

Perspectives on Faith Development

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By definition, faith is an expression of trust in the unknown. Where there is certainty — when everything can be explained and understood in human terms — there is no real need for faith. Faith is my way of knowing that God exists, that Jesus is God as well as my personal redeemer, and that the Holy Spirit is the direct presence of God in my life.

Faith has degrees of understanding and conviction. I used to think that a person either had faith or did not. But as I have come to see, *everyone* has beliefs, and these beliefs guide actions. It is not whether one has faith or not, but the *content* and *quality* of the faith that ultimately is a part of every person.

HOW DOES FAITH GROW?

This question focuses on the pilgrim image long associated with Christians, as illustrated in Ephesians 4:11-16: we are to grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ. How *does* a person develop as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

When does a person begin in the faith, and what happens as a person experiences a growing faith? A beginning point, for example, might be a family-oriented faith that is passed on from parent to child simply through the day-to-day routine in a Christian home.

This nurture-oriented faith might then mature to a time of learning and accepting doctrines and beliefs which have been passed down from others (parents, church, community, etc.). An advanced expression of this would occur as a person acted on or demonstrated the skill in using doctrines, beliefs, and practices in the same way as his or her models/teachers.

Additional spiritual growth depends on a Christian's ability and/or freedom to personalize his or her beliefs.

This growth step requires not only mastering the content of one's faith, but examining these beliefs in light of alternatives and personal experience. That is, the believer tests *what* he or she has come to believe against the realities of personal study, reflection and experience. Out of this encounter between what others have valued and one's personal conscience, develops convictions regarding the *why* and *how* of that person's faith.

So faith may be viewed as *what* I believe, but at a more mature stage it must also include *why* and *how* I believe, act, and live.

THREE RELATED PERSPECTIVES

Faith development has elements of all of the phases described above. There are, as we know, various ways of viewing the roles of learners, teachers, and the community of faith. I want to share with you briefly three perspectives that current research seems to support as the models for faith development.

Developmental-Conversion

This is closest to the pilgrim image. It assumes that there are rather distinct phases in the spiritual growth of persons. In my research, this is the pattern with which most Baptists identify. The *usual* development begins in a Christian home and proceeds through the following phases:

NURTURE (about ages 0-6)

INDOCTRINATION (about ages 7-older adolescence)

TESTING (older adolescence-adulthood)

MAKING CHOICES (adulthood)

ACTIVE DEVOTION (adulthood)

Research suggests that this process may be relatively superficial as in the case of persons who for the most part stagnate at the indoctrination level (whether by conscious choice or simply because that is the level of the status quo, or of cultural religion). Or this process may be a continuing conversion experience as persons rework and enlarge their understandings and commitments in ever-widening dimensions.

Let us look now at some assumptions that provide the foundation for faith development among evangelical Christians:

1. The Christian way is community (e.g., Body of Christ, People of God, loving neighbor as self).
2. *Coming to faith* and *growing in faith* are inseparable components of Christian discipleship.
3. Faith is a *gift*. There will always be an element of mystery concerning how and why God works.
4. All levels, or phases, represent faith. There is no greater or lesser. The key question is: How is one being *faithful* in the maturing process?
5. Phases represent *opportunities* for growth. There is no assurance that one will progress.
6. Integration of leadership theory and practice comes as we identify the outcomes desired (for example, I always ask: What am I trying to do to people?) and design appropriate ways to assist persons in spiritual growth at any phase.

NOTE: The ways in which you seek to assist persons are not always *age-related*, especially among adults. The developmental-stage base for our church curriculum materials was much more suitable 25 years ago due to common factors in our religious and cultural environment — when our regional and group identity were so strong. Now, with religious and cultural pluralism, there are still developmental stages, but there is less predictability and they are more individual in nature.

For example, many adults who become converts without exposure to traditional beliefs/practices that are expected in a particular Christian community may have extreme difficulty in interpreting and/or understanding why certain beliefs and practices are important. Effective nurture and instruction would be necessary for assimilation into the body.

7. Faith development is more a *patterning* than a sequential process, with advances and retreats — and sometimes existing in different stages in various dimensions of the same person's life. What makes sense of all this may be the ongoing learning process of ACTION — REFLECTION — EVALUATION that undergirds and informs the faith development process.

Crisis-Conversion

The crisis-conversion route of discipleship development is most apparent among persons who have a background of confused impressions related to trust of faith, community and/or people. These persons tend to

speak of their background in legalistic terms. When a new perspective causes them to search, extreme disillusionment sets in. In the absence of a trusted community, such persons are open for easy answers and strong leadership that exhibits caring and understanding of the person's plight.

Conversion is, in effect, equated with salvation. The route often followed finds the person transferring total dependence to the new-found answer and total rejection of one's former spiritual experience. This, in effect, is a new cycle of indoctrination.

If a person has a rather *weak* personality structure, the reinforcement of the new group or leader will be a continuing need — and must function as *authority* in the individual's life. Otherwise, disillusionment will set in and the person will look for another easy answer or paternalistic leader.

If a person tends to have a *strong* personality structure, searching eventually will set in and the individual will have to make choices concerning beliefs and practices. If group controls are too restrictive, again there will be a rejection and the person's basic mistrust of community will be reinforced.

If the *answer* to which one turns tends to be transcendent in expression (such as private prayer/confession periods, silent meditation, and individual Bible study) dependence on God becomes the highest good. Thus, meaningful relationships with others become increasingly less important in the person's life.

In this process, the focus of *authority* is the key issue. Where is one's major influence? For the God-dependent person, the key to spiritual growth is to learn to trust and relate to the faith community as a full participant. For the community-dependent person, the key is to trust and relate to the transcendent dimensions of spirituality.

Process-Conversion

This model recognizes the above, but views the process of faith development as a continuum of receptivity

to the claims of Christ. Indeed, one may be involved in a turning toward Christ long before accepting Christ as Savior.

For example, a person may be anti-Christian but in light of a particular circumstance *turns about* in his or her attitude and/or conduct. It may be that such a person turns from persecution to a new attitude of tolerance. It may have been brought about by some crisis, but whatever the cause, the individual instead of walking away from Christ and his Church now begins movement toward the One who has called. The person has not yet arrived at the point of becoming one of Christ's own body, but nevertheless has changed direction.

In reality this moment of change may be called *conversion* because it is a turn-around, and can easily be confused with regeneration. However, while this may be the moment of regeneration, as in Paul's case, it is not necessarily so. One may change direction and still be far from salvation. To say that one is born again may in this case be premature, and failure to comprehend this may account for many dropouts. For a discussion of this see Edward C. Pentecost, Issues in Missionology: An Introduction to the Conversion Process (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), p. 118f.

Spiritual growth from this perspective must take a person at the point of need, as in the *developmental-conversion* process, and assist the person in reorienting his or her life. Faith development might well be related to guiding babes, regardless of age, as they come to claim and act on their own beliefs as disciples of Christ.

IMPLICATIONS

Traditionally, campus ministry has been most effective with students who have come from Christian-home, Bible-belt, mainline SBC-church situations. These are the ones who for the most part are oriented toward a developmental growth process. To the degree that they are able to function within the system without too much conflict, they will respond to the nurture and education of their community of faith.

Ideas for approaches to Bible study and types of groups you might provide are listed in Figure 1. (See page 9).

The important thing is to provide opportunities for persons at all levels, not just one or two. By orienting them to the possibilities and helping them discuss their individual needs, you can begin to structure an overall program that will meet people where they are and provide for them as they mature.

Another possibility is to build on the strengths of your more mature students who are willing to assume increased leadership responsibilities. Enlist those who have gifts in relating to persons at the various levels. Provide special training, and give them opportunities to lead groups and provide ministry.

A good resource for helping persons understand their own faith development and the needs of others is my book, *Growing Faith* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982). I wrote this to provide a study guide for and experience in personal faith development.

Persons With a Crisis-Conversion Orientation

Look for a combination of these symptoms: highly dependent, distrust of larger groups, feeds on a relationship with one or two people who have similar symptoms, background of transition/crisis, suspicious of group decision-making, excessive legalism, manic-depressive, talks of *direct* experiences with God while discounting community worship, disillusioned with parents, peers, church, etc., and seeks quick, easy answers to complex problems.

You will usually see these persons as they look for authority and support figures to replace those they left behind. If you respond as a paternalistic judge, you will fill that need and the student will lean on you until you disappoint him or her. If you or someone in your group does not respond, the student will look for a center of emotional support and authority elsewhere.

The key to meeting needs of these persons is to surround them with direct leadership and a few understanding, nurturing peers for a period of orientation

APPROACHES TO BIBLE STUDY

LEVEL OF NEED	TYPE OF BIBLE STUDY	TYPE OF GROUP
Nurture	Inspiration Personal Testimony Devotional Approach Tell the great biblical stories/experiences	Fellowship Caring Support
Indoctrination/ Instruction	Information Convey knowledge about the content Interpret doctrines and practices	Sharing Task-oriented
Testing/ Making Choices	Interpretation (What is the Bible saying to me?) Assist persons in making application to life	Searching Encouraging
Active Devotion	All of the above as appropriate Leader serves as equipper, helper, and encourager People at this level can benefit from a variety of approaches as long as they point toward active living for Christ	Mission action Christian service Ministry support Vocational ministry Lay ministry

FIGURE NO. 1

and assimilation. During this time, which may extend from a few weeks to a semester, the aim is to develop trusting relationships while gradually moving from total dependence to an interdependency among the new student(s), the peer leader (s), and campus minister(s). Then, channel the person(s) into mainstream activities at the NURTURE LEVEL with some of your best student leaders.

In extreme cases, you will be dealing with students who have participated in or are ripe for a Bible cult. The appropriate response, apart from professional assistance, is to be clear and direct with the person. Acknowledge the disillusionment the person has that would "drive" him or her to an extreme answer. Listen and dialogue; don't condemn. Ask the person what alternatives have been considered; evaluate them.

Set up a way for the person to be exposed to a holistic, informed reflection on possible ways to meet his or her concerns. The best way would be for this person to meet with a student who has gone through this experience and has returned. Another is to provide reading material related to the symptoms being experienced. Then seek a commitment for involvement in the assimilation activity described above.

Of course, the best approach is preventive. Be open to searching and choice-making as a natural part of each person's spiritual growth. Discuss the needs and responses of persons at various points in their lives. Study the structure of Bible cults, the role of leaders, and what happens to participants. Contrast that with a wholesome, well-designed ministry to and with college students.

An excellent resource in this area is Unholy Devotion: Why Cults Lure Christians, by Harold L. Bussell (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan Press, 1983). This could be used for your personal reference, or as a resource for individual or group study. A helpful study guide for peer group leaders who could assist you is my book, Christian Leadership (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979).

Persons With a Process-Conversion Orientation

Pick out these persons through life stories, sharing of personal testimonies, records of recent conversions, and other expressions that indicate a significant change from one set of moral and religious values to another. Do not assume — as the person might assume — that he or she is at the same point of understanding and practice of faith as those in the mainstream program.

This person needs opportunity to begin as a babe in moving through the experiences beginning with nurture. The sequence may be rapid or slow, but a person with this orientation cannot skip steps. He or she may *imitate* others, but it is simply stimulus-response learning until the person actually circles through the meaning of faith and practice from the beginning.

Try setting up special groups and trained leaders who can nurture and instruct. Build some discipline into the program to meet the authority needs that come early in the process. Give opportunity for persons to expand their understandings as they become ready by moving to new groups, increased independence, and assumption of leadership responsibilities.

NOTE: The needs of people in this group are very similar to those of persons who are *developmentally-oriented* but have never moved beyond a nominal adoption of cultural religion. Thus, provisions for those in this category and for those in the *nurture* and *indoc-trination* phases might be the same.

Excellent resources in this area are published by the Church Training Department and by National Student Ministries of the Sunday School Board. Request information from the appropriate department, 127 Ninth Avenue, North; Nashville, TN 37234. Another recent publication that could be used is Dynamic Discipleship, by Paul W. Powell (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984).

YOUR ROLE

It is difficult to meet the needs of all students, and you won't. You can, however, focus on a mainstream program and have enrichment/assimilation provisions for those who do not fall into the general category. It will be important to view all provisions as *regular* cam-

pus ministry, avoiding any impression of a "we vs. they" attitude among the students.

Where do your energies go? My guess is that with effective recruitment and leadership training you can focus about 50% of your time on administration of the mainstream activities. The rest of your time would be divided between actual contact activity with the enrichment/assimilation activities and the administrative responsibilities you have in your work.

The information in this article is just an overview. It will prove most helpful if used (1) as stimulation for further research related to your particular situation, and (2) in the overall planning of ways to structure campus ministry at your institution.

Portions of this article have been adapted from Bruce P. Powers, Growing Faith (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982).