



Metaphors of Spiritual Reality: *Botanical Metaphors of Development*¹

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Every teacher and pastor, every parent and true friend—indeed, everyone who cares about another person—is involved in the processes of development. Not many years ago, the study of human development was left largely 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.² That is a healthy change.

Christians need to be knowledgeable about what development is and how it works. This is true not only because each Christian, as a person, is in one way or another, in the development process but also because Christians are directly participating in the development of others.

What is the Place of Spiritual 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, as a pastor or educator, is exclusively a spiritual matter may reflect profound truth or dismal misunderstanding.

Certainly spiritual concerns are central in the sense that all human matters are ultimately spiritual matters. But this should not be taken to mean that spiritual matters are separable from others aspects of life. An individual’s spiritual reality involves a composite of the whole person revealed in his or her natural attributes. In the new birth, a person is made alive spiritually, and is thus a spiritual being invested in corporal substance. In general, spiritual development interacts with all that it means to be human and, at the same time, spiritual development depends on conformity to the mind of Christ. Spiritual development is not equivalent to intellectual development, yet the appropriation of wisdom (making God-informed decisions about life) is basic (Proverbs 9:1-6).

The dichotomizing mind prefers to split the human being into separate parts, sometimes called “sectors” or “aspects.” Clearly, there is a difference between physical strength and emotional strength. And no one would argue (in Western traditions, anyway) that building the mind hastens or stimulates a person’s physical development. Since such distinctions can be made among aspects of development, it becomes an easy mental habit to assume that each of the “aspects” of the person is separate and distinct. Thus, one assumes that development in one aspect has little, if any, bearing on another aspect. This habit carries over into spiritual development, and it, too, becomes a thing apart. Conn fears such a “compartmentalization, a spirituality that is less than a life-system and, therefore, less God-centered.”³ Today, the linkage between mind and body is becoming better understood. Knowledgeable people today do not scoff at the propositions of inter-relationships. Mental health and physical health are related; stress or depression can be the causative mechanism in organic disease. Other findings show that moral development depends, in part, on mental development; that social

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² An example of a popular treatment is Gail Sheehy. *Passages* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974). A more scholarly treatment is Erik H. Erikson. *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1950).

³ Harvie M. Conn. Can I Be Spiritual and at the Same Time Human? *The Other Side* (September-October 1973) p. 43

development goes hand in hand with emotional development, and so forth.⁴ 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 inter-relatedness of human aspects.

The Word of God refers to contrasts, comparisons, and combinations of various elements of personhood: soul and spirit: (Hebrews 4:12) spirit and body: (James 2:26) spirit, body, and soul: (I Thessalonians 5:23.) These references hardly form a consistent argument for a tripartite being. But they do point to the truth that each 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 (James 2:26). 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), “heart” (center of the total being: intellect, emotions, will). These are metaphors, and potentially misleading ones, at that; they substantially overlap one another.

Scientific reason has challenged the understanding of each of these metaphors, particularly because the brain and the central nervous system are involved in the intellectual, emotional and systemic control functions of human life. Now after a period of exalting the brain, science is showing that even the brain cannot be described apart from its interdependency on the rest of the physical organism.

Christians should be especially wary of schemes that assign the spiritual essence of personhood to a status on par with “other aspects.” Such thinking de-centers 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.

The most satisfactory conclusion is that the division of personhood into “aspects” is just one more example of a dichotomizing and classifying approach to life that makes things easier to think about while, at the same time, distorting reality. These distortions actually confuse the way people think about development.

How should Development be Understood?

Three problems exist in the mental “programs” (metaphors) that are used to think and talk about development. The first problem is more a matter of visualization than of definition: What is development? Is it like the sandcastle, which is shaped by dribbling down more sand, packing wads in, and carving the whole thing so that it looks like something it really is not? Or is development a matter of time and nourishment and a drive toward fulfillment within, as with a tree? The tree is what it is; its shape and destiny are not changed very much from the outside. One may alter the environment, but the tree develops according to its own genetic pattern as best it can, given the environmental conditions.

The second problem in 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 is full, it is full. Or is it more like the successive steps in a *staircase*? (Consider the lilies of the field: They emerge, leaf out, bud, bloom, and wither. Also consider Apostle Paul’s illustration of the passage from childhood to adulthood. [I Corinthians 13:11])

⁴ Lawrence Kohlberg. *The Philosophy of Moral Development*, Vol. 1. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981)

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 taken from an outside source, as in the *arrow*?

As a developmentalist—one who takes developmental processes as the starting place for scientific understanding of the person—this writer prefers the metaphor of the *tree*, rather than the sandcastle. Consistent with the tree metaphor, the *staircase* suggests orderly steps, and the *lily* suggests a pattern that has been created within. It is tempting to seek out proof texts as if this was inherently a biblical argument, but it is not. The psalmist speaks of the “righteous” as being like a tree (Psalm 1:3), and the Old and New Testaments use the lily as a metaphor of social and personal maturation. (For example, Hosea 14:5, Matthew 6:28). It is noteworthy that the Word of God predictably uses botanical metaphors to describe development. Perhaps this is because the major alternatives would be metaphors from the animal (zoological) kingdom, which are prone to convey images of “animal training.”

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

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 becomes more unique because of interaction with its surroundings. In reference to the animal kingdom, development brings to mind the things that one creature does to, 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 may assert itself in the development of a puppy to such an extent that the dog grows up with an “unnatural” aloofness from cats. Among human beings, the shaping effect is an important key to understanding what each has become. Even siblings, genetically similar, often become quite diverse.

How do Behaviorism and Developmentalism Compare?

Philosophical determinism and its social science manifestation, behaviorism, argue that life’s circumstances 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 criminal courts of several states (notably in capital cases in Florida and California, widely reported in the media.)

Much that is done in institutional education today reflects a behavioristic philosophy. 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 a technical concern for establishing the *conditions* that will *cause* the learnings that are *intended*.

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 about the nature of humankind. Soft-headed developmentalism simply romanticizes these processes and characteristics, often giving little thought to the responsibilities of the family, the community, and the individual. The resultant passive and romantic naturalism falls ignorantly back into determinism.

More tough-minded developmentalism emphasizes responsibilities: 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 whose roles include specific responsibilities for others are to be concerned about conditions that enhance development. This concern is 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 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; the developmentalist's education acts *from* the learner. 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.

How does Church Growth Relate to Developmentalism?

"Church growth" is a development-related metaphor. So is the 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 array of messages, usually more suggested than specified. Whatever one associates with growing and growth processes is what is heard in "church growth." The mind's eye turns to life's experiences—maturing trees, grass that needs cutting, tumors that need excising, children growing up. Not all its meanings are positive.

The danger in the "church growth" metaphor 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 *within*, not doing *to* and *for* in order to *get*. The temptation to set up systems and machinery with clever methods so easily overshadows valid purposes.

Peters warns that the Holy Spirit must be seen as internal and organic, working within the church: "While methods are important, they are only tools The Holy Spirit is in the message; He anoints the messengers, and He operates in and through the Church. Therefore, church growth . . . must continue to be subjected to Scriptural scrutiny."⁵

The problem here is that in a technological society, educators tend to use mechanical and manipulative metaphors. This is why proponents of "church growth" sometimes exaggerate the Scriptures.

⁵ George W. Peters. *A Theology of Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), p. 255

What do Biblical Metaphors Suggest about Education?

Virtually all biblical teachings about development, whether of the person or of the kingdom, use botanical metaphors for illustration. The fact seems far more than coincidence or accident. Matthew 13, for example, includes several: the sower and the soils, the field with tares, the mustard seed; John 15, the vineyard (its pruning and its overseeing); John 12, the grain of wheat that must “die,” and so forth. Jesus’ consistent use of metaphors from the plant realm underlines creational truth: The order of things is within them. Jesus apparently wanted to discourage the human tendency to take an “animal trainer’s” approach to parenting, pastoring, and teaching. Humans are, instead, to respect the processes that God has built into each 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 naming the aspects of personhood). And as human beings in the *redeemed* line of Jesus Christ, the second Adam, the eternal spirit is present and develops according to the purposes and functions of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Effective Christian educating begins with the humble recognition that the educator does not create these realities; they are God-given, within the person. What parents, educators, and pastors do best is to participate with their students as co-learners, sharing in the development God has ordained—our development and theirs.

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

Educators must avoid two extreme positions: the belief that the unfolding naturally from within is self-perfecting, and 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. 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 the programs of development, each of which move toward heightened realization of human capability. These operate in physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral matters. But human realization (maturation) is not the same thing as attaining righteousness. Develop though he or she does, humankind does not become just before God apart from the work of Christ.

The matter of spiritual development remains somewhat clouded. A person is not born into the kingdom full-grown. He enters as a “babe in Christ.” In seeking to understand spiritual development, the Scriptures are essential. One finds help in the experiences and reflections of Job. Proverbs is a guidebook for spiritual development. The New Testament epistles are an encouragement toward spiritual praxis. Can all these pieces be put together into a model of spiritual development? Christian education could benefit from such a foundational theory.

Little can be learned about spiritual development through empirical research. The major tools of scientific inquiry are, by their own terms, limited to the natural universe. The Holy Spirit extends his work into the natural universe, but is 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. Descriptive or experimental studies are not helpful in this area.

The thesis of this article has two parts. First, the spiritual essence of humankind, like all other elements of the created universe, is a developing rather than a static attribute. A Christian’s spiritual reality is intended to develop and to move toward a spiritual maturity. Second, spiritual development occurs as the natural aspects of development (physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral) are enhanced, balanced, inter-related, 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 Epistle to the Hebrews is profoundly concerned with spiritual development, its handling of the spiritual essence is more inferential than definitional. From Hebrews, it is evident that “spiritual” growth does not occur apart from the natural aspects of personhood. As suggested in Hebrews 5:14, spiritual maturity 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.

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

Readers of the Bible are well-acquainted with metaphors and their more complex cousins, allegories. Evangelicals, who hold to literal interpretation, know full well the way to handle metaphors and allegories. For example, hermeneutical limitations are applied to the Lord as “Shepherd” and believers as “sheep;” one does not 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.

God communicates through human language, and language is perceived within the experiential world of the hearer. But because humans are finite and perceive in a fallen world, they have many limitations in their intellectual vehicles and processes. It is no wonder that “we see in a mirror dimly” (I Corinthians 13:12). In a Christian’s handling of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit helps one’s weakness, continuing his developmental ministry of interceding, interpreting, enlightening, and encouraging. All this is for the glory of Christ; how pitiful when it becomes intellectual arrogance. What believers know, they know by the Spirit; what they are, they are by the Spirit. In this great substantive metaphor of Romans 8 is the most sublime of awarenesses—that God is at work in humankind, working out the fulfillment of spiritual development.

Development is a reality because of the two great actions of God: his work in creation, and his work in redemption. Believers are part of God’s universe. It is theirs to enjoy with him. “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” (I Corinthians 2:12-13).

Let us rejoice in spiritual aliveness and educate toward spiritual development.