



## Transcriptions

### The Ecology of Spiritual Development

Ted Ward

**Annotation:** *Talbot Theological Seminary, November 1980.* Ted Ward asserts that the spiritual core of human personhood exists within an ecology important to development. That ecology incorporates human sinfulness and the creative redemptive purpose of God. Ward warns against using the ‘body, soul, spirit’ and similar references as a rationale for ministering to only one aspect of the human person. The human being is an integrated creature—a totally spiritual being in essence. The human person lives within a larger ecology (society) and effective learning takes place in interactive social experiences. As he concludes he describes the several aspects of development that cohere in a view of the person as a whole, essentially spiritual being. Spiritual growth is a process and not a matter of arriving at a stage at which one arrives. The processes of development are within and it is the task of the educator, parent and so on to identify and assist with development.



The ecology of spiritual development is a deliberate focus on what obviously is a central mission of the church. Some might argue *the* mission of the church, a spiritual ministry, and I have no objection to that. But to put that in the context of human reality, the word ecology is perhaps over-popularized today in one of its more limited meanings. It, indeed, has to do with a consciousness, a sort of preoccupation, with problems of the environment. But, as a matter of fact, the notion of ecology is a much older notion in science and it relates not just to problems of dirty environment—as if in air, water, and other pollutions—but it relates to the interrelatedness of things in nature. It relates to the fact that you can’t touch any component of the creation without affecting other components. You cannot change the course of a stream without affecting the life of thousands

and thousands of species that are affected by that particular streambed. You cannot even pave over the desert—by the way, that's known as development in Southern California—without, in fact, affecting many more facets of the nature in which that particular desert exists and the components of that particular part of the creation.

This lecture is focused on the fact that the spiritual core of human personhood exists within an ecology. And if we take seriously the notion of a spiritual ministry, we must be conscious of the ecology within which that spirit resides. The spirit of man is a reflection of the Spirit of God and, of course, it's at that point that we begin to understand the depth of human personhood. I tried to set the scene for that with you in my first lecture on presuppositions. And just to recapitulate: we argue that the creational view of man puts heavy emphasis on the image of God because man is a created expression of God. God creating in his image.

We further understand that we see the whole of the creation texts in the book of Genesis that part of the creation is the nature of man created to interact in a world of choice and sin is a reality. In that choice, decision-making, ecology of the human being, sin is a component. The human creature is marred by sin. But the creation story is not complete with these pieces. The redemptive processes of God are also part of the creation and God is at work within that ecology, redeeming.

Further, we as individual organisms within that total ecology are enlisted within God's plan to become partners in those redemptive processes. The key question then that we ask of the book of Genesis is what did God do. The primary question is what did God do, not how did God do it. And the primary thrust is the focal magnificence of the sixth-day creature (humankind) that God focuses upon in his redemptive processes. But God, in faithfulness to the whole of creation, is engaged in redemptive processes with reference to the whole.

The image, the likeness, of God is seen most specifically in the spirit nature of person. It is a creative, a responsible, a sensitive spirit in the same ways that God demonstrates himself to be creative, responsible, and sensitive. Again, from the first lecture we can argue that God creates in his image as a kind of representation of his essence and also in terms of a reflection of his processes. So image in the mirror sense and image in the photograph sense; each has its validity. We see God in the processes of Creation revealing and God continues to reveal to this day. We see man in his created being as the great inquirer. It's sometimes said, as we observe the animal world, that there are no creatures so curious as the felines. Curiosity killed the cat. And all the rest of that is in our Lord. And, indeed, among the creatures (the chimps, the cats, and others) do demonstrate far more of that kind of curiosity that is inquiry, even as we find in the animal world some creatures exhibiting the rudiments that we would call language.

But these are but very poor small pieces compared with the grandeur of language and the grandeur of the inquiry capabilities of the human person. We should understand this and respect it and, in fact, participate in it with a sense of exaltation because it is part of what God has created that we can be and be part of. It is sad when Christians downgrade the importance of the development of human understanding. It is sad when Christians treat the spiritual development aspect of man as if somehow it were apart from the rest of that ecology. That's my thrust in this lecture: the Spirit of God and the Spirit of God reflected in man is creative. The Spirit of God and the Spirit of God reflected in man is expressive. The Spirit of God and the Spirit of God reflected in man is

communicative. The Spirit of God and the Spirit of God reflected in man is nurturant, is committed, is sharing. All of this comes to make something of the magnificence of the human person.

By faith we take the Bible to be the Word of God and that act of faith opens up to us a tremendous realm of potential for understanding. Those understandings we derive from the Word of God rightly understood, rightly divided. And, by the way, I cannot accept “rightly divided” to have to do with temporal issues of dispensation, though it may also include that. But that capacity to open it up and rightly sort it out, which we call theology, opens marvelously the human understanding and, in turn, enlightens that process of humanistic human inquiry that we think of as science.

Never forget that within the whole of the creation story, we have God instructing Adam to begin the scientific processes. Not only was Adam instructed to relate to the creation in such a way that it could be brought into an ordered relationship to humankind, but Adam specifically was asked to be the agent of naming the animals. And that is not a nursery story. God gave it to man to begin scientific taxonomy in the garden. Science begins with the naming of phenomena and that process of naming the phenomena and coming to grips with the categorizations of nature began in the garden and it is part of the creational reality. Christians have absolutely nothing to fear from science. Christians have everything to gain from science theologically enlightened. We take by faith that God is revealed as Creator and Sustainer. We take by faith that Jesus Christ is Redeemer and Lord. We take by faith that the Holy Spirit is the indwelling presence.

But we must take by science enlightened by the Word that the human is an integrated creature not separable into several persons. And whether that separating into several persons is done by Freud or is done by well-meaning Bible teachers who argue body, soul, and spirit, we must understand that the reality of human person is unity and integrated-ness; not schismatic separateness of facets. Never perceive a human being in parts.

The Bible, in fact, does talk about body, soul, and spirit. But if you're careful a Bible student, you're probably aware that on other occasions the Bible talks about spirit and body. And on still other occasions other authors seemingly unaware of what the others have said and certainly one making us wonder about the Holy Spirit behind it all talks about heart, soul, mind, and body. You've got a bifunctional, tripartite, quadrite, whatever you want to view of man because as the writers in Scripture analyze human personhood, they metaphorically examine different facets in contrast. And we are well-advised not to make a theological dogma out of how many parts makes up a human being. As a behavioral scientist—not a behaviorist notice—that as a person concerned with the study of human behavior in social settings, I am here to tell you that there is one part in the human being but many aspects. The human being is a whole entity.

Now, as a matter of fact, the medical profession has made a mistake for a long time. They assume that the human body has two parts: the inside and the outside. That's why they say open your mouth and say ah. They want to see the other part. But I submit that what I just said is almost as silly as what we do when we body, soul, and spirit divide off and say, but our ministry is to the spirit.

Ten years ago I broke a leg. It was my last skiing experience. I'm a slow learner but once I get there, I really understand the lesson. Broke it rather badly, as a matter of fact, and was laid up for

quite a long stretch. And for me that's not exactly typical. I'm kind of on the go most of the time and it was a very hard period for me. I couldn't walk for about seven months and it was a question whether I ever would again. Thanks to the marvels of medical technology and science, I now am walking around with both legs the same length, although one of them is made of a little different stuff.

One of the things that I came to realize during that period is—I had known intellectually before but I'd never really experienced it—is that you can't really disorient the physical person without creating tremendous problems in the mental, emotional, and social processes. I really discovered that business of being laid up with that badly mangled leg, though I was sober, conscious, and able to take nourishment and quite convinced that the office needed me and I set up my dictating equipment and I got to it. In about the third week my secretary would truck back to me day after day the products of my dictating and other things and it was utter rubbish. It was almost useless. It reflected almost no insight. It reflected usually in the correspondence no real understanding of the letter's reading that I had made the day before. I would read the same letter the next day and see if my response really read to it and it didn't. I was disoriented in ways that I couldn't even understand. One part, notice, one part of me was affected. No. *I* was affected. I am an ecology. My spirit is within an ecology.

If we are serious about pastoring, if we're serious about educating, if we're serious about parenting, we must comprehend that we are dealing with whole people. It's absolutely absurd to assume that a child will leave his emotional personhood at the door as he enters his Sunday school class. He brings it right in with him and it probably interacts substantially with his intellectual personhood. In other words, goofing off is part of the act. People cannot be distributed in several places at the same time. Through science we understand, then, that the unity of human personhood however it is seen in metaphors—body, soul, and spirit, mind, whatever—exists within an even larger ecology known as human society. And human society itself is an instrument of God's continuing creative involvement with humankind.

Do you realize that learning is a social process, not a private process? And one of the things that people often do in learning—because schools tend to make us competitive, tend to make us anxious that other people will do as well as we do—it tends to make us isolate ourselves as learners and make learning a very private experience. Effective learning proceeds much more readily out of interactive social experiences with other people.

Our focus today is on spiritual processes. And again may I reiterate that I have no quarrel with the proposition that the prime responsibility of the church and the prime responsibility of the ministries of God through his people is essentially a spiritual ministry. But what I'm going to suggest to you in this hour is that that is only half of a very much more exciting story. Let me begin by sharing with you some of the classical aspects of human personhood as we think in terms of development or, in the vernacular, growing up. People grow up in many ways. They grow up physically. They grow up mentally. They grow up emotionally. They grow up socially, morally. We certainly know about the categories called childhood and adolescence and adulthood and we can usually tell the difference. Sometimes from the physical attribute you see adulthood, though from the behavioral you may see again adolescence or childhood. Or maybe you've never gone to an alumni party.

The mental process stages are somewhat less common to us, but they're no less distinct than the childhood, adolescence, adulthood categories. These are arbitrary categories laid on the ongoing continuous human processes. They are arbitrarily drawn. I've indicated at the left of the chart some of the key researchers.<sup>1</sup> Gesell and Ilg, for example, in the physical, who have documented the stages of growth; Piaget in the mental realm documenting the mental process group, and in the emotional processes and social processes such persons as Maslow, Erikson and others, and in moral development such persons as Kohlberg. These are aspects of growth that researchers have documented to the point where we can understand what's going on as people develop, as people grow up. These five constitute the major categories that we use scientifically to talk about the aspects of growing up or the development facets. These are sometimes called the aspects of human beings. The aspect of the physical. The aspect of the mental, etc.

Below the line that's going to be exposed right now is one more word, the spiritual. And my mind began to clear up as a developmental researcher when I began to draw that line. The spiritual is not an aspect. The spiritual is essence. And I submit that it makes a great deal of difference when you begin to draw that line and say but the spiritual is a different sort of thing. We can talk about aspects of personhood so long as we don't assume the spiritual to be one more aspect. What does it mean to be created in the image of God? To have a physical being? To have a mental being? To have an emotional being? To be a social creature? To have a moral? Yes, it's all of that. But what is the essence of *in the image of God*? Is it not that peculiar sharing of God's essence in spirit?

Now that makes a great deal of difference, then, when we recognize that our ministry, indeed, is a spiritual ministry. But the spiritual is not just one of a several multiple-choice lists set of aspects that we can be concerned about. Because once we accept that spiritual is a core function, a central reality that then is approached through many aspects, we understand that we must be concerned about—which ones of these in a process of becoming concerned about this? Look at these five. Which ones of those should we recognize we have to deal with if we're serious about the spiritual being? Number one? Yes? No. Number two? Yes? No. Number three? I don't want to bore you. There is an answer and the answer is all five. And anyone who engages in a spiritual ministry is obligated to the whole of human personhood.

Now where we get things into difficulty is when we get things out of balance or when we get over-emphases or where we get neglects. Let me share this with you. There is a biblical view of spiritual development that I could have venerated given another hour out of Scripture and theological proposition that begins with statement number one: that spiritual growth is a process, not a matter of arriving at a state. Even those who are big on such states of being, a second blessing, and sanctification, and so forth, will concede that spiritual growth is an ongoing process of life; not simply a state that you arrived at.

Secondly, within the processes that are involved in spiritual growth are factors which aid and factors which hinder. And as the person in education, or ministry, or parenting, takes seriously the discovery of those processes and factors in a person, or the particular social setting, particular parish, particular group, that person becomes able to participate constructively in that development process.

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<sup>1</sup> Two charts exist in the Ward Archives that relate to his comments. See "Basic Ways We are Alike" (Chart) 1976 and "Ecology of Spiritual Development" (Chart) 1990 in the Document Archives under the Theme: Human Development.

Remember we said that as a creational developmental presupposition, we assume that the processes of development are within and it is the task then of the educator, the task of a pastor, the task of a parent, to discover what processes are at work and get in tune with them to enhance them so that the spiritual development functions can proceed. Every Christian is invited by the Word of God to lay hold of these factors and to acknowledge responsibility to become an active partner in the process of spiritual development.

Now let me give you a few more propositions from an essentially theological ground. First, spiritual development begins with regeneration. The biblical imagery of being dead, without Christ, is much better understood if you understand the spirit to be center core essence, not an aspect. Because, as a matter of fact, if I was not physically dead, without Christ, but the Bible says that the person is dead. It doesn't even say is spiritually dead. It says is dead, isn't that interesting? Which suggests that when the Bible is talking about life and death that the Bible is talking not about the physical or the moral or the emotional, but is talking about the spiritual because that's the essence of personhood. See how valuable that line becomes? Then the Scriptures begin to focus themselves on one side or the other of that line. Now spiritual development is not a process that brings about regeneration but is the matter of a spirit dead because of the inheritance of sinful nature. And the processes that we describe sometimes overly simplistically as salvation experience—or more precisely in theological terms, regeneration—is the passage from death into life, hence, born again; hence, started from anew. What is it that is born as if again, born from anew? The essence of personhood, the spirit.

Secondly, spiritual development interacts with all other aspects of development. Now this language *all other aspects* is faulted in that it uses the word *other*. And I would call your attention to circle that word and put a question mark over it because it is the way we talk and it's perhaps the best way to communicate, but it does have a kind of a paradox in it. Are these *other* aspects, or are they the aspects of the personhood? Just be alert to that. I think it would be easier to say that spiritual development interacts with all aspects. But that gets a little bit complicated to say and so we stick the word *other* in there to help clear it up and then have to come back and remind that the main argument is that these are not *other* aspects or that spiritual is not *another* aspect.

Spiritual interacts within an ecology. The relating then to the person in the spiritual development sense moves through one or another of those aspects. One of the unfortunate things is that when the church is in an era—as it has been in several points of church history—in an era of exalting of intellectualism or is in a period of verbal Christianity—and I think I just described an era that we're in today—there is a tendency to primarily relate to the spiritual through, which aspect? The cognitive, the mental—in the mental in the cognitive sense, in the knowing sense. It is possible to relate to the spiritual through any of these aspects. And that is a very important thing to come to grips with because it helps you to understand that it is more than just the verbalizing about Christianity, the verbalizing about spiritual truth, the verbalizing about spiritual qualities that is important. For example, through social experience we come to experience contact with people who are living in or out of fellowship with Christ and there is something to be gained in our own nurturance of spiritual development from either of those experiences. As we fellowship with those who are out of Christ, our spirit is nurtured by virtue of its thanksgiving that there is something special that God has allowed us to participate in. As we fellowship with those who also are nurtured in the spirit, we fellowship as our spirit is fellowshiping socially and we share in common.

Just to take one of the things that is coming about today, and I'm fascinated to see it, is an increasing emphasis within God's people on the issue of what is moral and how do we deal in moral decision-making in the world around us. Now I again would not say that there are certain majorities of people in the country that call themselves particularly moral, [unclear phrase], but I am saying that there is in the last half-a-dozen years a greater awareness in God's people in North America that there are moral issues and that the Christian community ought to know where it stands. I'm all for that. I'm just not sure that it gives us any right to behave in un-Christ-like sorts of ways about shoving other people around until we get our way. But I'm delighted to see the recognition that in the moral judgment realm we also help in the nourishing of the spiritual dimension. So all these aspects relate in one way or another to the nurturance that we provide in spiritual development through ministries with God's people.

Spiritual development changes one's orientation toward self, toward flesh, and toward Satan. Spiritual development changes one's orientation toward self in the sense not of the debasing of self, but in the recognition of what a spiritual exalting of self is going on within the magnificent freedoms that Christ gives us to develop and become what we really are.

And as we mature in Christian experience, flesh becomes less a threatening part of ourselves so much as it becomes a matter of a continual dependence on God to keep us from falling back under our own base nature.

And as we grow in Christian experience, as we mature in spiritual development, this ecology in which we live becomes less threatening to us and we become more in tune with the Spirit providing in our spirit those protections that allow us to reach out to people.