



# Whitefield BRIEFING

November 1997 (Vol.2 No.5)

## *James Fowler's Concept of Faith Development - An Evangelical Perspective*

**Fred Hughes**

Dr. James W Fowler has been writing about faith development since the 1970s. For many years he was Director of the Centre for Faith Development at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. This paper seeks to respond to some aspects of his Faith Development Theory, particularly by indicating relevant biblical material.

Some Christians have difficulty with Fowler's understanding of "faith"<sup>1</sup>. Although this is partly because his material is complex, it is not the main problem. In part, Fowler understands faith as "meaning making". Faith "has to do with the making, maintenance, and transformation of human meaning"<sup>2</sup>. He uses the word "faith" to refer to the way in which all human beings make meaning in life. In this sense he regards faith as universal. His focus is on the activity or style of faith, rather than on any specific content. To Fowler the focus is on faith as a process and therefore on such aspects as human thinking, rational capacities, moral judging, personal relationships, and social awareness<sup>3</sup>. Understood this way, he asserts that faith develops throughout life in up to six or seven stages<sup>4</sup>.

Stages 0 and 1 cover the first 7 or 8 years of life. There is limited capacity for thinking and therefore for rational ordering of experiences. Fowler calls Stage 2, from ages 7 to 11 or 12 (and some adults), "Mythic-Literal Faith". Thinking skills increase and enable the ordering of experiences. Often these children are keen to belong to a group and their self-image is partly constituted by such belonging.

During the years 12 to 17 or 18 (and many adults), self-awareness increases and interpersonal relationships are very significant. In this third stage, called "Synthetic-Conventional Faith" or "the Interpersonal Self", meaning comes largely from relationships and roles. The desire to go with the crowd, to conform, is strong. Those at this stage are embedded in their stance and there is little ability to reflect on it or think for themselves.

Stage 4, "Individuative-Reflective Faith", can occur from ages 17 or 18 onwards, and the transition to this stage can be long and difficult. Beliefs and commitments previously somewhat unexamined are now becoming more consciously adopted. Individuality emerges, and one is less defined by one's relationships. With this conscious choosing, there is the "danger of a conceited autonomy and pretended independence"<sup>5</sup>.

Stage 5 is rare before age 30 and has been called "Balanced Faith" or "Inclusive Faith"<sup>6</sup>. Here, the unity, coherence and tidiness of Stage 4 begins to fade. It can emerge through coping with failure or living with the consequences of earlier decisions. Features of this stage are a new openness to others and an ability to keep in tension the paradoxes and polarities of faith and life.

Stage 6, which Fowler calls “Universalizing Faith”, is rare, occurring only in later life if at all. There is a relinquishing or abandoning of the self. This is motivated by a burning desire to love everyone, help others, and give one’s self even through self-sacrifice.

Throughout his analysis of these stages, Fowler is concerned more with the “how” of faith than the object of faith in terms of what (or whom) to believe. For example, he is not so much concerned with the precise beliefs about the God in whom one may come to have faith (or about some other ultimate concern) but more about how one reaches that position and how that “faith” is held and develops. Taking faith in this broad, universal way, has the effect of regarding Christian faith as a subset of the general phenomenon.

Another indication that Fowler’s understanding of faith is different from Christian faith as traditionally understood, is the place he gives to conversion. He maintains that conversion can happen at any stage of faith or in any of the transitions between them<sup>7</sup>. It is true that some people, at various stages of life, “convert” from one religion, denomination or stance to another, and certainly some people experience a conversion to faith in Christ. But the conversion in which Christian faith begins is different from the development of “faith” in Fowler’s sense, which can occur before and after **Christian** faith begins.

One important issue is whether the way in which Christian faith arises and grows is the same as the means by which others find meaning in life. This paper argues that Christian faith operates in a significantly different way from other ways of finding meaning in life: the process, the “how”, is different in some vital respects. It is important to note that however true and useful theories about human development in general might be, Christian faith has a supernatural element that makes its origin and growth distinctive.

Evangelical Christians regard the Bible as authoritative and seek to apply its teaching to every area of life. This means that for them, a key question concerns the extent to which Fowler’s use of “faith” follows the biblical usage. To answer this question it is necessary to clarify the way the Bible uses the word “faith”

and to enquire whether any biblical material supports Fowler’s use of the term.

### **BIBLICAL MATERIAL**

In the New Testament, “faith” has a variety of meanings. Sometimes it is regarded as trust in Jesus or **into** (*eis*) Christ. Paul sometimes uses it this way, for example in Colossians 2.5 “...how firm your faith in Christ is” and in 2 Timothy 3.15 “...through faith in Christ Jesus”. Some New Testament material sees faith as God-given. For example, Ephesians tells us that faith is “not from yourselves, it is the gift of God”. This is clearly central to understanding the “how” of Christian faith.

Turning to Hebrews 11.1, we are told that faith is “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”. That is, faith relates partly to strength of conviction about the future and also to an unseen spiritual world, which refers particularly to God who, although unseen, exists (cf. v6).

Faith in the New Testament can have a factual element, namely a belief that something is the case (Acts 8.37, Romans 10.9, 1Thessalonians 4:14). Because faith involves belief that some particular things are true, the letter of Jude could refer to “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3).

None of this involves denying that faith in the biblical sense helps Christians to make meaning in life, but this is not to say this is the same as Fowler’s “meaning making”. Faith, Biblically understood, both in its “what” and “how”, has a particular shape.

Fowler’s research confirms that various events can affect the way people see life, their views on the purpose of life and how they view their relationship with God. There are fluctuations in the intensity and confidence of faith in the lives of all Christians. These can arise from different sources such as marriage, illness, bereavement, unemployment, or retirement. Failures, joys, disappointments and so on can provoke a deeper reflection on whether one’s previously held beliefs and views of the world are sufficient for new circumstances.

Fowler’s theory, that people move through stages of faith, might resonate with one’s personal

experience or that of others. While not supporting any wholesale dismissal of his theory, weight needs to be given to biblical material which illuminates our understanding of what is happening to Christian faith through years of discipleship. Biblical material concerning the nature and purpose of the godly life and the concept of maturity needs to be explored.

In the Old Testament, several key features of the life of faith are demonstrated in the lives of particular people. Many of them were called to trust God through changing circumstances, when the future looked uncertain, but when God's presence was promised and assured if they served him in obedience. Hebrews 11 commends them for their faith, though they had their flaws, making humility and repentance necessary ingredients of faith. Faith in God involved taking risks, launching out into new situations in which they could not know the outcome and which they could simply avoid by following the line of least resistance and aiming at self-preservation alone.

Faithfulness to God in times of trouble is also demonstrated by characters such as Job and many of the prophets, who proclaimed the "word of the Lord" even though by so doing they endangered their lives (Jeremiah 1.2).

The Old Testament teaches that the life of faith involves courageous trust in God, faithful and persistent obedience even in adversity, an honest self-awareness that leads to humility and repentance, and a love of wisdom based on the "fear of the Lord" (Proverbs 1.7). This is the picture of the mature follower of God.

The life of Christian discipleship is always described in the New Testament as one with many blessings and also various costs, trials and temptations. In the Gospels, the beatitudes indicate the way of blessing and Jesus' words "Take up your cross and follow me" indicate there will be sacrifices to make. The book of Acts recounts how the Gospel spread and God worked in power as well as relating some of the opposition and difficulties which occurred.

In the letters, Paul writes about peace, joy, and hope, but in the context of weakness, suffering and groaning (Romans 5.1-5; 8.18-27). At the start of Ephesians, he praises God for spiritual

blessings in Christ, and at the end of the letter he describes the armour of God available for the battle. He states that behind every struggle Christians encounter, there are "spiritual forces of evil" (Ephesians 6.12). They are the source of the opposition. There can be no adequate account of any Christian's problems without due consideration of this diabolical dimension. This is not to be alarmist or to imagine that there are no other factors, but it is to be realistic.

This short exploration shows that a mixture of blessings and troubles is normal Christian experience. This means that any portrayal of the Christian life as only uninterrupted victory or as only unbearable misery is unacceptable because it discounts one aspect or the other.

Another way of looking at this is through the process of sanctification. Christians are being renewed in the image of God (for example Ephesians 4.24; Colossians 3.10), but that takes time as with any process of growth. This gives no reason for complacency, but it goes some way to explaining what is happening in the Christian's life.

Any understanding of the pilgrimage of Christian faith, with the fluctuations that all Christians encounter, must take account of this basic background. One very legitimate question emerges at this point: does the New Testament have a concept of maturity? If so, it would clearly relate to the goals Christians ought to have as they live through their life of joys and troubles.

### **MATURITY**

There is no explicit word for "mature" or "maturity" in the Greek New Testament. Where the word "mature" is used in English translations it usually translates the Greek *telos*, which can also mean "complete" or "to bear fruit". Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2.6 and Colossians 4.12 indicate that maturity for Christians is possible in this life. However, he implies that the mature were not perfect, because they still needed wisdom and still needed encouragement to stand firm.

An associated word is *pleroma*, usually translated "fulfilled", "fullness" or "complete". The New Testament urges Christians to be filled or to aspire to fullness. This shows that the need

to be filled is an on-going one. Looking at Ephesians 3.9; 5.18, Philippians 1.11, Colossians 1.9; 2.10 and 1 John 1.4 shows that the nature of the filling or fullness is variously understood.

These, and other passages, help to indicate what constitutes Christian maturity in biblical terms. Mature Christian faith has its focus in God. The filling is “of God”, “with the Spirit”. It is fullness of life “in him” (Christ). It is being filled with “the knowledge of his will”. This indicates the fundamental orientation of the mature Christian. This understanding of faith is fundamentally different from human wisdom. At its core is “the message of the cross” or “Christ crucified”, called by Paul “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1.18-25).

All aspects of mature Christian faith arise from and should be seen in the context of this God-focus. This is the crucial difference between Fowler’s generalised concept of faith and the biblical concept of faith. In empirical research a focus on the human process is legitimate, of course, and obviously Christian faith has a human dimension. Also, because Christians have much in common with other human beings, it is not surprising to find some similar aspects in how we all find our way through life. However, the biblical position that faith is a gift of God makes a significant difference to the way faith is understood. Faith as “God-focus” is very different from faith merely as a human process. The struggle that follows God-given saving faith, is significantly different from the struggle which all and sundry have. Matters of personal health and well being are of concern to Christians and others, but the healthy growth and development of Christian faith as “God-focus” is different from this.

## CONCLUSION

This has implications for Christian teachers, ministers and parents. It is one thing (an honourable task) to help people to think rationally, make moral judgements, find personal meaning and increase their social awareness. It is another to help people find Christian faith, fullness of life in Christ, and grow towards maturity in the New Testament sense. If faith development theory, especially concerning transition between stages, helps churches to respond sympathetically to crises of faith, at least partly caused by major changes in life circumstances, then the theory will serve the churches well. If the theory is allowed to assume priority over the biblical perspective, it will relegate the very perspective that can and should provide the main insights to the nature and development of Christian faith.

---

## REFERENCES

- 1 Fowler, James W, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (Harper Collins, 1981).
- 2 “Faith and the Structure of Meaning” in Fowler, J and Vergote, A (eds), *Towards Moral and Religious Maturity* (Silver Burdett, 1980), p.53
- 3 Moseley, R M, Jarvis, D & Fowler J W, *Manual for Faith Development Research*, (Atlanta, Emory University, 1986), pp.50-61
- 4 *Stages of Faith*, esp Part IV pp.119-213. For a shorter description of the stages see Astley, J, *How Faith Grows* (National Society/Church House Publishing, 1991) pp.16-35
- 5 Astley, J *ibid.* p.28
- 6 *Ibid.* p.30
- 7 *Stages of Faith*, pp.218ff.

Dr Fred Hughes is Head of the Department of Humanities and Religious Studies at Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education.