
Maturing in Christ: The Dynamic Process of Pilgrimage

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"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). Peter summarizes and concludes his letters with this stirring challenge. Its importance is heightened due to the imperative (command) mood of the verb grow. The apostle understood the great necessity for his readers to grow more fully into Christ. The Gospels and the Book of Acts capture in vivid detail Peter's spiritual journey in this very process. However, Peter is not introducing a new concept, but is reflecting what he had heard from Jesus' lips. Returning from the wilderness, Jesus began his public ministry with the declaration: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Passing along the Sea of Galilee, he met Simon and Andrew and graciously said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (Mark 1:17). Immediately they left their nets and followed him. Their sudden response captures the compelling nature of Jesus' invitation and message. Jesus extends the same invitation today in calling us to follow him.

Following Jesus is neither simple nor easy because it requires a new way of living. While newness, like growth, can be stimulating and refreshing it simultaneously requires the difficulty of change. Unfortunately most English versions of the New Testament omit the encouraging reminder contained in Jesus' initial invitation. A comparison of the KJV, NKJV, or RSV with more recent translations reveals that the latter ignore a crucial word in the Greek text. The more accurate rendering of the RSV, for example, is, "Follow me and I will make you *become* fishers of (people)" (Mark 1:17, italics added). That is, Jesus said that accompanying him is not a six-week sermon series on discipleship or the theme for a weekend spirituality retreat. It is a lifelong process of *becoming*.

Inherent in this reality is the recognition that following Jesus involves progress and growth. We need encouragement and signposts to keep us on course and guide us during the difficult times when there is little visible evidence of our spiritual growth. Scripture depicts this growth in a variety of ways. The apostle Paul mentions the differing levels of maturity as natural, carnal, and spiritual (1 Cor. 2:1-2). Similarly, John distinguishes among the differing phases of growth when he describes his readers as children, young men, and fathers (1 John 2:12-14). The writer of Hebrews is also deeply frustrated because his readers were still infants unable to digest the solid food he knew they needed (Heb. 5:11-14).

The history of Christian spirituality reveals a similar interest in noticing and naming spiritual maturity. Origen (185-254) developed a three-fold pattern of the

moral, natural, and contemplative levels to depict the soul's progress. He found these stages reflected in three Old Testament books: Proverbs for the moral life, Ecclesiastes for the natural life, and Song of Songs for the contemplative life. Benedict of Nursia (480?-547) emphasized the need to grow into greater humility. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), building upon Benedict's base, elaborated on how we can advance through the stages of humility by outgrowing the opposite stage of pride. Jacob's ladder (Gen. 28:12) inspired numerous models of maturity including that of St. John of Climacus (579-649). His *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, written specifically for monks, traced out a pattern of thirty steps toward perfection. Many monastic writers described the soul's journey as passing through three stages: purgation, or the shedding or cleansing from sin; illumination, or the growing awareness of God's light upon the soul; and union, or the experience of becoming one with God. In *The Soul's Journey into God*, Bonaventure (1217-1274) presented the soul's ascent as a six-step process (mirroring the six days of creation) to reach union with God. Walter Hilton's (1340-1396) classic, *The Ladder of Perfection*, enumerated the degrees in contemplative growth. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) is well-known for her four methods of drawing water that reflect four degrees of prayer, and for her popular, *The Interior Castle*, which describes seven movements of the soul as it grows into deeper union with God.

Thus, the human tendency to discover and mark spiritual growth is not new. Although this tendency is widespread among the saints, most Reformed Christians have not shared their enthusiasm. Words of Richard Lovelace evidence that Reformed spirituality struggles with the concept of ladders and hierarchical advancement: "Ladders are always intimidating, and it is my suspicion that Christians should always assume that they start each day at the top of the ladder in contact with God and renew this assumption whenever they appear to have slipped a rung."¹ Equally intriguing are Karl Rahner's comments as he argues that the traditional Roman Catholic three-fold way lacks biblical warrant: "Looked at as a whole, nothing more is really stated than the fact that there is such a growth and maturing process, and the command that the Christian must become more perfect in this way. There is a complete absence of any more exact definition of the stages of this ascent; no attempt whatsoever is made to give any real description of the characteristic properties of the individual stages or to arrange them one after the other in any determined order of sequence."² Nevertheless, the twentieth century revealed a continuing interest in plotting progress in personal growth. Erickson's epigenetic cycle, Piaget's cognitive development, Kohlberg's and Gilligan's moral development, and Fowler's faith development illustrate this desire.³ While each focuses on a different aspect of human development, they are linked through the foundational structures of developmentalism.

However, all efforts to quantify or measure our progress share a basic weakness. The Holy Spirit does not operate according to our human structures or our tendencies to categorize. Henry Scougal, a seventeenth-century Scottish professor at Aberdeen, speaks wisely: "I doubt it hath occasioned much

unnecessary disquietude to some holy persons, that they have not found such a regular and orderly transaction in their souls as they have seen described in books; that they have not passed through all those steps and stages of conversion which some . . . have too peremptorily prescribed unto others: God hath several ways of dealing with the souls of men, and it sufficeth if the work be accomplished, whatever the methods have been."⁴ This does not imply that the insights of psychological developmentalism or schemas of spiritual growth should be avoided. It simply calls for a more balanced approach.

The reality of daily church life reveals a potential weakness in any staged approach to growth. Maturing in Christ is broader than the mere knowledge of certain spiritual insights or theological truth. A person can be well-versed in theology or Scripture and yet not be influenced or guided by that truth. Knowledge isolated from integration is of little value in spiritual formation. Therefore, any balanced approach to spiritual maturity will resist the all too common contemporary practice of specialization and compartmentalization. Scripture is replete with painful examples of the difficulty of growing into balanced wholeness. The prophet, Eli, guided Samuel sensitively in his personal spiritual journey (1 Sam. 3:2-9). At home, however, Eli lacked the ability to provide the same spiritual and domestic leadership for his sons. Their callous insensitivity, manifested in wickedness to God, brought condemnation to Eli's household (1 Sam. 2:12-36). Similar tragedies are evident in the lives of David and Absalom, or Isaac and Rebekah. When Jesus called Simon and Andrew to follow him, he was clearly expecting more than the ability to pass a Bible proficiency test or to repeat the questions of the catechism. He called them to follow him in a new way of living. Paul reflects this principle in his reminder: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1; cf. 1 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:6).

Returning to our title provides direction for the remainder of this discussion. Any attempt to construct a biblical understanding of Christian formation must be grounded in the life of Jesus Christ. The preposition "in" is descriptive for both foundation and process. Before one can mature in Christ, one must live in Christ. The phrases "in Christ" or "in the Lord" represent a major Pauline concept. Adolf Deissmann concluded, "This primitive Pauline watch-word 'in Christ' is meant vividly and mystically, as is the corresponding phrase 'Christ in me.' The formula 'in Christ' or 'in the Lord' occurs 164 times in Paul's writings: it is really the characteristic expression of his Christianity."⁵ Clearly the operating system from which Paul lived and ministered was built upon his union with Christ. Because Christian spirituality has recognized the same necessity, many expressions of spiritual maturity rely upon this basic starting point. In particular, Reformed spirituality emphasizes that our life in Christ is the beginning, continuation, and end of our spiritual journey. In his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, John Bunyan captures the essence of our need for being rooted and grounded in Christ: "The Lord did also lead me into the mystery of union with the Son of God, that I was joined to him, that I was flesh of his flesh,

and bone of his bone,' and now was that word of St. Paul ["because we are members of his body," Eph. 5:30] sweet to me. By this also was my faith in him, as my righteousness, the more confirmed to me; for if he and I were one, then his righteousness was mine, his merits mine, his victory also mine."⁶ John Calvin asserts that our union with Christ is the basis for this "wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him."⁷

Before proceeding further, we must recognize that a biblical expression of Christian spirituality will be strongly Trinitarian. Sadly, many expressions of contemporary spirituality seem to place greater emphasis upon ourselves than upon God. While spirituality must be experiential, it is on unstable ground when it begins with us. Eugene Peterson underlines this fact with characteristic wisdom: "Christian spirituality does not begin with us talking about our experience; it begins with listening to God call us, heal us, forgive us."⁸ James Torrance also rightly notes that our spirituality and worship (which is essentially communal spiritual formation) "is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father. It means participating in union with Christ, in what he has done for us once and for all, in his self-offering to the Father, in his life and death on the cross."⁹ Since space limitations do not allow full treatment of this topic, this article focuses on the place of Jesus Christ in our spiritual life.

Being in Christ provides a practical overview of the process of spiritual maturity. It introduces us to a model, a motivation, and a means of maturity. In Jesus' life we catch a glimpse of the nature of maturity. Luke declares that Jesus "increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2:52). Obviously our focus is on his human nature, for Jesus grew as all humans do. He was unable to speak Aramaic or write Hebrew at birth. Just as all babies, he needed to be potty trained, taught how to hold a cup, and how to walk.

To follow Jesus' life as a model is to grow in the mental, physical, spiritual, and relational dimensions of life. If we reverse Luke's order for these four areas, we create an order which seems more chronologically realistic. Just as we, Jesus first experienced the relational dimension as he entered the human world and was surrounded by parents and family. Relational maturity involves living in proper sensitivity to those around us. It includes communication, forgiveness, and learning to treat others as we wish to be treated (Matt. 7:12). Spiritual maturity relates to loving both God and our neighbor. It calls for a balance between contemplative love and the desire to delight in God, and the compassionate sensitivity of justice and involvement in the brokenness of society. Closely connected is the importance of stewardship. How we care for our resources, both financial and natural, indicates the balance and maturity of our spiritual lives. Physical maturity recognizes that our bodies are essential to life. Jesus was not embarrassed to enjoy wedding banquets and attend dinner parties. He also slept, exercised, and cared for his body. In our contemporary frenetic society, in which many experts estimate that 90 percent of doctor visits are related to stress, we

would certainly benefit by reclaiming this neglected dimension of maturity. Finally, we note that Jesus grew in wisdom. The way he used his mind provides us with a model for developing the mind of Christ. The proper use of our minds frees us to wrestle with doubt, to accept the apparent paradoxes of life, and to attain emotional health.

Further, being in Christ teaches us the importance of motivation. Why do we desire to become mature? Perhaps some of our good efforts are prompted by duty, guilt, or fear, and an attempt to impress God or others. However, a better source of motivation is grounded in gratitude, obedience, and love. When our desire is to please God rather than ourselves we are in a healthier position. Bernard of Clairvaux reminds us that "the remembrance of benefits is an incitement to praise our Benefactor."¹⁰

Being in Christ also presents us with an alternative means to grow toward spiritual maturity. While our own effort is necessary (God rarely does anything without our participation), it is never the major factor. Luke's Gospel regularly mentions how the Holy Spirit accompanied or guided Jesus in his life and ministry (cf., e.g., Luke 3:22; 4:1, 14, 16). Although the specific references fade as his public ministry unfolds, we may assume that Jesus continually relied upon the Spirit's power and direction. We too can do very little on our own, but in Christ we can do all things (Phil. 4:13; John 15:5). Scripture reminds us that we easily become confused and forget God's prior and primary role in this process. Paul told the Corinthians that while numerous people may be active in the spiritual process, growth always comes from God (1 Cor. 3:7).

If being in Christ forms the framework for our spiritual progress, how can we conceptualize this dynamic process? A common biblical image for it is pilgrimage. Essentially pilgrims have four characteristics. First, pilgrims are moving. This movement may be either physical, as when Abraham was called to a new place and obeyed God's command (Heb. 11:8), or spiritual, as people make inner progress in their journey with Christ. Second, this movement is not a random or haphazard wandering. Pilgrims are not spiritual vagabonds, aimlessly moving wherever they wish. Biblically, their clear direction or goal is often Zion, the heavenly city (Heb. 11:16). Such was the centerpiece of Jonathan Edwards's sermon on Hebrews 11:13-14, "The True Christian's Life a Journey Towards Heaven": "Journeying towards heaven ought to be our only work and business, so that all that we have and do should be in order to that."¹¹ Third, pilgrims have a particular focus. The Pharisees, for example, were preoccupied with externals. They sought to create highly polished surfaces that gave a better impression than reality (Matt. 23:25, 27; Mark 7:1-13). Pilgrims however, focus on life's interior. They hunger to spend time with God. Finally, pilgrims realize that the journey is difficult. They are willing to discipline themselves in order to complete the pilgrimage. Paul exhibits this characteristic in his desire to press on toward the goal (Phil. 3:12; 1 Tim. 4:15).

While Scripture describes many pilgrims, the specific example of Jesus' father, Joseph, may assist us to conceptualize this image for our journeys.

Matthew 1-2 contain four basic movements of Joseph's pilgrimage. First is the Tradition Phase (Matt. 1:1-17), comprised of a lengthy list of names that resembles genealogical gymnastics. Jews employed genealogies to determine a candidate's qualifications for priesthood and to confirm allotments for land. Further, genealogies described people's connectedness with their communal past. This sense of rootedness was a dynamic force in forming character. Matthew asserts that Joseph, and therefore his son Jesus, was a descendant of David and Abraham.

Like Joseph, we all begin life at the intersection of tradition. The fact that we are influenced for better or worse by our parents and surroundings is not the sole determinant, but it is certainly a major factor. Our early experiences form first impressions that later need to be tested and accepted, or reevaluated and altered. Probing further into this formative influence demands a distinction between tradition and traditionalism. Today, some who unwisely resist anything that resembles tradition are in reality objecting to traditionalism. The latter reflects the stuffy, oppressive rigidity which constricts and restricts our thoughts and actions. Jaroslav Pelikan clarifies the distinction this way: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead and traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."¹² Therefore, tradition is life giving and needs to be sought and valued, while traditionalism must be rejected before it debilitates us.

The positive component of tradition is developed by repetition and ritual. The primary acts of recalling, remembering, and reliving our heritage deepen our experience. The opposing element of traditionalism is created by a formalism that blindly accepts what has been spoken without reflection or questioning. It resembles a cruise control approach that minimizes our active participation by reducing us to mere spectators.

The Crisis Phase (Matt 1:18-19) is the second movement of this model of pilgrimage. Matthew's Gospel states that Joseph was engaged to Mary, a Jewish cultural process that included three distinct steps. Step one was the arrangement by respective parents of a spouse for their child. Step two, betrothal, was the category of Joseph and Mary. During this period, while considered husband and wife, they were not living together. Only with step three, the completion of a mandatory year, could they consummate the marriage. Joseph entered the crisis phase when he discovered that Mary was pregnant. Shattered by this reality, he concluded that Mary was guilty of adultery. Jewish tradition required him as a righteous person to divorce her. Yet, the thought of fulfilling this legal demand created tension in his heart, for he loved Mary and wanted her as his wife. This crisis forced him to examine his tradition before making the required response. His sensitive heart sought the least painful way of divorcing her. Faced with the choice of either a public divorce or a quiet dismissal, Joseph chose the latter.

That crisis involves choice is reflected in the fact that the Chinese character for crisis is composed of two words: danger and opportunity. Each situation that confronts our tradition has the potential for guiding us into a deeper relationship with God. At the same time crises can also weaken us if we respond

inappropriately or lack the proper support in facing this challenge. Joseph's struggle was instrumental in preparing him to receive Jesus as his adoptive son. We too face crises that shatter the regularity and familiarity of our souls and force us to examine our heritage. Such examination does not necessarily lead us to discard our past or minimize the value of our earlier years. The struggle may solidify those genesis beliefs and behaviors. Or possibly, after wrestling with these issues we will alter our thinking and doing to create more room for Christ in our life. Numerous events can instigate this much-needed evaluation of our traditions. Awareness of sin, sickness, inner emptiness, job loss, failure or other major or minor upheavals can bring us to the point of testing and altering the weak features and confirming the strengths of our traditions. Nor should it be naively assumed that once a crisis has been faced we are free of further challenges.

The Awareness Phase (Matt. 1:20-23), the third movement, brought Joseph great relief. After much internal emotional and spiritual struggle he reached a decision. Perhaps it was after this exhausting conflict had been resolved that he drifted off to sleep. In a dream an angel of the Lord visited him with startling words: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1: 20-21). This liberating news relieved his crisis. No longer did he have to divorce Mary and lose his love. The truth rescued him from making the wrong decision. Mary was not guilty of adultery as he had assumed. Rather the God of Abraham and David had intervened in a miraculous way to create her conception.

God won Joseph's attention by addressing him as a son of David, a phrase that connected him again with his tradition. The refreshing reality that flooded his soul through this dream contained important strands of truth. First, Mary was to bear a son whom God had already named Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. In other words, the long-awaited Messiah would be born to his wife. Second, this was a confirmation of the prophets who had shaped Joseph's heritage and faith. Third, this child would be called Immanuel, God with us. Joseph's understanding, limited by his first-century context, was sufficient to guide his emerging faith. His faith, as ours, is more than intellectual content and propositional beliefs; it is the sum total of a response that initially brings us to discover Jesus Christ.

Our awareness of Christ will either enhance or stifle our relationship with others, for Christianity, regardless of how personal, is never a private matter. Joseph's great love for Mary led to an encounter that provided spiritual insight concerning the coming Messiah. As both he and Mary recognized the operative presence of God they were able to discuss their individual experiences of both the angel visits and the dreams. The communal aspect of reflecting, testing, and experiencing the indwelling Christ in each other greatly aids our Christian transformation.

Movement four is the Obedience Phase (Matt. 1:24-25). Awareness is important but it cannot stand alone. Head, or even heart, knowledge is never

enough. True awareness inspires a response. Joseph demonstrated this component by fulfilling the three specific tasks revealed in his dream: to take Mary as his wife, to refrain from marital relations until the child was born, and to name the child Jesus (Matt. 1:24-25).

The Old Testament narrative of King Saul in 1 Samuel 15 is a powerful commentary on the importance of obedience in our relationship with God. When Saul refused God's command to destroy utterly the animals and property of the Amalekites, he was rejected from being king over Israel. His defense was that the best of the captured goods would be offered to God as a sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:21). But that was not what God commanded him to do. Samuel, speaking the mind of God, underlines both the crucial dimension of obedience and the folly of all such human rationalization: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22). Saul's tragic disobedience cautions us against quickly sidestepping the commitment factor in our relationship with Christ.

A brief etymological background of the word obedience will enlarge our understanding. It combines the Latin terms *ob* and *audire*. The English meaning is "to listen to." Susan Muto and Adrian van Kaam amplify that meaning when they say that obedience "is our ability to listen to new levels of meaning in events that occur, no matter how challenging or painful they may be."¹³ This understanding not only reduces the harshness of obedience but also expands our realization of its importance. More than merely fulfilling certain duties, obedience is an attentiveness that is sensitive and responsive to God, our world, and ourselves. While there is a distinction between obedience and discipline, there is enough commonality to benefit from the words of Br. David Steindl-Rast. He contrasts the rigid and debilitating concept of regimentation with the liberating and inspiring principle of discipline: "Discipline is the attitude of the disciple, the pupil who looks into the teacher's eyes and is mirrored in the teacher's pupil."¹⁴

Obedience yields rich benefits. As the Joseph narrative demonstrates, obedience helps integrate and further deepen the insights discovered during the awareness phase. Listening has the potential to convert principles from the head down into the heart. The writer of Exodus says it this way: "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Exod. 19:5; cf. Deut. 5:29). Further examination of Joseph's experience reveals different levels or types of obedience. Ethically he was commanded to keep Mary and not divorce her. Relationally he was instructed not to engage in intercourse until Jesus was born. Spiritually he was reminded that Jesus' name was predetermined by his saving mission. Our journey also confronts us with a multiplicity of levels and types of commitment.

Pilgrimage itself is the integrating structure of Joseph's journey (Matt. 2:13-23). He may have thought, or at least hoped, that if he followed God's commands life would become simpler. The ensuing story of his relationship to Jesus reveals otherwise. His joy and pride as a new father, confirmed by the felicitous greetings

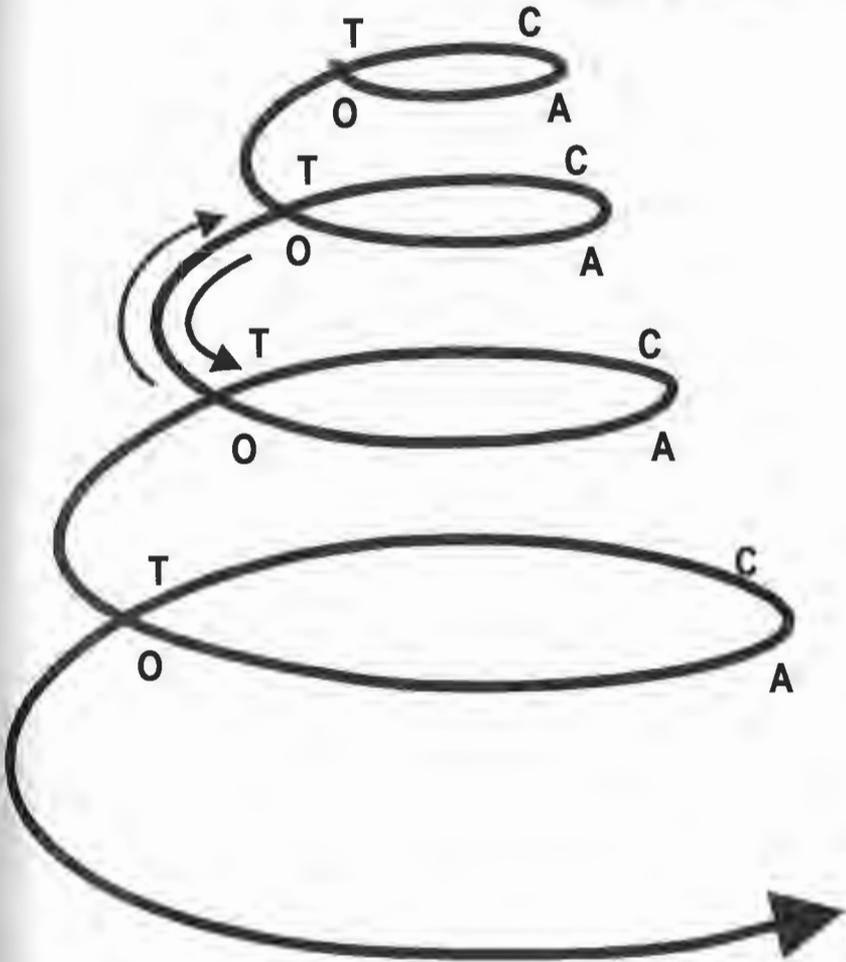
of the shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and the Magi, were short-lived. The joyful celebration was shattered by the alarming warning of the angel (Matt.2:13). King Herod, jealous and insecure, was about to seek and destroy the child. Joseph was commanded to take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt for safety. Thus began the pilgrimage that eventually led the holy family to settle in Nazareth. The movement within this pilgrimage was never random but always carefully choreographed by God for the safety of Jesus and his parents.

Reviewing Joseph's journey according to Matthew's Gospel illustrates the reality of life. The fact that he was the earthly father of Jesus, God's son, neither reduced nor removed struggle from his life or faith. A chart of his pilgrimage reveals progress that was neither continuous nor linear. As illustrated by the diagram opposite, the cyclical pattern of his journey resembles a helix. Each cycle includes the four phases of tradition, crisis, awareness, and obedience. If Joseph obediently follows what has been revealed to him, his maturity deepens. Had he refused God's call, he would have remained stuck at that place. Maturity in Christ is depicted by moving downward and inward, suggesting the need for continued integration within our life. However, when we resist God we cycle upward to the surface reflecting greater superficiality. By attempting to capture the dynamic movement of pilgrimage, this model suggests that there are times when we need to retrace the events and experiences of an earlier phase. The increasing width of each cycle implies that the more we move through each phase the more that aspect will enlarge and deepen.

Before moving on, some general observations serve to summarize the Joseph paradigm. Although we have examined only a brief portion of his life, the phases through which he passed may be representative of others beyond his experience. Whether we study other biblical characters or ourselves, there appears to be a transferability to this model. All people are formed by their traditions or their past. We all experience crises and setbacks that require us to examine more closely our earlier perceptions and beliefs. The resultant resolution and new awareness must then be integrated into our life to guide our further journeys. Of course, sometimes the Holy Spirit may lead us from tradition to awareness without passing through crisis. At other times we may be at two or more phases simultaneously. Joseph's pilgrimage creates not a structure but rather a process of phases normally experienced throughout life.

At this point we may explore the issue of where people become united with Christ. Or to phrase it differently, where does conversion take place within the Joseph paradigm? Does it happen during the obedience phase when people act on what they have discovered? Or does it happen more through tradition as they are formed by their environment? Sacramentally sensitive people who see grace very actively involved in baptism may favor the tradition phase. Those who appreciate the need to make a commitment once they become aware of the principles of faith would likely prefer the obedience phase. However, in actuality, conversion is a process that extends throughout our journey. This is especially true when people experience conversions to areas of life previously excluded from Christ's reign.

T	Tradition
C	Crisis
A	Awareness
O	Obedience



This raises the practical pastoral question of what happens when people in Christ get stuck in their spiritual journeys. Life and Scripture suggest two possibilities. One is represented by people who reach a stage of weariness with growth and change and simply want to stop. Rather than continue to deepen their maturity in Christ they become stagnant, become settlers rather than pilgrims. Settlers are interested in defining and enforcing rules that create safe boundaries. These may be ideological, situational, or other types of protective walls. For whatever reason, they refuse to go forward. Carried to extremes, this becomes the response of the Pharisees. Instead of being receptive to God's message as proclaimed by Jesus they created their own traditions and in the process denied the power of God's life-giving message (Mark 7:8-9).

The other possibility is represented by pilgrims who work through their questions and doubts. Paradoxically, pilgrims mature most, not when things are going well, but when they are growing through crisis. Thus, crisis can offer opportunity for new life.

Reality, however, requires one additional clarification. Many people in crisis do not experience deepening spiritual maturity. In fact, struggles may bring doubts that cause them to grow distant from God. This too may assist in the conversion of dynamic pilgrims into static settlers. Moreover, while we must occasionally travel part of the journey alone, it is always better to belong to a community of pilgrims. It is essential not to foster an individuality in our spiritual life that matches the misguided focus of much contemporary life. Healthy Christian spirituality has always emphasized the need and value of journeying with others. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* expresses this clearly. Its first part centers on Christian who, throughout his journey to the Celestial City, has a companion. He also stops at the House of the Interpreter for spiritual guidance on his pathway. The value of community is even clearer in the second part with its focus on Christiana, Christian's wife. In addition to her four children, she has Mercy as her traveling partner. Jonathan Edwards makes the same point in the conclusion of his sermon quoted above: "Let Christians help one another in going this journey. There are many ways that Christians might greatly help and forward one another in their way to heaven: by religious conference and otherwise. And persons greatly need help in this way, which is, as I have often observed, a difficult way. Let Christians be exhorted to go this journey, as it were, in company, conversing together about their journey's end and assisting one another. Company is very desirable in a journey, but in no journey so much as this. Let Christians go united, and not fall out by the way, which will be the way to hinder one another, but use all means they can to help one another. This is the way to be more successful in traveling and to have the more joyful meeting at their Father's house in glory."¹⁵ Today many people follow Edwards's advice by finding support and encouragement for their journey through small groups.

However, more important than the question of what happens when people get stuck on their pilgrimage is why it happens at all. Why would people who have been growing and moving in the proper path stop and become static? This

question leads us to the fascinating intersection of biblical psychology and spiritual theology. Broadly speaking, we can summarize the reasons why people get stuck or stalled in maturing in Christ into three general categories: cultural, external, and internal. Practically speaking, these barriers may be experienced in any of the four phases of tradition, crisis, awareness, or obedience in the Joseph paradigm. These factors are similar to speed bumps. Although some drivers attempt to avoid these barriers by driving around them, their efforts are frequently unsuccessful. As Diogenes Allen wisely comments: "If we feel that we have not progressed very far in the spiritual journey, perhaps we have not wrestled seriously enough with what hinders us from experiencing Christ's presence more fully."¹⁶ The more we understand the nature of these obstacles, the more likely we are to minimize their entropy in our spiritual formation.

Obviously, our Western culture is not conducive to growth in Christ. Given free reign, it will make us competitive and individualistic, expecting to receive everything we desire with a minimum of effort. It will falsely root our identity in performance and consumption. It will continuously assault us with noise and push us to travel at ever increasing speed. Above all, it will afflict us with a busyness that leaves no room for noticing, a central characteristic of being in Christ. Thus, as Janet Ruffing writes, busyness is no friend to Christian spirituality: "When I am busy being busy, my field of awareness constricts and I tend not to notice my surroundings or other people."¹⁷ Diogenes Allen's reminder of the "habitual presence" of God increases the importance of cultivating this awareness.¹⁸ The importance of listening and watching, of being attentive and awake, is frequently on the lips of Jesus as he calls people to awareness (e.g., Matt. 24:42; 26:4; Mark 4:3, 9; 7:14; 13:35; Luke 9:35). In each case the imperative mood of the verb heightens the urgency of his call.

In a culture that prides itself on busyness we need this liberating wisdom of the early desert tradition: One day a hunter found Anthony relaxing outside his cell with the brothers and rebuked him. "Anthony said, 'Bend your bow and shoot an arrow,' and he did so. 'Bend it again and shoot another,' and he did—and again and again. The hunter said, 'Father, if I keep my bow always stretched it will break.' 'So it is with the monk,' replied Anthony; 'if we push ourselves beyond measure we will break; it is right for us from time to time to relax our efforts.'"¹⁹ When the hunter heard these words he was convicted and edified and the other brothers went home strengthened.

Externally we face another set of factors that can stall or stagnate our Christian maturity. It reminds us of the priority of relationships. Many contemporary Christians struggle with the residual pain of brokenness experienced throughout their lives. These distorted relationships often manifest themselves in surprising ways.²⁰ A.W. Tozer once remarked that the most critical issue before the church is her image or perception of God. "For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move

toward our mental image of God."²¹ There is massive psychological and biblical evidence that our perception of God is formed by our relationships with our parents and other significant persons in our early years. If our image of God is distorted, it is difficult to delight in and hunger to know God more intimately. Therefore, we need to revisit our image of God periodically.

In this regard, many Christians over the centuries have found it helpful to seek the counsel of a spiritual director. These companions of the soul guide us to notice the presence and working of God's Spirit within our lives so that we may respond more cooperatively with God. One sagacious guide often addresses two questions to people struggling with their perception of God: Do you love the God you believe in? Does the God you believe in actually exist? If we do not love God, it is difficult to follow God. Further, to serve a counterfeit image of God is potentially dangerous for us and all those to whom we relate. A most helpful way to cultivate a healthy image of God is to pray the Psalms, the ancient prayer book that stretches our minds and stirs our hearts. Strongly recommended is the ancient practice of *lectio divina* that combines the reflective and affective methods to integrate Scripture into our lives.²²

Internally, we are brought to the most elusive and neglected reasons for spiritual dryness. Again, the wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers is helpful. Diogenes Allen adapts and develops this wisdom for contemporary readers around the teachings of Evagrius (345?-399) and his understanding of the eight deadly *thoughts*. In the sixth century, Gregory the Great reduced this number by one and renamed them the seven deadly *sins*. Diogenes Allen navigates us through this important distinction: "The earlier tradition of Evagrius and Cassian, however, stresses that what human beings wrestle with are not sins so much as *thoughts* which stir up passions and cause emotional turmoil."²³ The desert tradition taught that if people were able to understand and bring their thoughts under the control of Christ, their chance of falling into sin would be reduced. Thus, its guidance was clear: Notice your underlying thoughts and passions and recognize how they prevent you from following Christ. Readers familiar with this tradition's strong ascetical tendencies will recognize why they engaged in these spiritual habits. Through self-discipline they sought to be more faithful athletes of God (1 Cor. 9:24-27) and not hinder the work of God's grace in their lives.

Our approach will likely be less severe than their tradition, but the value of spiritual habits and disciplines must not be ignored. Dallas Willard challenges us with the perhaps surprising news that we should engage in disciplines that are difficult: "The need for extensive practice of a discipline is an indication of our *weakness*, not our strength. We can even lay it down as a rule of thumb that if it is *easy* for us to engage in a certain discipline, we probably don't need to practice it. The disciplines we need to practice are precisely the ones we are *not* 'good at' and hence do not enjoy."²⁴ Another valuable question in relationship to spiritual habits is raised by Marjorie Thompson: "What does God want to accomplish in me through this practice?"²⁵

Evagrius's list of deadly thoughts included an appetite for food, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, accidia (that is, boredom that becomes despair), vainglory, and pride. Consider pride alone, and how it can mask itself with a respectability that others envy. This danger increases when we assume that we have achieved something by our own efforts and hence become more self-sufficient and less dependent upon God. If humility is the most helpful attitude for growth, then pride is certainly the greatest obstacle. The truth is that we may be trapped by any of these deadly thoughts because it is difficult to sustain continuous growth and change. This means that no one is ever completely a pilgrim; there are periods and moods of the settler in us all. We are hybrids. Our hope is to be more centered on maturity than on immaturity.²⁶

In conclusion, I offer a brief comment on this article's initial question: How do we recognize progress in maturity? Obviously everything said above suggests that it is difficult to measure the work of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the fact that no readily quantifiable indicators exist does not prevent us from noticing signs of growth. As we grow in our desire and ability to love God and our neighbor, we demonstrate increased maturity in Christ. Moreover, since sanctification is the lifelong process of growing out of sin and into Christ, biblical passages such as Colossians 3:1-17 can serve as signposts to mark our progress. Through self-examination (both personal and communal) we can ask whether our focus is becoming more God centered (vs. 1-4), whether we are reducing our sinful behaviors and attitudes (vs. 5-11), whether we are growing in healthier relationships with one another (vs. 12-14), whether Christ's word is dwelling more fully in us, and whether our life is more radiant with gratitude and worship to God (vss. 15-17).

Recall the words of Jesus with which we began. Following Christ is a process of becoming (Mark 1:17). As we seek to be attentive and responsive to the Holy Spirit, and to grow in union with Christ, we shall mature in Christ and thus bring glory to God. In the meantime, we can pray with the hymn writer, William Williams:

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
hold me with thy powerful hand;
bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
feed me till I want no more,
feed me till I want no more.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 19.

² *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1967), 5. His initial chapter,

"Reflections on the Problem of the Gradual Ascent to Christian Perfection," offers additional insights to this discussion on the nature and origin of a staged progress of spiritual maturity.

³ See Les Steele, *On the Way: A Practical Theology of Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), 67-98 for a helpful summary of these and other developmental models.

⁴ *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1986), 94-95.

⁵ *St. Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*, trans. Lionel R.M. Strachan (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 140.

⁶ *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. W. R. Owens (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 60 (no. 233).

⁷ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.17.2.

⁸ *Subversive Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 27.

⁹ *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 20-21. For an excellent classical treatment of the nature and functioning of trinitarian spirituality see John Owen, *Communion with God*, abridged by R. J. K. Law (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991).

¹⁰ *The Love of God*, abridged and ed. James M Houston (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1983), 177.

¹¹ *Sermons and Discourses 1730-1733*, vol. 17, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), 435.

¹² *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

¹³ *Commitment: Key to Christian Maturity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 27.

¹⁴ *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 54.

¹⁵ Op. cit., 446.

¹⁶ *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1997), 93.

¹⁷ Janet Ruffing "Resisting the Demon of Busyness," *Spiritual Life*, 41, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 8. Additionally Diogenes Allen asserts, "As long as our attention is distracted because we ourselves are divided in our wishes, wants, desires, and hopes, we cannot attend to the word of God," op. cit., 81.

¹⁸ Op. cit., 30, cf. 83.

¹⁹ Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), xxiii; cf. 3-4.

²⁰ Leanne Payne contends that three basic barriers which block a Christian from growing deeper in Christ are lack of self-acceptance and the failure to receive forgiveness and grant forgiveness to others. Payne, *Restoring the Christian Soul: Overcoming Barriers to Completion in Christ Through Healing Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

²¹ *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 1.

²² The literature on *lectio divina* or spiritual reading is extensive. For a brief contemporary presentation which includes guidelines for using *lectio divina* in both

personal and group settings see Tom Schwanda, "Praying Scriptures with Head and Heart," *The Banner*, 133, no. 23 (Nov. 9, 1998), 24-26.

²³ *Op. cit.*, 66.

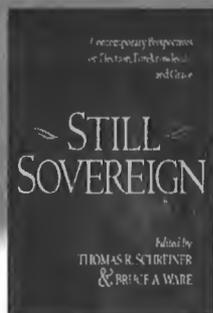
²⁴ *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 138.

²⁵ *Soul Feast* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 72.

²⁶ For a self-reporting instrument which assists persons in placing themselves along the pilgrim-settler continuum, see Richard Peace, *Pilgrimage: A Workbook on Christian Growth* (Los Angeles: Acton House, 1976), 12-15.

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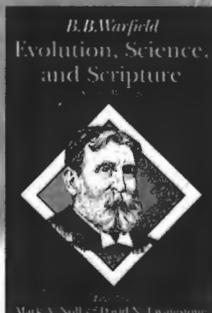
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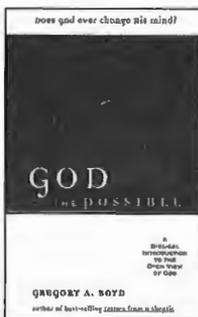
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