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## Insights from Faith Development Theory and Research

Jeff Astley

‘Faith development’ is a controversial phrase which refers to a controversial theory. The term is associated with the work of James Fowler and his associates in the United States, first at Harvard University and later at Emory University, Atlanta. His theory has been developed, adapted, applied, criticised and generally debated now for over two decades.<sup>1</sup>

### FAITH IN FOCUS

Faith development theory is controversial for three main reasons. First, it greatly broadens our usual idea of faith. For Fowler, *faith is universal*. He argues that we all ‘believe in’ - that is trust, relate to, ‘find’ and ‘make’ meaning in - something or someone. Faith isn’t just for the religious.

*Faith* has to do with the making, maintenance, and transformation of human meaning. It is a mode of knowing and being. In faith, we shape our lives in relation to more or less comprehensive convictions or assumptions about reality. Faith composes a felt sense of the world as having character, pattern and unity.<sup>2</sup>

‘The opposite of faith’, Fowler writes, ‘is not doubt. Rather, the opposite of faith is nihilism’: that is, the inability to describe *anything* in which one believes ‘and despair about the possibility of even negative meaning’.<sup>3</sup> Fowler’s research is a study of *human faith*, a generic term labelling our believing in and relating to whatever is ‘ultimate’ for us. It is to be understood as:

the composing or interpreting of an ultimate environment *and* as a way-of-being-in-relation to it. [It] must be seen as a central aspect of a person's life orientation. Faith is a primary motivating power in the journey of the self. It plays a central role in shaping the responses a person will make in and against the force-field of his or her life. Faith, then, is a core element in one's character or personality.<sup>4</sup>

For Fowler, religious faith differs from other forms of faith in having specifically religious objects or contents. In his terminology, these are *religious* 'centres of value' and 'images of power' in which we believe, and *religious* 'master stories' by which we live our lives.<sup>5</sup> But we all have something in which or someone in whom we believe; some object of our 'worth-ship'; some acknowledged influential powers; some life-directing narrative or myth of who we are and should be, and of what 'life is all about'. Conversion is a change in these contents of faith, which comes about as and when we come to focus our faith on different 'gods'.

Secondly, Fowler's theory is contentious in concentrating on *the form, rather than the content of faith*. This seems perverse to many. Most religious, and indeed most non-religious, people are interested in *what* people believe and *what* they believe in. They are concerned, then, with the content of faith. Fowler, on the other hand, has as his focus of research the ways in which we have faith, the *how* of faith. He argues that this form of faith can be viewed under a number of interrelated dimensions. They are listed below, and include such elements as the way we reason, the way we make moral judgements, the way we rely on authorities for our faith, our view of symbols, and the way we hold our experience and beliefs together. These aspects of faith are sometimes described as 'windows into faith'. This is a useful metaphor, for different windows will always give us different, partial views into a building; while some of the contents of the building may remain forever out of sight of observers, even though they peer in through all its windows.

The third main area of controversy is Fowler's claim that *the form of faith develops*. Again, details of this development are to be found below. Drawing on various studies of cognitive development, and broadening them, Fowler argues that the way we hold our faith can pass through up to six stages. At each stage we 'faith'

differently. ('Faithing' is perhaps a proper word to coin in this context, for the logic of faith is that of a verb rather than a noun; it is an activity, something we *do*.) As we move from one stage to another we often suffer the trauma of losing a familiar way of being in faith before we can take up a new way of composing meaning and enter into a new balanced relationship ('equilibrium') between our patterns of thinking, relating and valuing, and the world of our experience. This scheme of faith development draws on evidence from several hundred in-depth interviews that Fowler and others have done with children, young people and adults right across the age range.

It should be noted at the outset that some researchers are sceptical both of the empirical support for the theory and of its theological, educational and psychological presuppositions, whereas others are more enthusiastic.<sup>6</sup> Many educators and pastors accept that Fowler's faith stages 'chime in' with the experience they have had of the development of adults, youth and children in their charge. Many others claim to recognise in Fowler's scheme a process through which they themselves have moved. The theory has therefore been applied to pastoral counselling, to work with congregations and families, and to ministry with the mentally handicapped, in addition to educational work with students, young people and adults of all ages.<sup>7</sup>

Before filling in the details of faith development theory, I will offer two examples of ways in which the theory can help to illuminate our understanding of and relationship with other people.

How is it that we, as adults and particularly as parents, so often cannot 'get through' to adolescents: that they seem to be in another world from us? The situation may partly be explained by the fact that they believe in different things, of course. But faith development theory suggests that it may also be because the way they believe is so different from our own. Although most adolescents are able to think perfectly logically and abstractly, many of them have not yet started to 'think for themselves' and to reflect on their own world-views. It is always difficult to converse with people in a certain place if they do not know why they are there, or even *that* they are there. Most adolescents, and indeed many adults, are at Fowler's Faith Stage 3. At this stage they hardly know how or that they are in faith, or where their faith comes from. They operate a form of 'tacit meaning-making' which is blind to itself. It is like the implicit knowledge we have that enables us to recognise other people's faces or to ride a bicycle, while being quite unable to explain how we are doing it. The parent or teacher

of adolescents and young adults needs to know that at the present moment many of her charges simply cannot recognise where their values and beliefs come from, or how they have created their world-views. (And at this stage getting such people to concentrate on ‘how they are doing the riding’ may only result in their falling off their bikes.) Imagine that you are at this stage. It is a period when our ideologies can *only* operate ‘not in front of our eyes but from behind our backs’, to appropriate a phrase from John Hull.<sup>8</sup> This is what Stage 3 faith is like.

Here is another area where faith development theory can offer some illumination: Christian disagreements. Stephen Sykes has argued that disagreement is endemic in the church. He writes: ‘Conflict in Christianity is not accidental or occasional, but intrinsic and chronic . . . Diversity . . . is the norm for Christianity.’<sup>9</sup> Even a cursory review of church history will provide illustrative data to support this interpretation. Now faith development theory can offer us a useful commentary on at least some forms of this theological or religious disagreement. Its main insight is this. Those who have moved through several faith stages can appreciate the positions they have left, but it is simply not possible for them to imagine what things are like much ahead of their current standpoint. Life, in this respect, *is* like a journey. We know the countryside we have passed through, but we cannot yet recognise what lies ahead. ‘It does not yet appear what we shall be.’ Thus - as the report *How Faith Grows* puts it - ‘some controversial figures in the church may be better able to understand their opponents’ positions than those opponents can understand the people *they* oppose’.<sup>10</sup> In particular, those in the early stages of faith development (and I do not refer just to adolescents and young adults here, as we shall see) can often appreciate only one viewpoint; whereas those at later stages have a more open and wider sympathy, accommodating a variety of views. This is surely a mark of what we ordinarily describe as a move to a ‘more mature’ form of faith. Faith development theory can help us to acknowledge more easily this rather galling situation of one-sided incomprehension, and perhaps to live with it more patiently.

Before considering Fowler’s theory in greater detail, we should reflect on one particular question that is often raised about it. Does this account offer a neutral *description* of how people actually develop, or a *prescription* of how they ought to develop? Fowler claims that people could be mystically alive at Stage 1, and spiritual saints from Stage 3. No stage is more ‘worthy’ than another (certainly not *religiously-*

speaking). He argues that the stages are not stages of faithfulness or virtue, and insists that each stage is 'appropriate' for the person who has equilibrated at it. Yet he also writes that later stages in faith development theory involve 'genuine growth toward wider and more accurate response to God, and toward more consistently humane care for other human beings'.<sup>11</sup> Development is a good thing, then, if only for this reason.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the later stages are 'more comprehensive and adequate' than earlier stages:<sup>13</sup> they give a wider perspective on life and on other people, and they are more adequate in meeting the demands and perceptions of the new experiences that people tend to have later in life.

This is especially true of Stage 6, although Fowler admits that this stage, like the endpoints of most developmental theories, expresses *philosophical* - and I think *theological* - commitments and traditions. He describes them as 'grounding values and visions' that 'cannot be . . . empirically established as most developed, most true, or most adequate by strictly value-free procedures of inquiry'. That is to say, empirical research of an entirely open-ended form cannot establish 'the normative qualities of the most developed stage', for these derive from 'some faith vision of the excellence to which humans are called and for which we are potentiated'.<sup>14</sup>

But we must constantly remind ourselves that any stage may be regarded as Christian (if it has a Christian content). Further, it is a mistake to attempt to rush people through the stages. Fowler writes:

Other things being equal, persons should be supported and encouraged to continue to engage the issues of their lives and vocations in such ways that development will be a likely result. Pastoral care will seek to involve them in disciplines and action, in struggles and reflection, that will keep their faith and vocations responsive to the ongoing call of God. But we must remember that developmental stage transition is a complex and often protracted affair. Transitions cannot and should not be rushed. Development takes time. Much of our concern in pastoral care has to do with helping persons extend the operations of a given stage to the full range of their experiences and interactions.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, development progressively provides new structures of understanding and meaning-making that are more able to cope with the complex reality that *adults* experience. There are implications here for adult Christian educators. To quote from *How Faith Grows*:

It is only when people are ‘trapped’ in a faith stage that they have partly otherwise ‘outgrown’ (for example in their way of thinking), or when they have precociously ‘advanced’ beyond their actual psychological and social maturity, that the pastor or educator should step in to help them work on those aspects of their faithing that are out of step with the rest of their meaning-making.<sup>16</sup> Faith, says Fowler, is like a shawl (of meaning) that we knit and wrap around ourselves. It is not the job of the pastor or educator to slash at this with a knife or rip it from a person’s shoulders. But sometimes the shawl starts to unravel of its own accord. And then we should step in to help: not by darning up the loose ends, but by rolling up the wool, standing by the wearer in his nakedness, and then encouraging him to knit a new shawl for himself.

On the other hand we should not insulate people from reality (as they begin to perceive it anew), or try to keep people at a faith stage which psychologically they are outgrowing . . . . There is always the danger that a person will ‘over defend existing faith structures by screening out and “not knowing” dissonant data’.<sup>17</sup> It is new experience that often leads to faith stage change, as and when the existing structures can no longer accommodate it. This causes a situation of conflict in which a person’s faith is thrown off balance. Its form needs to change to restore some sort of equilibrium and with it a sense of ‘coping’.<sup>18</sup>

### **Faith Aspects**

As has already been indicated, the target of Fowler’s work is the form of faith or *faith-as-a-process*. (However, Fowler does not discount the importance of the content of a person’s faith, and the inevitable interaction between form and content.) In analysing the form of faith, Fowler discerns several aspects or elements within it. These aspects are:

- our reasoning (the way we think),
- our perspective-taking (our ability to adopt another's perspective),
- our moral judging (the way we make judgements about moral situations),
- our social awareness (where and how we set the limits to our 'community of faith'),
- our relation to authority (where and how we find the authorities on which we rely),
- our forming of a world-view (our way of 'holding it all together'), and
- our relation to symbols (our understanding of, and response to, symbols).

Fowler analyses all his faith stages in terms of these seven aspects. At each developmental stage a person's faith will exemplify a particular form of reasoning, of perspective-taking, of moral decision-making, etc. Fowler writes that 'to be "in" a given stage of faith means to have a characteristic way of finding and giving meaning to everyday life'. It is to have a world-view, 'with a particular "take" on things'.<sup>19</sup> The transition from one faith stage to another is marked by a change in one or more of these aspects of faith, as they mutate to the form that is more characteristic of a later stage. It is only when all the other faith aspects have changed in a similar way that the person can be said to have moved fully to the next stage.

The aspects of faith analysed by Fowler largely comprise *cognitive* skills and competencies, and are thus related to thinking, knowing and understanding. But a number also focus on relationships and the nature of the self. These latter aspects are more *affective* (related to feeling) than the others. Fowler recognises that the human process that he sometimes calls 'faith-knowing' has its affective side too. Faith for Fowler is basically a holistic concept involving the whole person - feeling, valuation and volition included. Although the cognitive dimension usually dominates his account of faith, Fowler is interested in the development of this whole complex of 'structures or patterns of thinking, valuing, committing and believing' that makes up a person's faithing.<sup>20</sup> He thus often writes of faith's 'logic of conviction' as something that is broader than the 'logic of rational certainty' of mere cognition.

Each of these aspects of faith can change. One of the most significant of these changes is the change in our reasoning processes, our 'form of logic'. As we mature

intellectually we become more capable of - or at least more willing to engage in - abstract thought. Our thinking is then less tied to concrete, particular experiences. As we continue to develop we may move into Faith Stage 4 where our reasoning powers are more fully released, and we really start to 'think for ourselves'. Adult Christian education can now take off. But at this stage we are often very dogmatic and defensive in our employment of our new, autonomous thinking, and that can pose new problems for Christian reflection and communication. Later we may change further, so that we become more willing to acknowledge tensions and paradoxes in our world-view, and more open to the outlooks and convictions of others. All these cognitive shifts have knock-on effects on our moral thinking and our ability to adopt the perspectives of other people, and on other, more affective, aspects of our meaning-making.

## **FAITH STAGES**

From the many interviews they have carried out, Fowler and his associates claim to have discovered six stages or styles of faith through which people may develop. I say 'may', because although some might argue that the pattern of progress is the same for everyone, everywhere (Fowler does not go so far as to claim this himself), many of us do not get very far in our faith development. And hardly anyone is at Stage 6! (Fowler quips that it is puzzling that this is the stage his lecture audiences are *really* interested in, despite the fact that so few experience it. He knows, of course, that we are bound to be fascinated by a stage that is the extrapolated 'end point' towards which our own development appears to be moving.)

As we have already noted, for Fowler conversion is a change in the contents of faith. It is a matter of believing in different things.<sup>21</sup> Others, however, have identified the transition from one stage to another as itself a sort of conversion. We might think of this as a conversion in the form of faith, a 'structural change' that is a type of identity-formation in which someone discovers who she really is. This sort of conversion unifies and integrates the self, particularly in adolescence and middle-age. V. Bailey Gillespie has called it 'religious-identity-conversion'.<sup>22</sup> When form-change and content-change go together (and Fowler recognises that either may precipitate the other<sup>23</sup>), we may indeed have 'a re-orientation of a person's entire life'.<sup>24</sup>

In each stage there is a degree of stability in ‘the ways one holds, understands, and takes responsibility for living one’s faith’.<sup>25</sup> But the stages alternate with the periods of transition described earlier, which are in many ways of equal significance to the faith stages themselves. These transitions may occur when the equilibrium of a given stage is upset by personal crises or novel experiences, disclosures and challenges that threaten the limits of the person’s existing faith patterns and structuring of experience. Faith development often results from such situations. But internal developmental forces, by transforming one aspect of faith so that it ‘runs ahead’ of other aspects, also contribute to a loss of stage stability, with the result that our faithing becomes more shaky and insecure.

The faith stages<sup>26</sup> are complex integrated structures of understanding, interpreting, valuing and relating. They are thought of as (i) *invariant* and (ii) *hierarchical*. These terms mean that (i) the sequence of stages always occur in a fixed order and no one ‘misses out’ a stage,<sup>27</sup> and that (ii) each stage builds on its predecessors, in the sense of incorporating the capacities that developed during earlier stages. Cognitive stage development theory, particularly the work of Piaget, has been much criticised, especially for underestimating the reasoning powers of young children and the influence of environmental pressures (for instance through education).<sup>28</sup> In my view, however, the broad pattern of Fowler’s schema can survive most of these criticisms, particularly in his account of the stages of adult faith.

In the section that follows I have used the titles for the faith stages that we adopted in *How Faith Grows*. Fowler’s own, sometimes rather jaw-breaking, terminology is printed in square brackets.<sup>29</sup> Although our concern in this book is mainly with adults, it is important to rehearse the whole sequence of stages that lead to, and in a developmental sense may be said to ‘make up’, adult faith.

### **Stage 0: Nursed Faith or Foundation Faith [Primal Faith]**

*Age: 0-4 approximately*

This is not so much a stage as a ‘pre-stage’, which is not really open to empirical investigation. The foundations for faith are here laid down in the early experiences of being picked up and nursed, when trust is first formed. This nursing ‘is a real and vital part of any sort of nurture that we might dare to call “Christian”. . . . We are loved into knowing and feeling, as we are loved into being.’<sup>30</sup>

## **Stage 1: Chaotic Faith or Unordered Faith or Impressionistic Faith**

### **[Intuitive-Projective Faith]**

*Age: 3/4-7/8 approximately*

At this stage the child's relatively uninhibited imagination yields a chaos of powerful images. As thinking is intuitive and episodic, reality is perceived as a scrap-book of impressions as yet not much ordered logically. It is another feature of this stage that symbols are viewed magically, and are treated as being what they represent. The powerful symbols of Christian experience, tradition and liturgy can contribute deep and lasting images in this stage of faith. Hence it may be that young children who are excluded from experiencing ritual and sacrament alongside adult Christians, on the grounds that 'they don't yet understand', are being cut off from a vital form of nourishment. Dependable, structured parenting continues to be crucial at this stage.

## **Stage 2: Ordering Faith [Mythic-Literal Faith]**

*Age: 6/7-11/12 approximately, and some adults*

At this stage the individual's power to think, to unify experience and to trace patterns of cause and effect enables her to order her experience. Story-telling is important at this stage, including telling the story of the Christian community to which the child or adult belongs. 'True stories' are now distinguished from others; but we are always 'in' the story rather than 'outside' it, and have no viewpoint from which to compare and criticise stories. People at this stage are very much 'belongers'. (We may recall how junior school aged children are so keen to belong to some club or group; and how their self-image is to a large extent constituted by such belonging.) By this stage individuals have achieved a measure of simple, concrete perspective-taking, overcoming the egocentricity of the smaller child.

## **Stage 3: Conforming Faith [Synthetic-Conventional Faith]**

*Age: 11/12-17/18 approximately, and many adults*

(It is worth noting that, according to Fowler's research, over a quarter of adults over the age of thirty are at this faith stage.) The ability to think abstractly has fully developed by now, and there is a new capacity for (mutual, interpersonal) perspective-taking, as the adolescent or adult begins to see herself as others see her. What her

peers think and say is regarded as particularly important. Interpersonal relationships are now very significant. But the same is true of other 'significant others', including parents, teachers - and sometimes church leaders. However rebellious we may view ourselves to be, at this stage we are actually little (or, if adult, big) conformists. 'It is a time of going with a particular faith-current, or faith-crowd.'<sup>31</sup> The ability to reason in a new and more powerful way, which is a significant feature of the stage, provides Christian educators with exciting opportunities for more abstract teaching and discussion. The scope of this remains limited, however, because the circle of people to whom we relate still does so much to provide our meaning-making, and we are largely unaware of that process. Those who are at this stage are not yet able adequately to reflect on their beliefs and values, or the way in which these are held. Thus when our views are challenged we may respond very defensively, without really knowing why.

#### **Stage 4: Choosing Faith or Either/Or Faith [Individuative-Reflective Faith]**

*Age: from approximately 17/18 onwards, or for others from their 30s or 40s onwards  
(but note that a substantial proportion of the adult population never reach this stage)*

The transition to Stage 4 can be long and traumatic, taking many years of struggle. Christian educators need to be particularly sensitive here, allowing people space to grow out of Stage 3 'faithing' into this new way of meaning-making. At Stage 4 I am able to take a 'third person' perspective from which to evaluate my own beliefs and relationships, as I distance myself from my previous value-system. Now 'I can no longer tolerate having my faith at second-hand. I must know who I am for myself, when I am not being defined by my relationships with other people.'<sup>32</sup> Beliefs and values which previously were rather unexamined can now be deliberately adopted. For the first time we explicitly and consciously take charge of, and accept responsibility for, our commitments, evaluations and world-view. At this stage faith can become one's own.

The 'certainties' of the individual who is at Faith Stage 4 arise from and contribute to his or her new-found autonomy and maturity. Most Christian educators would applaud such changes, as the beginning of a truly 'adult faith'. But there are also dangers here, including the danger of 'an arid over-intellectualism, . . . a conceited autonomy',<sup>33</sup> and an unrealistic sense of independence. There is also a

tendency in Stage 4 to caricature the faith of others in order to justify one's own truth, and an over-simplifying 'either/or' determination to create a *tidy* faith. This may result in our collapsing the inevitable paradoxes and tensions within our belief-system.

### **Stage 5: Balanced Faith or Inclusive Faith or Both/And Faith**

#### **[Conjunctive Faith]**

*Age: rare before the age of 30*

Many adults are content with their Stage 4 faithing, but others eventually find that their compulsion to resolve these tensions and to strive for clarification is becoming a psychological burden. Such people may be moving towards a fifth stage of faith which is characterised by a much greater openness to, and mutuality with, other world-views and perspectives. This faith stage is a marked development from the more rigid concerns for definition and conceptual clarity that are so characteristic of Stage 4.

Stage 5 faith is thus a more balanced and inclusive style of faith. It may be regarded as a *reworking* of Stage 4's unity, tidiness and coherence, and shows a more porous, 'dialectical' or 'dialogical' way of knowing that keeps in tension the paradoxes and polarities of faith, allowing us to live with ambiguity in our meaning-system. Those at Stage 5 are truly - but discriminatingly - *open* to other people and their viewpoints; they recognise that truth is too complex and many-sided for it to be adequately delineated from any one perspective. 'The person at Stage 5 is willing to engage the other and to be changed by the other in a way that was not possible from the posture of Stage 4.'<sup>34</sup> Such people also recognise that reason needs to be supplemented by other ways of knowing reality (especially intuition), and that our instruments of coherence and clarity are just too blunt to work the raw materials of faith adequately. The capacity for self-criticism, self-questioning and self-doubt develops more strongly as people move into Stage 5. Interestingly, Fowler claims that the individual's transition between Stage 4 and Stage 5 recapitulates the development in the history of ideas from the ideals of Enlightenment rationality, espoused in the eighteenth-century 'Age of Reason', to the less tidy and more plural multi-perspectival post-Enlightenment modes of consciousness that characterise today's 'postmodernity'.<sup>35</sup>

At this stage, then, the unity and coherence of our Stage 4 faith is beginning to fade. The new stage that may emerge from it can result from our coping with failure

and/or our living with the consequences of earlier decisions. It is often characterised by a new humility and a fuller recognition of our inevitable *interdependence*.

### **Stage 6: Selfless Faith [Universalizing Faith]**

*Age: usually only in later life; a very rare stage (and something of a theoretical extrapolation from Stage 5)*

This way of being in faith is essentially a relinquishing and transcending of the self.

‘Stage 6 people . . . go out to transform [the] world. And they often die in the attempt.’<sup>36</sup>

## **GROWING UP IN FAITH**

So James Fowler’s researches into human ‘faith’ or ‘meaning-making’ claim to show that individuals develop over time, through a sequence of stages, in the ways in which they understand, value and interpret that which they take to be ultimate, whether that be religious or not. In this section I want to concentrate on some rather more familiar adult and near-adult *life stages*, and to pick up some of the claims that Fowler’s faith development theory makes about them.

### **Adolescence**

Faith development research suggests that the majority of teenagers are at Stage 3 on Fowler’s scheme. We should note, however, that a proportion (over 12%) are still in transition from Stage 2, and nearly 4% are still actually *at* Stage 2. Stage 3 is marked both by the ability to think abstractly and by a new capacity for mutual, interpersonal perspective-taking. That sounds good. But Fowler’s stage of ‘Synthetic-Conventional Faith’ is labelled above as the stage of *Conforming Faith*. Sharon Parks describes the adolescent as living ‘under the tyranny of the “they”’, and writes of the task of late adolescence as the development of a self-identity and self-aware responsibility that has the power to counter this powerful psychological subjugation.<sup>37</sup>

Those who are at this stage are sometimes said to be ‘embedded’ in their faith outlook, in the sense that they are not yet able to reflect on their own beliefs and values. Thus, although the circle of people we relate to at this stage does so much to

provide our meaning-making, we are largely unaware of that process. To quote Fowler:

While beliefs and values are deeply felt, they typically are tacitly held - the person 'dwells' in them and the meaning world they mediate. But there has not been occasion to reflectively step outside them to examine them explicitly or systematically. At Stage 3 a person has an 'ideology', a more or less consistent clustering of values and beliefs, but he/she has not objectified it for examination, and in a sense is unaware of having it.<sup>38</sup>

It is this feature that partly explains the phenomenon that we noted earlier in this chapter: the difficulty of reasoning with young people about the views they have and the influences that others hold over them. And the same applies to those *adults* who remain in Stage 3.

### **Young Adulthood**

We have noted that many adults may be described as being at Stage 3 throughout their lives. Others, however, do change. By the time that they have reached the 21 to 30 age-group, less than 18% are still at Stage 3, with the great majority in transition to or stabilising at Stage 4. This transition to Faith Stage 4, which itself may take several years, is often entered into in late adolescence. But for many it will come later, as a mid-life transition. It is a change that involves my distancing myself from the others who have been so significant to me before, so as to discover who I am and what I really believe *for myself*. Stage 4 (Fowler's stage of 'Individuative-Reflective Faith'; in our terminology, *Choosing Faith*) is therefore marked by a double development:

The self, previously sustained in its identity and faith compositions by an interpersonal circle of significant others, now claims an identity no longer defined by the composite of one's rôles or meanings to others. To sustain that new identity it composes a meaning frame conscious of its own boundaries and inner-connections, and aware of its self as a 'world-view'.<sup>39</sup>

For many, this transition to Stage 4 will seem to be a loss of faith, but it is in fact - like all faith stage transitions - only *a loss of one way of being in faith*, in order to take on a very different way. Nevertheless, the development of a more autonomous, self-reflective faith can be the most traumatic of the transitions. Significantly, Parks distinguishes two distinct stages within Fowler's Stage 4. The first of these is a (post-adolescent) young adult stage of wary and tentative 'probing commitment' that develops before the more fully 'adult' faith stage is reached.<sup>40</sup>

The move from Stage 3 to Stage 4 often involves a literal, or at least a psychological, 'leaving home', as I withdraw to a vantage-point from which I feel that I can make my own decisions in a way appropriate to my new-found sense of autonomy. I can only move to Stage 4 by stepping out of my faith current and away from the faith crowd 'to choose a world-view for myself'. I may later return, as it were, to the bosom of my faith-family or faith-church; but even when I do I shall never be the same again. That would be like trying to recapture a first innocence. What I believe is now at last what *I* believe. I have after all, *chosen* to be here - and that makes all the difference.

### **Mature Adulthood**

As we have seen, some adults will later change even further as they enter the mid-life Stage 5 (Fowler's 'Conjunctive Faith'; our *Both/And Faith*). Only in the 30-40 age group do we find a substantial proportion in this faith stage (although people at Stage 5 make up only about 15% of the whole age group of interviewees over 30). Recall that Stage 5 subjects are more 'open' and responsive to other people and their world-views than they were at Stage 4. They are also less concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy, and they are not continually demythologising - or translating into doctrinal beliefs - the symbol systems of religion.

Experience has often given development a helping hand here, and Fowler describes those who are at this stage as knowing 'the sacrament of defeat and the reality of irrevocable commitments and acts'.<sup>41</sup> Thinking more generally about the dynamics of life and faith around the age of thirty, Henry Simmons writes of this as 'a time of crisis and growth'. He adds the challenge: 'We must stop keeping the experience of adulthood a secret.'<sup>42</sup> The person at Fowler's Stage 5, we noted, is more realistic and humble in her cognitions and affections than she was before, having

developed a perspective that recognises meaning and truth as many-faceted and likely to be found in unexpected places.

Readers should note how difficult it can be for a Stage 5 person to flourish within the fellowship of the church. Christian educators and pastors will recognise that adults at this stage have a viewpoint that is more complex and inclusive than hitherto. Church leaders should also acknowledge this: 'Too often the Church fears Stage 5 learners because they are difficult to control, pigeon-hole or understand.'<sup>43</sup> In those congregations or denominations where people's main concerns are for conceptual clarity and the resolution of all intellectual and moral tensions (as at Stage 4), or for obedience to clerical authority-figures from which lay people are expected to receive their own world-view (as at Stage 3), the individual who is at Stage 5 is a real threat. Much of the history of Christianity, including perhaps its earliest years, may be interpreting in part as a series of conflicts between Stage 5 (and indeed Stage 6) perspectives, overagainst those Christians who possessed rather more circumscribed ways of being in faith.

## **FAITH, SEX AND MATURITY**

Women have often been rather suspicious of Fowler's faith development scheme. One main reason has been that Fowler's Faith Stage 4, with its stress on 'autonomy' and 'distancing' oneself from other viewpoints, often sounds like a peculiarly masculine way of being in faith. Karen DeNicola has complained that 'persons who fail to blend reason and feeling - specifically, persons who rely solely on rational certainty - can too easily be scored at Stage 4, while persons who emphasize feeling can too easily be scored at Stage 3'.<sup>44</sup> This is not in fact, she thinks, a gender bias, but more of a bias towards thinking and intellect, with a consequent underplaying of the emotions. Such a scoring bias would explain why more men than women 'advance' (and advance earlier) to Stage 4.<sup>45</sup>

Fowler himself acknowledges the force of such criticisms. In his Foreword to *Critical Perspectives on Faith Development*, he draws on the influential publication *Women's Ways of Knowing*:<sup>46</sup>

Though Belenky and her co-authors do not claim to have offered a stage theory of women's development, the styles of knowing they describe parallel in some significant ways the development stages of William Perry, Lawrence Kohlberg, and our own. Roughly corresponding to our synthetic-conventional stage, they describe a style of knowing they call 'subjective' knowing. Approximating our individuative-reflective stage they describe a style of 'procedural' knowing. Key for our interests is their distinction between two different ways of developing procedural knowing. On the one hand, there is the 'separate' variant, the development of reflective and critical awareness and testing of one's knowing through objectifying the known and distancing oneself from emotional involvement with. This style is resonant with the Cartesian subject-object distinction and with Enlightenment ideals of objective rationality. On the other hand, Belenky and her co-authors identify a movement into procedural knowing which proceeds by a style they call 'connected' knowing. This is a knowing 'in rapport', a knowing that proceeds toward self-awareness and critical reflection through and by way of participation, relation, and the disciplining of subjectivity through dialogue and reflection. My suggestion is that in describing the movement from the synthetic-conventional to the individuative-reflective stage we [i.e. faith development researchers] have highlighted the 'separate' style of critical reflection and differentiation and have muted the 'connected' pattern. In not fully developing the latter, I believe we have underscored some of our female subjects, and likely, overscored some of our male subjects as well.<sup>47</sup>

It should be emphasised again that we are dealing here not so much with gender differences as with different developmental stages and faith styles that we may perhaps label '*feminine*' (*connected knowing*) and '*masculine*' (*separate knowing*), as long as we recognise that many men may take the 'feminine' route and vice-versa (i.e. 'feminine' is not the same as 'female').<sup>48</sup> The two ways of knowing are different routes into a full Stage 4 perspective which can incorporate and use both. The argument here is *not* that Stage 4 is mainly for men or solely for cool, objective, 'separate' intellectuals, and is therefore not available to those whose knowing and faithing remains more subjective, 'connected' and relationship-oriented (as they are in

many females). Rather, two different pathways exist that lead to the same stage of self-conscious, reflective (Stage 4) faith.

This account of the matter is close to the description Gabriel Moran gives of a truly Christian and human notion of ‘maturity’ and ‘adulthood’. This is Moran’s image of a synthesising of opposites, which involves the integration of very different elements.<sup>49</sup> Children and adolescents can be one-sided, but adult maturity demands balance and wholeness, and a holding together of what might otherwise fly apart. Moran recognises three areas that demand such integration: the rational and the non-rational, dependence and independence, and life and death.

There is little doubt that Fowler’s Stage 5 fits such a more balanced and integrated (and integrating) notion of adulthood, at least in some respects.<sup>50</sup> Certainly it is a stage of faithing at which the more intuitive and non-verbal functions of the self (controlled in many people by the right lobe of the brain) are combined again with the (left lobe) rational, verbal and intellectual activities. Certainly too, it is the stage for older adults who have learned the ‘wisdom of time’ (Sam Keen), have begun to face the inevitability of their own death, and have come fully to acknowledge the relatively fleeting and contingent nature of human relationships, hopes and successes. Stage 5 would also appear to be a time of recognition of the *interdependence* of our relationships, as opposed to the sometimes dangerously *independent* cognition of Stage 4, and the (inevitably) more ‘immature’ dependence of the earlier stages. Stage 5 offers itself, therefore, as a candidate for recognition as a more authentically human - and Christian - notion of adulthood, and therefore of (this particular view of) maturity. On such an analysis, it is of considerable significance for the adult Christian educator.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of faith development theory and its critics, see Jeff Astley *et al.*, *How Faith Grows: Faith Development and Christian Education*, London: National Society and Church House Publishing, 1991, from which parts of this chapter are drawn, with permission.

<sup>2</sup> James W. Fowler, ‘Faith and the Structuring of Meaning’, in J. W. Fowler and A. Vergote (eds), *Toward Moral and Religious Maturity*, Morristown, N.J.: Silver Burdett, 1980, p. 53.

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<sup>3</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981 (republished 1995), p. 31. Where the concept is thus construed as 'a system of convictions which defines for us what is of value, good, and real', faith 'has been described as the same as a meaning-perspective'. Jack L. Seymour, Margaret Ann Crain and Joseph V. Crockett, *Educating Christians: The Intersection of Meaning, Learning and Vocation*, Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1993, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> James Fowler and Sam Keen, *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith*, ed. Jerome Berryman, Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston Press, 1978, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, pp. 276-277.

<sup>6</sup> For a taste of the debate, see Kenneth Stokes (ed.), *Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle*, Chicago: W. H. Sadlier, 1982; Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (eds), *Faith Development and Fowler*, Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1986; Jeff Astley *et al.*, *How Faith Grows*, ch. 3; John Snarey, 'Faith Development, Moral Development and Nontheistic Judaism: A Construct Validity Study', in W. M. Kurtines and J. L. Gewirtz (eds), *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development, Vol. 2: Research*, Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1991, pp. 279-305; Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (eds), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development: A Reader*, Leominster: Gracewing Fowler Wright; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992; James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow and Friedrich Schweitzer (eds), *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education and Society*, London: SCM, 1992; Nicola M. Slee, 'Further on from Fowler: Post-Fowler Faith Development Research', in Leslie J. Francis, William K. Kay and William S. Campbell (eds), *Research in Religious Education*, Leominster: Gracewing Fowler Wright; Macon, Georgia: Smyth and Helwys, 1996, pp. 88-91.

<sup>7</sup> See James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984; Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986; James W. Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987; Astley and Francis (eds), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development*, sections 7 and 8.

<sup>8</sup> John M. Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?*, London: SCM, 1985, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen W. Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity*, London: SPCK, 1984, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> Astley *et al.*, *How Faith Grows*, p. 68-69.

<sup>11</sup> Fowler, 'Faith and the Structuring of Meaning', pp. 82-83.

<sup>12</sup> See Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>13</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, p. 101.

<sup>14</sup> Fowler, 'The Vocation of Faith Development Theory', in Fowler, Nipkow and Schweitzer (eds), *Stages of Faith and Religious Development*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>15</sup> Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>16</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, p. 114. See also Bradley Courtenay, 'Personhood - Personal and Faith Development', in Peter Jarvis and Nicholas Walters (eds), *Adult Education and Theological Interpretations*, Malabar, Fla.: Krieger, 1993, pp. 164-167.

<sup>17</sup> Fowler, 'Faith and the Structuring of Meaning', p. 67. Cf. Hull, *op. cit.*, ch. 3.

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- <sup>18</sup> *How Faith Grows*, pp. 40-41.
- <sup>19</sup> James W. Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1996, p. 68.
- <sup>20</sup> James W. Fowler, 'Faith Development Theory and the Aims of Religious Socialization', in Gloria Durka and Joanmarie Smith (eds), *Emerging Issues in Religious Education*, New York: Paulist Press, 1976, p. 200.
- <sup>21</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, p. 281; *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, p. 95.
- <sup>22</sup> V. B. Gillespie, *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity*, Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1979, p. 126; cf. Walter Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender*, New York: Paulist Press, 1986, pp. 31, 208-210.
- <sup>23</sup> See Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, pp. 285-286.
- <sup>24</sup> *How Faith Grows*, p. 17.
- <sup>25</sup> Fowler, *Faithful Change*, p. 68.
- <sup>26</sup> The faith stages are modelled on and develop the cognitive stages argued for by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg (his 'stages of moral judgement').
- <sup>27</sup> It is usually assumed that there is no regression back down the stages either, except presumably in cases of senility or as a result of gross psychological trauma.
- <sup>28</sup> For a summary of some of these criticisms, see Jeff Astley and William K. Kay, 'Piaget and Fowler', in William K. Kay and Leslie J. Francis (eds), *Religion in Education: 2*, Leominster: Gracewing Fowler Wright, 1998, pp. 162-165. The individualistic orientation of Piaget's work is criticised by 'social constructivist' theories that place more emphasis on the interaction of the individual with his/her social context and the rôle of language in development (see L. S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press; V. John-Steiner and H. Mahn, 'Sociocultural Approaches to Learning and Development: A Vygotskyan Framework', *Educational Psychologist*, 31, 1996, pp. 191-206).
- <sup>29</sup> This summary is largely drawn from my introductory essay in Astley and Francis (eds), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development*, pp. xx-xxii, and from material in *How Faith Grows*, with permission.
- <sup>30</sup> *How Faith Grows*, p. 19.
- <sup>31</sup> *How Faith Grows*, p. 25.
- <sup>32</sup> *How Faith Grows*, p. 27.
- <sup>33</sup> *How Faith Grows*, p. 28.
- <sup>34</sup> Romney M. Moseley, David Jarvis and James W. Fowler, *Manual for Faith Development Research*, Atlanta, Georgia: Center for Faith Development, 1986 edition, p. 155; 1993 edition, p. 60.
- <sup>35</sup> James W. Fowler, 'The Enlightenment and Faith Development Theory', in Astley and Francis (eds), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development*, pp. 15-28; Fowler, *Faithful Change*, pp. 172-176. Compare Walter James and Brian Russell, 'How has Post-Modernism Changed Education?', in *Tomorrow is Another Country: Post-Modernism and Christian Education*, London: General Synod Board of Education, 1996, pp. 26-33.

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- <sup>36</sup> *How Faith Grows*, p. 34.
- <sup>37</sup> Parks, *The Critical Years*, p. 76; cf. Jeff Astley and Nick Wills, 'Adolescent "Faith" and its Development', *Youth and Policy: The Journal of Critical Analysis*, forthcoming.
- <sup>38</sup> James W. Fowler, 'Perspectives on the Family from the Standpoint of Faith Development Theory', in Astley and Francis (eds), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development*, p. 334.
- <sup>39</sup> Fowler, 'Perspectives on the Family . . .', p. 335.
- <sup>40</sup> Parks, *The Critical Years*, ch. 5.
- <sup>41</sup> Fowler, 'Faith and the Structuring of Meaning', p. 73.
- <sup>42</sup> Henry C. Simmons, 'Human Development: Some Conditions for Adult Faith at Age Thirty', reprinted in John L. Elias (ed.), *Religious Education in Adulthood*, New Haven, Conn.: Religious Education Association, 1992, p. 18.
- <sup>43</sup> *How Faith Grows*, p. 32.
- <sup>44</sup> Karen Boyd DeNicola, 'Formal Operation Thinking, Stage 4, and Practical Knowing', unpublished paper, 1992, p. 1. This is reprinted as an appendix to the second edition of the *Manual for Faith Development Research*, 1993.
- <sup>45</sup> See also Slee, 'Further on from Fowler: Post-Fowler Faith Development Research'.
- <sup>46</sup> Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*, New York: Basic Books, 1986, ch. 6.
- <sup>47</sup> James W. Fowler, 'Foreword', in Astley and Francis (eds), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development*, p. xiii. Fowler actually uses the adjectives 'separative' and 'connective'.
- <sup>48</sup> See Leslie J. Francis and Carolyn Wilcox, 'Religion and Gender Orientation', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 20, 1996, pp. 119-121; Leslie J. Francis, 'The Psychology of Gender Differences in Religion: A Review of Empirical Research', *Religion*, 27, 1997, pp. 81-96; Belenky *et al.* write that 'separate and connected knowing are not gender specific. The two modes may be gender-related. It is possible that more women than men tip toward separate knowing.' Belenky *et al.*, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, pp. 102-103.
- <sup>49</sup> Gabriel Moran, *Education toward Adulthood*, New York: Paulist Press, 1979, pp. 28-34. Cf. Jeff Astley, 'Growing into Christ: The Psychology and Politics of Christian Maturity', in Jeff Astley and David Day (eds), *The Contours of Christian Education*, Great Wakering: McCrimmons, 1992, pp. 307-322.
- <sup>50</sup> See Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, p. 65.