

# EDUCATING FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH: AN APPROACH TO EVALUATE AND MEASURE SPIRITUAL MATURATION

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## *Introduction*

The intent of this article is to develop a model of educating towards spiritual maturation. The article begins by establishing goals and objectives for educating towards spiritual maturation. These goals or “pre-requisites” provide a framework to assess educational models of experiences within the church. Once the educational curriculum is identified the article provides a means of evaluating spiritual maturation. This evaluation process will assess the initial goals or “pre-requisites” developed for educating for spiritual maturation. This “praxis cycle” will be the basis for establishing a model for educating toward spiritual maturation for the Church.

## *Goals and Objectives for Spiritual Maturation*

Beginning by establishing goals and objectives as foundations for educating toward spiritual maturation includes three aspects, the cognitive, the affective, and the volitional. The cognitive refers to the rational or knowing aspect of spiritual maturation. The affective refers to the relational or internal aspects of spiritual maturation. The volitional refers to the active or doing aspect of spiritual maturation. These three aspects are what make up spiritual maturation in the believer. The first objective is to understand that these three aspects are in balance with each other. Each of these areas needs to be kept in balance in order for us to have a holistic approach to educating for spiritual maturation. It is easy to focus in the areas that are most comfortable and most natural. If focus is given to one aspect then a balanced view of spiritual maturation is not maintained. The goal of educating for spiritual maturation is to help people move from their personal trappings and to focus on the other aspects. Along with this idea of trapping, it is important not to place someone in our own personal aspect of focus. This approach could result in sheltering them from gaining a balanced approach to spiritual maturation. It is easy to attack others who are not on the same spiritual plane, because of viewing spiritual maturation from our own vantage point. Therefore, spiritual maturation includes all three aspects and they must be kept in balance with each other.

A second goal or objective is that each of these three aspects must interact with each other. It is important to maintain a balanced view of these three aspects and to understand that the three are always interacting with each other. The error of these extreme views is that they do not interact with the other two aspects. For example, when viewing the knowing aspect as central to spiritual maturation that he you neglect the other aspects, and vice versa. Spiritual maturation means we must move from one corner of the triangle to the other two corners, we must interact with all three.

A third objective or goal is to create an ecology for spiritual maturation. Perhaps the most important characteristic of the developmental theories is its capacity of relating widely to the whole range of human attributes. These developmental theories provide a means for us to

imagine more precisely how spiritual maturation might look if it were to come more clearly into focus, regarding an ecology of spiritual maturation refers to the interdependence of each aspect.

As Whihoit and Dettoni state, “The basic presupposition is that everything functions within an integrated whole-no individual component or system exists without reference to what exists around it” (1995 14). This concept of ecology suggests that any system is internally interrelated, that every part is joined together in such a way as to affect each other. This includes the five aspects of human personality which is the physical, rational, emotional, social and moral aspects. An ecology includes creating the right environment for spiritual maturation. In order for us to help people balance and interact within these three aspects, it means we need to create an environment that promotes spiritual maturation. This ecology forces us to ask such questions as: What kind of environment promotes spiritual maturation? How can we help people make more ecological changes in order to move toward spiritual maturation? These questions help us understand that spiritual maturation is best fostered in an environment that provides a learning community. This includes the support of others, the openness to different aspects of spiritual maturation, and the interaction of their environment.

Jesus modeled this type of ecology as he interacted with the environment. For example, Jesus went to Samaria on his way back to Galilee. (John 4:1-42) It was unheard of for someone to travel through Samaria because it was seen as unclean to the Jewish people. In John 4, Jesus talks with the Samaritan woman at the well. Through this ecological interaction she believes in Him as the Messiah (4:25). He intentionally went into different ecological settings to expose himself and his disciples to other people. This exposure gave them a greater understanding of spiritual maturation. Jesus modeled these three aspects in his ecology of spiritual maturation as he spent time away in prayer (being), teaching Scripture (knowing), and by being an activist for change (doing). Jesus’ example reminds us of the importance of an ecology of educating for spiritual maturation.

### *Toward a Definition of Spiritual Maturation*

In our attempt to establish goals and objectives for spiritual maturation we must now begin to work toward a definition of spiritual maturation. A definition of spiritual maturation is not easily established. Spiritual maturation includes the balance, the interaction, and the ecology of these three aspects. The cognitive (knowing), the relational (being), and the volitional (doing) are really the essence of spiritual maturation. Also, in Ted Ward’s book *Values begin at Home*, he uses the metaphor of the “hand model” as a relationship between the developmental theories to our working definition and understanding of spirituality. Also, Ward emphasizes the five aspects of the human personality (physical, cognitive, affective, social, and moral), through which we have access to the individual’s spirituality can assist in growth and maturation. This has value in understanding the relationship of the whole person to the work of the Spirit in their life. In Wards’ metaphor of the “hand model” each of these five aspects are represented by each finger. The essence, spirituality, or the heart of our being is represented by the palm. He suggests that the palm is the essence, the spirituality of a person. It encompasses all five aspects and actually holds them together. Also, Ward suggests that the palm is “jointed.” God made the human personality as a means for us to understand the human psyche and to understand our spirituality. God works through the natural aspects of the human personality in forming and

shaping our spiritual maturation.

The understanding of the developmental aspects of the human personality provides us a means to understand the meaning of spiritual maturation. It is these empirically based aspects of the human personality that provide avenues of spiritual maturation in the life of the believer. We see each of these aspects in all of life. It is in all of the areas of our lives where spiritual maturation is seen. All of these aspects make up spiritual maturation. Spirituality must be defined in this holistic way. We are not more spiritual by doing “spiritual” things such as prayer or reading the Bible as compared to playing volleyball with our family. All are a part of spiritual maturation.

Spiritual maturation is the tension of obedience to God’s commands and the abiding Spirit that works in us. We can see the significance of faith as cognitive, affective, and volitional. Abiding faith in Jesus Christ is faith that knows, that loves, and that acts. Faith is an essential aspect of education for spiritual maturation (Downs 1995 17-18). It is freeing to know that educating for spiritual maturation is not totally dependent on the volitional, but is likewise dependent upon the relational. It is really our trusting in the human developmental aspects as a means of God working in us. The Spirit of God is at work through the developmental aspects of the human personality. As we are obedient to God’s commands, He is abiding in us to manifest Himself through the fruits of the Spirit. This is done by “abiding” in Christ, like a branch “abides” by the nutrients of its vine (John 15). If we abide in Christ, we can rest in who we are, in the way God has created us. One can rest in the fact that our spiritual fruits will be a manifestation of our abiding in Him. Therefore, spiritual maturation isn’t what we do; it is what God does as we abide in Him. The fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) are a manifestation of spiritual maturation.

As we move toward a definition of spiritual maturation we can state that it includes a growing relationship with Jesus Christ which is seen in the manifestation of the fruits of the Spirit. Therefore, a definition of spiritual maturation is “a desire to know, love, and serve God that is seen by the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as we abide in Him through obedience to God’s command to love and serve others.”

### *Evaluation of Spiritual Maturation*

In the previous sections of this paper the objectives of spiritual maturation and the educational experiences a church can provide to further one’s spiritual maturation. However, no educational program or instructional curriculum is complete without the ability to assess or evaluate the outcomes of the educational process. If the previous can be regarded as “pre-requisites” to spiritual maturation, what we address in the following section of the paper should be considered the “post-requisites” of spiritual maturation. This section will focus on three critical questions: (1) Can we evaluate spiritual maturation? (2) If so, how can we do objectively evaluation through an instrumentation? Finally, (3) What are the measurable points of spiritual maturity? In answering these pertinent questions, we will discover the evaluative process of spiritual maturation.

### *Can Spiritual Maturation Be Evaluated?*

A related question would be “If we cannot, then how can any valid educational process be developed that is conducive to spiritual maturation?” If education requires evaluation, as Tyler suggests in *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (1969), and if spirituality is incapable of being evaluated, then it is obvious that education, in a formal sense, cannot be formally done for the purpose of aiding in one’s spiritual maturation. In short, it is an educational irony to suggest that spiritual maturation *cannot* be measured. We would contend that spiritual maturation can be measured based on three convictions, coming from Scripture, developmental theories, and the logic/reason behind our definition of spirituality.

First, Scripture itself seems to indicate that spiritual maturation can be assessed and evaluated. The New Testament does not provide developmental stages for spiritual maturation, but it does provide numerous metaphors of development, suggesting that spiritual maturation is designed to be a progressive life-long process. For example, Christians are described as being fed on a diet ranging from milk to meat, bearing fruit of the Spirit, growing from natural to carnal to spiritual, maturing from infants to adulthood, moving from worldliness to godliness, or knowing to doing, etc.

Simply noting that the Scriptures do illustrate a developmental process involved as one spiritually matures is not enough. Can a Christian measure or assess another Christian’s spiritual maturation? Yes . . . to a degree. It is possible, and legitimate, that Christians assess the spiritual maturity of another Christian, especially for the purpose of ministry. For example, in the selection of church leaders, a list of qualifications of qualified individuals is given (Acts 6:1-6, 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1:5-9) which describe the spiritual maturity of the one being considered for the position. Those making the selection would have to be able to discern through assessment of the spiritual maturity against a given standard of spiritual norms those who were qualified for the position. Inversely, Paul’s condemnation of the sexually immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5 did indeed require him not only to make a *moral* judgment, but a *spiritual* one as well. It is indeed possible for a Christian to assess the spiritual maturity of another Christian, noting its strengths and weaknesses, and the relative attachment of the individual to Christ.

### *Comparison to Developmental Theories*

Ted Ward’s “hand model” of the relation of developmental theories, as previously mentioned, to our working definition and understanding of spirituality is very enlightening at this point. Likewise, Perry Downs’ emphasis on the five aspects of the human personality (physical, cognitive, affective, social, and moral), through which we have access to the individual’s spirituality and can assist in growth and maturation, as value in understanding the relationship of the whole person to the work of the Spirit in their life. However, one fundamental difference which is repeatedly is that while the five aspects of human personality are *empirically* verifiable, measurable, and understandable, *spirituality* remains non-empirical and hence its developmental stages are indiscernible. Ward does note that the palm, which is where he identifies the Spirit and spirituality (i.e. central to the five empirical aspects of human existence), is “jointed.” Likewise, he suggests that if the five aspects of human personality are obviously developmental in nature, then should we not regard spirituality as being developmental even if we are unclear or removed from a full understanding of its maturation? Ward writes that because these five empirical avenues are open to us, they “invite the educator to see each human life as a unique

person emerging through common aspects that can be observed, measured, and evaluated” (Wilhoit and Dettoni 1995, 16).

Evaluation of spiritual maturation is possible since spiritual maturity is a developmental process directly related to the five aspects of human existence, which are all developmental in nature. One’s spiritual maturation is in many cases dependent on the other developmental patterns active in the believer’s life, which is especially true during the childhood years, when they are not yet in the what Piaget has called the formal operations stage. Hence, if spirituality is “limited” by the developmental levels attained in the five aspects of human personality, then spiritual maturity must be attained in “stages.” Is *spirituality* any less tangible than morality? Or social? Or cognitive? Is the problem reality, or a research theory and instrument?

In Downs’ *Teaching for Spiritual Growth* (1993) and Wilhoit and Dettoni’s *Nurture That is Christian* (1995) they each describe the developmental theories related to Christian educational theory and practice. All the theories discussed in these two books lead to the perception that humans develop in such a way as to lead them to self sufficiency and their ability to join the community. Whether it is physical, cognitive, affective, social, or moral development; ultimately their fruition is a wholly developed human being who is able to maintain his own existence in community. As the apostle Paul states,

. . . to prepare God’s people for *works of service* [social], so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach *unity in the faith* and in the *knowledge* [cognitive] of the Son of God and become *mature* [moral], attaining to the *whole measure* of the fullness of Christ [moral]. Then we will *no longer be infants* [physical] tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, *speaking the truth in love* [affective], we will in all things *grow up* [physical] into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, *as each part does its work* [social] (Ephesians 4:12-16 emphasis added).

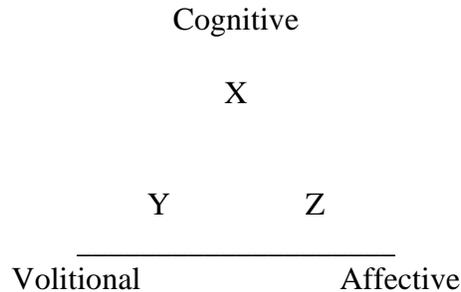
Paul does not provide a developmental model of spiritual maturation, but in this metaphor-rich description is one of a mature Christian fully functioning in a mature congregation. In this description of individual and cooperate spirituality, Paul uses metaphors to describe the mature Christian, all of which tend to have some kind of link to the developmental stages of human beings. Spiritual maturation does occur in stages, almost certainly dictated or heavily influenced by the developmental stages of the five aspects of personality. Paul’s purpose in ministry was to “present everyone perfect in Christ” (Colossians 1:28), and this perfection was indeed not instantaneous, but accessible through the five developmental aspects of human existence (Estep and Maddix, 1998).

### *Measuring Spiritual Maturation*

Let us not battle over semantics. No, you cannot measure the indwelling presence of the Spirit in a Christian life. No, you cannot measure how spiritual a Christian is, since we do not

have clearly defined spiritual maturation stages. However, yes, you can measure *how* a individual Christian's spiritual maturation is occurring.

After presenting models of spiritual development, reading about them in texts and articles, and hearing various speakers/professors explain their particular understanding of spirituality as demonstrated in the figure below; and then be told that it cannot be measured by any kind of instrumentation, it indeed challenges us. If spiritual maturation can be *defined*, *described*, and *mapped* . . . why *can't* it be tested? It would seem that if we suggest that we cannot assess spiritual maturation, then perhaps our conceptual map needs to be revised.



Spirituality is the expression of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, making expression in the cognitive, affective, or volitional corners (X, Y, Z). If this is true, then why can an instrument *not* be developed to create to ascertain which corner the individual Christian is found, and how far along the three axes (x-z, z-y, or y-x) he may find himself? The ability to place a “grid” over the triangle, and develop a Leikert scale for each grid point could at least offer a primitive rendering of the individual’s spirituality and the direction it is presently growing. The instrument could be taken by the individual, and by a close friend who would answer it for him. In so doing, it rules out more deliberate error. Such an instrument would, for example, state that John Doe’s spiritual maturation is heavily in the cognitive corner of the theoretical map, and is moving steadily toward the affective corner, along the x-z axis, but is not making progress toward the volitional (Estep and Maddix, 1998).

Once again, if spiritual maturation can be *defined*, *described*, and *mapped* . . . why *can't* it be tested? The instrument is purely theoretical, and is based on a well established model of spiritual maturation, and it avoids the “spiritual gift inventory” problem. Spiritual gift inventories are helpful in assessing a person’s abilities and gifts, but do not measure a person’s spiritual maturation. It would provide at least a partially objective test result to determine the pattern of spiritual maturity an individual Christian possesses.

### *CAVs in Spiritual Maturation*

What does the spiritual person look like? What are the outcomes of spiritual maturation? This section will discuss some of the basic expressions of spiritual maturity found in the cognitive, affective, and volitional corners of our spiritual map. This by no means should be considered a comprehensive list of outcomes, but indicators of development in these “corners” of the spiritual map. This list is representative of a holistic approach to spiritual maturation as

reflected in Ted Ward's "hand" analogy. They include the cognitive aspects (knowing), the affective aspects (being), and the Volitional aspects (doing).

Cognitive:

- (1) Knowledge of Scriptural content
- (2) Knowledge of theological constructions
- (3) Able to formulate their own theological viewpoints based on Scripture.
- (4) Able "to *distinguish good from evil*" (Hebrews 5:14).
- (5) Able to present the truth claims in logical and systematic ways.

Affective:

- (1) "The goal of this command is *love* . . .
- (2) which comes from a *pure heart* . . .
- (3) and a *good conscience* . . .
- (4) and a *sincere faith*," i.e. sincerity as being internal (1 Timothy 1:5).
- (5) Spiritual disciplines are results of spiritual maturity, as well as contributing factors.

Volitional:

- (1) Involvement in the ministry within the church and community (neighborhood)
- (2) Actively opposes social injustices
- (3) Works with the poor, indigent, and needy
- (4) Political action on behalf of human rights and needs
- (5) Participate in theological praxis

## *Conclusion*

This article is as much about terminology as it is about theology, developmentalism, and education. While the entire subject is a matter of discussion and continual re-evaluation, one fact is sure: It is the church's mission, as the people of God, to provide a conduit to spiritual maturation. As Christian educators, we must all focus not on the lecture, or the student, or the teacher, but on the holistic environment of instruction so as to make it conducive to spiritual maturation.

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