

## Faith Development Theory

James W. Fowler published Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning, in 1981. In it, Fowler outlines his theory of human faith development and the stages his work repeatedly revealed. The book is highly recommended for anyone seeking to disciple and minister to a fellow believer. Fowler's breakthrough work has become an integral lens of the ministry and a staple of the SROM library

*Note: All descriptions below are my understanding of Fowler's theory. All misunderstanding and misrepresentations are my own. - JC*

## What is Faith Development Theory?

The best way to begin to understand a broad theory is by examining its title. Titles are not chosen lightly, so a rough definition can be obtained from looking at the concepts included in the title.

### Faith

In order to be assessed as belonging to a particular stage of faith, one has to have faith. Fowler says that faith is a verb, and is always relational, meaning that there is always an *other* in faith. Without the other it is not faith. The stages of faith are then a definition of what this relationship with the other looks like. Fowler goes on to describe faith as being different than religion or belief. Religion, he says, are cumulative traditions in which one can participate without faith, or for which faith might not even be necessary. Think about Thanksgiving. Americans have cumulative traditions surrounding the holiday which we celebrate 'religiously' but it is not interchangeable with 'faith.'

The difference between faith and belief can be a little harder to see. I may believe that the sun is the center of the solar system, even though I have never actually seen the solar system. But there is no *other* in this example, no conscious being with which one can interact. Belief is not faith because it is not relational. "Faith involves an alignment of heart or will, a commitment of loyalty and trust." (pg. 11) Looking at what beliefs we have, whether political or social, out of which we create an other and thus an improper relationship, may illuminate potential idols in our lives.

But what about a loss of faith? Some people find or lose their faith along the journey. The transitions between stages are difficult, unsure times filled with negative feelings. Sometimes those feelings cause a person to choose to leave their faith or find a new one. Once a person loses their faith without committing to a new one, they are no longer able to be assessed by Fowler's theory. They have "dropped out" of the stages of faith. Additionally, if a person finds a faith as an adult, there is not a single entry point and the way they make meaning of that new faith must be evaluated in order for their stage of faith to be assessed.

### Development

The use of the word *development* in the title indicates that there is a progression through which one must go. Skipping stages is not possible. Fowler even warns that 'precocious development' may actually create undesirable characteristics, such as destructive fundamentalism. (In this case, fundamentalism is defined as a person who expresses lofty and global ideals, but lacks extravagant compassion and personal identification with each other person on the planet.)

Each stage is valuable and necessary. They are part of the process of a life-long journey. One stage is not better than another and it is improper for a person in one stage to look in judgment upon a person in a different stage. Immaturity is not a matter of comparison from one person to another, but rather pockets of inconsistency across one individual's world view (although the ability to examine that consistency does not exist in all stages).

Finally, Faith Development Theory, because it is a theory of the evolving relationship with the other, is tied to biological development. A baby cannot conceive of objects existing outside of their vision until their brain has grown to allow it. Normal biological development will take a person as far as Stage 3 on its own. Growth beyond that point is not inevitable or to be assumed as some people can (and do) remain at anyone place for the rest of their life.

## Theory

Fowler's work in Stages of Faith is a theory. In the world of research, this means that it is a high level concept, is based on research, and is testable. Fowler did a very large study of almost 400 people of many different faiths, finding the same trends over and over again. His very thorough and well documented research is what gives rise to the Stages of Faith. Furthermore, the stages have been observed researched in faiths around the world, including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hindu, Bahai, Universalism, and Christianity. Fowler is himself a Christian, but the stages described are not exclusive to Christianity. This means that the stages apply to people, not to other faiths or sects. Indeed, they can be observed in the devoted of any faith.

Fowler's work also stands with and integrates other highly evidenced and validated developmental theories, including moral judgment, perspective taking, bounds of social awareness, conceptual logic, and others. This means that it does not stand on its own, a conception of Fowler's own mind. Instead, and unlike many other theories of adult conceptualization, it combines and weaves together the major findings of others.

## Why study Faith Development?

At SRM, we believe we have a catalytic grace. What this means is that we believe God has given us a gift by grace to facilitate experiences that catalyze a person's relationship with God. In chemistry, a catalyst is a compound added to an experiment that speeds up the reaction. This can happen in a couple different ways, but the basic definition of a catalyst is that it makes a change happen faster. We believe God does something on our courses and makes changes happen faster. This is not the place to look at the why those changes might happen. Rather the point is that in order to measure change, one must identify a starting point and an ending point. The stages of faith give us those markers. It gives us the language for the change that is being catalyzed, the transformation that is happening. Being able to help see a student through the lens of the stages of faith gives an instructor an additional tool to come alongside the work the Holy Spirit is doing in their life and pour into that. It can help an instructor better meet a student where they are and disciple them in the season God has them. It is vital to remember that it is not our job to create the change; that privilege belongs to the Holy Spirit. Instead, it is our good pleasure to be a part of and witness to the process.

It is worth mentioning again that it is imperative that an instructor leaves judgment and comparison at the door. One stage is not better than another and all are part of God's plan. If seeing a person more clearly is not coupled with compassion, then that is evidence of self-righteousness and pride. This is a tool to meet people where they are and minister more effectively. It is not for pride and self-congratulation.

## Stages of Faith

### Stages 0 and 1

Stage 0, Undifferentiated Faith, is the stage of infancy. For infants, there is no differentiating God from parents. The infant's world is consumed with engaging with the world, learning patterns and beginning to predict and influence their environment. Trust, courage, love and hope are challenged and conflicted with abandonment, inconsistency and deprecation. It is time of relational foundations that will impact the rest of their life (i.e. parents and other care-givers).

Stage 1 is called Intuitive-Projective faith and the main stage of toddler years. At this age, children are highly impressionable, learning "dos" and "don'ts." It is characterized by fantasy and imagination. Children think about and develop a conception of God (even in an atheistic household), but that God has no personality. He is just an entity that impacts their life, not unlike their parents.

### Stage 2

Stage 2, Mythic-Literal Faith, comes into being as the child becomes school-aged. This stage is characterized by the development of morals and attitudes. Individuals are best able to think about these concepts in terms of stories. They are attracted to stories because by this age children have developed the ability to think about what another person's perspective and that something might "make them sad" or "make them happy." Individuals at this stage also conceive of justice in terms of reciprocal justice and fairness. Given their limited ability to conceptualize the future or complex system, justice looks immediate and reciprocal (if you hit me it is fair that I get to hit you back).

God, in this stage, begins to also have attitudes and morals. He begins to have a personality. He is able to have emotions and individuals start conceiving what things look like from his perspective. In this way, God is both mythical (in that he has an unexplainable personality) and literal (a characteristic of the logic children employ at this age). It is important to note that not all individuals grow out of this stage, though one can only speculate as to the reasons.

### Stage 3

Stage 3 is called the Synthetic-Conventional Stage. Most teenagers and many adults are in this stage. In Fowler's work every adult age group interviewed had some individuals still in Stage 3. The through-line of Stage 3 is the developing complexity of relationships. Cognitive growth allows a teenager to begin thinking about another person's experience in a greater way. A teen can start to understand how they are viewed by another person. In psychology it is called "I see you seeing me. I see the me you think you see." This realization of the "me" you think you see creates two versions of "me." Therein lays the conflict of identity and performance. Which "me" is the real me? This creates a hunger and need for a God that is deeply personal and relational. This is one of the best places to land when working with teens or others whom the Lord has in Stage 3.

Another characteristic of Stage 3 is the lack of explicit systems. These are called "tacit" systems. That means that they are unexamined either for definition or limitations. A common response of Stage 3 to deeper probing questions is "I don't know, I never really thought about it." Instead of an explicit decision making process, the individual's locus of authority is in the group and relationships s/he so deeply desires. Orson Well's called this "Group Think"

in his book 1984. The faith of the group, be it peers, parents or other proximal social entity, is the faith of the individual. They have not examined the beliefs or separated themselves from the group. That comes in the transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4.

The systems of meaning-making described by Fowler as Stage 3 may be seen in other domains, such as morals, convictions, or how they assemble their world-view. The aspect I use to double check the stage of faith is the role symbols play in how the individual relates to the divine. A person in Stage 3 needs symbols and rituals to have meaning. They need both together and cannot conceptually separate the two. The abstract concept (for example of divine intimacy) without the means to engage in it is beyond the developmental ability of the average teenager. Instead the symbol itself is sacred and equal with the concept it represents (think about controversy over burning the American Flag). When the symbolic trivialization of Stage 4 is forced on a person in Stage 3, damage can be done. Fowler warns “when this kind of emptying of the sacred is widespread in a society – as it is in ours today – a vacuum of meaning and of meaningful symbolic representations results in rampant anxiety and neuroses and in a resurgence of interest in all kinds of occult and spiritualistic phenomena” (pg. 163).

### Stage 3 Transition

The transition between Stage 3 and Stage 4 is the first time we see crisis of faith necessary for development. This may be that normal cognitive development can take a person as far as Stage 3, but then a different kind of development is necessary for further growth. We can choose to fight or yield to this growth. There is also a societal component to development in that different social systems can either hinder or encourage growth (think about the Amish *Rumspringa*). This is not a political commentary, nor should it be misconstrued as such. Rather it is that a Stage 3 person cannot disciple, mentor, or encourage a person in Stage 4. A social group comprised of mainly in Stage 3 individuals will not easily accept the further growth and development of one of their members, but instead try to re-educate and re-impose group-think on them.

As will all future stage transitions, this one is challenging and at times, painful. One must break from the binds of Stage 3 and begin to take ownership of both their faith and of their own development. The transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 is two-fold and requires a two-fold breaking.

First, one must leave their “home” emotionally. Unfortunately this can arise from some sort of betrayal by a trusted adult or friend. Good, Godly leadership and guidance, however, can possibly present a greater challenge in that it can be harder to separate from in order to move their locus of authority internally. It can be hard to learn to question good, sound advice. But this is precisely what must happen to leave “home” emotionally. One must question the system, examine the advice, and begin to understand how personal background can shape perception and world view.

The ability to see how background can create paradigms comes from leaving home physically, the second breaking. By leaving home physically, one encounters experience and perspectives about which one must make choices without the help of the group. It also causes one to begin to examine and question their background, values, and self. This questioning is not inherently negative, nor does it mean that one will comprehensively reject their background. (Rejection and rebellion has more to do with whether their social structured allows for growth and acceptance of diverse perspectives.) One may examine their values and come to the same conclusions and those who mentored them in Stage 3. The difference is the ownership of those concepts and opinions.

A person has fully moved into Stage 4 when both parts of the two-fold breaking have been completed. This, however, is not inevitable and people do find lasting equilibrium in a partial transition by only completing one of the breakings. For example, one can leave home physically only to remain emotionally dependent upon parents and friends. Or, one can leave home, rejecting one group and join another (like a gang). However, if the location of

authority is still external to the person and located within the group or guru, the Stage 3 to Stage 4 transition has not been completed.

## Stage 4

Stage 4 is called Individuative-Reflective Faith and is the most common stage for adults of all age groups. The characteristics of this stage are easy to identify and include both the internal locus of authority and analysis of the systems missing from Stage 3. In this stage an individual “owns” their faith and has made a decision to participate in their faith apart from their family or social group. Coupled with the ownership of one’s faith is the ability to see and accept the consequences of one’s choices. This stage is also characterized by a “second narcissism” (the first is toddler-hood). This means that one’s commitment is to the internal voice of authority and what makes sense for the individual as they interact with groups of congruent ideologies. In Stage 3, the “other” is a different social group. This changes in Stage 4 to a person or individual with a different ideology or worldview. A person in Stage 4 creates their own boundaries and intentionally creates their own interpersonal connections with ideologically compatible groups.

In terms of the functions symbols play, the symbol or ritual has been rejected in preference of the meaning or intent behind the symbol. In interviews or essays, many people don’t even mention specific symbols or rituals. Instead they focus on the meaning mediated by the symbol and explore where that may be found outside of the symbol or ritual itself.

Faith in this stage looks quite black-and-white. In Stage 4, an individual builds a means of interacting with others, which creates implicit ‘rules of engagement’ and predictions. System development and creating predictions creates formulas and if-then statements. “If I spend an hour in my bible this morning, *then* God will speak to me.” This self-determination can edify the transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4, but the strengths of Stage 4, overtime, become its weaknesses. As life accumulates experience and circumstances, one’s systems begin to crack and break down. But what about when those formulas begin to break down? What happens when you continue to be faithful in spending time with God, but he seems to not speak back to you?

## Stage 4 Transition

The transition from Stage 4 to Stage 5 is characterized by increasing negative emotions towards God. One may feel slighted by Him or even lied to. He no longer seems to be responding to established, even scriptural formulas. One’s underlying offense creates disturbing inner voices towards God. At the same time, one’s overly-reflected self is increasingly confronted by past experiences and paradoxes. Fowler says “Elements from a childish past, images and energies from a deeper self, a gnawing sense of the sterility and flatness of the meanings one serves – and or all of these may signal a readiness for something new... Disillusionments with one’s compromises and recognition that life is more complex than Stage 4’s logic of clear distinctions and abstract concepts can comprehend, press one toward a more dialectical and multi-leveled approach to faith” (pg. 183).

*I (Jessie) have found that the transition from Stage 4 to Stage 5 is more pocketed and less comprehensive. The transition involves going back to previous experience and reworking ones past where pockets of Stage 3, or even Stage 2 faith concepts remain. For example, an incident that occurred when one was a child may have caused a person to decide that God was disappointed with them, especially when they sinned. This view of God remained and helped inform the systems of interacting with God and relating to other people. The motivation to please or find acceptance with God may have been established, regardless of the scriptural truth about God’s opinion. Reworking those past experiences in light of a more intimate God and more complete Gospel message has helped me (Jessie) to*

*move parts of my meaning making from Stage 4 to Stage 5. I find that my faith development looks like Swiss cheese with pockets of Stage 2, and Stage 3, while there are also areas of Stage 4 and 5.*

Fowler is unclear if the reworking and reclaiming of one's past is the transition to Stage 5, or a characteristic of the stage itself. According to his research, however, his is clear that Stage 5 is unusual before mid-life (30-40).

## Stage 5

Fowler calls Stage 5 the Conjunctive Faith. The "other" in Stage 5 has changed an order of magnitude and is now concepts, ideas, paradigms, and lenses. It is complex and at times, difficult to describe. More observable characteristics include a change in Stage 4's commitment to logic and the either/or, a more open way of knowing. Instead of trying to understand according one's own experience and knowledge a "willed naiveté" emerges where one seeks to be taught by the concept. For example, instead of defining what grace is by using scripture and other people's words, a person in Stage 5 asks Grace to teach them what it is and what it means. This openness leads one to paradoxes and tensions. Instead of the either/or, one must accept the both/and of the paradoxes. 'It is true that both God is sovereign and just and there is injustice in the world.'

Fowler says this form of meaning making is more than a dialectical knowing, it is dialogical knowing in that there is an ongoing conversation by the concepts in paradox. The person in Stage 5 listens to and participates in these conversations. A person who conceptualizes their faith in Stage 5 understands that truth is multi-dimensional and that it must be explored from different lenses in order to more fully understand it. An example of this is considering what suffering for the Kingdom of God means, and exploring that through the lens of different people's or culture's experiences with suffering. What has suffering for the Kingdom looked like in the scriptures? What do other religions say about suffering and how might that shed light on one's own beliefs. It is a common misconception to think truth in Stage 5 is "squishy" and malleable. Rather truth is bigger, more beautiful, and more complex than our unredeemed minds can grasp. There is an intellectual vulnerability and one can identify with Job when he said, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:3).

In Stage 5, one realizes that they cannot escape looking at a faith concept through a lens. Instead, a person in Stage 5 seeks out different lenses and is unafraid of what those lenses might offer, including those of other faiths. This does not necessarily mean they dilute or abandon their faith. Indeed, it often serves to intensify their convictions. For example, after considering the act of communion, studying the perceptions (lenses) of it amongst Christian denominations, reading about self-sacrificial blood-letting practice in other cultures, and participating in a Jewish *Seder*, one may come to the conclusion that the ritual of communion is such a beautiful mystery that they choose to practice it every day and experience deep intimacy with the divine in the act. Fowler says that "Stage 5 distrusts the separation of the symbol and the sacred, sensing that when we neutralize the initiative of the symbolic, we make a pale idol of any meaning we honor" (pg. 187).

A person in Stage 5 still uses critical discernment and analysis, but only trusts them as tools and not a means of purveying the truth. The individual is aware of and suspicious of self-deception and limitations of both mind and experience. This is coupled with a willingness to "spend and be spent for the cause of conserving and cultivating the possibility of others' generating identity and meaning" (pg 198).

## Stage 5 Transition and Stage 6

The danger of Stage 5 is that it could potentially result in passivity, which can give rise to either cynicism or complacency (See Ecclesiastes) due to paradoxical truth. It has a greater understanding of both people and faith, and so it remains divided. Fowler says, "It lives and acts between an untransformed world and a transforming vision

and loyalties” (pg. 198). While this can possibly lead to cynicism, it can also lead to a radical actualization of passion for the transforming vision. This radical actualization is called Stage 6, a Universalizing Faith.

This is not a universal combing of all faiths, but rather a faith conviction is universally applied. An example of this would be Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from Birmingham Jail where he states, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” In this we can see a conviction the justice is universal and universally applied. Fowler uses Martin Luther King Jr. as an example of a person in Stage 6, in addition to Mother Theresa, Abraham Heschel, and Mahatma Gandhi. A person in Stage 6 is so moved by love and their compassion for and identification with the whole of humanity, that s/he is willing to die for the transformation of reality in the vision of what it could be.

Stage 6 is exceedingly rare, most of the individuals making such marks that they are recorded in our history books. The Stage 6 person conceives of the enemy of faith as idolatry, whether of concepts, systems, institutions, or groups and so they challenge institutions, authorities and the status quo in such a way that many of them are martyred.

It is worth noting that Stage 6 should not be confused with radicalism or fundamentalism of the kind that creates suicide bombers. Stage 6 is characterized by a deep and profound compassion for all of humanity. Additionally, a person cannot skip stages. Each stage is necessary for a time organically leads to the next stage in the proper time. Radicalism or destructive fundamentalism can sometimes be the product of “precocious growth” and trying to move individuals to radical actualization. A look at individuals of the kind described here often reveals that they are actually in Stage 3 and being radicalized by a group or guru.

## **How can Faith Development help you as a disciple-maker?**

It is worth reiterating that the goal of studying Faith Development is not to assign ‘levels of maturity’ to others or judge their personal growth in their walk with the Lord. That is the role of the Holy Spirit and he is better at his job than you are. The value in studying Faith Development is that it can serve as a tool to come alongside another in their walk with the Lord. You can better see and meet them where they are. As a disciple-maker, sometimes we are confronted with questions or challenges with which we do not know how to deal. Treating a person in the Stage 4-5 transition the same way you would a person in the Stage 3-4 transition would not be appropriate. God is doing different things in their lives and they need different encouragement and scriptures on which to meditate. For Stage 3-4 transition, it is appropriate to talk about what others think and what they think. For a person in the stage 4-5 transition this is a backwards move.

Moreover, it is important to have self-awareness for the stage in which you are located. This can help you find an appropriate person to disciple, as well as find an appropriate person to disciple you. A person in Stage 4 cannot appropriately disciple a person in Stage 5. It is important to remember that age or even time as a Christian is not what is relevant. Rather it is how they conceptualize the faith and make meaning from it.

Finally, it is important to be at peace with where God has you. It is His job to grow and mature you, not yours to grow and mature yourself. Yielding to what he brings, understanding that negative feelings and experiences are part of that process (thus not to be avoided), and releasing your life to God at increasingly deeper levels will keep you on a healthy trajectory. His job is to lead; yours is to follow.