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# New Testament Principles of Wholeness

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*This paper, by a distinguished German Baptist teacher at the theological seminary in Hamburg was originally given at the Baptist International Conference on Theological Education in 1989 and has appeared in the privately published collection of conference papers entitled "The Gospel in its Wholeness", published by the Education Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, to whom we are indebted for permission to make it available to a wider audience. Our thanks are also due to Dr Paul S. Fiddes of Regent's Park College, Oxford, who prepared the paper for publication.*

### I. Areas of Wholeness

Where does the New Testament speak of wholeness? Who and what is regarded as 'whole'? Which Greek terms and Hebrew equivalents should we consider? These are the questions that arise when we venture to discover 'principles' of wholeness.<sup>1</sup>

(1) *God, of course, is 'whole'*. But in what sense? The translation of Mt. 5:48 shows clearly what the problem is. The RSV translates 'You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect', while the NEB interprets as follows: 'You must therefore be all goodness, just as your heavenly Father is all good.' The Greek term here is *teleios*, indicating that God's perfection has a definite moral quality. But a rather different connotation is contributed by the Hebrew root *shlm*, familiar to us as 'peace, completeness, harmony', and with the original meaning 'to have enough' and 'to restitute, to cover a damage or deficit'. In any sense, the emphasis here would fall on God *making* complete, not so much on *being* complete. The 'God of peace' (1 Thes. 5:23; et al.) repairs the broken world (e.g. Eph. 2:14ff.); he will 'make complete' what you 'do in secret' (Mt.

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<sup>1</sup> For the Greek cf. H. Hübner, articles *teleios*, *teleioo*, *teleo*, *telos* in *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* III, Stuttgart, 1983, 821ff., and the literature mentioned there. For the Hebrew cf. G. Gerleman, *shlm* in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* II, München, 1976, 919-935.

6:4, 6, 18; *apodidonai*, usually translated 'reward').<sup>2</sup> Jesus, according to John 19:30, dies with the words 'it is accomplished' (*tetelestai*). Another aspect of God's wholeness is expressed by the reference to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Col. 1:19 reads: 'For in him all the fulness (*pleroma*) of God was pleased to dwell (similarly) 2:9, 'the whole fulness'; cf. Eph. 1:23). This means that God revealed himself totally and authentically, without any reserve. Eph. 1:10 and Gal. 4:4 underline that this revelation occurred in 'the fulness (*pleroma*) of time' (NEB: 'when the time was ripe'). God's activity in *Heilsgeschichte* thus follows the principle of 'wholeness'.

Likewise, the final part of salvation history will begin when 'the full number (*pleroma*) of the Gentiles has come in' (Rom. 11:25). Christ died for the sins of the whole (*holos*) world (1 Jn. 2:2). The will of God, too, can be called 'perfect' (*teleios*, Rom. 12:2).

All the New Testament principles of wholeness can thus be traced back to God's own wholeness, including all the shades of meaning we have found. God himself represents completeness, totality, undividedness. This also implies moral values, i.e. perfect righteousness and goodness. God acts according to his own nature; so *Heilsgeschichte* is not a partial event but guided by fulness of intent and action. God aims at completing and restoring what is incomplete, divided or damaged.

(2) *Christians on their side, should devote themselves wholly to God*, as they are bidden in the great commandment, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all (*holos*) your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength' (Mk. 12:30-33 par., quoting Dt. 6:4). God's completeness calls for our undivided response (cf. Mt. 5:48). It is not adequate to react half-heartedly to God: 'Do you believe with your whole heart?' (*ex holes tes kardias*, Acts 8:37). If people intend to obey the law, they must keep all of it (*holon ton nomon*, Gal. 5:3; Jas. 2:10). Christians must consciously place their entire life with all its aspects under God's rule. Their whole body (*holon soma*) should be light (Mt. 6:22f. par. Lk. 11:34-36); by bridling our tongue we bridle the whole body and become a perfect person (*teleios aner*, Jas. 3:2). Christians must not be double-minded, divided in their soul (*dipsychos*, Jas. 1:8; 4:8).

It is not just a matter of quantity, if God demands our full attention. Rather, it is a matter of correspondence to God himself and the possibilities in salvation. Wholeness implies peace and being-in-order, which we are lacking. God invites us into his own wholeness, which requires, of course, that no parts of our existence are left aside, not being drawn into the process of completion.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. U. Luck, *Die Vollkommenheitsforderung der Bergpredigt*, München, 1968.

Wholeness on the human side can be expressed, therefore, in terms of oneness that also includes priority. Jesus Christ 'creates in himself one new person in place of the two, so making peace', reconciling us to God (Eph. 2:14ff.). Ecclesiological oneness is an integral part of the gospel of Christ; in Christ there is no Jew or Greek . . . , 'for all are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28; cf. Col. 3:11). The work of salvation is all-comprehensive. The fellowship of the saved must be one and whole; a divided church is a contradiction to the gospel. Wholeness can further be described as putting the decisive matters first, i.e. as priority and concentration. 'Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness,' Jesus says (Mt. 6:33). Our energies must be concentrated at the right point in order to achieve the aims of wholeness. Discipleship will never work if someone first (*proton*) wants 'to bury his father' or 'say farewell to those at home' (Lk. 9:59-62). Wholeness will not be in view, unless we stand on the basis of the gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1ff.) and observe the first or great commandment (*prote entole*, Mk. 12:28; *megale*, Mt. 22:36).

(3) *Wholeness implies a process of growth in a person*; it is not an impersonal and abstract ideal to be achieved once and for all. Rather it means a process of becoming mature. Wholeness refers to the development of an organism; 'perfection' is a misleading translation, as it suggests a 100% result reached at a certain stage and maintained unchanged.<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4:12-14 sets as the goal of the 'equipment of the saints' that we 'attain to the unity (*henotes*) of faith . . . , to the complete man (*eis andra teleion*), to the measure of the stature of the fulness (*pleroma*) of Christ', no longer being 'small children'. Paul does not yet regard himself as 'already perfect', but 'strains forward . . .' (Phil. 3:12ff.). There is a beginning and a process of completion (*epiteleo*): God began a good work and will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6); 'You began in the Spirit; do you look for completion in the flesh?' (Gal. 3:3). We persist in the process of endurance which should have a full effect (literally, 'perfect work', *ergon teleion*), so that we are 'perfect and complete' (*teleioi kai holokleroi*, Jas. 1:4). Faith is completed (*teleioun*) in works (Jas. 2:2). The process of maturing can be described too in terms of a series of 'productions': 'suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope' (Rom. 5:3-5; similarly Jas. 1:3-4; 1 Pet. 1:7), leading to the position of 'having been proved' (*dokimos*). Paul prays for Christians that 'the God of peace may sanctify you wholly (*holoteleis*) and your

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man*, London, 1970; revised German edition, *Der vollkommene Mensch. Eine Idee im Wandel von drei Jahrtausenden*, Stuttgart, 1975.

spirit may be kept complete (*holokleron*) . . . at the coming of our Lord' (1 Thes. 5:23).

Such statements have an eschatological perspective. The process of Christian growth begins with conversion and reaches its goal at the return of Christ. Interestingly enough, however, completion is not a goal far off in the future but something that becomes reality in one sense even now. It can be contrasted with the initial stage of Christian 'childhood'. In Philippians 2 (cf. above on vs. 12ff.) Paul continues to approach 'those who are mature' (v. 15); and in 1 Corinthians 2-3 he contrasts the present 'childish' state of his recipients with spiritual maturity (both times *teleioi*). Furthermore, God desires that his gifts, in particular his love, should come to completion (*teleioun*). His love wants to penetrate and transform our total behaviour, especially in our love to one another (1 Jn. 2:5; 4:12, 17, 18).

Wholeness is thus nothing exceptional for Christian existence, no idea of perfection never attained. Rather, it is the direction of God's work with us, becoming real even now. The concept of wholeness shares both of the two aspects: 'already now' and 'not yet'. God in his wholeness, with the fullness of his revelation, will and love, draws us into his wholeness, leading us along the way towards the final completion in the eschaton.

## II. Formulations expressing spiritual growth

How does the New Testament speak of wholeness? What is the language of wholeness? In what forms does it find expression, for what purpose and in which situations? There seems to be good reason to regard wholeness-statements as a part of early Christian catechetical instruction. Beginners were informed about the goal and quality of their path with Jesus Christ. Typical of growth-language is the reference to leaving behind the stage of 'drinking milk' and becoming able to eat solid food (1 Cor. 3:1f.; Heb. 5:12-14; cf. 1 Pet. 2:2; Eph. 4:14; 1 Cor. 13:10). Wholeness refers to maturity, to being grown-up. The converts received information about their new position (being in Christ, the Spirit, freedom, righteousness, and newness of life). They were made familiar with the 'law of Christ', especially the commandment of love. They learned about the new fellowship, about the sanctification of daily life, about bearing the fruit of the Spirit, and so on. One part of this basic instruction apparently dealt with the 'Pilgrim's Progress', i.e. with becoming more experienced, gaining spiritual stability, receiving a deeper insight into the Lord's ways and purposes, looking forward to the completion of God's intentions. Such catechetical material could be

used also at other occasions and in other forms, as, for example, encouragement in times of distress, reproach in dangers, we have partly to rely on such forms in order to reconstruct the underlying catechetical instruction. It is important, however, to observe the 'setting in life' (*Sitz im Leben*) of wholeness-language: it is related to the pilgrimage of Christians, who begin their way and who need orientation and guidance. Several texts shed light on the various forms in which the New Testament speaks of wholeness.

### 1. Exhortation and encouragement

In *1 John* there are four instances speaking of God's love becoming complete (2:5; 4:12, 17, 18). It is God's love (explicitly in 2:5; 4:12), not our love that reaches its fulness. This happens when we love one another. Not that our love is becoming stronger and greater; rather, God's love would remain incomplete if we did not love our brothers and sisters. The exhortation is thus that we should exert love. In so doing, God's love accomplishes what it purports. As the love of parents to their children becomes really 'complete' only when the children love each other and their parents (including subsequent ethical qualities), so God's love does not want to stay alone, but aims at the transformation of our lives.

In *Matthew 5:48* Jesus exhorts his people to be 'perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Luke in the parallel statement [6:36] reads: 'Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful?'). The text is the climax of a longer instruction, commenting on the right understanding of the decalogue and similar Old Testament texts. (Decalogue interpretation evidently was a part of the Christian catechetical instruction.) The instruction ends in a section about 'love your neighbour', referring to enemies as the test-case of true love (Mt. 5:43ff.; cf. Rom. 12:9ff.). 'Perfection' goes beyond what is practised even among sinners, viz. 'loving those who love you'. True 'children of the Father' will be people who love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (v. 44). 'Children' implies here both the new status of people before God (in contrast to slavery) and the life destination of the 'newly born'. *Matthew 5* reflects, in this perspective, catechetical language. Jesus' instruction is both encouragement and exhortation, setting a goal, showing a way, and promising fulfilment.

In *1 Corinthians 14:20* Paul admonishes the church: 'Do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature (*teleioi*)?' The context deals with prophecy and glossolalia. Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11f. in support of his argument that the Corinthians should over-come an immature preference for the spectacular

charismata; rather they should think of how to win the unbelievers. Growing up in Christ thus includes an increasing missionary attitude and a decreasing concern for one's own spiritual edification. There is nothing wrong about one's personal experiences in the Spirit; but mature Christians integrate *all* their capacities, including their mind, into their faith. And this faith loses self-centredness; rather its attention is directed towards the effect which their behaviour has upon people still outside the Christian experience.

In *James 1:2-4* the author encourages his readers to have a positive attitude towards the 'testing of faith'. By hardships and temptations God wants to make their endurance grow, which 'should have full effect (literally, a perfect work), so that you may be perfect and complete (*teleioi, holokleroi*), lacking in nothing'. James sees his addressees in danger of stumbling on their way, not reaching the goal of endurance, viz. the 'crown of life' (v. 12). The addressees are 'double-minded' (v. 8), dividing their friendship between God and the world; they are caught up in striving for riches and reputation, abusing the commandment of love, the concept of *sola fide* and the gift of teaching in wisdom. The problems they have to tackle are much like those in the Galatian and Corinthian correspondence or in the Pastoral Epistles. Christian growth thus is realised in the development of enough stability to 'overcome' (cf. Rev. 2:7) the manifold obstacles on the path to heaven.

Beginning the Christian way is good; but it is only the initial step. It is necessary to go the subsequent steps too, to cover 'what is lacking' (Jas. 1:4). In *Mark 10:21 par. Luke 18:22* Jesus uses the same words towards the rich young ruler (cf. also Lk. 9:57-62). The version in *Matthew 19:21* reads: 'If you would be perfect (*teleios*), go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' The man had a good intention certainly; he wanted to make his way to eternal life, fulfilling all the commandments of the decalogue(!). But another decisive step (towards having 'a treasure in heaven'; cf. Mt. 6:19-21; Jas. 4:4; 5:1ff.; 1 Tim. 6:17-19) was still waiting, viz. putting his entire confidence in Jesus and not in riches; this was daring, radical discipleship.

## 2. Promise, prayer, blessing

Christians are exhorted to undivided commitment. But this is the second word. The first word is that it is God who enables them to grow towards completion. They are not creating perfection by themselves; rather God invites them to enter more and more into the real of wholeness. Wholeness is thus an integral part of discipleship;

it is indispensable without any doubt. But it would not and could not exist, if God did not 'begin and complete the good work' (Phil. 1:6). The language of wholeness therefore comes back again and again to the forms of promise, prayer of intercession and thanksgiving, and blessing.

The finest example of such prayerful promise is *1 Thessalonians 5:23f.*: 'May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly (*hagiasai hymas holoteleis*); and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound (*holokleron*) in a blameless way (*amemptos*) at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.' In the preceding sections Paul had called the church to sanctification and spiritual watchfulness; the imperative is now crowned by the indicative, speaking of God's watching care for his children. God himself, the 'God of peace' (we may use the term here: 'the God of wholeness'), will keep his eyes upon you. It is his strength and faithfulness which 'will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 1:8f.). Sanctification is a thorough-going event, embracing all parts of man, ethical as well as cultic. Paul places '*holokleron*' ('sound') at the outset of the next sentence, linked first and directly with 'spirit'. A similar emphasis on the human spirit is found in the conclusion of other Pauline letters too (Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23; Phlm. 25). 'Sound' means here 'complete, intact, nothing missing'. Paul goes on to add 'soul and body', in order to underline the wholeness of human existence. Not just a part of us, but even our innermost personality and personal identity will be preserved until the day of the Lord. But that is not all; the decisive word follows: 'blameless, guiltless'.

In the history of studying the concept of Christian perfection the question of *sinfulness* has played a considerable role.<sup>4</sup> We cannot adequately discuss it here. The general New Testament position (cf. especially Rom. 6 and 1 John) may be summarised in the following statements: (a) Christ has liberated us from bondage to sin; we died to sin; the person who is born from God is free not to sin. (b) Sin shall not have dominion over us; we must not serve two masters. (c) We should not pretend that we are beyond any temptation; we had better openly confess where we fall short. (d) Sinning must retain its character as something basically alien for the Christian. (e) Sinlessness is not moral perfection, but whether God regards us as worthy to be in his presence. (f) The final word will be spoken by God in the eschaton.

In *1 Thessalonians 5:23f.* Paul assures his readers of God's

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology. An Historical Study of the Christian Ideal for the Present Life*, London, 1934.



faithfulness and reliability. God wants us to achieve wholeness, and he will take care of it. Certainly this does not imply any false carelessness on our side. But God's promise relieves us from anxious strain and self-relying efforts to make our salvation perfect. Rather, our efforts are embedded in and carried by God's watching care.

The language of prayer and promise is often combined with the eschatological outlook (cf. also *1 Cor. 1:4-9*), and we usually find this in the opening and closing parts of the epistles. In *Philippians 1:6-11* Paul expresses his confidence that 'he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion (*epitelesei*) until the day of Christ Jesus.' Paul has little to complain about in Philippi; he is grateful for the fine work in the church. His main concern is that they should grow even more in love, knowledge and unity (1:9; 2:1ff.), '... so that you may approve what is excellent and be pure (*eilikrinois*) and blameless (*aproskopoi*) for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God' (Phil. 1:10f.). Paul describes both Christian growth now and its eschatological completion. Spiritual growth implies the capability to discern and approve (*dokimazein*) what is pleasing to God (cf. Rom. 12:1f.). Further, it implies activity, viz. the bearing of the fruit of righteousness (cf. Rom. 6:13ff.). Finally, it is no end in itself but leads to the glory of God. Ultimately it is not that an ideal is brought to perfection, but that people grow up in the realm of redemption toward the likeness of God, so that they may stand before God and add to heaven's joy and glory. Christian wholeness thus is intimately connected with what we know as the 'image of God' (*imago Dei*).

A passage like *2 Corinthians 3:18-4:6* expresses this idea, contributing by its own terminology to the language of growth. Paul rejoices over his service in the new covenant, which is the covenant of glory, light, openness and freedom. The process of spiritual growth is here described as 'being changed into his likeness from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit'. Christian perfection is nothing other than being transformed into the likeness of Jesus. This is a miracle, performed by the Spirit himself. Christian wholeness is nothing else than what Paul writes to 'his children' (!) in Galatia, with whom he is 'again in travail, until Christ be formed (*morphothe*) in you' (Gal. 4:19).

### 3. *Reproach and Warning*

*Hebrews 5:11-6:32* starts with the reproach 'you have become dull of hearing. You . . . ought to be teachers, but you need someone to teach you the Christian alphabet again. You need milk . . . Solid food

is for the mature (*teleioi*), who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.' The writer wants to leave behind 'the word of the beginning, proceeding to maturity (*teleiotes*; 6:1)'. He then lists the elementary matters (6:2f.). Christian maturity implies the ability to teach others (the elementary lessons), the trained capacity to distinguish good from evil, and experience in the 'word of righteousness' (5:13). Maturity does not mean perfect knowledge (rather, the addressees are invited to learn more about God's mysteries), nor a perfect moral standard. Maturity is distinguished from spiritual 'childhood'. It is achieved by experience and training ('learning by doing').

In *Galatians 3:1ff.* Paul blames the churches: 'Are you so foolish? having begun with the Spirit, do you look for completion (or 'end', *epiteleisthe*) now with the flesh?' Paul wants them to continue in the Spirit. Of course, he does not mean that they can achieve any completion with the flesh. The concept of completion, however, is not wrong. The words here used for beginning and completing are exactly the same as in *Philippians 1:6*. The completion is a long-term process of growth, reaching its climax in the eschaton. According to 5:1ff. this process comprises 'standing firm in freedom' (vs. 1, 13), 'obeying the truth' (v. 7) and bringing forth the 'fruit of the Spirit' (v. 22).

According to *1 Corinthians 2-3* Paul has to rebuke the church: 'I could not address you as spiritual men (*pneumatikoi*) but as fleshly men, as babes in Christ', not yet fit for solid food, 'for there is still jealousy and strife among you' (3:1-3). The many divisions in the church reveal the 'childish', immature stage. Among real *pneumatikoi* Paul would be able to speak about God's wisdom (2:6ff.); the truly spiritual people are called 'mature' (*teleioi*) as well. Certainly Paul would not reveal another gospel! Probably he refers (in 2:6-16) to a deeper insight into the ways of God's salvation history, to the mysteries and 'depths of God' (v. 10), as a comparison with the final section in *Romans 11* shows. Mature Christians are privileged to be more familiar with God's intentions and will, to have 'Christ's mind' (2:16). The Corinthians are hindered, however, by their still flesh behaviour, by false triumphalism, and by self-centred objectives.

It seems that James uses ironical and polemical language by referring to the 'perfect law' (*nomos teleios*) and the 'law of freedom' (*Jas. 1:25; 2:8*), meaning the commandment to love the neighbour. His addressees are proud of their freedom (as the Corinthians were), abusing Pauline key-statements for their own selfish purposes. 'Perfect law' then reflects the pretension of the recipients that they had 'the best religion'. James turns their argument against them: unless you really fulfil this 'beloved law' you will be judged

according to it! Among his recipients James observes an erroneous understanding of maturity, which is an expression of self-deception.

### III. Signs of Maturity

What are the signs of maturity according to the New Testament? What does it mean in reality to be 'grown up' in Christ? How do mature Christians behave, differing from their earlier stage of 'childhood'? Our previous study of the most important texts provides the basis for a more systematic collection of data.

(1). Paul, James and other New Testament writers stress that one sign of Christianity maturity is the *absence of self-centredness and division*. This becomes evident in the overcoming of jealousy, factions, fighting and strife. Christian maturity thus has an ecclesiological and ethical dimension. In Christ all are one; there is a unity in which there are no borders or differences. Spiritual growth creates peace and harmony among people and also in one's heart which is no longer divided, 'double-minded'. Self-centredness is overcome, too, in terms of a 'childish' concentration on one's own spiritual edification. Our eyes and hearts become open for the needs of others; the spirit of mission sets the priorities in our actions. In this sense we become 'perfect in our minds' (1 Cor. 14:20), 'perfect and complete' (Jas. 1). Where there is still fighting and competition among Christians, i.e. 'childish behaviour', the presuppositions for 'mature spiritual instruction' do not yet exist. Self-centredness breaks the body of Christ apart; the fulness, oneness and wholeness of Christ cannot be manifested. Maturity, however, rejoices in the great gift of God who wants to share his peace, fulness and wholeness with us. Maturity values Christian fellowship as a high privilege which needs total commitment. Maturity is eager to grow more and more into the 'measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' (Eph. 4:13).

(2). The *fruit of the Spirit* is another sign of maturity. Galatians 5:22 mentions love first, which is 'the bond of completion' (*teleiotes*, Col. 3:14). 1 John emphasises that God's love wants to come to its completion by the fact that we love one another. The fruit mentioned in Galatians 5:22 includes furthermore joy, peace, patience, and so on; all of these signs of maturity. There is a clear connection, too, between maturity and the endurance which is the strength of bearing even hardships. Righteousness is another of these signs (cf. Rom. 6:13ff.). The very emphasis on 'bearing fruit' (e.g. Jn. 15:16) implies the concept of growth and ripening, 'filled with the fruits of righteousness' (Phil. 1:11). Or, to use another metaphor: 'discipline yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained in it' (Heb. 12:11). The various lists of 'good fruits' (Gal. 5:22;

Eph. 5:9; Jas. 3:17f.; etc.) thus function as criteria for Christian maturity.

(3). Several times the New Testament calls Christian maturity the *ability to teach others*. The grown up person is familiar with the elementary lessons of discipleship (cf. e.g. Heb. 5:11f.). The adult or adolescent can eat 'solid food' and give 'milk' to beginners. In a certain sense, the church is a system of instruction, fulfilling Jesus' great commission, '... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Mt. 28:20). As we have already remarked, wholeness is a term that played a role in early Christian catechism. Spiritual growth is not an automatic process working by itself; rather, it means growing in understanding, a renewal of our minds, 'learning to distinguish good from evil' and 'discerning the will of God' (Heb. 5:14; Rom. 12:2). Christian maturity is taught and learned—and, of course, practised ('learning by doing'). Lessons have to be internalised, understood and applied. This system requires more experience and qualified people, who no longer depend on being nurtured, but who can share their growth in insight and experience with others. Of particular importance is, of course, firmness over against false teaching and heresy (cf. Eph. 4:13f.). They are eager to lead those who have gone astray back again to the way of truth (1 Jn. 5:16; Jas. 5:19f.). The mature Christian is a 'teacher of the church', leading others in the true way of God, which is the way to oneness and wholeness.

(4). The mature Christian *receives deeper insight into God's will and ways*. This is a delicate point; some commentators fear a two-class system of Christians, like gnosticism with a lower and higher degree of spiritual knowledge, almost with two different gospels (cf. the scholarly debate on 1 Cor. 2:6–16). Certainly, Paul did not intend such a system. But we cannot rule out his statement: 'Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, though not a wisdom of this age . . . but the secret wisdom of God in a mystery . . .' (2:6f.). His recipients cannot yet bear it. Similarly, Hebrews 6:1ff. wants to go beyond the 'elementary doctrines'. In Philippians 3:8ff. Paul says that he is not yet perfect, but 'straining forward to what lies ahead', in particular 'to know the power of his resurrection'; this is Paul's advice to 'those who are mature'. What does this mean? In Hebrews 6 and 1 Corinthians 2–3 a deeper understanding of Christology seems to be implied. But eschatological expectations also receive attention (Phil. 3). Romans 11 may shed further light on the question. Here Paul reveals a 'mystery' (lest the church 'be wise in their own conceits') about God's eschatological plans with Israel (11:25ff.). After having done so, Paul exclaims in a hymn: 'O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God' (v. 33–36). Paul knows that people

may easily make a wrong use of such insights, especially of eschatology. Prophecy, therefore, has to be 'weighed' by the church (1 Cor. 14:29). Genuine Christian wisdom and prophecy has to stand the test of the 'fruit' (Jas. 3:13-18; Mt. 7:15ff.). But again this does not nullify the importance and use of deeper insights into God's will and ways. The Book of Revelation forms part of such an insight. Its main purpose is to keep the church on God's path during its pilgrimage through a world full of evil and corruption, in order not to 'fall into temptation'. God's will and ways may concern the entire world, the church and our personal life. The 'fruit of maturity' in this connection is primarily wisdom.

(5). *To be faithful and trustful*, in particular in times of difficulties, is another sign of maturity. Early Christian catechetical instruction informed neophytes that temptations were awaiting them, just as happened to Jesus himself (Mt. 4 parr.; 1 Pet. 1; Jas. 1:2ff.; 1 Cor. 10:1ff.; Heb. 2ff.). Temptations should be met in such a way that our endurance grows. Temptations may mean suffering; we should know that 'suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character' (Rom. 5:3f.). Jesus himself passed through the process of 'learning obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation' (Heb. 5:8f.). Such maturity implies obedience to God, bearing the burden which the Father does not remove (cf. e.g. 2 Cor. 12:7-10). In particular, the difficult question of God's righteousness (theodicy) is drawn into the theme of peace with God. 'Nothing can separate us from God's love' (Rom. 8:31-39). This is the experience of someone who knows personally the hardships he enumerates, which so often tend to make us doubt God's love. In the same letter Paul also tackles the question: 'Is God unjust?' (3:1-8). Not always do we discern immediately what God has in mind; but the mature Christian is not unfamiliar with God's mind. He knows that 'from above every perfect gift' comes down to us; we must not blame God when we get into troubles (Jas. 1:13-17). Further, faith and confidence grow in such a way that we lose our self-centredness, asking rather for God's purpose for our relationships with other people. Paul and his colleagues interpreted their suffering as a means for God to impart even greater help to others: 'If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation' (2 Cor. 1:6). This is Christ's mind, who was 'made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest' (Heb. 2:17f.).

(6). 'We are being changed into the Lord's likeness from glory to glory . . .' (2 Cor. 3:18). The all-important characteristic of spiritual maturity is *the likeness of Jesus Christ*. Christian 'wholeness' has no other scope than the image of God. Man was created according to

this image; but by sin it became lost, and so did the 'glory' (cf. Rom. 3:23). The process of salvation can be described, therefore, as a process of restitution and transformation. This includes, for example, 'loving as I loved you' (Jn. 13:3-7) and being one as Jesus and the Father are one (17:21). Such a likeness in love and in other respects cannot be realised without the 'likeness of his sufferings' too (e.g. Phil. 3:10). 'Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day' (2 Cor. 4:16). The likeness is eschatologically fulfilled by our being *with* Christ: we shall be with him (1 Thes. 4:17), 'ruling with him' (2 Tim. 2:11f.). The openness towards the future (Phil. 3:12ff.) and the orientation towards 'being with Christ' is an integral part of the process of becoming 'complete'. Mature Christians are not yet 'filled' (1 Cor. 4:8). Their attention is directed to what lies ahead. 'We are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (1 Jn. 3:2). This is what God created us for; the 'new creation' is the restitution of God's image through Christ.

#### IV. Conclusion: Principles of Wholeness

The most important results of this investigation about New Testament principles of wholeness are, in my view, the following.

(1). Wholeness is *something positive and an invitation by God*. It is no far-off ideal of perfection, to be achieved by strenuous efforts (by 'works of the law'), nor an abstract concept. Rather, it is a spiritual life-concept; it is a way on which God places us, the way for the 'pilgrim's progress'. Wholeness is God's concept for our growth; God invites us to go this way; he provides both orientation and strength. He 'began' and 'will complete' the process. The New Testament texts, therefore, often contain encouragement and even promise.

(2). Wholeness is a *process of growth*. We should describe it in terms of biology and organism. Growth-language is related to life and development. Wholeness then means maturity. Maturity is distinguished from childhood; but it is not a static stage once reached. Rather, maturity opens new dimension of activity and of straining forward. The process of growth participates in the dialectic of the 'already now' and the 'not yet' of eschatology.

(3). Wholeness has its measure in the *image of God and the likeness of Christ*. God created man in his image; living in Christ means the restitution of the lost image. God, who is 'perfect', invites us to share in his fulness and wholeness, in his mercy, peace, glory, goodness, harmony, and so on. Growing into the likeness of Christ is

a spiritual act of transformation (the Spirit being the 'guarantee' or 'pledge') 'until we take the shape of Christ'.

(4). Wholeness has *personal, ethical and ecclesiological dimensions*. The *individual person* is being healed from inner divisions to become an integrated Christian personality. This occurs on the way of discipleship, which is a living in Christ, by means of the forgiveness of sins, growing in endurance, putting all our confidence in him, bearing his cross, producing the fruits of the Spirit, knowing the power of his resurrection, and being kept blameless until the day of the Lord. Wholeness is an *ethical* category, too. In particular, it includes mercy, peace, righteousness and love. Such characteristics as God's love and peace are completed by our behaving according towards one another. Christian maturity means the ability to discern better the will of God. Wholeness is also a collective term, a group concept, and therefore also vital for *ecclesiology*. Wholeness in this sense means unhindered community, perfect communication by 'walking in the light of God'. The oneness of God is to be reflected in the unity of the church. The ecclesiological dimension is also relevant in terms of serving one another. Christian maturity provides instruction for the less experienced, prophetic orientation for the church, and wisdom for keeping to the path of truth.