

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Worship at different stages of faith

If we're growing as Christians, we keep moving through different stages of faith as we go through life. They are like successive levels on a spiral path that goes around a mountain repeatedly as it goes up the mountain. We keep reconsidering some of the same issues over and over, but each time they arise we see them somewhat differently from the ways in which we've seen them previously. Our path keeps leading us into slightly new territory, and we keep getting a wider view than we've previously had.



When we get to new parts of the path we may see God in new ways and thus may change our ways of speaking to God and experiencing God. That means some of our previous ways of worshiping may no longer work for us. We may need new kinds of food and new companions for the spiritual journey, too.

Climbing the mountain of faith

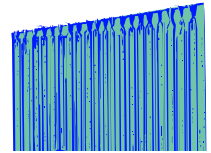
James W. Fowler, an Emory University professor, describes stages of faith that are like successively higher levels of the mountain. He is a Christian but his stages don't just apply to Christian faith or even religious faith. They describe not what a person believes, but rather how he or she arrives at his or her beliefs about life and applies them.



Fowler warns that the stages he describes aren't to be seen as a scale for measuring persons' worth. Neither are they educational or therapeutic goals toward which to hurry people. He claims that people can find wholeness and integrity at any stage. Fowler's descriptions, however, can help us see why different churchgoers may need different kinds of worship services, and see what churches may need to provide for people at different stages.

We don't all want to open the curtain

A *Connections* reader recently compared pastors' fear of revealing what's behind familiar church practices, to the wizard's fear of letting Dorothy see behind his curtain in *The Wizard of Oz*. Unfortunately that's an apt analogy. Many church leaders seem panicked by the prospect of having members examine what they believe and what our worship language really says. Leaders seem afraid to let members know what scholars have learned about the life of Jesus and the Bible's origins. They seem afraid to nudge members to examine their religious beliefs in light of what we have now learned from other sources of knowledge.



Our system is geared to early stages

This refusal to open the curtain is understandable, however, when we look not only at how the system of rewarding clergy works but also at where many members—perhaps most—apparently are in their faith journeys. For members at the earlier stages of faith, the mere suggestion of looking behind the curtain can feel threatening or seem sacrilegious. It certainly won't seem necessary. Yet people at a later stage find looking behind the curtain essential and those at a still later stage may see no need for any curtain.



Later-stage people need the church too

To serve its God-given purposes, the church must provide what's needed by people in later stages, not just earlier ones. It must acknowledge and affirm the stirrings that are drawing some members toward a new stage. Despite Fowler's claim that any stage can provide wholeness, we need to provide some nudges for such moves. We don't consider earlier centuries' knowledge adequate in medicine or other fields, so why should we in religion? We especially need to connect people who are starting to move or are at the later stages of faith, for conversation and study. They need support and companionship, to reassure them that they're not alone, sinful, or crazy when they feel the need to ask questions and move forward. They need the church, and the church and the world need them.





■ Faith in infancy and childhood

Fowler believes we begin the faith journey as infants, in a pre-stage in which seeds of trust, courage, hope, and love are planted. Then thought and language bring what he calls Stage 1.

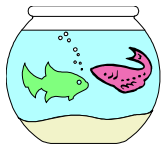
Stage 2 typically comes in elementary-school years, but some adults remain at this stage. In it, a person adopts beliefs and moral rules and attitudes but interprets them literally. People at this stage see the world as based on fairness, and they see God as having personal, physical, bodily characteristics. They use stories and myths to explain experience.

■ Stage 3 - Keeping the package closed

James Fowler finds that most people move to Stage 3 at adolescence. They start thinking about how they experience life. Religious people re-compose their picture of God, starting to see God as having inexhaustible depths and being able to see into the depths of themselves and others.

External authority

Stage 3 people see authority as being outside of themselves. Their main authorities are custom and tradition, valued face-to-face groups like friends and family, and the holders of official leadership roles in traditional institutions.



Conventional, unexamined faith

Stage 3 people don't examine and thus can't really explain the system of beliefs and values to which they are committed. It's just there, like water for fish. Stage 3 people see their faith system as a total package. They don't separate or look at its parts. And they see it as being everyone's faith system and tying everyone together. They're aware of their beliefs and values, and they defend them and feel them deeply, but they don't analyze them.

Sacred symbols

Stage 3 people don't separate the symbols and rituals of their faith from what those symbolize. Worthy symbols are themselves sacred for Stage 3 people. For Stage 3 patriots, for example, their nation's flag is equivalent to the nation itself, so if someone burns or spits on the flag, it's seen as



an attack on the nation and thus needs to be punished and prohibited. Damaging a Bible—the physical book—is declaring Christianity to be worthless. To a Stage 3 Christian, failing to take Communion in the customary way may mean failing to obey God.



Don't-rock-the-boat church participation

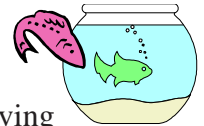
Many adult Christians never move beyond Stage 3, thus much that churches do is designed for Stage 3 Christians. Fowler finds that in many ways religious institutions work best if most members are in Stage 3, because it's a conformist stage, a don't-rock-the-boat stage. Stage 3 churchgoers mostly feel obligated to do whatever their church asks of them.



Conventional worship is likely to be satisfying and helpful for Stage 3 Christians. They won't feel any need to analyze what the words or rituals mean or to question what's being done. They're likely to see changes or even questions as denials of Christian belief or even as offenses against God.

■ Stage 4 - Taking it all apart

Some people eventually feel the need to leave Stage 3. Something motivates the fish to leap out of the fish tank and look at it. The Stage 3 people may see clashes between authorities they've depended on. A common motivation for leaving Stage 3 is leaving home, emotionally or physically or both. Reaching midlife often triggers this change, as does a big change in an important relationship or job. Whatever makes people suspect that their beliefs don't match what they see of the world, or makes them see that their ways of coping no longer work, can be the impetus for moving to Stage 4.



A hard transition

The move can be frightening, disorienting, and painful. It's a time of feeling cut loose from one's moorings but not seeing any safe place to move to. It can make the person seem strange and threatening to family and friends who haven't felt any need to change. It's thus a hard transition to make, and many people don't make it. If it happens, it's an upheaval, Fowler finds, and it can last for several years.

Internal authority

A crucial part of moving to Stage 4 is ceasing to rely on external sources of authority, and relocating authority within the self. The Stage 4 person no longer sees himself as merely a composite of the roles he fills, such as father, doctor, or pastor. He no longer lets his identity be defined only by other people.



Examined meanings and values

Unlike Stage 3 people, Stage 4 people think critically about their system of meanings and values. They no longer merely accept it without question.

Broken symbols

Stage 4 people recognize the meaning of symbols as separate from the symbols themselves. They believe that if a symbol or ritual act is really meaningful, its meaning can be expressed by a definition or concept. This change in a person's way of seeing symbols can bring a feeling of loss, dislocation, grief, and even guilt. But it can bring gains, too. Deeper dimensions in the meaning of the symbols, and a wider range of meanings, become apparent.



The Stage 4 people in our midst need the church's encouragement and help for the search they're involved in. They need assurance that there will be a safe place to move to if they let go of the assumptions that no longer make sense to them, and that they won't be rejecting the truth by moving to a new stage. They need to know that they're experiencing God-inspired growth. They need safe places to ask questions and consider possibilities. They need companionship of other Stage 4 Christians and also of some who have moved to Stage 5.

■ Stage 5 - Putting it back together

Eventually the Stage 4 person may become restless. She becomes aware of what Fowler calls "anarchic and disturbing inner voices." Stories, symbols, myths, and paradoxes from her own or other traditions may break in on the neatness of her faith. She starts recognizing that life is more complex than the Stage 4 logic of clear distinctions and abstract concepts can cover. She begins seeing that truth has more levels than she had previously realized. She starts the move into Stage 5, a move that rarely happens before midlife.



Stage 5 people see the interrelatedness in things. They reclaim and rework their past. They see both sides (or many sides) of issues simultaneously. They become willing to let reality speak for itself, instead of trying to force it into familiar categories. They see that what symbols communicate can be wider and deeper than what words and concepts can cover.



This kind of faith, explains Fowler, is open to encounters with traditions other than its own. The Stage 5 person expects that truth has disclosed and will disclose itself in those other traditions in ways that may complement or correct his own. Yet at the same time, he is confident in the reality his own tradition communicates.

The strength of this stage is in the ability to see and be part of one's own group's most powerful meanings while at the same time recognizing that they are relative and partial and that they unavoidably distort the divine. The Stage 5 person, finds James Fowler, can appreciate symbols, myths, and rituals because he



This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 13 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

or she has been grasped to some extent by the depth of reality to which they refer.

The Christian who is at Stage 5 needs worship, learning, and companionship that acknowledge the truths contained in Christianity while also acknowledging that neither it nor any other religion knows all about God or is the only path to God.

■ Stage 6 - Seeing what's universal

The very few people in Stage 6 show qualities that shake our usual criteria of normalcy. They are often seen, says Fowler, "as subversive of the structures



(including religious structures) by which we sustain our individual and corporate survival, security, and significance." They often become martyrs for the visions they embody. They engage in what Fowler calls "spending and being spent" in the effort to make actual what Christians call the Kingdom of God. They're so rare that finding one in our church congregation is very unlikely.

But what about the Stage 3, 4, and 5 people who are there? How can we help all of them to worship God, find real community, and mature in faith? That's the question we urgently need to answer.

Barbara



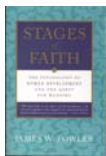
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Want to read more about Fowler's stages?



James Fowler's best known book is *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1981/1995). In it he describes what he sees as six stages of faith.

He tells how he derives his stage theory partly from the findings of other scholars who have identified stages of life based on biological growth, development of moral judgment, and other factors. Fowler's more recent book, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), goes on to describe how stages of faith relate to vocation, which he defines as "finding a purpose for one's life that is part of the purposes of God."



When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

—1 Corinthians 13:11



Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food ... but solid food is for the mature ... Therefore let us go on to perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ and not laying again the foundation ...

—Hebrews 5:12-6:1