



Growth and Development of Persons in and for the Kingdom of God

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Among the influences upon the practice of education, few have been more significant than the recognition that a child is not a miniature adult. Though such an awareness is taken for granted today, the opposite was the rule a few centuries ago. Adolphe Meyer states:

That the years of childhood possess a nature all their own, though hinted at by an occasional sage, was a view which, if thought of at all, was dismissed as an utter and palpable absurdity.¹

As that view moved from absurdity to acceptance it changed just about everything having to do with education. Today curriculum materials are written in terms of the needs and abilities of the particular learners for whom they are intended. Prospective teachers are informed in education classes (classes which may have their origin in the discovery noted above) that the learner is at least as important a consideration in the teaching/learning situation as is the material to be learned. And, not incidentally, the realization that a child is something other than a miniature adult led to a field of study known as growth and development. Obviously, if the child is one who becomes an adult, or at least may become an adult, there must be some process by which this occurs. As the words suggest, the intent of research in human growth and development is to discover and describe that process.

I. OBJECTIONS TO GROWTH THEORY

There can be little doubt that growth, and related words, are part of the vocabulary in today's language. There seems to be no end of concern that people can, do, and should grow. A recent denominational mailing included several pieces that headlined the word "grow." "Come, Expecting to Grow" urged one colorful

¹Adolphe Meyer, *An Educational History of the American People* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967) 36.

poster. Another emphasized opportunities for pastors to grow. Curriculum materials used in many congregations, as well as teacher training programs, make use of research findings in growth and development. Lucie Barber, in the Preface to *The Religious Education of Preschool Children*, lists the names of leading educators she believes are either exponents of, or are interested in, developmental theory—a list so long and auspicious that it is painful to be excluded.² Nevertheless, there are those who are less than enamored with developmental theory.

Those with a realistic bent in their educational philosophy might argue this way: "The

teacher is charged with the responsibility to communicate substantive materials, and it is the task of the student to learn it. When the student, not the material, is the center of attention, learning suffers.” It is conceivable that in a climate that is favorable to a return to the basics, in congregational as well as public education, pastors and teachers would subscribe to such a stance.

Others, because of certain theological perspectives, may also find reasons to object to, or ignore, findings in growth and development research. There is, first, the question of value. Gabriel Moran, especially in his critique of Lawrence Kohlberg, wonders if there is any, or much, correlation between how a person thinks morally, and how that person acts. Since Kohlberg describes only the former, Moran questions the value of his work.³ Second, there is the matter of its origins. Though several may be credited with initiating the movement, Jean Rousseau is as good a candidate as any. It may be recalled that it was Rousseau who claimed, in his educational treatise *Emile*, that all things coming from the hand of God are good...it was in the hands of men that all deteriorated. His conclusion was that children should be kept from the influence of society, nurtured under the guidance of a tutor, and allowed to develop naturally. His assumption that children are born good, and naturally develop as good persons, given the opportunity to do so, was a denial of the doctrine of original sin and of any need for a radical transformation through any gracious act of God.

Many, if not all, surveys of education point to the emancipation from the doctrine of original sin as one of the great events in Western educational history. If that emancipation didn't necessarily imply that humans are born good, at least it meant that they started life as neutrals on the issue of good and evil. That implication became a basic tenet in the educational philosophy of John Dewey. For whatever else he is remembered, he is associated with great optimism for the learner in a democratic society. Depending upon one's perspective, Dewey is either admired or condemned for his influence upon American education, and its emphasis upon human potential.

Finally, even the words “ growth and development” may have the ring of an alarm...especially when they are connected to a very optimistic view of human nature. The suggestion seems to be that if educating is done appropriately, people will grow and eventually realize their fullest potential as humans. Put crassly, such a perspective raises the old saw: “Every day, in every way, I'm getting better and better.” Those committed to a theology of the cross, who believe in the redemptive act of God in Jesus Christ as the source of all hope and salvation, may

²Lucie Barber, *The Religious Education of Preschool Children* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1981) 2.

³Gabriel Moran, *Education toward Adulthood* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 108.

very well question the validity and value of any theories that stress how it is humans “make it.”

Before attempting to say something positive about growth and development theory, a historical overview might be helpful to those, especially, who are not familiar with the field.

II. A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

As noted above, Rousseau was among the first to emphasize the need to accept children as children. Initially, his influence resulted in a great deal of romanticism about children.

Eventually, however, it led to the careful observation of children. As one might expect, those observations began with the body. Once the obvious had been described and catalogued into normative stages of growth, however, attention was turned to other dimensions of human life.

Erik Erikson, informed by the psycho-analytical theories of Freud, found and described eight stages of psychological growth that extended from birth to death.⁴ His work represents one of the most ambitious, and influential, of the studies done in human development.

Even before Pestalozzi made the point in the mid-nineteenth century, thoughtful teachers had argued the need to proceed in teaching from “the concrete to the abstract.” It was Jean Piaget, however, who raised the question: is it possible for young children to proceed from the concrete to the abstract in their thinking? With his background in the natural sciences, Piaget spent a lifetime systematically observing children in an effort to find patterns of cognitive development. As a result of his observations he concluded, among other things, that abstract thinking was not even possible for a person who had not reached the stage of formal operations, a stage seldom reached before the age of eleven.⁵

If Piaget could discern stages of cognitive development, others were led to the conclusion that his approach would yield results in other dimensions of human life. Lawrence Kohlberg was among those who were so convinced. His target for observation was moral development. He, along with others, observed and interviewed hundreds of people of various ages and discovered that the ability to make moral judgments, and the nature of those judgments, follow a pattern as predictable as Piaget found in cognitive development. Kohlberg was able to trace moral development through six stages, each with clearly defined characteristics, one following the other in irreversible order.⁶

Acknowledging the differences among them, and his dependence upon them, James Fowler built on the work of Erikson, Kohlberg, and Piaget in an attempt to discover stages of faith development. In his most recent book, *Stages of Faith*,⁷ Fowler asserts that faith (at least faith as he defines it) follows a pattern similar to that found by Kohlberg—a pattern of six stages which, again, is norma-

⁴Erik Erikson, *Identity—Youth and Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968) 1-336.

⁵Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies* (New York: Random House, 1967) 62.

⁶John Miller, “Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson: Developmental Implications for Secondary Education,” *Adolescence* 50 (1978) 237-49.

⁷James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 89-303.

tive and irreversible. While it has been suggested in the foregoing that research in growth and development is a rather recent phenomenon, the concept of growth is surely not new. In both the Old and New Testaments there are many passages that allude to it.

III. BIBLICAL IMAGES OF GROWTH

If not contradictory, there are at least several different perspectives on growth in the Bible. Those that I shall note are: relationship with God comes about through transformation rather than growth; growth is both natural and expected; and, maturity is dynamic rather than static.

1. *Growth is natural and expected.* In the creation story God commands Adam and Eve to

be fruitful and to multiply. Although this exhortation may be used as a justification for the exploitation of the earth and its natural resources, it need not be seen in that way. Rather, as Genesis 26:12 indicates, sowing and reaping with the blessing of the Lord naturally result in growth. Isaac experienced this growth in such a large measure that it became a source of envy among his neighbors.

In the New Testament growth is not only natural, but expected. In several of his parables Jesus used agricultural images to illustrate that expectation. The vinedresser, he said, prunes the vines in order that they bear more fruit. Stewards who do not use their gifts lose them. Unproductive plants are cut down and thrown away. Those who exercise responsibility over small matters find themselves being placed in even more demanding positions. The images are illustrative of God's expectations for his chosen people, Israel, but they also apply to a disciple. To be chosen of God carries with it certain expectations—expectations of growth. Of significant importance, however, is the nature of that growth, as Gabriel Moran illustrates in *Education Toward Adulthood*.⁸

2. *Transformation—not Growth*. While there are passages which depict growth as natural and expected, the central theme of the Bible is that relationship with God originates in a divine act of grace. God comes to a sinful humankind, and in his gracious love "...reconciles the world unto himself." Responding to the question of Nicodemus, Jesus said it was necessary to be "born again" if one were to see the Kingdom of God. Being born of the water and the Spirit is a radical event. It is a change that comes about through God's mighty act. There is no way that one can grow into that relationship; there is nothing natural about developing into it, or passing through a variety of stages until one realizes it. To be in Christ is to be made new—to have been made, by the grace of God, an heir of the Kingdom which Christ has established and is establishing.

3. *Maturity is Dynamic*. Though relationship with God is established on the basis of a divine gracious act, that relationship is not a static one. As James Sanders points out, a static interpretation of history led Israel to the conviction that God could do nothing other than to preserve Israel in terms acceptable to Israel's expectations. Trust in status rather than life in the covenant was a characteristic, says Sanders, of the false prophet at the time of the exile. Jeremiah, and other of the prophets, rejected this one-sided emphasis upon God's grace that did

⁸G. Moran, *Education toward Adulthood*, 23-31.

not take into account Israel's response (ability) to God. Being identified as the people of God, Israel was called to live as the people of God.⁹

In Colossians 1:28 the writer described the goal of his ministry as "maturity in Christ Jesus." If Sanders is correct, there is the distinct possibility to perceive that maturity in static terms that eventually limits the freedom of God. If Israel was, upon occasion, guilty of such an interpretation, Paul was not. In Philippians he wrote: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those who *are* mature be thus minded" (3:14-15).

Maturity seen more as an openness to growth than a static condition is also a theme in Ephesians 4. This writer—who has described Gentile Christians as persons made alive, brought near in the blood of Christ, and no longer strangers—exhorts his readers to grow up in every way into Christ. If that growth had already reached its fullness, what would be the sense of the exhortation ?

Faced with the prospect of false teachers who had once been in the church, but were now leading others into apostasy, the writer of 2 Peter calls upon his readers not to allow their lives in Christ to be destroyed. Rather, he wrote: "...grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:18). Again, a static view of the Christian life not only could lead to a false, though faithful, perception of one's relationship with God; it could also lead to the denial of faith as well.

IV. THE SERVICE OF BAPTISM AND GROWTH

Though it may not have been intended in a deliberate way, these three biblical images are addressed in the Service for Holy Baptism in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.¹⁰ The opening words spoken to the baptismal group make clear that God initiates the relationship begun in baptism. The prayer before the profession of faith links God's creation with his re-creation through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the waters of baptism the baptized shares in that death and resurrection, is reborn a child of God, and made an heir of eternal life. Beyond the moment of baptism, Christ and his church remain the source of power for growth throughout the life of the baptized.

The introductory statement of the service also suggests that growth is an expectation, that is, it will occur for those who are baptized and live in fellowship with Christ and his church. And, while growth appears to be an expectation, there is the recognition that it won't be complete this side of the day of Christ. The statements addressed to parents, though presumably not meant to be a commentary of developmental theory, do provide a framework in which to discuss some of those theories as they relate to Christian growth.

V. DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY AND CHRISTIAN GROWTH

While objections to developmental theories may remain, the realization that growth has some roots (pardon the pun) in both Word and sacraments provides

⁹James Sanders, "Hermeneutics," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Keith Crim (Supplementary Vol.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 402-07.

¹⁰*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg: 1978) 121.

an occasion to examine what the research may have to offer in understanding Christian growth. Since the amount of research is immense, and rather technical, the specifics will not be introduced here. A good summary can be found in the fifth volume of the *Parish Teacher Annual* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981) for those who are interested. Only a few general themes arising out of the baptismal service will be included here.

1. *There is the recognition that religious education begins very early, even immediately, after the child is born and baptized.* The potential for learning is assumed as parents are told to bring their baptized child to the services of God's house. If either the child or the environment were considered neutral with respect to learning possibilities, this exhortation would make little sense except as a symbolic gesture on the part of the parents. Lucie Barber, claiming that stimulus-response learning is the only way that the very young child can learn, states that learning occurs as children experience how their needs are met and how others respond to the actions they initiate. What they learn has to do with trust, predictability, and self-identity.¹¹

Trust, says Iris Cully, is of particular importance at this early age because it becomes the building block upon which trust in God eventually comes.¹²

Simply bringing children to worship services, however, doesn't assure growth any more than reading the Bible assures understanding. There are some children who, for a time, may be better off not attending services, especially those services designed solely for adults. Other children may benefit from only parts of the service. If children learn from the responses they get to their actions, and for an hour each Sunday they get scolded, spanked, hushed, corrected, and pinched, what will they learn from being brought to the services of God's house? The congregation that asks parents to bring their children to worship—that is, the congregation that acknowledges that young children learn in a particular way—needs to ask itself what it is that children learn in and during the worship service. Then attention needs to be given both to the child who learns, and to the environment in which he or she learns, in order that an effort be made to make that experience a positive one.

2. *There is a concern for cognitive growth.* Experience that leads to affective learning seems to be emphasized first in the baptismal service. The next phrase focuses more on cognitive learning. Developmentalists tell us that children after the age of five have a great capacity for memorization. They learn nursery and story lines with apparent ease—and given opportunity, repetition, and incentive—can memorize the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer as commended in the baptismal service. Of course, these three symbols are not all that children could, and should, learn at this point. Though Ronald Goldman is concerned that children should not be exposed to biblical materials too early,¹³ I agree with those who argue that children take from the Bible what they can, and the rest has no lasting negative effects. Therefore, the growing child should learn biblical stories, characters, and events.

Learning the Creed and the Lord's Prayer is important for this age because

¹¹Iris Cully, *Christian Child Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 5.

¹²Ibid., 3-8.

¹³Ronald Goldman, *Readiness for Religion* (New York: Seabury, 1965) 3-10.

they are used in worship. Perhaps the Ten Commandments, if they are to be memorized, should also find their way into the service from time to time. Being able to recite these, even if the words aren't understood, can provide a sense of belonging for the child. Belonging, or "affiliative faith" as Westerhoff calls it, represents movements beyond the experience level to which the very young child is limited.¹⁴ Challenged to learn information, the learning allows them to identify with a community and gain a necessary sense of belonging. For the congregation this means the provision of settings where these stories and symbols can be heard, and said, regularly. A premium will be placed on the exciting story teller, and upon those who can find a variety of ways by which to tell them.

One would not expect a critical treatise on either education or growth in the baptismal service. But the location of the phrase on teaching the Creed and the Lord's Prayer—coming as it does between statements that stress experience on the one hand, and critical thinking on the other—implies recognition of one of the basic premises of growth and development: that growth proceeds through a series of stages which are normative and irreversible. If this has validity, then the value of learning the symbols of a community with which a child has had little or no

experience needs to be examined. Parents who wish to begin their child's religious education at age seven or eight may be forcing a child into a situation in which he or she has no purpose or identity. At the same time, when children do come—and adults, too—and find their way into the life of a congregation for the first time, perhaps it would be appropriate to establish a relationship of trust and belonging before, or at least concurrently with, the teaching of information.

3. *There is a search for meaning.* The third phrase is a very intriguing one: “As they grow in years you should place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith...” For a variety of reasons this phrase has come to be associated with confirmation. As youth begin this phase of their lives they are ceremoniously given a Bible and required to attend classes specifically designed to instruct them in the faith. Though it may not always come off very well, the timing for such an enterprise is appropriate. If the child has had a solid experience in a worshipping community, and has learned the symbols associated with that community, the adolescent years can be ones in which all that has been received can be investigated and challenged in order that the person be prepared for the responsibilities of the years ahead.

For developmentalists, every stage is significant, but there are some that seem to be especially so. For Erikson, the crisis of identity versus role confusion is a pivotal one, a crisis that begins about the age of thirteen. For both Kohlberg and Fowler, the movement from stage three to four is critical. It is described as moving from believing and doing because others expect it, to believing and doing because the person is convinced that it is right. These changes come about only through struggle...both for those making the transition and for the ones living with them. It is a transition that doesn't come to all, but when it does, it rarely comes before mid-adolescence. Fowler is of the opinion that the transition requires not only challenges to parents and institutions, but physical separation from those people and agencies that have formed the person up to that point.

Of all the implications for a ministry to adolescents in the church, only a few

¹⁴John Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1976) 89-103.

can be mentioned here. First, and probably foremost, is the tremendous importance of providing a solid relationship for the growing person in the family and congregation up to, and through, adolescence. That relationship provides the basis for the adolescent's freedom to do what she or he needs to do. Instruction during these years needs to be somewhat open-ended. That is not to say that the church shouldn't communicate what is confessed, but there needs to be an openness to the issues of youth. Not all their questions will be answered, but no questions should be disallowed. That youth are struggling with their faith and behavior ought not be a source of despair. Struggle with God, and one's self, says Robert Davidson, is an expectation which has a strong biblical precedent.¹⁵ If youth raise the question: “Do I really want to be a part of you?” the community needs to keep reminding them: “We want you, you are a part of us, you are a child of God in Christ.”

The inclination to raise questions is probably related to the new thinking capabilities that begin to be realized at about the age of eleven, the stage of formal operations. This stage makes it possible for a person to be conscious of life's several dimensions—past, present, and future—and to do logical, or abstract, thinking. Becoming equipped with the ability to think in new ways,

youth are not only able to raise challenging questions, but they are also able to gain new insights into the meaning of Christian faith.

4. *Context and action affect faith and understanding.* The final phrase of the baptismal exhortation, "...living in the covenant of their baptism and in communion with the church, they may lead a godly life until the day of Jesus Christ," relates to several ideas associated with growth and development. First, growth takes place in a context. The developmentalists agree that while growth occurs in predictable, irreversible stages, there is no necessity that one grow. In addition to a capacity for growth, there needs to be an occasion and a context for growth. Baptism, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, is one, and the determinative, source for Christian growth. The Spirit does not disdain, however, to do its work in and through people and events. The church is the context where young children experience trust, where somewhat older children learn the symbols and stories that belong to the church, where youth are both challenged and supported in their search for identity, and where adults, while continuing to experience all the above, are encouraged to search and grow into new dimensions of what it means to be Christian. The sanctuary, the classroom, the home, the people who call themselves Christian, are all part of that context, but they aren't all of it. Recognition of other contexts, and their creative use, could well be a priority for those responsible for Christian education. Second, growth involves the affective, the cognitive, and the behavioral. Another way of understanding the exhortation to parents in the baptismal service is in terms of these three dimensions. While the first phrase emphasizes the affective, the second and third concentrate on the cognitive. The last, referring to the living of a godly life, addresses the behavioral. Some months ago I asked an adult class what they understood by the term "a godly life."

"It's a life characterized by action," one said.

"What do you mean by that?" I continued.

¹⁵Robert Davidson, *The Bible in Religious Education* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1979) 52ff.

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"Well," said the person, "a few weeks ago you said that one of the characteristics of God was that he initiated action. God chose us, God acted to save us. If we are to live godly lives, our lives will have to be active."

If these three are related to each other, and constantly impinge upon each other, then it is just as likely that growth will occur through action as it will through thought. And it is as likely that action will influence what one thinks and believes, as belief will determine action.

Third, as noted earlier, growth/maturity is always dynamic. One never arrives this side of eternity. When physical growth and chronological age were the only accepted evidences of growth one could probably justify the notion that adulthood was one even plateau stretching from the age of 21 to senility or death. Possessed of such a view, adults could argue that the store of religious information gained in confirmation, and reinforced with regular—or occasional—sermons would see them through. Adulthood is not that way, however. There are needs and crises that come during this period that have to be faced. Moran believes that these crises have a particularly religious orientation, and that one of the reasons for the inability of adult education to attract significant numbers of people is related to the failure to recognize that orientation.

Increasingly, writers in religious education express the concern that the church become more involved in adult education. One reason given is that parents are the primary religion

teachers of their children, and they need to be helped to carry out their responsibility. Another reason is provided in the teaching ministry of Jesus. As someone has said: “Jesus blessed children and taught adults; we bless adults and teach children.” There is no need, of course, to argue for teaching either adults or children. Where growth is encouraged, and maturity is recognized as dynamic, each stage of life becomes an opportunity for teaching and learning.

VI. THE KINGDOM OF GOD/DEVELOPMENTALISM

Throughout the writing of this article I have wrestled with the temptation to relate developmental theories to the central concern of this issue—the Kingdom of God. There might be those who would have preferred that I struggle even longer, but I need to conclude with some ideas that could serve as a point of departure for a discussion of Christian education and the Kingdom of God.

Thomas Groome insists that the Kingdom is the one theme that must govern all efforts in Christian religious education.¹⁶ He makes that claim, primarily, because he views the Kingdom as central in the teaching of Jesus. At the same time, there are certain aspects of the Kingdom that relate to some of the principles discussed here. What remains is to indicate two of those connections, especially with respect to adult education, in an introductory way.

To begin, both the Kingdom and growth theory allow for experience, reflection, and action. In one instance the Kingdom comes as a surprise and thrusts one forward into a more profound relationship with God. It is an experience that one can only receive. In other instances the Christian may be particularly active,

¹⁶Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 35-51.

working in a number of ways to witness to the Kingdom in everyday life and the social order. The rule of God applies to all of life—thoughts, feelings, and actions. None is less, or more, important than any other—and all impinge on each other in the Kingdom that comes.

Though there are, obviously, opposing views, one understanding of the Kingdom is that it has come, it comes, and it will come. The Kingdom is dynamic. The church not only looks to a past event, but expects the rule of God to continue to come into the lives of people today. At the same time, the rule won't be fully realized until Christ comes in glory. Whatever our past, which always needs to be taken into account, whatever our present, the rule of God calls us forward into both a richer understanding of our relationship with God, and a more active participation in his will. Each new vantage point in life becomes an opportunity to consider where the vision of the gospel would lead us. Again, allowing for and expecting those surprises God brings into our lives, there is also a need to recognize a movement in life that leads to an enlarged vision of God's Kingdom. As part of its responsibility Christian education seeks to help people and congregations to focus that vision in such a way that growth can take place. One of the great obstacles to this ministry will undoubtedly be the adolescent notion that in confirmation one comes to know all there is to know about God and his purposes. Beyond that barrier comes the realization that maturity, and the rule of God, knows no bounds that we can possibly see or imagine.

I began by noting that the discovery that children are not miniature adults led to research in growth and development. It is altogether possible that this research would lead to the

realization that adults are not just overgrown children. Adults, like children, have a great capacity for growth. The way in which they are challenged to grow, and the degree to which they do grow, cannot help but affect the life of the church. And could it not also be that such challenges can give *birth* to a vision of the coming of the Kingdom, and subsequently a *maturity* to the one who prays, “Your kingdom come”?