

Stages of faith, Stages of life



Janet Brooks Gerloff



Jesus adapted his approach to his audience, so today Church leaders should consider the needs of the whole range of listeners, from first-time enquirers to those who have been disciples for many years writes Ian Paul

There are a number of reasons why we often feel we want to present the Christian faith to different groups of people in different ways, either expressing ideas by different means or addressing quite different issues.

The most obvious context is that of working with children and young people. Young people live in a very different social context from many adults in the same congregation, and they might have very different questions to engage with. For children, the issue is more fundamental. Depending on what age they are, they simply see the world and think about it in a very different way. This means that in most Christian work with children, both the agenda and the means of communication are quite distinct from those that are deployed with adults.

The excitement of coming to faith

There is also another, broader, context for this question. Many people, especially within the evangelical tradition, have come to faith in a context of great excitement and enthusiasm, where the claims of faith have been presented with a compelling certainty – even with a sense of simplicity. As they have grown older, they have realised that some things are a lot less simple and certain than they had been led to believe! A context which focuses on decision and commitment is not always a context where questions can be asked and explored. This gives rise to a sense of dichotomy

between initial commitment and further maturity – one that often leads people to move from one church to another, or even one church tradition to another.

Six or seven stages

A powerful answer to the such questions was provided by psychologist James Fowler. He identified six (or seven) stages of faith as follows:

Stage 0: Primal or undifferentiated faith (birth to 2 years)

Stage 1: Intuitive-projective faith (from three to seven)

Stage 2: Mythic-literal faith (later primary, early secondary school)

Stage 3: Synthetic-conventional faith (from early adolescence to adulthood)

Stage 4: Individuative-reflective faith (usually mid-twenties to late thirties)

Stage 5: Conjunctive faith (mid-life crisis)

Stage 6: Universalizing faith, what some might call a form of 'enlightenment'

The influence of Fowler's work

Fowler's work has been very influential, and was followed up by extensive field research, mostly by others (not Fowler himself). It would be hard to find a teaching course on working with children and faith that did not feature Fowler very prominently. As a result of its widespread use, it has also been seen as the basis for explaining

differences amongst adults and not just differences between adults and children. So the person experiencing enthusiastic conversion who now has many questions might see him – or herself as having moved from Stage 3 (or even Stage 2) on to Stage 5 or 6. And in conjunction with this, different faith traditions have been identified with different stages. Perhaps the 'problem' with evangelicalism, they say, is that it is stuck in Stage 3, whereas liberal churches have matured to Stages 5 or 6!

Fowler's work not without critics

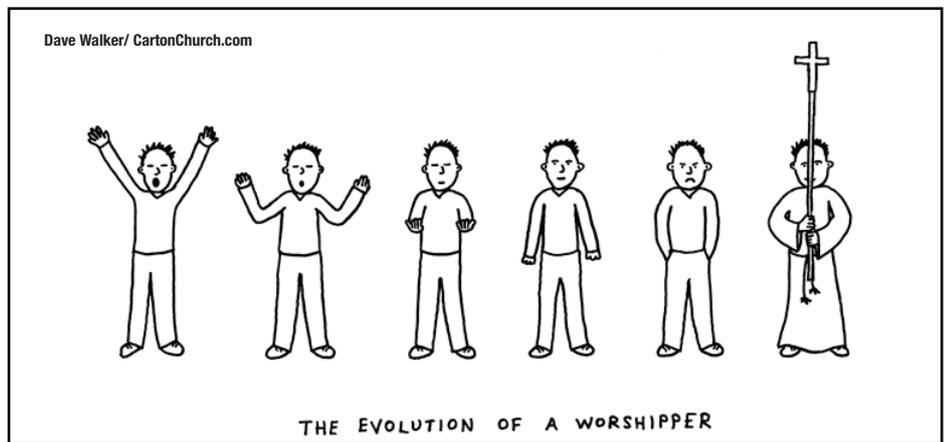
Fowler's framework has not been without its critics. From a purely psychological perspective it is seen as being too concerned with cognition, and with being very context-dependent, located within a particular Western understanding of developmental psychology. But it has also been criticised in relation to its understanding of 'faith'. Fowler drew on theologians from a liberal and post-liberal tradition such as Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Wilfred Cantwell Smith who saw faith as a universal human impulse, of which Christian faith was simply one particular expression. It is hardly surprising, then, that the 'universalising' approach is seen as the final and most 'mature' expression of faith. This highlights a broader weakness: although presented as 'objective' and related to human psychological development, the approach is not

neutral with regard to the different theological traditions within Christianity.

There is a practical problem too. Although the framework is very helpful when working with children of different ages who are already in the context of faith, in a post-Christendom context the chronology of faith discovery does not match Fowler's psychology of faith development. A member of our church came to faith in her 50s after her children had left home, and describes her encounter with God in terms of a lost child suddenly finding a parent again. Yet she herself is a psychiatrist with a responsible and challenging job! I recently preached on how easy it is to settle down, look back on the 'heyday' of early faith, and now just coast along at the same level, as if nothing more was going to change. As many young people (including university students) responded to this as older people who had been Christians for many years. The questions and challenges we face are perhaps not so different – nor delineated by age – as Fowler would have us believe. Whenever I have spoken in an all-age context (and I mean 'all age', not just for children) I am struck by how many older men are engaged in what is happening. A concrete, kinaesthetic approach to teaching and learning, used for the sake of children, suits them much more than the verbal, passive approach of much traditional preaching which is supposedly geared to adults.

How Jesus adapted his teaching

The New Testament appears to support this observation. There are some passages which suggest a differentiated approach to understanding faith, such as *1 Corinthians 3: 2* 'I gave you milk, not solid food, since you were not yet ready for it' and its parallel in *Hebrews 5:12,13* 'you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!' It is also notable that Jesus at times differentiates the style and content of his teaching to 'outsiders' and to his inner circle (*Mark 4:12*). But many other examples suggest something much more varied. In old age, Anna and Simeon have a confident expectation of God at work meeting their longing



for Israel's deliverance in *Luke 2:25–38*. They appear to be at Stage 2 still into their 80s! On the other hand, the 'rich young ruler' seems to have got tired with the certainties of religious legalism, and for one reason or another has a good few Stage 5 questions to ask (*Matthew 19:20*). By contrast, even when the Twelve have been with Jesus for a good while, they are slow to grasp or understand him, and need repeated, simple illustrations of his message (*Mark:17–19*).

Reconciling questioning and trust

The most striking example undermining the notion of linear progression in faith development comes from Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God:

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (*Matthew 18:3*)

It is from this verse that we get the idea of 'conversion'; in the Authorized Version of 1611 it read 'Unless ye be converted. . . ' Yet Jesus is clear that being child-like – having no legal status, being the most lowly, having a sense of dependence on others – is not just the qualification for entry into the kingdom, but also the mark of 'greatness.' It appears as though, no matter how sophisticated our faith, no matter how mature our understanding, we cannot move beyond the stage of being a trusting child.

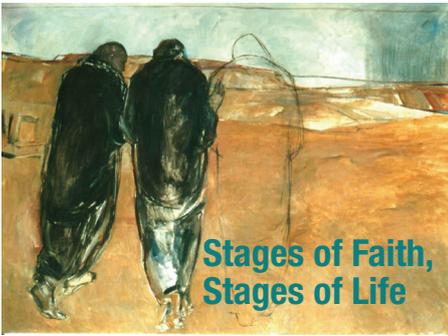
To reconcile the ideas of questioning and of trust, we might turn to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. In the course of considering how it is that human beings make sense of themselves in the world, Ricoeur introduces the ideas of pre-critical and post-critical naïveté. Pre-critical naïveté represents the kind of faith

in Fowler's early stages—the kind of enthusiastic, straightforward trust that is the mark not only of children but also of the newly converted. Critical questions are needed—but on their own they can simply undermine faith, and create a desert where nothing can live. Criticism destroys what is false, the 'idols' of human imagination, but it cannot give life to the true symbols that we need to make sense of existence. Having asked hard questions, we still need to make a 'wager of faith' on what is true. 'Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again' says Ricoeur. This suggests that moving beyond Fowler's Stages 3 and 4 need not take us to his Stages 5 and 6, but might instead take us to a different version of earlier stages—a form of naïve trust, but one which has been honed by questioning and critical-reflective thinking.

Implications for local ministry

This has some important implications for ministry in the local church. It means that we should avoid contrasting the idea of trusting in God and making a commitment with the idea of questioning God and seeking maturity. It means that, in 'evangelistic' contexts we need to acknowledge that there are hard questions, and in contexts where we are exploring those questions we need to acknowledge that there is still a need for decision. Conversion and commitment therefore mean making a decision to embark on a journey of discovery, and not simply to change from one static position (unbeliever) to another (saved). Churches which are effective evangelistically should also be churches promoting maturity in discipleship.

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In preaching, we need to consider the needs of the whole range of listeners, from first-time enquirers to those who have been disciples for many years. Even though I have a PhD in biblical interpretation and publish academically, part of my Rule of Life is to be involved in something evangelistic, which this year includes speaking on our church's Alpha course on whether we can trust the Bible. And, if we are going to take Jesus' command to 'change' seriously, we might expect that God will say some of the most profound and challenging things to us in the context of all-age worship which is accessible to children. [r](#)

about the writer

The Revd Dr Ian Paul is Managing Editor at Grove Books Ltd and Director of Partnership Development at St John's College, Nottingham, where he also teaches New Testament and hermeneutics. Before moving to St John's, he spent eight years on the staff of St Mary's, a town centre church in Poole, Dorset. He is a member of General Synod and the Church of England Evangelical Council. He is married to Maggie, who is a GP, and they have three children. He also admits to being an iveterate chocaholic.

ABOUT THE PAINTING

Emmaus, the painting on our cover and on pages 4 and 6 is by Janet Brooks Gerloff (1947 to 2008). Completed in 1992, it hangs in the Benedictine Abbey of Kornelimünster in Germany. Janet Brooks Gerloff was born in Colorado in the USA but spent much of her life in Germany. The dominant theme in her work is people in conflict and transition. Apart from her paintings she also designed windows and altar pieces for a number of churches in Germany.