

“Are You Growin’, Man?” A Second Look at Pauline Growth Imagery

James P. Hering*

**Dr. James Hering is associate professor of New Testament at Erskine Theological Seminary, Due West, South Carolina and serves on the Council of Reference for Haddington House. James holds a Ph.D. in New Testament studies from Aberdeen University.*



Those who grew up in the 1960s will remember the strong influence which the Beat Generation¹ exerted upon our day-to-day speech. At the time, we were largely ignorant of the writings and culture which engendered our hip-cool lingo and equally unaware that our speech was festooned with remnants of that earlier counterculture. Hollywood and the record industry had, by then, imbibed it into their screen characters and lyrics. Beat lingo no longer jarred our sensibilities, awoke social consciousness or upset our parents; it had “gone mainstream.” As with many emerging social phenomena, the Christian community was not left untouched by the new forms of expressions and lifestyle. Our youth leaders were cool, our music hip, our hair long and our clothing slightly bohemian. Youth groups that were “with it” met in coffeehouses. Our manner of speaking, as might be expected, also followed suit. “Are you growin’, man?” served as a greeting-cum-accountability check.

For some of us who had come out of paganism and drug use, the faith was, even with such adopted social trappings, a completely new life and home. Together we were “growing” away from our former lives into the likeness of Christ, Who described this transformation in declaring, “Behold, I make all things new.” I remember those days with not a small amount of nostalgia. It was nostalgia, I must add, that kept me hanging on to certain *outward* forms far beyond their sell-by date. Yes, by 1978 I was the guy at church that talked like a retro-hippie² and looked disturbingly like an Elvis

¹ “Beat Generation” referred to the emerging generation which grew up predominately in the Western nations in the 1950s and early 1960s. It was a generation which loved music (hence beat) and freedom of expression, often threw off moral restraint and advocated non-conformity. More specifically, it often refers to the writers and artists of this movement.

² “Hippie” – The “hippie” subculture arose predominately in the Western nations in the mid-1960s and inherited many of the characteristics and values of the Beat Generation in addition to much drug abuse and lenient morality – love and peace were

impersonator. I cannot recall the day when I became aware of my cultural obsolescence, but it hit me like a hammer. I cut my hair and sideburns, tossed the bell bottoms, stopped punctuating every phrase with “man”, and, of course, I ceased using the “overwrought” growth metaphor to describe my spiritual condition. In its place I substituted the heady vocabulary of the Reformers. A clean-cut man emerged, speaking an intentional, *confessional* language. Or so I thought.

It was a late afternoon in Aberdeen, over twenty years since my outward transformation. Looking over my books I could see granite walls and the naked winter landscape of Scotland, all soaked in the cold and wet they call *dreich*. Tired of the tedium of my redaction-critical work on Colossians, I began considering some rather negative remarks of a particular commentator regarding St. Paul’s *overuse* of growth imagery. Having long forgotten my own criticism of Christian faith-speak in my youth, I looked closely at the author’s examples with an eye towards exonerating the Apostle. To my surprise, I found that the commentator was correct in his observation: Paul had a fascination with the growth metaphor that could be fairly described as enthusiastic. Whether speaking of plant life, the human body or even buildings, Paul tended to characterize the spiritual health of Christians (and the church as a whole) in terms of the growth metaphor. Now this might be obvious to those who have never discarded such language, but it was a revelation and lesson to me. By eliminating growth language from my Christian vocabulary, I had made myself blind to its presence in the Word of God. My theological landscape had become as gray and lifeless as the icy streets below me. I wondered how many souls I had chilled with my fallow theological jargon.

Looking beyond Paul, it seemed that some form of growth sprang forth from every page of the Bible, from the gardens which bookend its story to the root of Jesse of whom it speaks. Trees with their branches, leaves and fruits, fields alive with vines and grazing animals testify to something beyond themselves. Behind all of the natural imagery I saw the Lord Himself, the Giver of life, the true Vine, the Shepherd of the sheep. It was clearly time for me to re-tool my lifeless vocabulary.

After all due *metanoia*, I looked more closely at Paul’s growth metaphor. In describing the spiritual life of Christians, he seizes upon images such as “being knitted together”, “being built up” or “being rooted” in Christ or His Body. Surprisingly, these verbal expressions, with almost no exceptions, are unique to Paul. Whereas numerous New Testament writers make use of words such as “fruit” or “root”, they are typically not connected to a broader growth metaphor as an expression of Christian piety.³ One almost gets the impression that Paul developed his Christian growth imagery without referent other than the images evoked by the Lord Himself in His teaching and parables. Closer inspection of the Gospels bears this out; one New Testament

the mantras. Often the word “hippie” characterized a hair style as well, generally long hair and unconventional dress.

³ 1 Peter 2:2 and 2 Peter 3:18 are notable exceptions.

pericope, for instance, demonstrates a particularly strong level of verbal coincidence between the imagery of Jesus and Paul: Jesus’ Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-20; Matthew 13:1-23; Luke 8:4-15).

This parable was without doubt a favorite didactic tool of the early Church as it is preserved in each of the Synoptic Gospels in its entirety, including the rather lengthy concluding Midrash of Jesus. In looking closely at the vocabulary of the parable, there are several words which describe the work of God (as depicted in the various seeds): *root*, *mystery*, *growth*, *fruit* and *fruit bearing*.⁴ A quick survey of these terms as used among the New Testament authors returns an unexpected result: their use is limited primarily to the Gospels and Paul.⁵ In Paul, moreover, they are *all* incorporated at numerous points and expanded forms⁶ and uniquely related to the growth metaphor. Furthermore, three of the words in our survey, *root*, *fruit bearing* and *mystery* are *unique to this parable*, being found nowhere else in the Gospels. This presents us with an excellent control mechanism for linking this particular vocabulary with other texts. Consistent with the pattern we have observed above, these three words are *almost uniquely adopted by Paul*.⁷

These verbal coincidences, however thought-provoking, do not necessarily establish a genetic link between the parable and the vocabulary of Paul. What our findings do illustrate, I think, is a strong tendency for Paul to adapt growth metaphors to advance his view of the process of sanctification. Outside of the Gospels there is no other New Testament author who more consistently relies upon natural phenomena to communicate the living nature of Christian faith. His understanding (or adaptation!) and employment of the growth metaphor has spanned the centuries to our time and remains ever-green (I couldn’t resist).

Are we in step with the ancient, organic patterns of describing the living relationship to our Lord? Perhaps there are some contemporaries who have sullied the waters by employing these wonderful metaphors in an overwrought or unworthy manner. The old Latin adage *Abusus non tollit usum* reminds us not to surrender proper use in the face of misuse. What we have here is a didactic gift which is simply indispensable for understanding our Christian life. It has been taken upon the lips of our Lord, the Evangelists, the Apostles and the Church Fathers. Why should it not be on ours? I can testify that I have returned, with gusto, to my old ways: The question really hasn’t changed after all: “Are you growin’, man?”

⁴ ῥίζα, μυστήριον, ἀξάνω, καρπός and καρποφορέω, respectively.

⁵ See Hebrews 12:11, 15; 13:15; James 3:17,18; 5:7,18; Rev. 1:20; 5:5; 10:7; 17:5,7. Most of these incidences do not reflect the growth metaphor.

⁶ ῥίζα, for example, is found in verbal (ῥιζόω) form only in Paul. Space prevents a listing of the Pauline occurrences, which are 42 in total.

⁷ The only exception is the use of mystery in Rev. 1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7. The application here is apocalyptic in nature and is not applied as a growth metaphor.

A Concluding Afterthought

I have thought much on the process of growing and have reached a rather anticlimactic conclusion: growth is a function of remaining in the fight. No secrets or formulae, just steady persistence in obedience. If you remain at your station, you will grow, for it is the work of the Holy Spirit. Remaining, of course, is first “in Christ” and secondly in the fellowship of believers (I have grown most when I have had the privilege to be near mature and godly believers!). I have noted that growth seems to come in spurts and a bit more slowly to those who have been in Christ for a long period of time. It seems to me that we quickly reach the limits of our humanity (frailty and sin) in our ability to grow (and even dry out at times, shrinking rather than growing)! All these obstacles will be removed one day, when we see the Lord “face to face”. If I were to describe the growth process, I think I would characterize it as remaining in the boxing ring. There is suffering and struggle, but we hover near the trainer’s corner, where we find encouragement and help (healing). Our own growth, in times of struggle, may not be apparent at all. Much more important, it seems to me, is whether or not we know where our trainer is!

Paul’s Growth Imagery

Being “rooted together” – to “grow up”

Eph. 4:15-16 (ESV)

¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to *grow up* in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body *grow* so that it builds itself up in love.

Col. 2:2, 19

²that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ,

¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, *grows* with a growth that is from God.

Being “built up”

Eph.2:20

¹⁹So then . . . you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ *built on* the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone . . .

Col.2:6-7

⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ *rooted and built up* in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Being “rooted”

Eph.3:17

¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being *rooted* and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend . . . the love of Christ . . .

Col.2:7

⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ *rooted* and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.