



Faith Development and Faith Formation: More Than Just Ages and Stages

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On Sunday evenings a year or so ago our church decided to engage the congregation in a study of worship. We got a book for the adults and teens to read and discuss but, while they were great for adults, we realized that we needed something else for the children. My wife, Laura, assembled some lessons on worship from a few other sources. The leaders of both the adult and children's groups enjoyed the study.

In one of the sessions Laura asked the children, ranging in ages from 3rd to 6th grade, to think about special events in their lives and place them on a time line. The children wanted to list "one-year-old birthday," "two-year-old birthday," and so on. Laura was looking for something else, though, so she said, "What about the first time you rode a bike or maybe when your baby brother was born?" But even with the examples that Laura gave the kids just couldn't do the task that she was asking them to do. Afterward we realized that we were seeing developmental theory in action. Kids of this age have a difficult time seeing that they have a personal past and a personal future. They can't see the big picture very well yet. As they grow older they'll be able to do that but they can't do it yet.

It was a good reminder of the importance of thinking about development in issues of faith formation and church ministry. It is very easy for us to think of development in terms of physical tasks: we would never, for example, ask a two year old to ride a two-wheeled bike without training wheels because we know that they don't have the balance to do that yet. But sometimes we don't think about other types of development and what impact that information might have on how we do things.

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There are many types of development and a number of theories about how people progress through various developmental stages: theories of physical development, cognitive development (how we think,) psycho-social development (how we interact with others,) moral development and faith development. As we think about faith formation it is useful to think about development and how that might impact the way people interact with our ministry.

Faith Development: Insights and Cautions

Much of what we know about faith development comes from the work of John Westerhoff and James Fowler. Their theories of faith development are useful (although imperfect) tools to help us understand what we might expect as people grow in their faith. Both theories cover much of the same territory, but in this chapter we'll focus on Fowler's theory.

Before we begin, though, there are a few things that we should keep in mind.

First of all, faith is a gift from God—it is the result of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives and an amazing outpouring of grace. Turning it into series of stages through which we navigate is at best tricky and at worst a complete misrepresentation of the mystery and wonder of God's place in our lives. One reasonable response to this discussion is to despair that those of us engaged in it could easily miss what is really going on. So we need to do our work carefully and we need to continuously remind ourselves that all of this is nothing without the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Second, this theory is flawed. What's more we don't know exactly how it's flawed. So we need to be really careful when we apply this information. Fowler's theory has been criticized for being based on Western Christians and is not as universal a theory of faith development as he claims. So perhaps what Fowler says doesn't apply as well to Christians from non-Western Cultures. His faith development theory is also based on other developmental theories, those of Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg, all of which also have limitations. Those limitations will be part of the faith development theory as well.

Finally, all developmental theories recognize that while the order in which we move from stage to stage is fairly consistent the amount of time each person spends in each stage varies quite a bit. It's like the way children learn how to walk: we can say the general order in which things happen but we really can't tell when they're going to happen. So even though we can give approximate ages for each of these stages there are going to be examples of people who are doing the things associated with that stage at both older and younger ages. We also need to resist the urge to think of these stages as discreet—instead there is a gradual change from one stage to the next.

Having made all those disclaimers it might seem that we can hardly say anything at all about how we develop faith but that's not quite true either. It's been my experience, and the experience of others, that much of what we learn about faith development from studying these stages of faith ring true. They match our own experiences and the experiences that we have observed in others as we have watched them develop and grow in their faith. Thinking deeply about these stages will give us some insight into how we and others develop in our faith. Even with all the problems with the theory noted above, it is still helpful to think about how people in various stages can be nurtured in their faith. So let's look at Fowler's theory and consider what we can learn about faith formation from it.

Faith Development in Children

In his book, *Stages of Faith*, when Fowler considers the faith of very young children, children up to about age two, he calls their faith stage a "pre-stage" and refers to it as **Undifferentiated Faith**. This is a stage in which we form our first pre-images of God. Fowler suggests that, while we don't directly learn about God in this stage—at least we are not able to verbalize what we've learned—the things we learn set the stage for what will come later. Ministry to children at this age, therefore, should be about the very things that we would expect—care and safety. The best things that we can do for young children are to give them a place where they can be well cared for when their parents are in worship or in meetings and where both they and their parents feel comfortable. Erickson suggests that trust is one of

the primary issues that children of this age address. Making church a place where the warmth of the family of God is felt by young children and where children can learn to trust that they will be well cared for and loved is one of the most important things we can do for these young children and for their parents.

The next stage of faith, which Fowler refers to as the first stage, is *Intuitive-Projective Faith*. This stage is found primarily in preschool children and is, primarily, a reflection of parental faith. It would be easy for us to conclude that this isn't really a child's own faith since it is a reflection of someone else's faith but that is missing an important point: children of this age are generally not able to think abstractly, to take someone else's perspective on things or to think through complex ideas.¹ Their faith is not a "thought-out" faith. Rather, it is a faith based on impressions – impressions that they mostly pick up from their parents. It would be unrealistic for us to expect children of this age to give us any sort of logical or well-organized description of their faith. They're not wired for that yet. Their faith talk will reflect their thoughts—it will be impressionistic, based on the stories that they have heard and on the things they've picked up by being around people of faith in their home and in their church. It is, as Fowler's name suggests, intuitive.

Knowing that children of this age are building a foundation for the type of faith they experience later we want to be careful with the impressions we give them at this early age. Kids learn stories from us in church but they also learn other things that might have an even larger impact, such as things that reflect the climate of the church. They'll get a sense if church is a place of warmth or of conflict. They'll begin to know whether their parents see church as a place of joy or a place at which they merely have an obligation. They'll quickly get a sense of whether church is a place where they feel comfortable.

Children this age also like a certain amount of repetition. When our children were younger they had their favorite audiotapes, videos and DVDs. In the case of our youngest child we saw more episodes of *Barney* then we could possibly enjoy but our daughter continued to watch them. We saw an example of this in our church a few years back. In our children's worship center for three-year-olds, we begin each Sunday with some time playing with Play-Doh. We saw this as a way to help the children settle down and get acclimated to the leader and to each other. It happened every week and the children

seemed to like it. One summer, we decided the change things up a bit and asked all the children, ages 3 through 3rd grade to come to a different room to hear a story together. The 3-year-olds were not happy. A few of them just couldn't figure out why we had changed things—they wanted their Play-Doh time! This reinforced to us the importance of Play-Doh for these children, but more broadly it reminded us just how important repetition and ritual are. This sort of ritual has been built in to many programs for children such as Jerome Berryman's *Godly Play* or Berryman and Stewart's *Young Children and Worship*.

To help children of this age grow in their faith, repetition shouldn't happen just in children's worship rooms, it should also happen in congregational worship and in their homes. Perhaps in congregational worship you could have certain songs that are sung every week (like the Doxology, "Praise God From Whom All Blessing Flow") or words of blessing that are the same from week to week. Certain congregations or denominations have this built-in, but for others this may be something they make a point of adding. At home you might have mealtime rituals involving prayers, sung blessings² or Bible reading. These are things young children can grab on to and they will come to expect every day or every week. Connecting what you do at home with what you do at church will help children see that faith is not something that's just in a certain building, it is a way of life.

As preschoolers get older they move into the next stage of development, *Mythic-Literal Faith*. This stage is found in those starting at around age six and it often lasts until age 11 or 12. In other words, this is the elementary school stage. These children can articulate their faith better than they could before, but that has as much to do with language development as it does with faith development. Their faith is still primarily a reflection of the faith of others their world has gotten bigger and so now people other than their parents also have significant influence.

I remember when my oldest daughter was in kindergarten. One evening at dinner I asked her to lead us in a prayer at the end of our meal and she prayed a prayer similar to the ones I had prayed at the table since she was old enough to pay attention, but then she added a request for one of her classmates who was sick. That event struck me because it was the first time I noticed her faith being influenced by someone other than my wife or me.

She was imitating what her Christian school teacher had done in class. She demonstrated in a small way what Fowler suggests happens ordinarily at this stage.

Children in this stage learn more and more of the stories of the Old and New Testaments. Kids begin to connect these stories together, but still don't see them as one large story. Story is important to all of us in our faith formation but it is especially important to children at this age. For one thing the stories catch their attention. While this is true for all of us, of course it is especially true for children of this age because they are not good at abstract thinking yet.³ This is one of the things we learned from Jean Piaget's work in cognitive development. This characteristic of their thinking makes story, as opposed to lessons that are built around concepts, particularly well suited to them.

Even more importantly, though, the stories of the Bible give children a sense of who they are and of what it means to be the people of God. These are our family stories and learning them is important at this stage in faith development. It gives children the pieces they will need so that, when they get to the next stage of development and can begin to put things together, they have the building blocks at their disposal already.

The church, then, has a wonderful opportunity to share the important stories of our faith to children at a time when they are developmentally ready to receive them. A dry transmission of these stories isn't going to do it, though. We need to use this opportunity to share these stories with them in a way that allows children to live inside of the stories.⁴ These stories are rich and deep and we should not use them as merely a vehicle to get to a moral lesson. If we do this we will be merely giving children a checklist of dos and don'ts instead of introducing them to the stories of God and his people.

Children in this stage don't usually ask questions about whether the faith that they received from their parents works or not. They pretty much still just accept it as the way things are. This is also true for adults who are still in this stage. Kenneth Stokes, in his book, *Faith is a Verb*, writes that adults who possess a faith that is "straightforward and literalistic" experience their faith this way. They will likely find themselves most comfortable in a church that emphasizes a highly literal interpretation of scripture and a strong sense of the authority of the church leaders. While they will likely not have the

same cognitive restrictions as elementary school children, they will come to their faith in the same unexamined way.

Faith Development in Adolescents and Young Adults

The next stage, *Synthetic-Conventional Faith*, begins around the time that students enter middle school and lasts throughout much of high school. Again, some people will remain in this stage for much of their lives. Anyone who has spent much time with middle schoolers knows that identity formation is a big part of what is happening at this time. Erickson's theory of psycho-social development helps us understand that this is one of the major issues that kids in this age. Piaget's theory of cognitive development suggests that this is a time in which children are more able to handle abstraction. The interaction of these two things has a number of ramifications in education as well in other areas. For example, these children and teens more fully realize that they have a personal past and a personal future. They are also capable of seeing things from the perspective of other people—a skill that they often use to look at themselves. This fuels the self-absorption—sometimes called adolescent egocentrism—that we see in kids at this age. Describing life with their teenage son, friends of ours said it was like "Caleb Radio—all Caleb, all the time." Because adolescents see the world through this relatively new lens of imagining what others think and because they are trying to figure out who they are they spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about themselves. Anyone who has spent time with middle school kids has seen this.

Self-absorption is not the only issue in this stage, of course. Because they are capable of more abstract thought is more possible, kids and teens are also to begin to put the Bible stories that they have been hearing for years into a larger story of faith. They can, for example, begin to understand the connections between the Exodus, the celebration of the Passover and the Lord's Supper. These connections, which help us realize that the Bible is one large story, are difficult for younger children to understand. Teenagers' ability to do this allows us to have deeper and more complex conversations about faith than we could when they were younger.

Two other interesting things, which may seem contradictory, are also going on at this time: a desire for independence and a strong desire to belong to a group. Since teens at this stage want to be independent they are at the point where they want to choose their own faith. For the first time, their faith is not merely a reflection of someone else's faith. They actually make some deliberate personal commitments. Their experience is still quite limited, though, and they want to be part of a group, for the most part they choose the faith of their parents. So, even though they make a choice, the list of options is usually limited to one—the faith they were raised in.

The importance of friends is great at this age. Because these teens are trying to figure out who they are they will try to differentiate themselves from their parents, at least to a certain extent, and they will align themselves with a group of friends who can also have a significant influence on them. Sometimes teenagers literally wear their identities on their sleeves—or at least on their clothes. You can often tell how they identify themselves based on the way they dress. Recently my wife and I passed two teenage boys who were pretty clearly communicating a few things about themselves without saying anything. The way they had their hair and the way they dressed identified them with a particular group of teens in our community who spend their free time skateboarding. Whether they realized it or not, these boys were carefully creating an image that showed that they were part of the skater group. To a certain extent, this is true of all teens: all teens are working on their identities and they often begin this by identifying themselves with (or against) certain groups.

Another important issue in both this stage and the next is the location of authority. For young children authority for many things is clearly located with their parents. Parents have control over many of their decisions, certainly their big ones. Early on, for example, parents pick out the clothes their children wear. As they get older they begin to make those choices themselves. Those first choices come from a limited set of options, usually chosen by their parents. Later the choices are completely their own. As children grow into teens and then into young adults the location of that authority shifts from being primarily external (with parents) to being primarily internal.

People who are in Fowler's synthetic-conventional stage of faith, whether they are teens

or much older, find their source of authority for their faith is primarily located outside themselves. Cult leaders use this sort of authority structure to help them control the people who follow them. Some Christian leaders who see themselves as having God-given authority over their flock may structure their church in a synthetic-conventional mode, depending on their followers to pretty much do what they say. While it is easy to paint these people in a purely negative light, there are, of course, a number of examples of Christian leaders who do not abuse this authority and who care deeply for the people in their congregations. But the point is the same—the people who are in the synthetic-conventional stage of faith give over much of the authority for their faith to someone else.

This is in contrast to the fourth stage, *individuated-reflective* faith. This is a stage that is characterized by what happens when we take control of our faith, when the authority for our faith comes to reside within us instead of with someone else. This often happens at the same time as other significant life changes like moving away from home. Again, the shift in the center of authority doesn't happen overnight. But moving away from home—perhaps moving away to college—can be a trigger to make it happen more quickly or it can initiate the beginning of such a shift. Sometimes this move merely results in a relocation of authority from parents to someone else and does not represent taking on that authority personally. For example, someone might leave a church that is very authoritarian and will move to a different group that still exerts great authority over their members. This is likely not a change in faith stage but is merely a change in the particulars of their faith experience.

But if there really is a change in the location of authority, these people examine their faith in a way that they really didn't before. They take a step back from the faith that they accepted when they were younger and they begin to ask if this faith really works for them. They perhaps engage questions that have been lurking under the surface for a while but hadn't really allowed themselves to address.

Although a number of college students find themselves here, this isn't just a phase for college students. Research has found that this stage happens for people throughout their adult lives. People in this stage are allowing questions to have a foothold in their faith. This can be a powerfully positive experience as people realize that the Christian faith has the sort of depth that holds up

well to their questions, especially when they have the opportunity to work through them with thoughtful, articulate people who don't give them easy answers. It doesn't take a theologian to know that God is bigger than we can imagine. It also makes sense that there will be questions for which we just don't have answers. But a person who listens carefully, thinks through the questions and explores the beginnings of answers with people in this stage of their faith can be a great help. Some people, according to Kenneth Stokes, are told simply not to question their faith (Stokes, 19). But this sort of response isn't helpful. People in this stage aren't going to be satisfied with a "because I told you so" faith—they want something that they can grapple with.

People in this stage of faith seek a church community that allows them to express their faith in their own way. At this point their faith is quite individualistic; for the first time in their lives, their faith belongs to them as a person instead of them as a group. A few years back I was talking to a student who told me that she really had her own personal beliefs that didn't match any church or organized group. Back then I found it remarkable that a person of this age could just assume that her 19 years of experience gave her insights that centuries of thought by thousands of people hadn't come up with! But really, she was simply giving voice to what this stage is all about. She needed to define her faith in her own way. It needed to make sense to her and accepting someone else's answers wasn't going to cut it.

What we sometimes see in this kind of faith, and what I saw in that student, is throwing off of the trappings of church—a desire to reinvent faith to get at the heart of what these people see as "what really counts." This might involve switching to another church where the faith is perceived as being "alive" or "authentic." It might mean getting involved more deeply in church education. It might mean staying in the same church but seeking additional places to grow in faith, whether that is through attending a Bible study at another church, attending lectures and worship services or just reading things that speak to the person's individual expressions of the faith. Of course, other factors might enter in to these decisions. Relationships formed over the years, for example, often keep people in their churches even if they feel that their needs aren't being met. But however it gets played-out, for many people

there will come a time when their previously unexamined faith gets put under the microscope.

Churches can respond to this stage of faith in a pre-emptive way by presenting the Christian faith to children in a way that invites questions. We want to give children a faith that shows that we grapple with scripture and seek to discover God's will for our lives.

One way we can do this is to give them the stories that show that biblical characters were not always "goody-two-shoes" types of people. I'm not suggesting that we tell first graders all the details of Judah and Tamar, but I do think it is good for them to know that David faced Absalom as well as Goliath, or that that Abraham trusted God with Isaac but wasn't so sure when he said that Sarah was his sister instead of his wife. As we get to see that the people in the Bible were just like us we can begin to see that we can worship and have a relationship with God just like they did. If we give children a mere shadow of the full story of God and his people then when they ask if the faith that they have followed for years actually *works*, they won't have a good answer.

Faith Development in Adulthood

In stage five, which Fowler calls *conjunctive faith*, the unsettled sense that exists in stage four settles down a bit. People in this stage can own the faith of the community in a way that they couldn't before. There are still questions but these arise in the context of a solid faith. There is a strong sense that the "my faith" that the person has developed earlier has become "our faith." People in this stage recognize that long-standing expressions of faith have depth and richness to them and they are ready to embrace them. They may be ready for significant encounters with Christian faith traditions other than their own. But unlike an earlier stage in which there is a desire to try out other ways of faith to see if they fit, this is a deep commitment to seeing if other traditions might have insights that can enrich the experience. This stage represents a faith that does not place authority in the hands of someone else but it is also not afraid to recognize the wisdom that others can share with regard to faith. Fowler cautions that this is not a "wishy-washy neutrality" but instead it represents someone who is open to

other perspectives because he or she is extremely well grounded in faith (Fowler, 186).

People in this stage of faith are often eager for insights that can give them a richer and fuller understanding of God and his work in the world. These people will be open to in-depth teaching and service opportunities as well as opportunities to work with other churches and faith groups while remaining deeply engaged in their home church. They are able to see the beauty of worship that is both progressive and ancient. They can see the complex in the simple. They can be part of a group without feeling like they are sacrificing their individuality.

Fowler adds a sixth stage, **universalizing faith**, to his list which we will only briefly mention here. This stage, according to Fowler, is a radical living out of your faith. The faith that has been solidified in stage five becomes something that has an even more significant impact on the life of a believer. The examples that Fowler gives changed their lives in radical ways for their faith, people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonnhoffer or Mother Theresa. Fowler says that this stage is quite rare.

Conclusion

We should keep a few things in mind when we think about faith development and faith formation.

- It is important to articulate our faith to each other and to our children. In their book *Soul Searching*, Smith and Denton write that “religious language is like any other language: to learn to speak it, one needs first to listen to native speakers using it a lot, and then one needs plenty of practice speaking it oneself” (Smith, 133). We get better at understanding our faith by articulating it and we articulate it better when we practice. Giving children and others religious language will help in their overall development.
- Bible stories are a vitally important in helping children (and all of us) understand that our faith is much more than just a series of rules or moral lessons. God introduces himself to us in these stories and they help us know Him and know ourselves. They are

our family stories and we need to tell them often and well.

- People of all ages need to know that they have an important place in our church community. One way to do that is to give them an opportunity to participate in worship leadership. Senior citizens, young children and everyone in between should feel that the majority of church programs give them an opportunity to rub shoulders with each other. Having adults in the lives of younger Christians is good for everyone. Children learn that the faith that they received from their parents is shared by other important people as well; they get a first hand look at how older Christians live their lives and they see that all of church life—a not just the “kid’s part”—is for them. Older adults get to share their personal stories and they get practice articulating their faith. They are also reminded that the questions that teens and young adults have are an important part of the faith journey.
- The home is vitally important to the early years of faith development. Not only do children and teens spend more time at home than anywhere else, but the influence of parents on early faith development is hard to overemphasize. Churches should support parents in helping their children learn about God and how God work in their lives.
- All of these stages are best experienced in community. By being with other Christians in various stages of their faith development we have the chance to more fully experience our own faith. We were created to live in community and it is in community that our faith finds its best expression and our faith can grow. Giving children a strong sense of the Christian community is the best way to give them the support that they will need in various stages of their faith.

End Notes

- ¹ This comes from an understanding of Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive development.
- ² Ron Rienstra has written about sung meal table graces and included examples in Rienstra, Ron, “Table Graces: Connecting Sung Prayers in Church

with Meal Prayers at Home,” *Reformed Worship* 76, p16-17.

³ See Arthur, Sarah, “Distinguishing Dragons: The Importance of Story in Faith Formation” in Keeley, Robert J. (ed.) *Shaped By God: Twelve Essentials for Nurturing Faith in Children, Youth and Adults*, Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2010, p37-46.

⁴ For an extended discussion of what I mean by this see Keeley, Robert J., *Helping Our Children Grow in Faith* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.

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