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Faith Development: A View of James W. Fowler's Theory

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Q. WHAT IS TRUE FAITH?

- A. True faith is
not only a knowledge and conviction
that everything God reveals in His
Word is true;
it is also a deep-rooted assurance,
created in me by the Holy Spirit
through the gospel
that, out of sheer grace earned for us
by Christ,
not only others, but I too,
have had my sins forgiven,
have been made forever right with
God,
and have been granted salvation.

(The Heidelberg Catechism, question
and answer 21)

For many Reformed Christians, this confession in the Heidelberg Catechism not only biblically illuminates the meaning of faith, but also gives expression to a heart-felt experience. Yet the statement does not say all that can or that must be said about man's faith. The confession clearly speaks about "true faith," i.e., the faith to which one is called in the Holy Scriptures of the Christian religion.

But the Christian would readily admit that faith is not the exclusive possession of those who follow Jesus Christ as Savior. All men have faith in someone or in something. The Bible itself warns against false faith or idolatry. John Calvin teaches that every man is "incurably religious."² In the life of every man, woman and child on the face of the

earth, there are objects of ultimate concern, centers of value and power that gives life its meaning and purpose.

Sometimes one's faith comes to expression in institutional or formal ways, such as in a church or in a worship service, but this need not be the case. Even those who appear non-religious, for example, the atheist or agnostic, have certain centers of value which enable them to find meaning in life. Faith, then, is a universal human concern.

To understand faith as described above does not imply, however, that everyone's faith is equally valid. The biblical Christian speaks of true faith, i.e., faith in the triune God as revealed in the Bible. To find one's meaning or purpose in any other is to have a false faith which ultimately leads to destruction. According to Fowler, the content of faith may vary. It may have Christian content, Muslim content, or secular humanistic content. This is, of course, crucial, but the main focus of Fowler's theory is the *structure* of faith, regardless of its content.³

Even when people have the same content in their faith, the ways in which this faith shapes their lives may differ significantly. For example, within an orthodox Christian community some people may live out their faith without questioning the shape of the Christian life taught by their parents. Other believers, because of their commitment to serve Jesus Christ in a biblical way, may challenge aspects of their parents' teaching and opt for a life style far different from that of their parents. Furthermore, most people experience change and growth in their faith as the years go by. One's faith is not an unchanging, static something, but a living, changing relationship. Oftentimes faith is evaluated and described as simple or mature. In such evaluations, one is not necessarily evaluating the *content* of faith, but is instead evaluating the way in which one's faith functions.

In his theory of faith development, James W. Fowler attempts to identify the stages through which people pass as their faith develops. Fowler, Director of the Center for

Faith Development at Emory University, acknowledges the formative influence of Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, and Levinson on his own thought and specifically on his theory of faith development.⁴ Drawing on the theories of these men and having conducted extensive interviews with nearly four hundred individuals from a wide range of religions, Fowler identifies and describes six stages of faith development. He maintains that all individuals move through a given sequence of faith stages as they progress from the simple faith of childhood to the more mature faith of stage six. According to Fowler, there is a close connection between psychosocial development and the structural-developmental stages of faith. One should, therefore, expect to see faith development which parallels and reflects the psychosocial development. He warns that one should not use the theory of faith development to gauge the relative worth of an individual nor to determine at what stage a person should be at a given chronological age. A complex range of factors are involved in bringing a person from one faith stage to the next. Faith development cannot be programmed or hurried, but it can and must be encouraged and nurtured. Sometimes a person's faith development reaches a plateau. At times faith development lags behind psychosocial development or, less frequently, bounds ahead of it. In either case, difficulties arise. The optimum situation sees concurrent psychosocial and faith development.⁵

Fowler's focus on the stages of faith development begins with what he calls a pre-stage which begins at birth. To inform the reader adequately of this theory of faith development, I will give Fowler's summaries of the basic elements found in the pre-stage and in each of the six stages, and then a brief elaboration on Fowler's views.

Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith

In the pre-stage called Undifferentiated faith, the seeds of trust, courage,

hope and love are fused in an undifferentiated way and contend with sensed threats of abandonment, inconsistencies and deprivations in an infant's environment. Though really a pre-stage and largely inaccessible to empirical research of the kind we pursue, the quality of mutuality and the strength of trust, autonomy, hope and courage (or their opposites) developed in this phase underlie (or threaten to undermine) all that comes later in faith development.⁶

Drawing heavily on the developmental psychology of Erik Erikson, Fowler believes that during this early period of life in which the intimacy between mother and infant builds a sense of trust and begins to develop a sense of mutuality, the foundations for mature faith are laid. It is a "pre-stage" because it precedes language and conceptual thinking. It is a crucial period for every human being and one which is extremely difficult to analyze systematically.

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith

Stage 1 Intuitive-Projective faith is the fantasy-filled, imitative phase in which the child can be powerfully and permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions and stories of the visible faith of primally related adults.

The stage most typical of the child of three to seven, it is marked by a relative fluidity of thought patterns. The child is continually encountering novelties for which no stable operations of knowing have been formed. The imaginative processes underlying fantasy are unrestrained and uninhibited by logical thought. In league with forms of knowing dominated by perception, imagination in this stage is extremely productive of longlasting images and feelings (positive and negative) that later, more stable and self-reflective valuing

and thinking will have to order and sort out. This is the stage of first self-awareness. The "self-aware" child is egocentric as regards the perspectives of others. Here we find first awarenesses of death and sex and of the strong taboos by which cultures and families insulate those powerful areas.⁷

This stage of development is characterized by imagination more than by anything else. Equipped with newly-acquired speech, the child begins to sort through the various new experiences of life. With little understanding of cause-effect relations, the child's understanding of the how and why of things is fanciful and shows little logical thought. In regard to matters of faith, the child is gripped by powerful images and feelings evoked by the faith of those adults who stand in the closest relationship to him.

The stories and explanations of matters of faith which these relate, together with the adult life styles observed by the child, are woven together to form the child's intuitive understanding of God and the child's relationship to him. At this stage, the child has become self-aware, but he has not yet developed the capacity to see matters from any point of view but his own. His understanding is the only understanding! Imaginative and realistic elements of his notions stand side-by-side, both equally acceptable.

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith

Stage 2 Mythic-Literal faith is the stage in which the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community. Beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations, as are moral rules and attitudes. Symbols are taken as one-dimensional and literal in meaning. In this stage the rise of concrete operations leads to the

curbing and ordering of the previous stage's imaginative composing of the world. The episodic quality of Intuitive-Projective faith gives way to a more linear, narrative construction of coherence and meaning. Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience. This is the faith stage of the school child (though we sometimes find the structures dominant in adolescents and in adults). Marked by increased accuracy in taking the perspective of other person, those in Stage 2 compose a world based on reciprocal fairness and an immanent justice based on reciprocity. The actors in their cosmic

taken at face value. The stage two individual does not yet engage in abstractions or generalizations drawn from these explanations.

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith

In Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional faith, a person's experience of the world now extends beyond the family. A number of spheres demand attention: family, school or work, peers, street society and media, and perhaps religion. Faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements. Faith must synthesize values

In spite of his desire to avoid an intellectualistic view of faith and its development, Fowler in his theory has fallen prey to it.

stories are anthropomorphic. They can be affected deeply and powerfully by symbolic and dramatic materials and can describe in endlessly detailed narrative what has occurred. They do not, however, step back from the flow of stories to formulate reflective, conceptual meanings. For this stage the meaning is both carried and "trapped" in the narrative.⁸

According to Fowler the stage two level of faith development emerges as the individual acquires concrete operational thinking. Able to employ inductive and deductive reasoning, the child now distinguishes between the real and the imagined. Especially significant, according to Fowler, is the child's ability to narrate his experience. Stage two people express their understanding of God, self, and the meaning of reality in literal, concrete narrative. Their understanding reflects the explanations they have heard from those who stand in close relationship to them, explanations which are

and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook.

Stage 3 typically has its rise and ascendancy in adolescence, but for many adults it becomes a permanent place of equilibrium. It structures the ultimate environment in interpersonal terms. Its images of unifying value and power derive from the extension of qualities experienced in personal relationships. It is a "conformist" stage in the sense that it is acutely tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others and as yet does not have a sure enough grasp on its own identity and autonomous judgment to construct and maintain an independent perspective. While beliefs and values are deeply felt, they typically are tacitly held—the person "dwells" in them and in the meaning world they mediate. But there has not been occasion to step outside them to reflect on or 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 or she has not objectified it for examination and in a sense is unaware of having it. Differences of outlook with others are experienced as differences in "kind" of person. Authority is located in the incumbents of traditional authority roles (if perceived as personally worth) or in the consensus of a valued, face-to-face group.⁹

Just as the advent of concrete operational thinking made possible the emergence of stage two faith, according to Fowler, the appearance of formal operational thinking creates the possibility for stage three faith. Enabled to reflect on their own thoughts and experience, people at this stage of development are no longer tied to the literal, concrete understanding of faith, but can grasp patterns of meaning or an over-arching understanding. Fowler speaks of the individual developing a "personal myth" at this stage.

Characteristic of the individual in stage three is a new sense of standing in relationship to a variety of other people. It is a stage in which one's proper role in these relationships is being tested and discovered. Fowler describes the effect of this development on one's faith as follows:

. . . when God remains or becomes salient in a person's faith at this stage (he) must also be re-imagined as having inexhaustible depths and as being capable of knowing personally those mysterious depths of self and others we know that we ourselves will never know.¹⁰

People in stage three, a stage which usually develops in adolescence, are searching for an understanding of themselves in their relationships with others. As they struggle to clarify this understanding of self in relationship to God and to life in general, the views

of the significant others in their lives are powerful influences. Generally one's views at this stage are formed quite uncritically and unconsciously. This stage is a *person-oriented* one.

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith

The movement from Stage 3 to Stage 4 Individuative-Reflective faith is particularly critical for it is in this transition that the late adolescent or adult must begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes. Where genuine movement toward Stage 4 is underway the person must face certain unavoidable tensions: individuality versus being defined by a group or group membership; subjectivity and the power of one's strongly felt but unexamined feelings versus objectivity and the requirement of critical reflection; self-fulfillment or self-actualization as a primary concern versus service to and being for others; the question of being committed to the relative versus struggle with the possibility of an absolute.

Stage 4 most appropriately takes form in young adulthood (but let us remember that many adults do not construct it and that for a significant group it emerges only in the mid-thirties or forties). This stage is 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 roles 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 itself as a "world view." Self (identity) and outlook (world view) are differentiated from those of

others and become acknowledged factors in the reactions, interpretations and judgments one makes on the actions of the self and others. It expresses its intuitions of coherence in an ultimate environment in terms of an explicit system of meanings. Stage 4 typically translates symbols into conceptual meanings. This is a "demythologizing" stage. It is likely to attend minimally to unconscious factors influencing its judgments and behavior.¹¹

According to Fowler's theory, the transition from stage three to stage four is especially critical. In this transition, individuals abandon the security of a faith shaped by the faiths of significant others and critically evaluate the position which has become their own. Often such a transition is prompted by a young adult's leaving home in connection with marriage, pursuing a college education, or moving into his or her own apartment.

Fowler notes that crucial to this movement into stage four, faith is the "relocation of authority within the self."¹² It is not the case that the views of others are of no value, but such views are now *critically* evaluated by the individual. Stage four people sense where they stand and attempt to understand where others stand and what has led them to their position. In addition, the individual in stage four takes account of societal structures, recognizing them as more than mere extensions of interpersonal relations.¹³

Another characteristic of stage four individuals is their understanding of and use of symbols. In regard to symbols, a questioning attitude prevails. What had previously functioned meaningfully in the person's life is now tested. If the symbol is found to hold or convey significant meaning, they believe that such meaning can be reduced to propositional statements. This characteristic of stage four is often referred to as its "demythologizing" character.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith

Stage 5 Conjunctive faith involves the integration into self and outlook of much that was suppressed or unrecognized in the interest of Stage 4's self-certainty and conscious cognitive and affective adaptation to reality. This stage develops a "second naivete" (Ricoeur) in which symbolic power is reunited with conceptual meanings. Here there must also be a new reclaiming and reworking of one's past. There must be an opening to the voices of one's "deeper self." Importantly, this involves a critical recognition of one's social unconscious—the myths, ideal images and prejudices built deeply into the self-system by virtue of one's nurture within a particular social class, religious tradition, ethnic group or the like.

Unusual before mid-life, Stage 5 knows the sacrament of defeat and the reality of irrevocable commitments and acts. What the previous stage struggled to clarify, in terms of the boundaries of self and outlook this stage now makes porous and permeable. Alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions, this stage strives to unify opposites in mind and experience. It generates and maintains vulnerability to the strange truths of those who are "other." Ready for closeness to that which is different and threatening to self and outlook (including new depths of experience in spirituality and religious revelation), this stage's commitment to justice is freed from the confines of tribe, class, religious community or nation. And with the seriousness that can arise when life is more than half over, this stage is ready to spend and be spent for the cause of conserving and cultivating the possibility of others' generating identity and meaning.¹⁴

Fowler's summary of stage five faith gives the reader some of the main characteristics of this stage. Yet Fowler himself expresses frustration at his own inability to clearly explain the features of this stage.¹⁵ This difficulty he attributes to the complexity of this stage of faith development.

How is one to understand stage five faith? Fowler explains that in distinction from "the dichotomizing logic of Stage 4's 'either/or,'" stage five faith ". . . sees both (or the many) sides of an issue simultaneously."¹⁶ So, Conjunctive faith sees the connections between things and strives to avoid simplistically forcing reality into a given mold corresponding to one's own system of beliefs.

Such a faith is both more confident and more open than that of stage four. It is more confident in that it dares to allow the reality "out there" to show the inadequacies or incompleteness of one's understanding. It is more open in that it, recognizing the inadequacy of any system, is ready to be open to truth that comes from the systems and understandings of others. For example, the stage five person stands within his own belief structure and yet eagerly encounters other beliefs, knowing that neither his understanding nor that of any other person or community can fully comprehend the truth. Stage five faith is critical, yet accepting; confident, yet aware of its own inadequacies.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith

Stage 6 is exceedingly rare. The persons best described by it have generated faith compositions in which their felt sense of an ultimate environment is inclusive of all being. They have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community.

They are "contagious" in the sense that they create zones of liberation from the social, political, economic and ideological shackles we place and endure on human futurity. Living with felt participation in a power

that unifies and transforms the world, Universalizers are often experienced as subversive of the structures (including religious structures) by which we sustain our individual and corporate survival, security and significance. Many persons in this stage die at the hands of those whom they hope to change. Universalizers are often more honored and revered after death than during their lives. The rare persons who may be described by this stage have a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us. Their community is universal in extent. Particularities are cherished because they are vessels of the universal, and thereby valuable apart from any utilitarian considerations. Life is both loved and held too loosely. Such persons are ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith tradition.¹⁷

For Fowler, stage six faith is faith come of age, the mature faith which is the culmination of the prior stages. As indicated in the quotation above, Fowler believes that few people achieve stage six faith. In his further discussion of this stage, he suggests a few likely representatives of stage six: Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Dag Hammarskjöld, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Abraham Heschel and Thomas Merton.¹⁸

Fowler, in pointing to these likely representatives of stage six, cautions the reader that such a designation is not to be understood as denoting perfection or a semi-divine status. They, like others, have their imperfections and moments which show little insight. What marks these few as mature in faith is that ". . . Stage 6 becomes a disciplined, activist *incarnation*—a making real and tangible—of the imperatives of absolute love and justice of which Stage 5 has partial apprehensions."¹⁹ The person with stage six

faith dedicates himself to change the present, painfully divided reality into a unified, transcendent reality.

As Fowler's summary statement above indicates, those individuals of stage six faith are often seen as subversives and threats to the existing systems and institutions. Their visions of a universal community evoke opposition not only from those who are regarded by most as people of violence and injustice, but also from those who are opposed to injustice in the world, and yet, through compromise and accommodations, allow such injustice to continue. Often society's intolerance of stage six individuals becomes so great that they forfeit their lives, only then to be hailed as true visionaries and spiritual leaders.

many Christians would understand by the term. For Fowler, if one is to understand the Kingdom of God properly, he must rid himself and his faith of the exclusivistic notions which are so often present. Since no particular faith of an individual or community can embody nor fully comprehend universal truth, one must recognize that the truth comes to expression in a variety of traditions, symbols, and communities. Recognizing this, stage six universalizing faith approaches all people and all religions with understanding and appreciation while still standing firmly in its own position, fully appreciative of the truth which comes to expression in it. The stage six individual recognizes the validity of the specific images and symbols of his own faith and yet

The sin-caused brokenness which is seen in the whole of reality, including the human community, cannot be mended by faith which is simply structurally mature.

Another characteristic of the stage six individuals is the concreteness of their vision. They are not driven by an abstract ideal so much as by an understanding of the reality around them. They see injustice and violence in the oppressed minorities who cry out. And they respond not with general observations or lofty proclamations unrelated to the realities of life, but with visions born from a true understanding of the evil which breaks down life and the healing which must take place. Their concern is with the particular and individual as well as with the universal and corporate.

To further clarify stage six faith, Fowler asserts that this culmination of faith development is embodied in the Jewish-Christian understanding of the Kingdom of God.²⁰ From one who has set out to analyze objectively the development of faith as a universal human phenomenon, such a claim is surprising. Yet Fowler defends his assertion while at the same time broadening the notion of the Kingdom of God beyond what

acknowledges their inadequacies to reflect the truth fully. Such a position or perspective leads the individual to certain relationships with those of different beliefs. For example, the stage six Christian lives in such a way as to embody the truth in the present world, recognizes the faith of non-Christians without expecting them to become Christians, and acknowledges the misperceptions and distortions of the truth which, because of sin, are in his own views as well as in those of others.²¹

In the preceding pages a brief summary of the major features of Fowler's theory of faith development has been presented. Fowler's theory, which was developed in the late 1960's and early 1970's, in the form presented above, is quite recent and therefore reaction to it, both positive and negative, is limited. Yet, it is clear that Fowler's theory has already been well-received by many involved in "religious education." Its perspective is even now being implemented in various methods and materials being made

available for church education programs. But is Fowler's theory an acceptable one for the Reformed community?

As indicated earlier, Fowler readily acknowledges his indebtedness to a number of people whose views provide the foundation upon which he builds. Included in this list are Erik Erikson, H. Richard Niebuhr, Robert Bellah, Carl Jung, Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget.²² Fowler's system of the six stages of faith is most directly based on the Piagetian-Kohlberg structural-developmental paradigm. Since this underlies his work, one should examine and ascertain whether this foundation is biblically acceptable.

The article by Larry Reynolds entitled "Lawrence Kohlberg: Pursuing John Dewey's Vision," found in this issue of *Pro Rege*, provides helpful insight into the weaknesses and the unbiblical characteristics of Kohlberg's theory. In addition, the article suggests a number of problems with Piaget's theory. Such considerations certainly are involved when evaluating Fowler's views.

With such a foundation for his theory, the question is naturally raised whether Fowler's theory might not be rationalistic. This criticism has often been made of those in the Piagetian tradition. Kohlberg especially has been faulted for neglecting the affective aspect of moral development in favor of the cognitive. Does Fowler fall prey to this weakness?

As Fowler developed his own theory of faith development, he was fully aware of such criticism and sought to present a more balanced theory which took account of the affective as well as the cognitive.²³ For aid in avoiding a rationalistic bias, Fowler draws heavily on the developmental psychology of Erik Erikson. But one must still ask whether Fowler succeeds in his attempt to do justice to the affective. Walter E. Conn, writing in *Religious Education*, judges that Fowler does not. He observes that Fowler focuses on the structure of the cognitive dimension of faith, but neglects the structure of faith's basic trust and loyalty, its affective center. This,

claims Conn, is relegated to Fowler's discussion of content. Conn sees this as a failure in Fowler's attempt to provide a theory which adequately gives an analysis of faith.²⁴ In spite of his desire to avoid an intellectualistic view of faith and its development, Fowler in his theory has fallen prey to it.

In addition to this criticism, questions must be raised regarding Fowler's views of structure and content. In attempting to examine the universal human phenomenon of faith, Fowler determines to study the structures of faith which can be studied apart from the specific content of faith. Although there is a certain benefit to be gained from this approach, what Fowler fails to adequately take into account is the extent to which the content of one's faith shapes and determines the structure. One wonders if the structure/content approach of Fowler's is not a type of fact/value dichotomy in which the structure is seen as a neutral something which does not reflect one's religious stance.

Fowler's view of the six sequential stages is also significant. As noted earlier, it reflects the work of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson. But this is more than a formal reflection. It also embraces the humanistic notions of human fulfillment which culminate in freedom and autonomy. Fowler discovers a "natural development" in man as he moves forward toward fuller humanity. This can take place regardless of the specific content of one's faith.

It is striking that Fowler has attempted an empirical study of faith, yet he soon discovered that his work was not only descriptive, but also normative. Fowler's six stages of faith are understood in relation to "mature faith."²⁵ But precisely what is "mature faith?" How does one determine the elements of such a faith? It is in this area that Fowler's presuppositions become most obvious. Here he speaks of the Jewish-Christian image of the Kingdom of God. In so doing, he realizes that such an understanding of "mature faith," or stage six faith as Fowler refers to it, will bring about a

negative reaction on the part of some from a non-Jewish or non-Christian position. But he argues that simply because this image of the Kingdom of God comes from a Jewish-Christian content does not *per se* make it provincial or untrue. It is one tradition's image which effectively apprehends much of the ultimate reality toward which people are moving. So, far from viewing himself as a biblical apologist, Fowler believes that he has systematically come to understand the nature and structure of mature faith, which, it happens, corresponds to the Jewish-Christian concept of the Kingdom of God.

To further clarify what Fowler means by describing stage six faith in terms of a vision of the Kingdom of God, the following quotation is helpful:

The issue is finally not whether we and our companions on this globe become Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Taoists, Confucianists or Christians, as important as that issue is. The real question is, will there be *faith* on earth, and will it be *good* faith—faith sufficiently inclusive so as to counter and transcend the destructive henotheistic idolatries of national, ethnic, racial and religious identifications and to bind us as a human community in covenantal trust and loyalty to each other and to the ground of our being?²⁶

Such a description of the Kingdom of God is interesting and even lofty in terms of the modern humanistic spirit, but it is far removed from the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God. Scripture unequivocally connects the Kingdom of God to the King, Jesus Christ. Apart from Him, the Kingdom has no meaning or significance. *Good* faith, according to the Bible, must be faith in the true God through His Son, Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Any other faith is false and idolatrous.

The sin-caused brokenness which is seen in the whole of reality, including the human

community, cannot be mended by faith which is simply structurally mature. The healing comes only through the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Followers of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior know this and give their lives fully to the Kingdom of God, not because they have evolved as persons through a normal, unhindered development of faith through various stages ultimately arriving at stage six faith, but because the Holy Spirit has come into their hearts, convicting them of their sin and creating within them faith in the person of Jesus Christ. To be sure, there is growth after one's conversion, and this growth and development may be observed and studied. But true faith, mature faith, is not primarily a way of finding meaning and purpose in life, but a loving, covenantal relationship to God through His Son in the power of the Holy Spirit which then does indeed make life meaningful.

Fowler's theory of the stages of faith development has flaws in regard to its perception of sin and of revelation. Both concepts, crucial to the development of a biblically-sound theory, are noted by Fowler as significant, yet seem to function minimally in his theory. Fowler writes:

The reality of *sin* as personal, corporate and cosmic in character comes clear to us from moments of disclosure in our histories of revelation. The reality of sin comes clear to us as well, when we reflect upon the intractability of our own and of our companion's capacities for self-righteousness and destructive hatred in dealing with each other.²⁷

Fowler's observation regarding sin correctly acknowledges that sin's influence is pervasive. Yet the radical antithesis in the world today as a result of sin has little or no place in his theory. It seems that his understanding of stage six faith and the Christian gospel would reject such a notion as divisive and contrary to the universalistic emphasis of the Kingdom of God. But, whether in confor-

mity with the perception of the Kingdom of God found in stage six faith or not, the antithesis is clearly a teaching of the Bible.

Fowler also writes of the importance of revelation in connection with faith.

Revelation—if it truly is revelation—constitutes a disclosure of the character of ultimate reality, and of its implications for the shape of our lives—which is true and true universally. A stage theory enables us to take account of a proper relativity in our ways of apprehending and responding to such revelation.²⁸

Aspects of Fowler's statement are worthy of acceptance. Human understanding of God's revelation is always fallible and relative. Yet, further reading of Fowler on the subject of revelation reveals that for him the term is filled with Neo-orthodox meaning. What is revelation? Is the Bible revelation? Or does the Bible record accounts of the revelation experiences of various people in a Jewish-Christian tradition. Although Fowler nowhere specifically answers these questions, a Neo-orthodox perspective seems obvious.

In light of Fowler's understanding of mature faith, one is also led to ask where such analysis leaves those whom Scripture points out as models of faith. Few would appear to have developed beyond stage four, the Individuative-Reflective faith. Fowler's reading of the Pauline corpus leads him to the conclusion that the early writings of the apostle reflect stage four faith, but the later writings reflect a more mature, stage six faith.²⁹ What such analysis does to the normativity of Scripture is an interesting question!

To point out the problems and deficiencies of Fowler's theory of faith development is not to say that it is without value or usefulness. Certain of his observations of how faith functions reflect valid insight and are helpful. Certain similarities in how faith functions can be detected when one com-

pares different individuals and different faiths. From such a study, Christians can learn much about their own faith. All people are changing and developing throughout life in a wide variety of ways—intellectually, emotionally, psychically, socially, morally, etc. And one's faith comes to expression in terms of these various aspects of human life. Fowler's research should be carefully studied and tested by all who are in leadership roles in Christian education and in Church education, but the foundation upon which Fowler's theory rests must be tested against the biblical teaching about people and their faith.

Notes

¹*Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1979), p. 7.

²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, ed. John J. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 44-47.

³James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 249.

⁴Fowler, p. 38.

⁵Fowler, p. 114.

⁶Fowler, p. 121.

⁷Fowler, p. 133.

⁸Fowler, p. 149.

⁹Fowler, pp. 172-3.

¹⁰Fowler, p. 153.

¹¹Fowler, p. 182.

¹²Fowler, p. 179.

¹³Fowler, p. 157.

¹⁴Fowler, p. 197-8.

¹⁵Fowler, p. 185.

¹⁶Fowler, p. 185.

¹⁷Fowler, pp. 200-1.

¹⁸Fowler, p. 201.

¹⁹Fowler, p. 200.

²⁰Fowler, p. 206.

²¹Fowler, p. 210.

²²Fowler, p. 38.

²³Fowler, pp. 101-5.

²⁴Walter E. Conn, "Affectivity in Kohlberg and Fowler," *Religious Education*, 76 (January-February, 1981), p. 34.

²⁵Fowler, p. 199.

²⁶Fowler, p. 293.

²⁷Fowler, p. 210.

²⁸James Fowler, "Stage Six and the Kingdom of God," *Religious Education*, 75 (May-June, 1980), p. 247.

²⁹Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, p. 298.