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Faith is a Verb: Dynamics of Faith Development (Book Review)

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Faith Is A Verb: Dynamics of Faith Development, Kenneth Stokes (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989). 115 pp. \$9.95. Reviewed by K. Bussema, Professor of Psychology.

"Faithing never ends. It is always dynamic" (80). This simple, yet provocative assertion is the central theme of Stokes' book which was written for "men and women—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or of another tradition—who may not be members of a parish, congregation or synagogue but who are truly seeking to grow in their faith" (v). Kenneth Stokes, the director of Adult Faith Resources based in Minneapolis, is an ordained minister and holds a doctorate in adult education from the University of Chicago. In this brief book designed for either individual or group study, Stokes attempts to relate current discussions of faith development and the results of a major research project conducted by the Gallup organization to the typical member of a local congregation. *Faith Is A Verb* is best seen as a study and discussion guide for use in a variety of adult education settings and is not a scholarly analysis of the intricacies of faith development.

Stokes divides his presentation into eight chapters, beginning with an explanation of what he intends by using faith in an active verb form. The influence that doubt, crisis, and developmental changes in adulthood have on faithing are then presented in conjunction with an overview of the work of Fowler (*Stages of Faith*), Westerhoff (*Will Our Children Have Faith?*) and Erikson. Major findings from the Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle Project are judiciously included to illustrate and reinforce the discussion. Stokes next examines the individual faith process both within and outside of the organized church. The book concludes with a list of thirty-three tasks for faith development fashioned after the work of Havinghurst (*Developmental Tasks and Education*). Stokes also provides a number of optional group experiences coordinated with each chapter.

Looking briefly at each part of *Faith Is A Verb*, I had a variety of reactions. The discussion of faith as active, dynamic, growing—as a verb—is interesting, though not very challenging. Missing here is a concrete definition of what faith actually is. Adding to the vagueness, Stokes takes a very individualistic and personalistic approach to faithing. "My faith is a unique blend of my background and my religious experience plus my development of body, mind, personality, social setting and 1001 other dimensions of my being that make me unique and different from everybody else. Ultimately my faith must be owned by me" (5). In the next paragraph Stokes recognizes the tension between this assertion and religious traditions, creeds, and communities. However, Stokes only acknowledges the tension; he does not suggest how the tension can be resolved. The reader is left hanging with the statement that "creeds and doctrines are the starting point for meaningful faith development" (5).

The image of faith presented here lacks a substantial

core. Faith becomes faithing, a dynamic, changing, unfolding something. One gets the impression that faithing could be replaced with being, living, or growing without changing the direction or tenor of the discussion. Stokes is not alone here; a common thread in much of the present literature on faith development is the use of a generic, belief-free definition of faith. The same problem reappears in a later chapter where Stokes wrestles with the difference between being religious and being spiritual. The substantial question of the foundation and essence of being religious or having faith is unanswered. Stokes, instead, shifts the focus to the tension he finds between individual and corporate expressions of faith. Being religious is almost reduced to going to church, while being spiritual is described as something more.

The chapters on the role of doubt and questioning in an individual's faith journey and the differences between men's and women's faith experience are more satisfying and helpful. The reader here, however, shouldn't expect clear-cut answers to these issues, but more of an awareness of the processes involved. The discussion questions provided along with the material presented could initiate a lively and relevant discussion.

Comparing life-long faithing to the familiar theme of life-long learning, Stokes connects both expected and unexpected life transitions to changes in one's faith experience. Supplementing common descriptions of adult developmental stages with data from the Gallup survey, the reader is assured that adulthood is dynamic and unfolding. If one is willing to be open to change and explore its meanings, faith can also grow and be enriched. According to Stokes, the church community has often neglected the transitions of adulthood and needs to learn to respond to adults in terms of their particular life position.

In the final chapter Stokes provides a thoughtful list of developmental tasks to create an awareness of life-long faithing. Faith is not something one obtains in early adulthood and maintains through old age, but rather faith grows, fades, or may even be aborted as life unfolds. Stokes seems particularly sensitive to middle age concerns, especially the problem of mid-life dropouts. His suggestions and questions might help those whose faith has been practiced primarily "for the kids" to rediscover the centrality of faith for all of life.

Faith Is A Verb needs to be read, discussed, and challenged. The reader must recognize that Stokes' book can be only a starting point for serious discussion. The overview of some of the relevant material, especially Fowler, is over simplified and inadequate. As Reformed Christians we must help those seriously examining the nature of their faith life to recognize that although faith is active and dynamic, true faith also has substance and is grounded in the unchanging work of Christ.