

Stages of spiritual maturity

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HAWKINS, Texas—The apostle Paul in Hebrews 5 and 6 reveals his frustration with people who have occupied space in God's church for quite some time but have not progressed beyond an elemental understanding of godly knowledge.

These people should have developed an appetite for solid food but in actuality had not yet become weaned from metaphorical milk. In Hebrews 5:13, as well as 1 Corinthians 3:2, Paul gently reprimands those who should have prepared themselves to teach others but, sadly, still need to have someone teach them the basics.

In 1 Corinthians 13:11 Paul suggests that "when I was a child, I understood as a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things. In this article I would like to offer some helpful adjustments we can make in our spiritual growth, allowing ourselves to put away childish things, changing our orientation from carnal to spiritual.

Self-centeredness: the paddle

The metaphor I choose to exemplify the childish approach to spirituality is the canoe paddle. The canoe paddle offers only an either-or approach: Either push the paddle out of the left side or push it out of the right side to make the canoe go in a straight line.

This approach we could characterize as:

- Two-valued, polarized, tending to extremes and excesses.
- Reacting to outer physical circumstances rather than responding to inner cues.
- Showing extreme sensitivity to its own self-interests but oblivious to the interests of others.
- Requiring clearly marked boundaries to feel secure.
- Tending to react impatiently and rigidly, intolerant of complexity and confused about gray areas.

■ Showing excessive zeal about the letter of the law but ignorance of the spiritual intent.

The immature in the faith tend to see things as black and white, with no degrees in the middle of the continuum: a yardstick mentality. For example:

- Can I take a walk in the woods on the Sabbath day?
- What constitutes the minimum length of time to pray?
- What constitutes the least amount of fasting I need to grow spiritually?

Peter (before Christ designated him an apostle) frequently and impetuously dived from one extreme to the other. The night Jesus instituted the new Passover symbols He said to Peter, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 13:8).

Peter responded with his childish either-or canoe-paddle reaction, "Oh, in that case wash all of me!" (John 13:9).

The Scriptures contain many examples of spiritually immature people flip-flopping from one extreme to the other.

In 1 Corinthians 5:2-13 Paul reprimands the Corinthian congregation for becoming puffed up with pride in their tolerance of differences, in this case allowing an incestuous relationship in their midst.

When Paul recommends disfellowshipping, the canoe-paddle extremist Corinthians went to the other ditch, showing no tolerance for this man after he had repented, forcing Paul to write a second letter requesting reinstatement of the repentant man (2 Corinthians 2:6-11).

Many parents undoubtedly are frustrated when, upon correcting a child, they watch their offspring flip-flop in exaggerated self-condemnation:

"I just can't do anything right."

We recognize self-absorption as perhaps the most dominant trait of the emotionally and the spiritually immature.

Parents of infants realize those precious, lovable bundles of joy are also 100 percent carnal, self-absorbed, unconcerned about how their needs and wants have to adjust and accommodate the needs of others.

Infantile behavior, whether in infants or the 40-year-old brat on the freeway, is rude behavior (1 Corinthians 13:5). The infantlike are concerned about rights, liberties and privileges more than their responsibilities to others.

Initial spiritual understanding tends to react simplistically, obsessed with questions of what we can and cannot do, as in the manner of using a canoe paddle.

Even though children can be secure with yes/no permissible/impermissible contradictions, they need reeducation in the process of thinking in terms of degrees, gradations and contexts.

A behavior appropriate in one context may become inappropriate in another context. The infantile motorist who insists on his right to drive the speed limit when the roads have become slippery acts irresponsibly and dangerously.

Other-centeredness: the steering wheel

As we mature spiritually, our emphasis changes from whether a specific action or behavior is right or wrong. We become concerned about whether something or a certain behavior might prove appropriate or inappropriate.

The secondary phases of spiritual growth could be characterized by moderation rather than extremes.

The steering wheel might prove an appropriate metaphor for the second stage of spiritual maturity. The steering wheel, unlike the paddle, lets us make sensitive adjustments rather than go to radical either-or extremes.

One of the biggest failings of beginning drivers consists of their tendency to oversteer, to use the steering wheel primitively like a paddle.

In Philippians 4:5 Paul asks the Philippians to let their moderation become known to everyone. A minister explained at a Bible study that the sense of this verse implies "not insisting on one's own way—or rights—but yielding to the will of others, even when we feel we are in the right."

Paul showed tolerance and gentleness toward people with limited understanding rather than offending any of the brethren with supposed rights or privileges.

In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul responded to an abuse of the Corinthians' newfound liberty to eat meat (which at one time had become sacrificed to idols). To many in the congregation, it may have seemed like a flip-flop of church doctrine or perhaps a licentious manifestation of situation ethics.

What the Corinthians had misinterpreted as a flip-flop of the Acts 15:20 decision turned out to be a maturation in understanding that the supposed idol was, in effect, nothing.

After the "decision," the congregation still considered idolatry a sin—just as much as before. Perhaps an analogous situation today would occur if a chocolate lover bought a case of chocolate rabbits on sale that two weeks earlier had used as Easter ornaments.

To the chocolate lover, chocolate is chocolate, with no sentimental associations with any holiday.

If perhaps a member with a tender conscience felt this purchase inappropriate, the member who understands that chocolate is simply chocolate should refrain from flaunting his enlightened understanding.

We should not consider liberties, rights and privileges absolute when applied to our appetites. Both gluttony and drunkenness become problems of moderation rather than either/or, eating/not eating.

Things do, however, move from a matter of degree to an absolute when we run the risk of offending someone. Paul set the proper example of yielding a privilege or right in 1 Corinthians 8:13 when he said, "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat again."

To reiterate, people in the first stage of spiritual growth (whose concerns appear self-centered, exclusively concerned with rights, what is permissible and what is not permissible) react to Christian living using the metaphorical canoe paddle, making a series of 180-degree opposite-to-opposite pushes.

The second stage of spiritual growth shows an increasing concern for the feelings of other people: placing emphasis not exclusively on "what" but "when" something may seem appropriate.

Singing does not constitute an act of sin, but it may become inappropriate in some occasions. Consider Proverbs 25:20:

"Like one who takes away a garment in cold weather, and like vinegar on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart."

Making adjustments to the feelings and well-being of others represents graduating from the paddle to the steering wheel, which allows for fine adjustments and corrections.

God-centeredness: yaw control

The third stage of spiritual growth replaces self-centeredness with God-centeredness. The third and final stage of spiritual growth makes use of a yaw control, or yaw damper device: an internal guidance instrument like those found in submarines and aircraft to keep a constant equilibrium to guard against outside forces that would cause the vessels to pitch and roll.

My brother, a pilot for Northwest Airlines, described it as a gyro-stabilized platform that sends out corrective signals whenever it senses movement.

The carpenter's level works on the same principle. An controller of attitude, or yaw, unwanted movements from side to side, would instantaneously make an adjustment if the submarine or aircraft drifted out of a state of equilibrium.

The spiritual yaw-control device is installed when Christ's thoughts displace our carnal thoughts as explained in 1 Corinthians 2:16 and Philippians 2:5-8. Paul admonishes us to replace our thoughts with Christ's thoughts.

Installing spiritual yaw control involves having God Almighty engrave His very law on the fleshly tables of our hearts as stated in Hebrews 8:10::

"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord. I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them."

Eventually these engravings of God's holy and righteous law eventually enable people to become living epistles of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:3).

Even though the third stage of spiritual growth may appear outwardly dramatic, the effort to bring every thought into captivity (2 Corinthians 10:5) represents a dramatic and heart-stopping life-and-death struggle.

Several years ago I had the opportunity to listen to and talk with Thomas Jefferson scholar and impersonator Clay Jenkinson.

Mr. Jenkinson had immersed himself so thoroughly in the works of Jefferson that he could ad-lib and infer what Jefferson might have said and thought in any given circumstance.

As he fielded students' questions about current events, Mr. Jenkinson answered the students, responding with the virtual mind of Jefferson.

The yaw-control stage of spiritual growth depicts the need for God's Spirit to saturate our minds to govern our thoughts and actions. As we filter our thoughts with the Word of God, our inner spirit ought to emerge as more glorious while our carnal appetites should become increasingly extinguished.

With the mind of Christ as the dominating force in our behavior, we could have the ability to maintain equilibrium, balance, joy, and contentment—regardless of outward circumstances.

Paul demonstrated a well-functioning yaw control in Philippians 4:11-12, where he states that he had learned to show contentment in whatever state he found himself.

At the end of Paul's admonition to the Corinthians to grow up (2 Corinthians 13), he indicates that God's character trait of agape love constitutes the core of yaw control.

We should regard the "perfected love that casts out fear and torment" (1 John 4:18) as not so much God's love for us as His personality trait of love emanating out of the core of our being.