Spiritual Development and the Epistemology of Systems Theory

Based on systems theory, especially the contributions of Gregory Bateson, the concepts of first-, second-, and third-order change will be presented as a potential framework for conceptualizing spiritual development. The relevance of these concepts to the spiritual process of 12-step recovery will be explored, followed by an application to Christian spirituality. It will be suggested that one way of understanding Jesus' teachings is to view them as addressed to a culture mired in first-order strategies of change. In attempting to introduce a Kingdom based on radically different principles, Jesus made use of paradoxes, reframes, parables, and metaphors as techniques through which the second- and third-order change necessary for an experience of Kingdom life could be facilitated. Specifically, it is the epistemological shifts characteristic of second- and third-order change that are considered constitutive of spiritual development. If these epistemological changes reflect new ways of perceiving, based on the principles of the Kingdom of God as espoused by Jesus, then spiritual development from a Christian perspective could be said to have occurred.

In his classic paper, The Cybernetics of Self: A Theory of Alcoholism, anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1971) suggests that a new epistemology based on cybernetics and systems thinking needs to emerge. He refers to the twelve steps of Alcoholic Anonymous (AA), especially the first two steps, to illustrate how their approach to working with alcoholics is consistent with such an epistemology. Since AA's approach is distinctly spiritual, the epistemological change Bateson is identifying is often described as a spiritual awakening (Alcoholic Anonymous, 1976). Bateson (1971) himself described it as "an involuntary change in deep unconscious epistemology-a spiritual experience" (p. 331). In this paper, the connection between epistemological change and spiritual development will be explored from the perspective of systems theory. A special effort will be made to illustrate how this connection is consistent with the emphasis on spiritual development found in both the twelve-step recovery model of AA and the path of Christian spirituality.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHANGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SYSTEMS THEORY

AA has gained a reputation for its success in helping many to achieve a sustained recovery from alcoholism. Based on the twelve steps, its approach is distinctly paradoxical and spiritual. First, alcoholics are challenged to admit powerlessness over their use of alcohol and second, they are encouraged to recognize that the assistance of a Higher Power is available, which is received through surrender. Embarking on this process, however, requires that alcoholics become capable of doing something that previously they have not been able to do. They must break out of their old pattern of addressing their alcoholism. Instead of continuing to insist that they can control their drinking and relying on their own willpower to prove it, a dynamic that Bateson (1971) referred to as "alcoholic pride," they must accept their inability to manage their lives and acknowledge their need for Higher help. For such a drastic shift in strategy to occur, epistemological change is required.
Epistemology is the flip side of the coin from ontology. Whereas ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, epistemology is concerned with the process by which that knowledge of reality is ascertained. In other words, it addresses the question, "how do we know what we know?" What are the basic assumptions and premises that influence perception (Keeney, 1979)? According to Bateson (1979), "epistemology is always and inevitably personal" (p. 87). No person's mind operates as a blank screen, objectively recording his or her experience. In fact, there is no such thing as objective experience (Bateson, 1979). For Bateson, all experience is processed through personalized filters that interpret that experience on the basis of unconscious presuppositions. As a result, each person's reality is constructed via a subjective process that is probably influenced by a number of factors, ranging from social forces to genetics.

In spite of its subjectivity, a person's reality is real to him or her. Since the epistemological process by which that personal reality is constructed is unconscious, the product of perception is rarely evaluated. Rather, it is typically equated with objective truth and allowed to influence the person's experience accordingly. Any change, therefore, that does not address these deeper epistemological issues tends to be only superficial. As Keeney (1979) says, "the deepest order of change that human beings are capable of demonstrating is epistemological change," (p. 7) which involves a radical transformation in the way a person experiences the world.

The emphasis in this paper will be on the changing nature of individual perception and how the corresponding epistemological shifts can reflect spiritual development. Based on systems theory, spiritual development will be equated with the epistemological shifts characteristic of three levels of systemic change-first-, second-, and third-order. Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974) are credited with identifying and applying first- and second-order change to family interactions. They do not, however, specifically discuss third-order change, although their concept of meta-meta change may be similar. Bateson (2000) offers the concepts of third-, and even fourth-order change, which he terms Learning III and Learning IV. Since he is uncertain whether humans are capable of fourth-order change, only his comments concerning third-order change will be considered relevant. In the first half of this paper, the concepts of first-, second-, and third-order change will be defined and illustrated with reference to the twelve-step recovery approach of AA. In the second half of the paper, these concepts will be expounded further with reference to Christian spirituality.

LEVELS OF CHANGE

First-Order Change

First-order change is probably best described as commonsense change. For instance, when some behavior within a system exceeds acceptable limits, its opposite may be invoked in order to regain balance. Or, if a family member is acting inappropriately, the desired behavior may be encouraged. Thus, behaviors within a system are altered, while the system's structure (i.e., the rules governing that behavior) remains unchanged (Watzlawick et al., 1974). Although it is commonly employed, this type of change is usually superficial and is often characterized by the cliche, "the more things change, the more they stay the same."
This type of commonsense approach is typically what alcoholics initially apply in attempting to control their drinking. When told that they are out of control, they insist on their ability to exercise control and, thus, employ first-order strategies to prove their point. This generally involves mustering the willpower to say "no" instead of "yes" to alcohol. If they are temporarily successful, it confirms their claim and bolsters their ego. Although this may appear to be a victory for the alcoholic, it is actually part of an ongoing pattern in which the alcoholic is trapped and which will eventually lead to his or her downfall. As Bateson (1971) pointed out, temporary success in achieving sobriety destroys the challenge. Now, believing that they can exercise self-control, they risk taking another drink. Of course this leads to more out of control drinking and a repetition of the pattern.

Such a pattern seems similar to what Bateson (1971) was describing when discussing alcoholic pride and AA's strategy of reminding themselves, "once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic." By placing alcoholism within the self, alcoholics are constantly reminded that regardless of how much sobriety they attain, there is still within them the capacity to relapse. This attitude of humility helps to counter an innate pride that is based on the conviction that I can and seeks to repeatedly prove itself through challenging its opponent, the alcoholic system.

First-order strategies based on alcoholic pride rarely prove successful. Whenever alcoholics say, "I will fight the bottle," they are asserting themselves in their pride and challenging the alcoholic system. In the hierarchy of systems, however, the larger systems tend to exert a greater influence over their subsystems than vice versa (Napier & Whitaker, 1978). Since the alcoholic system encompasses the alcoholic, it tends to exert more control and, thus, creates an experience of powerlessness for the alcoholic. As a result, it is insanity for the alcoholic to think that he or she can resist the influence of the larger system. This is why repeated first-order strategies tend to result in consistent failures. In fact, AA defines insanity as continuing to apply the same approach yet expecting different results. To make matters worse, alcoholics do not seem able to recognize this dynamic. As Bateson (1979) puts it, "there is no free will against the immediate commands of the images that perception presents to the 'mind's eye'" (p. 37). In other words, as long as alcoholics continue to perceive their experience based on old presuppositions, they will continue attempting the same solutions leading to the same results—the more things change, the more they stay the same. To break out of this vicious cycle, alcoholics must experience epistemological change. This is typically reflected through an acknowledgment of powerlessness.

Second-Order Change

When alcoholics come to the point of acknowledging powerlessness, an epistemological shift is experienced. As Bateson (1971) stated, "to be defeated by the bottle and to know it is the first spiritual experience" (p. 313). Instead of allowing their alcoholic pride to tempt them into continuing a competitive relationship with the larger system, they admit defeat. At this point they often become open to evaluating the presuppositions that have been governing their previous first-order strategies. Although this is typically experienced as a crisis, with their whole worldview in shambles, it creates the possibility for a new epistemology to emerge. If
they are actually able to adopt new ways of thinking and acting based on new rules and premises, second-order change occurs (Watzlawick et al., 1974).

In comparison with the rules and premises that previously governed their system, these new ones often seem paradoxical in nature. Instead of the commonsense idea that out of control drinking should be addressed by choosing in-control behavior, second-order change says that the complementary position of honesty is better. Instead of continuing to engage in the first-order strategy of exerting more willpower in a determined effort to prove their control over alcohol, it becomes important for alcoholics to recognize and admit that they cannot manage their lives, at least as it concerns their drinking behavior. To genuinely make this admission, a shift in self-perception is required. Rather than exulting in pride, bowing in humility becomes appropriate. Such a change is generally made possible through the gift of hitting bottom.

Hitting bottom is the end result of an escalating symmetrical relationship. As Bateson (1971) defines it, a symmetrical relationship is characterized by competition, in that more of a given behavior from one person triggers more of the same in another. This dynamic is encapsulated in the cliche, "keeping up with the Joneses." In contrast is Bateson's description of a complementary relationship, in which each person's behavior fits or complements the other's—the dominance-submission pattern is a good example. Since the pride of alcoholics leads them to believe that they can handle their drinking behavior, they insist on proving themselves right. This creates a symmetrical relationship involving a competition with the larger alcoholic system, which is doomed to failure and eventually ends in hitting bottom or, to use Bateson's term, schismogenesis.

In Bateson's (1971) discussion of the epistemological status of complementary and symmetrical premises, he indicated that these different styles of relating can be elevated to an epistemological level because they reflect fundamental premises embedded deeply within the mind. If those premises are ever changed, the impact is so significant that its effects reverberate throughout a person's entire world. Such is the power of epistemological change. As an example, Bateson referred to the symmetrical pride or hubris of the alcoholic. Since alcoholics operate on the fundamental premise that they can or at least should be able to manage their lives, whenever they encounter a challenge their immediate response usually involves some variation of the theme "I can." This lends itself to an application of first-order strategies, which in a symmetrical relationship requires constant resistance. Any prolonged success eliminates that resistance, thus leading to increased risk-taking in order to restore the challenge. This engages the larger system in an escalating interaction with the typical consequence of failure for the alcoholic and ultimately, hitting bottom. The vicious cycle repeats itself until eventually the alcoholic is able, hopefully, to acknowledge powerlessness and, thus, avoid responding to temptation based on pride.

Accepting the idea of powerlessness creates the possibility for a radical shift in the structuring of the alcoholic system. Rather than resisting the system, the alcoholic submits to it. In other words, a symmetrical relationship has been changed into a complementary one (Bateson, 1971). For this to occur, the first of two important steps must be taken. The first step, as has already been described, involves the acknowledgement of powerlessness, whereas the second is characterized by a lifestyle of surrender to a Higher Power. Each of these will be more fully
described in an attempt to illustrate how epistemological change constitutes spiritual
development.

This is not to say that all epistemological changes are experienced as positive. In fact, probably most epistemological shifts initially feel like loss rather than gain, as the experience of hitting bottom certainly attests. Yet, even the suffering of loss does not preclude the possibility that such an experience can be transformed. An example related to the possibility of third-order change inherent in the Christian concept of redemption will be offered later.

Second-Order change and hitting bottom.

When dealing with their desire to drink, alcoholics who have admitted powerlessness are no longer conceptualizing their dilemma through old premises and assumptions. Rather than insisting that they have the power to control their behavior, they now know that they do not. This change of belief alters the strategy by which they address their problems. Instead of getting caught up in a symmetrical relationship with the alcoholic system, against which they now realize they are powerless, alcoholics adopt a complementary view of their relationship to others and to God. Hitting bottom was the experience that made this change possible. Unfortunately, it usually takes the realization that the pain of staying the same is going to be greater than the pain of change that opens alcoholics to the possibility of doing something different.

At this point, the experience of hitting bottom, which probably has been prefaced by numerous similar failures, can be considered a gift. Although it turned their world upside down, it provided a window of opportunity whereby an epistemological shift could occur. This does not guarantee, however, that the resulting change will be permanent. Alcoholics may have to hit bottom many times before they bankrupt the epistemology of self-control (Bateson, 1971). But ultimately, it tends to be through hitting bottom that a favorable relationship with the larger system is developed. Only when alcoholics have exhausted their own resources are they open to the higher resources that are available to them. The challenge, however, is in accepting that these higher resources cannot be claimed through first-order strategies. They are received through the paradoxes of second-order change, which, according to Christian spirituality, requires faith (Len: or “emptiness” a concept present in other spiritualities also).

This scenario, of hitting bottom before being able to experience second-order change, raises the question, "does second-order change always require a hitting bottom type of experience, or can persons make this epistemological shift in a less painful manner?" While hesitating to say "always," AA literature does seem to suggest that typically some kind of despairing experience is associated with the epistemological shifts characteristic of second-order change (Alcoholic Anonymous, 1976). If first-order strategies are working adequately, there is usually no motivation to explore other possibilities.

Generally, the despair of coming to the end of one's resources is what provides the motivation necessary for change. Of course, there are probably exceptions to this principle, such as mystics who intentionally seek out altered perceptual experiences, but they tend to be a rare
breed. For average persons, it takes the gift of suffering to invite them to consider alternate ways of knowing. In the words of C. S. Lewis (1962), "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world" (p. 93).

This idea, that the suffering of hitting bottom is the doorway to change, is part of what was previously referred to as the paradox of second-order change. If first-order strategies can be called commonsense, second-order could be called uncommon sense. Along with considering an experience of hitting bottom as a gift, the epistemological shift it brings leads to the additional paradoxical strategy of acknowledging powerlessness. Whereas commonsense would suggest that weakness in willpower should be addressed by mustering the will, second-order epistemology takes the approach of admitting the weakness and accepting an inability to overcome it through one's own resources. Although this initially generates despair, it also points the way out by positing the existence of a Higher Power whose help is available. (See Paul’s “oh, retch man that I am…”) Thus, the first two of the twelve-steps illustrate the paradox of strength being found in weakness, a principle that only the despairing are typically willing to accept.

In sum, second-order change involves an epistemological shift facilitated by an experience of hitting bottom. This significantly alters the way alcoholics perceive and relate to themselves and the universe. They have moved from a symmetrical relationship to a complementary one. Instead of trying to be "captains of their soul" and "masters of their fate," they have recognized that they are no match for the larger system of which they are a part. As Bateson (1971) says, "the relation 'part of must necessarily and logically always be complementary" (p. 332) although the meaning of that phrase will differ from person to person. A few paragraphs later he reiterates, "the relationship of each individual to the 'Power' is best defined in the words is part of (p. 333). Adopting a complementary relationship, therefore, involves viewing oneself as part of a larger system over which one is powerless. Rather than competing with that system through the use of first-order strategies (symmetrical), alcoholics learn to surrender by applying second-order strategies (complementary).

Third-Order Change

Although second-order change implies the need for surrender, it does not necessarily produce it. Bateson (2000) acknowledged that there could be a replacement of the premises by which a person lives (second-order or Learning II) without necessarily achieving Learning III. Although powerlessness has been acknowledged and the corresponding epistemological shift experienced (second-order), an act of genuine surrender may not have occurred (third-order). Bateson (1971) said that being defeated by the bottle is the first "spiritual experience" involving an epistemological change or "a change in knowing about the personality in the world" (p. 313), but he also said that it does not constitute surrender. For an alcoholic to genuinely surrender, another epistemological shift may need to be experienced. In this paper that shift is referred to as third-order change.

In first-order change, persons are basically operating with the belief that they can exercise control over their world. In an attempt to get what they want, they exert their will over the
larger system of which they are a part. When they finally realize that they cannot control this larger system, they become candidates for second-order change. Their perception of self as powerless leads them to change their relationship with that system, from symmetrical to complementary. Although this includes a restructuring of their system, thus legitimately constituting second-order change, it does not necessarily involve an authentic surrender to it. For that to occur, an epistemological shift concerning how the alcoholic perceives the larger system is necessary. For instance, a prisoner of war may recognize that he is powerless over his captives, but while he realizes that adopting a complementary relationship with them is in his best interests, he may refuse to genuinely surrender, at least in terms of his attitude. To the extent that he maintains an attitude of defiance, his complementary behavior reflects only external conformance and not genuine, internal change.

This same scenario seems possible for recovering alcoholics as well. While they may realize that it is in their best interests to adopt a complementary relationship with the larger system, they may remain inwardly defiant. As a result, their actions reflect begrudging effort rather than willing cooperation. Such resistance is understandable given the nature of hitting bottom. For many, an experience of defeat triggers feelings of anger and resentment. They may believe that this larger system cannot be trusted. Since it seemed to facilitate an experience of brokenness for them, they wonder if it really has their best interests at heart. Although they acknowledge powerlessness, they may not like it. Secretly they may be still trying to manipulate the system. Even though they are engaging in complementary behaviors, they are doing so in a "jumping through the hoops" manner that reflects an ongoing self-centeredness. This is akin to the "dry drunk" behavior that Berenson (1976) describes. While the alcoholic may no longer be drinking, his or her life still revolves around alcohol, only now the self-focus is on not drinking. For alcoholics to move forward in their recovery and spiritual development, epistemological change of the third-order may be necessary.

Third-order epistemological change involves a "profound reorganization of character" (Bateson, 2000, p. 303). In second-order change or Learning II, the focus is still on the self. "Selfhood is the product or aggregate of Learning II (p. 304) in the sense that a person identifies his or herself as the sum total of his or her characteristics and behaviors. In Learning III, however, the self becomes less relevant in that "the concept of self will no longer function as a nodal argument in the punctuation of experience" (p. 304). In other words, persons become more aware of how they connect with the larger system in third-order change. "Personal identity merges into all the processes of relationship" (p. 306) so that persons gain more of a sense of their connection with all things. Such an experience sounds similar to what Jesus described as losing one's life in order to find it (Lk. 9:24).

While shifting to a complementary relationship with the larger system by acknowledging powerlessness marked the transition into second-order change, surrender appears to mark the shift to third-order. Bateson's (2000) description of this phenomenon seems contained in the phrase "the identified self is no longer in charge of organizing the behavior" (p. 306). Persons at this stage are apparently able to recognize eternity in the minutiae of life and so live with an awareness of and submission to the much larger forces that are at work in the universe.
Furthermore, the perception of these larger forces appears favorable, in the sense that the larger system, especially the Higher Power, is not perceived as antagonistic but redemptive. This seems to explain how the response of surrender can be chosen willingly.

In the twelve-steps, the facilitation of the shift to third-order change appears to begin in step three, where alcoholics decide to turn their lives over to their Higher Power. It then seems to culminate in step eleven, where on a daily basis they pray only for a knowledge of His will and the power to carry it out. In the process of steps three through eleven alcoholics are taking an honest look at themselves, making amends, and discovering the serenity that comes with a complementary style of relating. As they undergo this process, it is hoped that they will realize that the paradoxical path of recovery begun with second-order change is actually a path that has their best interests at heart. If they do, third-order change will have occurred. Now, rather than fearing or resenting their Higher Power, they discover a personal experience of love and redemption. Instead of begrudgingly engaging in a complementary relationship with the larger system, they become capable of genuine surrender in an attitude of trust and cooperativeness. Willfulness has changed to willingness (May, 1982).

**EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHANGE AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY**

From the perspective of systems theory, Jesus' mission can be conceptualized as seeking to facilitate epistemological change. According to the New Testament's description, especially that of the Gospels, Jesus came to a culture mired in patterns of first-order strategies. According to the Apostle Paul, they were living under the larger system of the law (Gal. 3:23), which imposed a strict standard of performance. Although relating to this larger system was supposed to involve submission or a complementary relationship, it was actually discovered that the law provoked resistance or a symmetrical relationship (Rom. 7:7-25). In their attempts to keep the law through willpower alone, they discovered what alcoholics discover—that the larger system of which they are a part exerts more control over them than they do over it. Just as with alcoholics, the activation of this larger system, with its various feedback loops, only served to undermine a symmetrical response. What the law commanded it could not produce (Heb. 7:18-19). Once again, the fundamental premise of pride appears to be a factor. The requirements of the law seemed to activate the innate pride of persons who believed that they could do what the law commanded. As with alcoholics, an epistemological shift was necessary to change their relationship with the law from symmetrical to complementary.

**First-Order Change and Christian Spirituality**

Sin becomes sin because the law identifies it as such (Rom. 7:7). Those who sin are considered sinners. Thus, to avoid such a negative self-perception, a sincere believer says, "I will fight sin." In spite of his or her sincerity, this assertion tends to invite a symmetrical relationship with the larger system, in that the goal becomes proving that one is not a sinner. Based on the fundamental premise of pride, such a declaration seems to suggest that the person believes he or she is capable of successfully avoiding what the law defines as sinful. This creates a first-order strategy where the focus is on doing the opposite of that which constitutes sin. If the person is successful, the new self-perceptions that emerge appear to
indicate that he or she has conquered sin and is, therefore, not a sinner. This removes the resistance needed for a symmetrical relationship. To restore the challenge, risk-taking will probably occur. In his or her pride, whatever precautions the individual might have been taking to avoid sin will be relaxed. Careless behavior will tend to result, often leading to a repetition of the old pattern and, ultimately, an experience of powerlessness. To better understand this dynamic, a further exploration of Bateson's (1971) cybernetic epistemology might be insightful.

According to Bateson (1971), mental processes, such as thinking, deciding, and acting, are not contained in some part of the system but in the system as a whole. Although it seems commonsense to say that a person has a mind, as though it is located entirely within the body, Bateson suggests otherwise. He sees immanent mind as inherent in the total system, which goes beyond the individual to include all the other components of a given interaction. Using the example of a man felling a tree with an axe, Bateson says that the mental characteristics of mind are not just within the man but immanent in the entire circuit of interaction. Each swing of the axe is affected by all the other elements involved, of which the individual can only control a portion. For instance, how the axe functions or how the tree slices are out of his control, yet will be included in the thinking, deciding, and acting that comprise the event. Thus, immanent mind is located in the total system of brain-muscles-axe-stroke-tree-cut-eyes-brain. In Bateson's (1971) words, "the mental characteristics of the system are immanent, not in some part, but in the system as a whole" (p. 316). For this reason, "in no system which shows mental characteristics can any part have unilateral control over the whole" (Bateson, 1971, p. 316).

From this perspective, Bateson's explanation for powerlessness can be understood. If immanent mind includes more than just an individual, then persons may not have the ability to exercise complete control over the mental processes governing their behavior. Whenever they engage in a particular behavior, a larger system gets activated. All of their subsequent actions, therefore, will in some sense be determined by the total interaction of this system. This includes the recursive loop of that person's previous actions, the responses of the larger system, and timing. Since the subsystem of the person is influenced by the greater forces of the larger systems of which he or she is a part, the individual may have little control over the process. As a result, powerlessness is experienced. In the words of theologian Paul Tillich (1952), it is not so much that people break the law of God as it is that they are broken on His law. In other words, symmetrical attempts to assert oneself against the law will lead to a breaking experience (hitting bottom). Such is the frustration of trying to keep the law of God through the use of first-order strategies. Maybe this explains why much of Jesus' teachings appear to encourage second-order change. According to Wolfhart Pannenberg (1983), "it is not just the moral strategy but the whole outlook of life that must change. And this can be achieved only by recasting our interpretation of the world and our place in it in terms of the sovereignty of God and of His kingdom" (p. 26).

Second-Order Change and Christian Spirituality

Jesus began His famous Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) with a set of paradoxical statements known as the Beatitudes. These included such assertions as the poor in spirit gaining the
Kingdom of Heaven, the meek inheriting the earth, and the merciful receiving mercy. Along with these ideas were numerous other paradoxes that Jesus indicated were principles of the Kingdom that he had come to proclaim. In this Kingdom, the greatest are servants, the last are first, the generous are prosperous, the weak are strong, and entrance cannot be earned but is granted as a gift. Furthermore, to the apparent distress of all who heard, the Kingdom was not to be established by competition with enemies but by surrender to God. All of these ideas appear to contradict commonsense, especially to a culture stuck in patterns of first-order change.

According to what these people were taught, righteousness was earned by obedience to the law as interpreted by their religious leaders. This created an oppressive system where those in authority could make the rules and demand adherence while the people struggled to measure up. Even though these religious leaders promoted themselves as ideal examples, Jesus accused them of not practicing what they preached. In fact, he told the people that unless their righteousness exceeded that of their leaders, they could not enter the Kingdom of God. This statement must have come as a shock to those who heard it. After all, who was more righteous than the Pharisees, and if they were not good enough, was there hope for anyone? Who can reasonably expect to exceed the performance standards of the leaders who actually set the standards?

One way of conceptualizing what Jesus was doing is to view it from the perspective of second-order change. It appears that he was attempting to expose the futility of first-order strategies by making people aware of the impossibility of reaching their goal of righteousness through continued engagement in more of the same behaviors. If their current best efforts barely gained the approval of their leaders, how could they hope to elevate their performance to a level that surpassed their leaders? To those who seriously considered what Jesus was saying, it could have easily facilitated a hitting bottom type of experience characterized by the despair of realizing that their best was not enough. It is to these people that the paradoxes of the Kingdom may have had special meaning.

In seeking to facilitate second-order change, Jesus not only emphasized paradoxical principles but also used reframes, parables, and metaphors. A man’s blindness is reframed as an opportunity for God’s power to be displayed (Jn. 9:3), a thief’s confession of sinfulness is reframed as a ticket to paradise (Lk. 23:39-43), a widow’s offering of pennies is reframed as larger than all the other gifts (Mk. 12:41-44), and a woman’s socially taboo behavior is reframed as an expression of her love for which she receives forgiveness of sins (Lk. 7:36-50). These are examples of how Jesus took what appeared to be experiences of powerlessness and vulnerability and reframed them in ways that invited a redemptive perspective. This sounds similar to the twelve steps, where the first step of acknowledged powerlessness leads to the second step of available help in the form of a Higher Power.

Jesus also seemed to be illustrating the paradoxical nature of second-order change in some of His parables. Maybe the clearest example is found in the story of the prodigal son. After wasting his inheritance, the prodigal hits bottom while working in a pigpen, the significance of which would not have been lost on listeners familiar with Jewish dietary laws. However, the son’s repentant response engenders a restoration of his status. Although this was probably
an unexpected result, it graphically captures the epistemological shift that comes with hitting bottom. No longer is this son acting out of his pride, which is the motive for most first-order strategies, but rather he is interacting with the larger system from the complementary position of humility. This second-order position of perceived weakness becomes, paradoxically, a position of strength, which leads to a reception of the greater resources available to him from his father (Higher Power).

Some of the metaphors Jesus chose to describe the Kingdom of God, and entrance into it, also reflect the paradox of second-order change. He compared the Kingdom to a mustard seed (Mt. 13:31-32) and to yeast (Mt. 13:33), both of which are seemingly small and insignificant yet grow and spread to become more sizable and influential than their inauspicious beginnings would have suggested. For those who would enter that Kingdom, Jesus said it was necessary that they become as little children (Mk. 10:15). Again, the paradox of greatness resulting from humility is illustrated. The status of Kingdom life is available to those with the unassuming attitude of a child.

These paradoxes, reframes, parables, and metaphors provide a glimpse into what Jesus may have been trying to accomplish. In coming to a people stuck in patterns of first-order change, he was attempting to make them aware of their powerlessness to earn righteousness. Yet, in bringing them to the point of despair, He was also offering an alternative. For those "who had ears to hear" (Mt 13:9, Mk. 4:23, Lk. 14:35), He was claiming that the righteousness they were trying to earn was actually available to them as a gift, which they received through the second-order strategy of "grace through faith" (Eph. 8:9). Of course, this strategy of "grace through faith" is typically adopted only after other pride-based possibilities have been exhausted. Now, in hitting bottom, they are finally open to the epistemological shift that allows for an experience of second-order change, which in this case involves a reception of grace through an exercise of faith.

Third-Order Change and Christian Spirituality

Although second-order change is certainly a significant step in the process of spiritual development, it is not the pinnacle. Other challenges await. Of these, one of the greatest is probably the act of surrender characteristic of third-order change. As it is being used here, the term surrender does not imply passiveness, as though the individual is simply waiting in resignation expecting God to do everything. Rather, it involves "an active choice to relinquish one's will to God's rule" (Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2000, p. 149).

Through His own example, Jesus seemed to present the surrendered life as an ideal. Those who would follow Christ are encouraged to adopt His attitude of submission (Phil. 2:5). This involved a willingness to empty Himself of all the privileges He enjoyed as God's Son, to take human form, and to become obedient to death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8). Throughout the Gospel records, Jesus' life is depicted as submitted to His Father's plan (Jn. 5:19, 30). The most graphic example of this is probably that of His passion. While in the Garden of Gethsemane, wrestling in prayer prior to His crucifixion, Jesus begins sweating drops of blood as He agonizes over what awaits Him. He asks if there is any other way that His Father's purposes can be accomplished, but ultimately surrenders by saying, "not My will but Yours be done"
(Mt. 26:39). This act of surrender allowed the higher plans of the universe, as contained in His Father's purposes, to be accomplished. According to Christian spirituality, these plans included the redemption of creation.

In aspiring to the surrendered life, one of the primary challenges is trust. To genuinely surrender, it is important to be able to trust the Higher Power to whom one is surrendering. This typically requires an act of faith, although not blind faith. Hopefully, through the process of second-order change a person has begun to experience his or her Higher Power as redemptive. If so, then surrendering becomes a safer risk than it might have been had there had been no previous history of love and care. Yet, even with a sense of trust, it is difficult to submit one's own ego to the will of another. The Apostle Paul refers to it as offering oneself as a "living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1-2). Of course, the problem with living sacrifices is that they keep trying to get off the altar. Such is the challenge of living the surrendered life. Experiencing this type of epistemological shift is probably less of an event, and more of a process. In other words, instead of making one choice to surrender, which is continually sustained, it is probably more accurate to say that a person catches glimpses of the surrendered life but does not necessarily maintain it. Surrendering appears to be a choice that one has to make over and over again. While hopefully it becomes a more consistent way of knowing, it will probably always remain a challenge.

Ultimately, the trust required for surrender finds its most solid basis in the nature of the Higher Power, which, according to Christian spirituality, is redemptive love. Believing that the process of one's journey is inherently a redemptive one, which the Higher Power is helping to coordinate, makes for a more willing and cooperative experience. In using the term "redemptive," the following concept is intended. Redemption constitutes a pattern of grace at work in the world that is seeking to transform the destructiveness of sin and evil into something greater than would otherwise have been. This power is working both at the macro level, in terms of the unfolding plan of redemption for all of creation, and at the micro level, in terms of the redeeming of individual lives. Those who develop a complementary relationship with the power of redemption not only experience personal healing but also contribute to the healing of the universe. In so doing, the image of God is reclaimed and reflected, personally and corporately.

In choosing to surrender to the power of redemption an epistemological shift of the third-order occurs. Now a person's knowing has less to do with self and more to do with God, as he or She is understood. Life is being lived for the will of another (Higher Power) rather than one's own. Personal agendas are submitted to the larger purposes of the universe, which the power of redemption is seeking to unfold. One becomes less conscious of self and more conscious of his or her connections with others and creation. Seeking to live in harmony with those connections becomes important. At this point, persons realize that the law of God is actually the law of their own being (Tillich, 1952). As a result, pre-suppositions once again have changed and, thus, ways of knowing have expanded. The Apostle Paul describes it as union with Christ, as evidenced by "living according to the Spirit," which he compares with "living according to the flesh" (Rom. 8:5). He apparently sees these different lifestyles as constituting epistemological shifts, as reflected in his comment that those who are "in the
"flesh" cannot discern the things of God. In fact, those things seem like foolishness to them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

CONCLUSION

Paul's distinctions between flesh, spirit, and union with Christ appear similar to the distinctions between first-, second-, and third-order change. Although he may not have been using these distinctions to indicate phases of spiritual development, the parallels are worth noting. According to Paul's writings, those in the flesh operate based on the natural, common sense logic characteristic of first-order strategies. Since other ways of thinking seem foolish to them, they get stuck in "more of the same" types of behavior. Their focus is the law of God. When they perceive themselves to have fallen short, they simply try harder. If that does not prove effective, they appear prone to either giving up out of frustration and discouragement, or hiding their shortcomings out of anxiety and fear lest someone see behind their image and they become exposed.

Those who have had a spiritual awakening become capable of living according to the Spirit, which can be conceptualized on two levels (second-and third-order change). First, is the development of a lifestyle that is increasingly characterized by the principles of the Kingdom of God that Jesus outlined in His teaching. Through this new way of being, the wisdom and power of the Kingdom's paradoxes are discovered.

Although this new lifestyle of second-order change certainly reflects an epistemological shift and, thus, constitutes spiritual development, it does not necessarily involve surrender. To describe such third-order change, Paul seems to reserve the terms "in Christ" (Eph. 1-2) or "Christ in you" (Col. 1:27). These terms reflect the unity of the believer with the Savior and suggest a new way of perceiving self, others, and the world. So dramatic is this new epistemology that Paul prays for Christians to have a "spirit of wisdom and revelation" in order to become capable of grasping what it means (Eph. 1). Those who are gaining this insight could be said to be experiencing third-order change. From this perspective, spiritual development in the context of Paul's theology could be equated with the epistemological shifts of first-, second-, and third-order change that are reflected in the transitions from living according to the flesh to living according to the Spirit to discovering, through an increasingly surrendered life, the unity of being "in Christ" and experiencing "Christ in you."

An example from the life of Jesus can also be used to illustrate this connection between the three levels of change and spiritual development. On one occasion Jesus was confronted by a rich young ruler who asked Him what good deed he had to do to inherit eternal life (Mt. 19:16-22). Jesus responded by telling him to obey the commandments (first-order change), which the man said he had already done. At this point Jesus tells him that if he wishes to be mature he should sell all he has and give it to the poor (second-order change) and come follow Him (third-order change). Unfortunately, the young man was unwilling to take that step "because he had many possessions" (Mt. 19:22).

According to the gospel record, Jesus used this incident to illustrate the paradoxical principles of the Kingdom of God by commenting that all who have left everything to follow Him
(surrender) will be rewarded many times over and will inherit eternal life (Mt. 19:23-30). In the context of this story, maturity (spiritual development) seems contingent upon experiencing second-order (selling everything) and third-order (following Jesus) change. For that to happen, however, old presuppositions must be discarded and new ones formed (epistemological change).

In fact, in this story Jesus' disciples reacted to His comments with a response that appeared to reflect their own "stuckness" in first-order thinking. When Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God, they asked with astonishment how anyone could be saved. In other words, if those who have apparently succeeded in life, as evidenced by their wealth, are not good enough, how does anyone else have any hope? Similar to the outrageous statement of Jesus mentioned previously ("unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the Kingdom of God"), He once again appears to be shocking people into an awareness of their own inadequacy and need for second and third-order change.

These examples from Scripture, referring to both the life of Jesus and the writings of the Apostle Paul, seem to indicate that spiritual development, according to Christian spirituality, can be conceptualized as a process of epistemological shifts resulting in second and third-order change. While first-order strategies are typically characterized by commonsense thinking, second- and third-order strategies tend to appear paradoxical, especially to those socialized in Occidental cultures and, thus, require increasing levels of faith and trust. The anxiety that this produces, along with an innate pride that refuses to bow, often necessitates an experience of hitting bottom before persons are willing to take such risks. But, for those who have the courage to embark on such a journey, the process is inherently redemptive and can, therefore, be trusted.

[Sidebar]
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[Reference]
REFERENCES
HarperCollins.

[Author Affiliation]
BILL BUKER
Graduate School of Theology and Missions
Oral Roberts University

[Author Affiliation]
Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Bill Buker, PhD, Oral Roberts
University Graduate School of Theology and Missions, 7777 South Lewis Avenue, Tulsa, OK
74171. Electronic mail may be sent via Internet to bbuker@oru.edu.

[Author Affiliation]
AUTHOR
BUKER, BILL. Address: Oral Roberts University Graduate School of Theology and
Missions, 7777 South Lewis Avenue, Tulsa, OK 74171. Title: Assistant Professor of
Counseling Degrees: BA, MDiv, MA, DMin, Oral Roberts University; PhD (currently
enrolled), Oklahoma State University. Specializations: Marriage and Family Therapy;
integration of psychology and spirituality.

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