. In recent years, the popular awareness of the “stages of life” has made the literature of development everybody’s business. Materials like Gail Sheehy’s *Passages*, Erik Erickson’s far more scholarly *Childhood and Society* being examples. As I see it, this increased interest in the stages of life and human development processes is very much a healthy thing. We all need to be knowledgeable about what development is and how it works not only because we are, each one, in some stage and process of development as individuals; but, because we are people who directly participate in the development of others, we

dare not be ignorant. No contributions from social science are more potentially valuable to the Christian. After we have clarified purposes, as we attempted yesterday, but before we can get on with evaluating alternative views of education, as we will attempt tomorrow, we must stop to examine development.

All aspects of human development are interrelated. The fact that many religious educators and pastors claim to be concerned mostly, or exclusively, with spiritual development does not change things. Spiritual development does not occur in a vacuum. To argue that one's ministry is exclusively a spiritual matter may reflect profound truth or dismal misunderstanding. I am willing to delay judgment when I hear a pastor or a religious educator talk this way, though I usually fear for the worst. In the sense that all human matters are ultimately spiritual matters, I embrace the centrality of spiritual concern. But when one argues that spiritual matters are separable from other aspects of life I must dissent. The spiritual reality of a person involves a composite of the whole person revealed in natural attributes. In the new birth, we are made spiritual beings invested in corporal substance. In general, spiritual development has a natural interaction with all that it means to be human and, at the same time, spiritual development is dependent on conformity to the mind of Christ. Spiritual development is not equivalent to intellectual development, yet the appropriation of wisdom, that is, making God-informed decisions about what to do with one's hands, is basic. Proverbs 9 and elsewhere in Proverbs is where we gain insight on this.

The dichotomizing mind prefers to split the human being into separate parts, sometimes called "sectors" or "aspects." Clearly, there's a difference between physical strength and emotional strength. And no one would argue, at least in Western tradition, that building the mind can hasten or stimulate a person's physical development. Since such distinctions can be made among the aspects of development, it becomes an easy mental habit to assume that each of these aspects of the person are somehow rather separated and distinct and, thus, that development in one aspect has little, if any, bearing on any other aspect. This habit carries over into spiritual development and it, too, becomes a thing apart. Harvie Conn fears compartmentalization, a spirituality that is less than a life-system and therefore less God-centered.

Today the linkage between mind and body is becoming better understood. A knowledgeable person today does not scoff at the propositions of interrelationship. Mental health and physical health are related; stress or depression can be the causative mechanism in organic disease. Other findings show that moral development is dependent in part on mental development; that social development goes hand in hand with emotional development, and so forth. Some of the professions that once held to particularistic views of development and health are now re-writing their books and their creeds to reflect the new evidences of interrelatedness of human aspects.

The Word of God alludes to contrasts, comparisons, and combinations of various of the elements of personhood. For example, soul and body in Hebrews 4; spirit and body, James 2; spirit, soul, and body, 1 Thessalonians. These references hardly add up to a consistent argument for tripartite being. But they do point to one truth: that the human person is a complex creature of physically-based attributes, including various mental and social processes, and of spiritual essence. The physical without the spirit is dead. This is one way to understand James 2. In given contexts, of course, the emphasis on one or another functions or processes calls for such words as "mind"—intellectual competencies, "soul"—the core of natural consciousness, especially related to human

needs, and “heart”—the center of the total being: intellect, emotions, will. These are clearly metaphors, and potentially misleading ones, at that; they substantially overlap one another.

Scientific reason has challenged our understanding of each of these metaphors, particularly on the grounds that the brain and the central nervous system are rudimentarily involved in the intellectual, emotional, and systemic control functions of human life. Now after a period of time exalting the brain, science is showing us that even the brain cannot be described apart from its interdependency on the rest of the physical organism. It all adds up to the basic argument: when you take it apart, it isn't real.

Christians should be especially wary of schemes that assign the spiritual essence of personhood to a status on par with other aspects. I wish I had a way verbally of underlining that without shouting: Christians should be especially wary of schemes that assign the spiritual essence of personhood to a status on par with other aspects. Such thinking decenters the spiritual essence and treats it ultimately as a sort of esoteric trimming on a physical essence. Similarly hazardous, though not a popular tendency in the Western world is the detaching of spiritual essence, seeing it as disembodied, and virtually ignoring its physical interdependencies. This latter danger is a characteristic of Hindu-based religions.

Indeed, the most satisfactory conclusion is that the division of human personhood into aspects is just one more example of dichotomizing and classifying that sort of approach to life that makes things easier to think about while at the same time distorting them. As I see it, these distortions confuse the way people think about development.

There are three resultant problems in the mental programs, metaphors, used to think and talk about development. The first problem is more a matter of visualization than of definition, namely, what is development? Is development like a sand castle: a matter of adding and shaping, dribbling more sand down through one's fingers, packing wads in, carving the whole thing so it looks like something that it really isn't? Or is it a matter of time and nourishment and a drive toward fulfillment from within, as with a tree? The tree is what it is; you can't change its shape and destiny. At least you can't change it very much from the outside. You may alter the environment, but the tree develops according to its own genetic structure as best it can, given the environmental conditions.

The second problem in our concept of development is maturity, the destiny and fulfillment of development. Toward what end is development moving? When is it over? Is development like filling a bucket? When it's full, it's full. Or is it more like the successive steps in a staircase? Spiritually, consider the lilies of the field. They emerge, they leaf out, they bud, they bloom, they wither. Also consider Paul's passage from childhood referred to in 1 Corinthians 13.

Third, the idea of development requires some sort of attention to the matter of process. What sorts of things bring about development? Is the pattern within, as in a lily, or is the force and direction brought about from an outside source, as in a flying arrow?

As a developmentalist—one who takes developmental processes as the starting place for scientific understanding of the person—I think with the metaphor of tree rather than the metaphor sand castle. I conceptualize a staircase of orderly steps and patterns created from within, as in the lily. It is tempting to seek out proof texts as if this were inherently a biblical argument; it is not.

Though I see no need to build a case on the Psalmist's righteous man in Psalm 1, or the Old and New Testament's use of the lily as a metaphor of social and personal maturation, for example, Hosea 14; Matthew 6. I do take notice that the Word of God predictably uses botanical metaphors for development. Perhaps this is because the major alternative would be metaphors from the animal kingdom, the zoological, and such images are prone to the concept animal training.

Every student of the gospel is impressed that our Lord's public ministry was largely among rural folk. His appeal as a public speaker was enhanced by the frequent use of metaphors and analogies based upon agrarian experience. He reiterated some of the Old Testament imagery of shepherd and sheep, identifying himself as the Good Shepherd. But analysis of the parables and the illustrative metaphors reveals a striking preference for the botanical rather than zoological illustrations, especially when dealing with matters of spiritual development and the growth of his kingdom.

Emphasis on the growth of things botanical brings to mind the organic functions within. The external conditions in which a plant grows, important as they are, do not determine its nature, nor do they prescribe what it will become. Assuming that conditions are satisfactory to sustain life at all, the acorn will become an oak tree. The bulb will fulfill its promise as a tulip or lily. Its nature is in its genetic structure. Its development is patterned by its nature and the whole traces to its creational roots.

These observations, if made in the zoological realm, would similarly be true. But an animal ranges more widely, initiates experiences more on its own and, thus, becomes more unique because of the interaction with its surroundings. In reference to the animal kingdom, development brings to mind the things that one creature does to, or for, or with another. Nurture is interactive and deliberate. One animal has a shaping effect on the other. Among pets, for example, a dominant cat in the household may assert itself in the development of a puppy to such an extent that the dog grows up with a very unnatural aloofness from cats. Among human beings, the shaping effect is an important key to understanding what each has become. Even siblings, genetically similar, quite often become diverse.

Philosophical determinism and its social science manifestation, behaviorism, argue that the circumstances of life shape and control what a person becomes. The choices and decisions a person makes are never truly free since they are made within the context that life deals out to that person. Seen from the presuppositions of biblical Christianity, the major hazard in this point of view is its reduction or removal of the responsibility that each person has before God. 'I couldn't help it', has become a supposedly reasonable defense for unrighteous persons before God, and in recent years also in the criminal courts of several states notably in the capital cases in Florida and California widely reported in the media.

Much that is done in institutional education today reflects a behavioristic philosophy of this sort. Teachers set learning goals for students without involving them in the process. Learning outcomes are assessed in terms of behavior change, for example, listing the themes of each chapter of the Pauline epistles. Educational planning is seen as the technical concern for establishing the conditions that will cause the learnings that are intended. Very mechanistic.

A major alternative to behaviorism in social science and education is the developmental perspective. Developmentalists focus on what is within the person—what the patterns of unfolding and fulfilling tell us about the nature of humankind. Of course, softheaded developmentalism simply romanticizes these processes and characteristics, often giving little thought to the responsibilities that they suggest: responsibilities of family, community, and of the individual. The resultant passive and romantic naturalism falls ignorantly back into determinism and we're locked up again.

A more tough-minded developmentalism has emphasized this responsibility: all human beings share the task of creating environments which support and encourage the most liberating human development. The parent, the educator, the minister, indeed, all those whose roles includes specific responsibilities for others are to be concerned about conditions that enhance development; not because those conditions create or produce development, but because the best fulfillments of the developmental processes can and should be purposefully encouraged.

The crucial point of contrast between developmentalism and behaviorism within education is in the role of the learner whether the learner is the subject or the object of the learning process. The behaviorist's education acts *on* the learner as object. The developmentalist's education acts *from* the learner as subject. The behaviorist plans *for* the learner; the developmentalist plans *with* the learner toward the learner's sense of responsibility for setting his or her own direction and pace.

The shepherd/sheep metaphor can be misused to justify a behavioristic approach to teaching and learning. But in Scripture, this metaphor is used in reference to God's providence. It is not applied to development, either of the person or of God's power as a whole.

Church growth, on the other hand, is a development-related metaphor of our time. So is a related favorite missionary term church planting. The imagery of organic life and the implication that expansion is appropriate are usually intended by those who use these terms. The use of such metaphors provides a sort of communication code.

A metaphor connotes a wide variety of messages, usually more suggested than specified. Whatever one associates with growing and growth processes is heard whenever one hears 'church growth.' The mind's eye turns toward life's experiences: maturing trees, grass that needs cutting, tumors that need removing, children growing up, whatever; all of this church growth.

The danger in the metaphor church growth lies in taking it behavioristically rather than botanically. Development, whether of the person or of the church, can be seen as something to bring about by efforts, additives, and shaping. Or it can be seen as something to be respected, nourished, and encouraged. There is a difference. A developmentalist accepts the latter and prefers to think in terms of working *with* and working *within*, not doing *to* and doing *for* in order to *get*. The temptation to set up systems and machinery with clever methods so easily overshadows valid purposes.

George Peters in his most recent book<sup>1</sup> warns that the Holy Spirit must be seen as internal and organic within the church. Quote: "While methods are important, they are only tools. The Holy

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<sup>1</sup> George W. Peters. *A Theology of Church Growth*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981). This was the "most recent book" at the time of Ward's address.

Spirit is in the message. He anoints the messengers; he operates in and through the church. Therefore, church growth must continue to be subjected to Scriptural scrutiny.”

The problem here is that we live in a technological society and, thus, we tend to use mechanical and manipulative metaphors. This is why so much church growth philosophy exaggerates the Scriptures and, I believe, often misusing Scripture. The imprecision of metaphors was a concern to Jesus’ disciples. Reflecting on their consternation, one can speculate about the arguments that they may have pioneered. Are the birds in the mustard tree good guys or bad guys? [Is] the permeating action of the eleven representative of the spread of the gospel or of evil infiltrators? Those disciples would have had various reasons for their mental association with those metaphors just as surely as we have ours, and they would not have been all the same.

Virtually all biblical teaching about development, whether of the person or of the kingdom, use botanical metaphors for illustration. This fact seems far more than coincidence or accident. Consider the sower and the soils in Matthew 13—the field with tares, the mustard seed, the vineyard, its pruning, its overseeing, the grain of wheat that must die in order to live, and so forth. Our Lord’s consistent use of the metaphors from the plant realm underlines creational truth: The order of things is within them. He apparently wanted to discourage the human tendency to take an animal trainer’s approach to parenting, pastoring, and teaching. We are, instead, to respect the processes that God has built into the person. As human beings in the created line of the first Adam, the patterns of natural development are within: physical, mental, emotional, social, and moral in one approach to the naming of the aspects of personhood; an approach that I usually use with some consistency—physical, mental, emotional, social, and moral. And as human beings in the redeemed line of Jesus Christ, the second Adam, the eternal spirit is present and developed according to the purposes and functions of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. Effective Christian educating begins with the humble recognition that the educator does not create these realities; they are God-given, within the person. What we do best as parents, educators, and pastors is to participate with our students and our children as co-learners, sharing in the development that God has ordained—our development and theirs.

Indeed, this leaves us plenty to do. There are experiences to be selected and recommended. We should be conversing and critiquing. There is a valuing process to be encouraged. There are awarenesses to be awakened. Beneath it all, there are listening skills and a spirit of humble concern to be developed in the educator or the parent or the pastor.

My intention in these lectures is to raise your consciousness of how you think about human development and education, not to teach a short course on hermeneutics. It is not the principles of biblical interpretation that are being challenged but, instead, I am attempting to warn you about what happens in the repositories of your mind as intellectual experiences are filed or misfiled—to use yet another expressive and inadequate metaphor.

We must avoid two extreme positions: on the one hand, the belief that the unfolding naturally from within is self-perfecting; and on the other hand, the belief that the natural processes are doomed to no development at all apart from spiritual regeneration. If self-perfection were the natural consequence of development, regeneration would make no sense; and, on the other hand, if no development occurred apart from regeneration, no human being would get beyond the cradle.

Clearly, the grace of God to the just and to the unjust is shown in those programs of development within, each of which move toward heightened realization of human capability. These operate in the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral areas. But human realization, maturation, is not the same thing as attaining righteousness. Develop though he does, man does not become just before God apart from the work of Christ.

The matter of spiritual development remains somewhat clouded. We are not born into the kingdom full-grown. We enter as babes in Christ. I continue to search the Scripture for clearer understanding of spiritual development. I find help in the experiences and the reflections of Job. I see the Proverbs as a sort of guidebook for spiritual development. I see in the epistles, especially in John, an encouragement toward spiritual praxis. Can all these pieces be put together somehow into a model of spiritual development? Christian education could benefit from such a foundational theory.

I have yet many things to learn about spiritual development and I propose to continue to search within a theological context. I expect to learn far less about this vital human development matter through empirical research. The major tools of scientific inquiry are, by their own terms, limited to the natural universe. The Holy Spirit of God extends his work into the natural universe, but it's hardly subject to its observable characteristics. Even so, the spiritual essence of the person made alive in Christ Jesus is not apt to be clearly seen or properly understood in physical terms. I would not propose descriptive or experimental study in the spiritual realm. So-called 'scientific theology' leaves me cold.

My thesis has two parts: first, that the spiritual essence of humankind is, like all other elements of the created universe, a developing rather than a static attribute. God's Holy Spirit is constant but, as breathed into Adam, the human's share of spiritual reality is intended to develop and to move toward spiritual maturity.

Second, spiritual development occurs as the natural aspects of development—that is, the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral—are enhanced, balanced, interrelated, and brought into obedience to God. Spiritual development is not the same thing as, nor the sum of, these natural aspects of development, but the processes are intensively interdependent.

Although the letter to the Hebrew Christians is profoundly concerned with spiritual development, its handling of the spiritual essence is more inferential than definitional. From Hebrews we can at least be sure that "spiritual" is not a thing apart from the physical aspects of personhood. Spiritual maturity particularly involves the intellectual grasp of what God has said, the using of empirical evidence, and the bringing to bear of moral judgments and actions which are obedient to God's principles and all of that is loaded into one little verse, for example, Hebrews 5:14.

How we conceptualize development—the metaphors we use to think about what it is, where it is headed, and how it works determines what we deem appropriate and inappropriate educational and pastoral activity. Educators, pastors, parents; we are all in the development business, and we carry out this business knowledgeably or ignorantly.

Readers of the Bible are well-acquainted with metaphors and their more complex cousins: allegories. Even those of us who hold for literal interpretation know full well the way to handle

metaphors and allegories. For example, we apply hermeneutical limitations to the Lord as shepherd and ourselves as sheep. We don't argue that God is the youngest boy of the family who must sleep across the doorway at night, nor that God's people should walk on all fours. We accept metaphors and are thankful for them.

God communicates through human language, and human language is perceived within the experiential world as each of us as hearers. But because we are finite and are perceiving in a fallen world, there are many limitations in our intellectual vehicles and processes. It is no wonder that we see through a glass, darkly. In our handling of the Scripture, the Holy Spirit helps our weakness, continuing a developmental ministry of redemption, interceding, interpreting, enlightening, and encouraging. All of this is for the glory of Christ. How pitiful when it becomes intellectual arrogance. What we know, we know by the Spirit; what we are, we are in the works of the Spirit. In this great substantive metaphor of Romans 8 we face the most sublime of awarenesses: that God is at work in us, working out the fulfillment of our development—redemption. To more fully appreciate Roman 8, we need the concept of development, itself. Development is a reality because of the two great actions of God in Creation and in Redemption. We are part of God's universe. It is ours to enjoy with him.

From 1 Corinthians 2, "Now we have received the Spirit that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words."

Rejoice in spiritual aliveness; educate toward spiritual development. God bless you. Amen.