

YOUTH AND FAITH DEVELOPMENT

By Mark Tittley

The goal of youth ministry within the church involves outreach and nurture, so effective ministry seeks to reach youth for Christ and also to nurture them in their faith. Human development can be classified into six categories: physical, intellectual, social, emotional, moral and spiritual. In

Luke 2:40,52 we read that Jesus grew (developed) in wisdom (intellectually) and stature (physically), and in favour with God (spiritually) and man (socially). This paper will explore the concept of faith, its development and how it relates to the other areas of human development.

1. FAITH DEFINED BIBLICALLY

Literature on faith development offers a variety of definitions of faith, however, most of them tend to be psychological rather than theological. From a theological perspective, faith is defined as: "a certain conviction wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, as to the truth of the gospel, and a hearty reliance (trust) on the promises of God in Christ" (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 1941, Pg 503). Here the emphasis is on what we believe and who we believe in and not just the fact that we believe.

Biblical faith is a complex activity made up of three elements:

- * The intellectual element is concerned with the knowledge of faith. When a person comes to Christ it is with some fundamental knowledge about the object of that faith.
- * The emotional element involves the acceptance of the validity of the knowledge of this faith with an active embracing of it.
- * The volitional element of faith is the choice of the will to respond and act on what is believed. Obedience is stressed because the person is changed by this faith.

The crucial concern for youth ministry is how much we can expect from young people. How much knowledge, conviction and obedience should we expect from them? In this regard the theories of faith development become helpful. Three theories will be considered, those developed by James Fowler; John Westerhoff and Bruce Powers. Just before we consider the theories it may be important to reflect on the validity of turning to developmental theorists for insights, when some may say: "surely faith is a matter of conversion and not development!"

2. DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY & CONVERSION

William Hendricks, in *A Theology for Children*, has insights which are applicable. He says: "If by 'development' one means an inevitable, non varying pattern by which every child must develop and does naturally and invariably do so, then the gap between the disciplines is serious. If by 'conversion' one means a supernatural relationship that is qualitatively different from other experiences in life and which experience does not build on any previous experience of a child, then the gap between the disciplines is uncrossable" (1980, Page 231,232). He proceeds to define the two aspects:

- * Developmental science seeks to provide a general pattern of how children learn, think, internalise and act. It does not try to regulate and predestine how children will function in every

area of their lives. He says, "If 'development' is understood as a studied description of how children experience and relate to reality, then developmental psychology can assist religious educators in evaluating and explaining religious experience and the child's religious 'conversion' experience" (Hendricks, Page 232).

* Christian conversion occurs when a person is awakened by God the Holy Spirit, and accepts and responds to God the Father's acceptance of them through the action of God the Son. It involves the turning from a destructive pattern of existence to a redemptive pattern. This re-orientation has affective (practical and action-orientated) aspects and cognitive (mental) aspects. It is the rebirth of the previous self, but not the supplying of a new body, a new way of learning, or a new pattern of perceiving reality. So, it follows, that "religious educators can relate developmental psychology and conversion if they have an adequate biblical theology of the relation of nature and grace" (Hendricks, Page 233).

3. FAITH DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

A. James Fowler

For Fowler, faith is a normal human experience and not a particular Christian activity. His definition is existential (experience orientated) and relativistic (not rooted in the absolutes of Scripture). His formal definition is: *Faith is people's evolved and evolving ways of experiencing self, others and the world (as they construct them) as related to and affected by the ultimate concerns of existence (as they construct them) and of shaping their lives' purposes and meanings, trust and loyalties, in the light of character of being, value and power determining the ultimate condition of existence (as grasped in their operative images - conscious and unconscious - of them).* (Stages of Faith, 1982)

He suggests a dynamic triad of self, others and shared centres of value and power that make faith something that is evolving, existential and relative. It has to do with how we see ourselves, others and the ultimate values that we hold in common.

Fowler says that just as individuals go through stages in their moral or intellectual development, so they go through stages in the development of their faith. The stages are predictable, invariant and sequential. Variation lies in the content of the faith and the extent to which one's faith develops. He builds on the work of Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg in order to define six stages in faith's development. He speaks of infancy as characterised by "undifferentiated faith." This is a pre-stage that contains the seeds of trust, courage, hope and love that will later become integral parts of faith. His six stages are:

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (3-7 Years Old)

Children get their ideas about God and religion from adults, so faith is formulated by watching and listening to their parents. No one tells them to use this approach, it is intuitive. Usually children get their first impression of God by projecting their impressions of their mother or father onto God. Fantasy plays a big role in the thinking of the child. They are highly imaginative and can be strongly influenced by the examples and stories of adult's faith.

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith (8-12 Years Old)

Here children are beginning to give attention to the rest of the world and to distinguish between

what is real and what is fantasy. While children are still threatened by the uncertainties of the world, their faith in God gives them a sense of security. Children move back and forth between concrete and abstract thinking. Their belief, attitudes and rules are interpreted literally. Children in this stage of development are both reflective and able to understand other's perspectives. They have simply accepted their spiritual heritage and ask no questions. During this stage God is perceived in human form somewhere in the sky.

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Adolescence)

This is the most common faith structure found among adolescents. Their world begins to expand far beyond the limits of the family. Friends, school, work, church youth group, sports teams and the media all demand their attention. Their faith must provide coherence and meaning to these new experiences. It is synthetic, not in the sense of being false, but in that it is shaped by interpersonal relationships. This interpersonal orientation is geared to bring a sense of unity to the individual, as they try to integrate their own religious views with the incompatible views of others. It is conformist in nature as youth are highly aware of the opinions, expectations and judgments of significant others, and as their identity is not sufficiently formulated they do not have autonomous beliefs, evaluations and perceptions. It is conventional in that it is shaped by the attitudes of those that one is with at any given time. The great danger here is that people settle for a faith that is second-hand. Young people tend to compartmentalise their faith so that Sunday's commitment does not impact Monday's lifestyle. Stage 3 continues as the primary structure of faith for many adults. Here people conceive of God as a personal advisor and guide, but in a less personalised fashion than before.

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (Young Adulthood)

As identity develops, and decisions made conflict with the surrounding environment, the person begins to differentiate from the value system and perceptions of others. Individuals move into stage 4 when they accept personal responsibility for their own beliefs, actions, attitudes and values and they develop a first-hand faith. It is individuative in that it is a faith of their own, and it is reflective in the sense that those who move into this stage have taken time to reflect on what they actually and personally believe. People at stage 4 have engaged in critical self-reflection and examination of their beliefs and values. They are able to view God in more abstract ways, not as a personal advisor, but as a spirit embodying moral truths and personal presence.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith (Middle Life)

During this stage the individual recognises thoughts, impulses, feelings and memories that have been previously suppressed and as they uncover and work through their past they begin to recognise the parental, social, ethnic and religious influences that have affected their development. While stage 4 helped the individual to set boundaries to identify self as separate from the world, stage 5 helps these boundaries become less fixed and rigid. Faith here is conjunctive in that ironies and paradoxes are allowed in the person's concept of truth and reality, this is because absolutes are seen as more relative.

Stage 6: Universalising Faith (Later Life)

This stage is rarely seen, but when it is, these individuals make a significant impact on society. They are absolutely committed to the task of universalising the concepts of unconditional love and absolute justice. They have a broad focus that leaves them undaunted by threats to themselves or their loved ones. They are satisfied with nothing short of the ultimate good of all humanity. Often they are viewed as potentially dangerous to the existing political or religious

structures. Examples include: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa and the ultimate example of development: Jesus Christ.

B. John Westerhoff

John Westerhoff III uses the analogy of rings in a tree to describe faith development. Each ring remains, even as another ring develops around it. He defines faith as "an action which includes thinking, feeling and willing. It is sustained, transmitted and expanded through our interaction with faithing selves in a community of faith" (*Will Our Children Have Faith?* 1976, Page 89-91). He suggests four stages of faith that emerge one from the other so that a clear developmental process is evident:

Stage 1: Experienced Faith (Preschool and Childhood)

This is foundational faith. The child experiences, explore, tests and reacts to faith. He copies the faith of other, and by observation and interaction begins to develop a faith of his own.

Stage 2: Affiliative Faith (Adolescence)

Here faith is characterised by a strong sense of belonging to a group and it has a strong affective aspect. Also there is a sense of authority that the community's way of understanding faith will influence values and actions.

Stage 3: Searching Faith (Late Adolescence)

Now faith is characterised by doubting and questioning. There may be some experimentation with other religions or ways of expressing faith, and there is a growing need to commit oneself to one or several causes.

Stage 4: Owned Faith (Adults)

This stage is reached when the person comes to peace with his faith and wants to be characterised by it. This person will strive to witness for their faith.

Adolescents must question and even doubt their faith if they are to own it. The context in which this process should take place is the community of faith (ie. the church). He argues that enculturation (nonformal relational experiences) rather than instruction (formal teaching settings) is the best means of nurturing faith. We should help adolescents question their faith in order to help it grow.

C. Bruce Powers

Bruce Powers has suggested another way of understanding the process of faith development. He sees faith development as a cyclical process that continually helps a person adjust to life needs. This process involves awareness of a growing need, recall of Christian teaching, understanding possibilities for response, conviction of certain actions, and application of one's knowledge and talents in Christian service. His five steps are the result of integrating Fowler and Westerhoff with a reflection on his own faith pilgrimage. Rather than describing stages, he speaks of five phases of development:

Phase 1: Nurture (Ages 0-6)

The first phase, Nurture, is the first exposure to the meaning of life. The most influential people in this phase are parents and teachers, although what they say is not as important as that they love the child.

Phase 2: Indoctrination (Ages 7-18)

The second phase, Indoctrination, has a primary goal in the acquisition and mastery of the content of faith. The content is gained, not only from reading the Bible or listening to sermons, but also from interaction with other people who influence belief. Together youth decide what they will believe. By means of responding to life issues in the ways their faith suggests, they will have the ability to begin incorporating their faith into their own personalities. The process of learning the content of Christian faith and reflecting on life needs in relation to that information makes teaching youth a critical means of enhancing their faith development. Also, the role of parents and youth leaders is critical.

Phase 3: Reality Testing (Ages 19-27)

During the Reality Testing phase the individual tries out their faith in the arena of life to see if it will stand up. Here some of the idealism of youth is challenged and changed by the realities of life.

Phase 4: Making Choices (Ages 28-35)

During the Making Choices phase, the person truly owns their faith, and their life is now, to some degree, shaped by what they believe.

Phase 5: Active Devotion (Ages 36-)

The process culminates in the phase of Active Devotion after the age of thirty six.

D. Von Hugel

Von Hugel in *The Mystical Element in Religion* takes three main stages in human development - infancy, adolescence and adulthood - describing the predominant needs and activities which characterise each stage. He shows that religion must take into account the predominant needs and activities of each stage, and so concludes that religion must include three essential elements, an institutional element corresponding to the needs and activities of infancy, a critical element corresponding to the needs and activities of adolescence, and a mystical element corresponding to the needs and activities of adulthood.

The needs and activities of infancy do not disappear in adolescence, nor do the needs and activities of adolescence disappear in adulthood. But they should cease to be predominant as we grow up. Religion must include all three elements: the institutional, the critical and the mystical.

Stage 1: Infancy - Institutional

Here we are concerned with physical movement and sense impressions and our needs are for food, warmth, protection and affection. A child's memory becomes filled with stories, with family history as it grows and experiences life. They normally accept what they are told by their parents as true, uncritically. They also need guidance on what they may and may not do. Their greatest emotional needs are for protection and affection, for without these they cannot learn to trust either itself or anyone else. The church must help to pass on to the child its history, its doctrinal and moral teachings.

Stage 2: Adolescence - Critical

This is a time when the mind begins to question. We try to discover some unity and meaning in the multiplicity of sense impressions, facts, teachings, beliefs and experiences presented to us. We develop plans for the future - based on a theory about our lives. Adolescents do not accept

obedience that is unquestioning acceptance of whatever is presented by the teaching authority - they want to criticise, read, and listen to opposing theories. True Christianity is always critical, questioning and continually developing in its understanding of God and of human life.

Stage 3: Adulthood - Mystical

The characteristic of adulthood is a growing awareness of inner consciousness, of the complexity of feeling and emotion within us, revealed to us through our activity, our encounters and relationships with others, our work, what we read, hear and see, and of the internal activity which results from this, our hopes and despairs, sadness and joy, fears and expectations, certainties and doubts. As we become more conscious of this inner world, we are both attracted and frightened by it. In adulthood we become increasingly conscious of the complexity of our inner life, of its mystery and incommunicability. Religion must answer this stage of growth with encouragement and guidance, fostering our imaginations and allaying our fears. Here God is encountered rather than thought about - experienced from within, rather than from without. This is the mystical element of faith.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

The theories of faith development, when considered critically and with the knowledge that they relate to how faith develops and not primarily how it is created, have the following valuable insights to offer for youth ministry:-

A. Faith is Dynamic - not Static or Unchanging

The theories show that many factors affect the development of faith - either helping faith to grow or hindering its growth. The various aspects of a person's development have a direct influence on faith development, such as cognitive, moral, social, physical and emotional development.

B. Social Context Dynamically Influences Faith Development

Social development is of great importance to faith development. During childhood the home situation, relationships with parents and the quality of the model parents provide directly affects the child's view of God, their ability to trust or believe in Him and their potential for faith development. During adolescence, as teenagers are exposed to authorities outside the home and peer relationships they proceed through a faith development crisis. They seek to correlate what they have been taught with what other voices are saying. This naturally leads to a period of doubting and questioning of the content of their faith. During the young adult years, often for the first time, people begin to personally reflect on their faith and move towards owning it.

C. Past Experiences Directly Affect Present Faith Development

The analogy that faith development is like the growth of a tree reflected in the rings within the tree trunk (Westerhoff) suggests that each new stage of faith development build on the stage before it. In dealing with people, it is important to realise that experiences they have had in the past have an impact on their faith today. It may be necessary at times, when dealing with a presenting problem, to explore further back into the person's past to discover the cause of the problem.

D. Adolescence is Characterised by Great Change in Faith

The common threads running through all these theories of faith development is that adolescence is a time during which faith will be questioned. The teen's new cognitive abilities (called formal

operations by Piaget) and need to establish independence from their parents will probably be evidenced in some form of questioning their faith. This should not be viewed as a spiritual problem, but a normal process of development. In fact, questioning may indicate that faith is growing. The way leaders respond to this questioning is important: if they communicate anxiety about their questions, youth will think that their beliefs cannot stand up under close scrutiny, but if leaders respond with openness, without condemnation, youth will conclude that doubt is a normal part of growing up.

E. Youth Must Develop According to Christian Standards

God has designed human life with a transition between childhood and adulthood called adolescence - a period where a number of issues need to be resolved. But, if the person considers themselves to be a Christian they need to know that God has standards that they are to follow. Helping teens to talk about their struggles and then helping them to integrate their Christianity into these struggles in positive ways, will be an effective means of nurturing them in their faith.

F. Development is Related to the Unique Life of the Individual

We should not expect the same change in each person as teenagers are individuals in different stages of transition through adolescence. In one we may expect growth in their desire to worship God, and in another a reduction in their need for drugs. Both involve change, although the kind of change is different for each. For some teens adolescence is quite easy, so we can expect that their spiritual growth will be quite high. But for others, it is an extremely difficult period and most of their energy will be spent in trying to survive the period. For them, our expectation of spiritual maturity will be less, although it is still proper to desire and expect to see some growth. People only fail to grow when they are not willing to change. The change that is expected is not conformity but genuine growth in faith.

G. Faith Must Develop in Knowledge, Values and Behaviour

For all adolescents spiritual growth includes a growing knowledge of the content and more specifically the object of the Christian faith, a deepening of the values of the kingdom of God, and a lifestyle characterised by a more radical obedience to the teachings of Scripture - these are the foundational aspects of faith. Neil Anderson, in *Stomping Out The Darkness*, says, "the depth of faith is determined by the depth of your knowledge of the object" (Regal, 1993, Pg 99), so it is important to develop people in their understanding of God which will in turn help them grow spiritually.

H. Youth Need Encouragement not Discouragement

Because adolescence is already a negative and critical period in the life of the teenager, any criticism from leaders will only reinforce in the teenager's mind the fact that they are unable to live up to the Christian faith. If expectations are too high, we will tend to be critical and abusive in our relationships with them. This will only hinder their growth further.

I. Teaching Must Reflect Faith Development Insights

Faith development has implication for the way the child, teenager or young adult is taught. Age-appropriate guidelines will be discovered if we consider each stage closely. Children learn from observing their parents - teaching must reflect an emphasis on the family and the home life of the child. They are influenced by examples and stories of faith - Biblical stories of faith heroes are

important. They are beginning to think abstractly, so they can gradually understand deeper truths as they develop. Teenagers are affected by the world outside the home - ministry must focus on faith in a pluralistic society, how doubt and questioning help to develop faith and challenge to conform to Christ and not the world. Young adults must be encouraged to reflect personally and honestly on what they believe to ensure that as they create a life structure for themselves they build it around a first-hand faith.

For a fuller treatment, read about fourteen different [faith development theories](#)

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