Children and patterns of spiritual growth: a Pauline perspective
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In academic theology and biblical scholarship as much as in popular Christian literature and culture, expectations of spiritual growth are unchallenged and accepted as completely normative.

It seems self-evident that, just as humans grow and mature physically, emotionally, socially, cognitively, they must also develop spiritually. These parallels are widely held to be obvious and while there is abundant discussion around the conditions and schemata that might most accurately describe or measure such progress, there is little if any discussion about whether we do actually grow spiritually.

Against the tide of such remarkable cross-disciplinary agreement, I think it is worth challenging and investigating the idea of spiritual growth, and spiritual maturity.

The concept of spiritual growth is indeed fuelled from a cross disciplinary confluence of ideas – from systematic theology (as we will hear from our colleague, DJ Konz in his illuminations of Barth), the Social Sciences, a strongly represented field via the legacy of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg and Fowler, and the inheritance of Spiritual Formation (explored later by Vivienne Mountain) and Biblical Scholarship (a John the Baptist cry from me here, to be more than fulfilled in our finale by Sean Winter this afternoon).

If nothing else, such uncanny agreement across our frameworks ought to raise some suspicions.

The task of this paper is to evaluate the ways in which Pauline texts may be used to support or (as I hope to argue) subvert the idea of spiritual growth and maturity. Time allows us only to take one representative text for close scrutiny: Philippians 3:12-17
Firstly, let me affirm the usefulness of these common ways we have come to think about humanity. The emergence of the Twentieth Century stage theorists, Freud, Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, Fowler, Bowlby, Maslow, Bruner – almost every sub-field in the social sciences now has proponents of a stage-theory model. Progressive development is the grammar for how western culture imagines human life. Though the rhetoric of scienticism claims objectivity, all such systems inherently carry imperatives and value judgements. Normative milestones, institutionalized age-stage education, stage specific equipment, programming and marketing have come to order our culture.

This grammar of stage theories enable us to describe human life in some agreed terms. This is of value in many ways. As my patience with a certain mannerism in my children wears thin, I remind myself – this is a stage – it will pass. And it does. And is replaces by a new compulsive fascination. However, in tandem with affirming their utility, we need to also establish the limits, in particular the theological limits of stage theories. The descriptive should not become an imperative. We must hold in first priority, that the stage theory follows the creative, unique and yet unfolding life of the human. The human does not follow the stage theory programmatically. This is a core tenet of the constructivist ideologies, though in relation to children is often obscured in popular usage and we find human beings suffering under the yoke of tight normative time-boundaries and restrictive bandwidths of typicality. Real live children in their diverse family shapes often have uncomfortable dialogue with such finely-graded taxonomies.

And how then, does this well ordered, late second millenium western anthropology converse with the chaotic visionary theology of first century Paul?

Let’s hear first from Paul

Phil. 3:12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.
Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.
Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

(NRSV)

Here we have a classic text which almost unanimously scholars identify as a model of spiritual progress towards maturity. The party line goes something like:

Even the great apostle Paul admits that he isn’t perfect, but he is on the track, racing towards the finish-line, towards maturity, and if we are maturing too, as clearly we should be, we’ll be agreeing with him.

What could be more straightforward?
Several difficulties appear immediately.

Firstly the verb τετελείωμαι (vs 12) and the adjective τέλειοι (vs 15) if translated in a consistent way with each other seem to come into conflict. The group of words relate to perfection or completion, finishing or fulfillment. ‘Perfect’ is a value laden term for many of us, but finds its core meaning in the idea of completion, lacking nothing. A ‘perfect cadence’ in music, is the one that finishes the piece. The imperfect cadence is the one used at the midway resting point, and still sounds like there is more to come. This is an appropriate term for God, because God is perfect – complete, lacking nothing.

τετελείωμαι, is most commonly translated ‘perfect’; ‘not that I am already perfect’. To be entirely accurate ‘not that I have already been made perfect’ reflecting the passive voice is better. Mostly, we are unperturbed by a person, even an admirable person not claiming perfection.
What does trouble us, then is vs 15 where it seems Paul is claiming to be (along with some others) perfect.
‘In as much let the perfect τέλειοι think this.’ (15)
Questions abound: ‘Think what?’
And further, he calls on the Philippians to imitate him. Can he be asking them to imitate his imperfection?

In order to resolve the awkward conflict there are several solutions offered. Some read τέλειοι (the perfect) as ironic.\(^1\) Paul baits his critics or competitors with their own claim turned back on themselves ‘Let the (so called) perfect, those who think they are perfect, think this’

This reading is possible – it allows for a consistent rendering of meaning between τετελείωμαι and τέλειοι and Paul is certainly capable of this kind of ironic, disparaging jibe.\(^2\)

Another alternative is presented by those who relativise the term to the less demanding ‘mature’. So while Paul can claim not to be perfect, he can claim, with others to be mature. This turn alters the paradigm of the passage, installing a gap, between the perfection Paul is not, and the maturity he might be. Here, the space is opened for a program of spiritual progress to occur.

Some interpreters, looking for a first century correlation see the Greek moral philosophers\(^3\) who spoke of moral maturity as a source for Paul’s thought.

Whether or not Paul drew from their language or not, I would hope to maintain a distance from the ethics of the Moral Philosophers, whose vision of maturity was exclusive in terms of class, role and gender.\(^4\) Paul on the other hand, is best

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2. Galatians 5:12
4. Daniel J. Harrington, and James F. Keenan, *Paul and Virtue Ethics: Building the Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 7. As we determine our anthropological vision, we subsequently designate corresponding virtues to fill in or "thicken" the image of the human that we aim at. Thus Aristotle's elitism led him to discuss virtues primarily for those who could be magnificent. While he designated other virtues for educated men, he did not develop any for women or slaves. But as philosophers and theologians further developed a more inclusive anthropology, they needed virtues that substantiated this more democratic framework. Of course, Paul who so promotes community, is also inclusive. He recognizes the Jewish
understood as troublingly inclusive. If there is a moral maturing ethic in Paul at all I think it is thoroughly collective and corporate.

Examining what falls between these terms, interpreters are drawn to the metaphors of Greco-Roman athletics. Most commonly the foot race, though Williams quite dashing narrates the race of the charioteer, and a few prefer, as I do, the wrestler.

Initially the metaphor of the athlete making progress along the course of the race appeals, for its common touch, familiarity and simplicity. Interpreters join the dots between a vision of running a race, the language of progress and the ideology of spiritual maturity. But it is unsatisfactory. The dynamic of progress and maturity infers improving, strengthening, gaining. But a runner becomes depleted along the course of the race. The logic doesn’t quite fit.

The more dominant language in this pericope is the language of grasping, taking hold – which better fits the image of the wrestler. The repetition of variations on the verb λαμβάνω four times in vs 12 and 13 yielding ‘not that I have already taken is well

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6 David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, Mass.;: Hendrickson, 1999), 264. Williams elaborates a most vivid analogy:

"Philippians 3:13-14 describes the charioteer, intent on the race, his eyes fixed on the front, not daring to look behind lest the slightest pressure on the reins (wrapped around his body) produce a false move and cause him to lose the race and possibly his life. Paul declares that his goal is to know Christ" (v. 10), but he has not yet attained it (v12), as some may claim to have done. Nevertheless, it remains his goal. Thus, "forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead I drive on toward the finishing line." He is explaining to his readers, by means of metaphor, that those who long to be like Christ faced danger in looking back. Past achievements (breeding complacency) and past failures (promoting despondency) are best forgotten in the interest of pressing toward the objective. There is still much to do for Christ and much to be achieved in the quest to be like Christ. The possibilities both of service and of sanctification are not exhausted until the Christian is summoned to the pulvinar of "the presiding magistrate" to receive from him the prize that awaits the victor (v. 14).
matched with the common meaning of διώκω (‘persecute/pursue’) emphasizing aggressive contending over a more tame chase on foot. The connotation of ‘persecute’ especially places I proximity to an outline of Paul’s former life in Judaism, should not be overlooked. Thus a less comfortable reading emerges in which Paul resists –

‘Not that I have taken hold (ἐλαβόν), or have already been completed, but I pursue that I might also take hold (καταλαβο), but I am taken over (κατελήμφην) by Christ. Brothers, I myself do not reckon to have taken over (κατειληφέναι) ’

The wrestler image also is commended by sympathy with the Jewish identity of Israel – the one who ‘wrestles’ or ‘struggles’ with God. Paul’s Jewish identity in Philippians, while complex and contentious, can bear this Jewish allusion. Ostensibly Paul has made a disclaimer against his prior ‘gains’ in Judaism (Philippians 3:4-8). Simplistically taken as an outright rejection of all things Jewish misses the place his autobiographical sketch occupies in the broader argument of Philippians, and denies the positive attachment Paul holds to various Jewish elements, not the least of which include circumcision (Phil 3:3 ‘We are the true circumcision’), scripture (Phil 2:15 ‘shine like stars’)\(^7\), and the Christ/Messiah.

If we allow that ‘wrestling’ is an appropriate image for Paul’s language in 3:12-14, and that some elements of Judaism remain in his theological narrative here, we must ask, what function the items of Jewish heritage (3:4-7) take in the larger structure of Paul’s discourse, and how this informs our discussion of Spiritual maturity and progress.

Here I suggest that Paul is not making a wholesale rejection of the content of Judaism as an ineffective means of attaining salvation. Rather recounts his own person history, formerly viewed in terms of advancing merit, and declares it usurped

\(^7\) Cf Daniel 12:3 Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.
completely by Christ. Paul has described for us one set of stages of faithful life and then reneged.

Taking a step back and widening the frame, we see that Paul’s primary focus is not on Judaism, or gentiles or righteousness, or maturity, but on Jesus as Lord. Paul’s concern is ultimately cosmological in scale.

It is in the central unifying, or rather dominating vision of chapter 2:5-11 that we find the controlling ethic for reading all of Philippians. The narrative of Christ is paradigmatic for Paul, and for the Philippians with him as he will call them to join together in imitation (3:17).

The trajectory of the Christ story in 2:5-11 shocks us with self emptying and downward mobility. God in Christ becomes a human, a slave, and dies a repulsively shameful slave’s death. All of this is done without claiming the status of a god (unlike the familiar myths of Greek gods who came to earth to make mischief among humans, retaining their god status and powers) and yet always being God.\(^8\) God does this as God. For those with aspirations to progress and grow and advance spiritually, it seems one cannot do this while following Jesus, the Christ of God. He is simply going the other direction.

It is important not to falter at this point in following Paul’s vision. There is a temptation to imagine the story-arc of this unit to trace an inverted parabola – Christ empties himself, descending to the depths of humility and then ascends exalted and restored to the heavens. It might even be envisaged as a two-stage process: descent and ascent. This is emotionally familiar and satisfying, and for those who are hoping to follow Jesus and progress ever upward, the path is laid. But attending closely we can read something more scandalous. However, it is possible to read these more closely as a unity. That the cross and being raised/exalted are not separate stages but one act of revelation of who God most glorious is. It is at the point of emptied out death that Christ is revealed as exalted God. A false detachment of Crucifixion

\(^8\) Michael J. Gorman, "Although/Because He Was in the Form of God: The Theological Significance of Paul’s Master Story (Phil2:6-11)." *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1(2) 2007, 147-169.
from Resurrection, creates a theological void (or black hole as Keith Dyer puts it) which is filled by unhelpful and extra-theological content: ‘doctrines of personal sanctification, charismatic renewal, seeker sensitive church growth.’ It interests me that these phenomena all are mostly adult-focussed.

Returning then to chapter 3 - Paul has been grasped by Christ. We note the emphasis is Paul’s language which pushes away from his own identity ‘not that I’; ‘I, myself have not’ which holds coherence with Galatians 2 ‘no longer I that live’ and 1 Corinthians. As Paul continues:

‘διώκω εἰς τὸ βραδείον τῆς ἀνω κλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.’

I press on to the prize-giving in the upper call of God in Christ Jesus.

The question of what the prize actually is has drawn a little speculation, with variations on ‘knowing Christ’, ‘Christ himself’, ‘the call of God’, ‘eternal fellowship with Christ’, ‘moral advancement’. Suggestions which objectify Christ, making him our reward or goal reverse the focus of Paul’s self-effacing model.

I suggest that, taking our cue from Paul’s strong first-person disclaimers, “Not I”, we recognize Christ in the centre of this passage as the agent. The one whose calling it is, who wrestles and contends with the powers, and will claim the upper prize. Christ will be crowned. It is Christ’s drama, and Paul proclaims that we – in the most radically inclusive sense are drawn into it.

So where does this connect with our evaluation of spiritual maturity?

First we note that we have been unable to assess the biblical terms of ‘spiritual maturity’ in a direct way, because such a phrase is literally absent from Paul’s writings.

\[9\]Keith D. Dyer, ‘Paul and Embodied Resurrection’ in Keith D. Dyer and David J. Neville, Resurrection and responsibility : essays on theology, scripture, and ethics in honor of Thorwald Lorenzen (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2009), 139
Therefore, we have sought to trace possible patterns of progression from familiar passages that have been taken as templates or exhortations to spiritual development, progress or growth.

However, Paul’s vision leads us in an alternative direction. His primary claim is that Jesus is Lord of the cosmos. Life in Christ runs contra to the powers of the empire, and the powers of the flesh. The two powerful visions offered us in Philippians demonstrate on the one hand, the endlessly self giving, emptying model of Christ crucified, and on the other hand, the life of Paul grasped by Christ joined with others in corporate life imitating Christ.

The Story of Christ in God attests to liberation from the normative powers of the flesh. Yes, there is physical and social, emotional, psychological development, but the life of the Spirit operates in perpendicularity to these ‘normative’ processes, and destinations such as ‘maturity’ proceed without implicating a parallel agenda for the Spirit. Thus we see that God enters human history as an infant, not as a mature man. He doesn’t come at the pinnacle of civilization. He doesn’t grow to old age, but is cut off in this prime. God is free to accost young girls and old men. The spirit makes things new and regenerate, and the destiny of the cosmos is not maturity but all things made new. Our aches and creaks now are not old age setting in, but birth pangs of the new creation. In such a Pauline perspective, although he never addresses children directly, we find an antidote to the developmental norms of our nature and progress driven expectations and limitations of our culture, for children and adults alike. Pauline theology is corporate and focuses on participation in the self-giving, honourless, life of Christ. In Paul’s theology, it is God in Christ who acts, and we are drawn as participants into that. When Paul, rarely speaks of progress, it is the progress of the Gospel, not the individual. The place of children then, spiritually is as full participants in this life.


