Growing together in Faith – How can it be Understood Theoretically and be Achieved Practically?

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Samevatting

Die doel van hierdie artikel is om sowel praktiese leiding as teoretiese besinning te bied. Dit begin daarom met 'n aantal praktiese probleme wat ouers ondervind by die geloofsontwikkeling van hulle kinders en ook hulleself.

Vervolgens bied dit 'n kritiese evaluering van James W. Fowler se populêre wetenskaplike model vir geloofsgroei. Vanuit 'n Christelike perspektief beskou, is sy teorie egter nie aanvaarbaar nie. Daarom word drie ander, meer eksplisiet Christelike modelle om geloofsontwikkeling te beskryf (deur Olthuis, Westerhoff en Van Belle ontwikkel) ondersoek. Die slotgedeelte is 'n poging om, in die lig van 'n meer gepaste Christelike model, die praktiese probleme waarmee die artikel begin het, op te los.

1. Growing in faith poses serious practical problems

The people who heard about the birth of John the Baptist asked the question: "What then is this child going to be?" (Luke 1: 66). A similar question is asked by Christian parents today: "Will our child one day be a believer?" This crucial question is not only asked at birth and other special occasions, like baptism, but very often when their children grow up and become critical about the faith they have inherited from their parents. Then parents ask themselves what role they should play in ensuring that their children will be believers (cf. Westerhoff, 1983).

1.1 A great responsibility, but how should it be fulfilled?

Usually parents realise that what they say and do will influence their children's faith development. In the light of their promise to God at the baptism of their child(ren) they have to guide them. They are responsible not to give their children "stones" instead of bread or feed them "snakes"

instead of healthy spiritual food (cf. Matt. 7: 9 - 10). Christ reminds all adults of their huge responsibility when He says: "If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him/her to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his/her neck" (Mark 9: 42).

At the same time parents realise that they cannot *determine* how their children's faith will be. If, on the one hand they are *responsible* for their children's development in faith, but on the other hand cannot *make* them to believe, cannot *give* them faith, *how* then should it be achieved?

1.2 Not only a problem for parents

Religious education is not only done in the family, but also in the churches, schools and at tertiary educational institutions (cf. Astley, 1991; Buetow, 1991; Groome, 1991; Morgan, 1983 and Westerhoff & Hauerwas, 1992). More adults (teachers, lecturers, ministers etc.) than only parents are therefore confronted with the problem of exactly *how* to assist and guide children and young people to grow in faith. Their problems are complicated by the fact that they have to provide spiritual guidance to children who are not their own and of different age groups.

1.3 Adults may be part of the problem

Many parents, ministers, teachers and lecturers still regard children and even young people as incomplete persons who have to be moulded into adults. Before they have grown up, they have little to contribute. They are not appreciated for what they **are** (also as believers), but for what they will eventually **become**.

Christ's disciples were of a similar opinion (cf. Mark 10: 13 - 16). But Christ was indignant: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these". Simultaneously he warned the grown-ups: "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it". With these words Christ draws attention not to the childishness but the childlikeness of the children, their childlike trust. Children's faith seems to have a dignity and value of its own. They can put grown-ups to shame by teaching them how to believe!

To be able to help the young, adults may therefore sometimes need a critical look at their own faith: What is the character of my own faith? Is it a living faith? Am I growing in faith? Have I really reached a mature faith?

1.4 A joint venture, but in different stages

God has ordained it that the pilgrimage of faith should be made together. At the same time we know by experience that the content and way of experiencing faith are different in adults and in children. The Bible confirms the fact that there is something like growing in faith or different stages in faith. Christ himself indicates that children already have faith (cf. again Mark 10: 15). And elsewhere the Bible criticises "grown-up" believers who still want to live on milk instead of solid foods (Heb. 5: 12 - 14 and 1 Cor. 3: 1,2) and emphasises the need of maturity in faith (Eph. 4: 13).

But what exactly is meant by a mature faith? And if we should grow through different stages, which stages? These are important questions, because adults have to be aware of their own faith development and the specific stage of their own faith to be able to assist younger people at a different stage. If not, they may delay and even harm instead of facilitate the growth of faith in others.

1.5 More than simply a human endeavour

Two important facts are already clear from our knowledge of the Bible. Firstly, that God created man/woman with a capacity to believe, to live with Him in a relationship of trust and surrender. Secondly, that this capacity has to be unfolded. Our task is to answer to God's revelation in particular phases of faith. But, in the third place, the Bible also draws alteration to the fact that growth in faith cannot simply be achieved in one's own power. It is the work (a gift) of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit blows wherever it pleases and can play a role in the faith of a person which is above human comprehension. How should this decisive fact be acknowledged in our own life of faith as well as in our efforts to influence and guide the faith development of others?

1.6 Even more complicated

Being human includes the following dimensions: the numerical, spatial, physical, biotic, psychic, logical, historical, lingual, social, economic, aesthetic, juridical, moral and pistical (faith).

It should be remembered that faith – the highest, most important facet of human life – doesn't exist or grows in isolation from all these other facets or capacities of the multi-dimensional human being.

Because of their close interconnectedness, will it be possible to isolate and describe one's faith life? If not, is it really possible to consider the in-

fluence on faith of *all* these factors and *vice versa?* (It is a difficult task already to understand, for instance, the emotional and rational dimensions of faith.) However, these facets cannot be ignored. (The faith transferred in a family or a church, for example, clearly has a social dimension.)

1.7 Conclusion

From these few remarks it should be clear that growing in faith is a very complex problem. To know how to help others to grow in faith is even more difficult. Christians cannot achieve this important task successfully by merely reading the Bible. They have to face the difficult task of studying the development of faith *itself* and do so *in the light* of God's revelation in Scripture.

Can the many *practical* problems (of which only a few were mentioned as examples) perhaps be solved from a *theoretical* perspective? How should such a scientific approach be inspired by the Biblical perspectives about faith mentioned on the preceding pages?

2. An evaluation of Fowler's theory of the development of faith

The works of James W. Fowler (1981, 1984, 1987, 1991 and Fowler *et al.,* 1991) are not the most recent, but still the best known and most influential written by development psychologists on faith development. Many scholars and other writers continue to apply his theory in their study of the faith of children (cf. Pierce & Cox, 1995), students (cf. Gathmann & Nessan, 1997; Das & Harries, 1996 and Dudley, 1999), men (cf. Dittes, 1999), women (cf. Slee, 2000, 2003), alcoholics (cf. Hortsmann & Tonigan, 2000), HIV-positive people (cf. Courtenay *et al.,* 1999) and in pastoral care (cf. Tam, 1996) to mention only a few examples.

Fowler (cf. 1981, 1984, 1987) distinguishes the following six phases in the development of faith: (1) the intuitive-projective, (2) mythic-literal, (3) synthetic-conventional, (4) individuative-reflective, (5) conjunctive and (6) universalising faith.

Because of it's already indicated popularity the real danger exists that Christians may accept and apply Fowler's theory as if it is the final word on this important but complex subject. To counteract this tendency, this article will not emphasise the positive elements of his theory, but rather draw attention to its weaknesses. Critical question's was already asked in many reviews (cf. for instance Hoehn, 1983/1984) about Fowler's first book of 1981. The discussions continued during the nineties (cf. Astley & Francis, 1992; Fowler, Nipkow & Schweitzer, 1991; Hobson, 1993 and

Dykstra & Parks, 1986). Today critical questions are asked especially from a post-modern perspective. (Cf. the following articles published in *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 11(3), 2001: Streib, Fowler, McDargh, Day and Rizzuto).

The following (ten) critical questions will be asked:

2.1 Could Fowler's theory achieve a satisfactory synthesis?

Fowler tried to integrate in his theoretical insights both theology and (development) psychology. Theologically he was influenced by H.R. Niebuhr and P. Tillich and he combined the work of the following psychologists: J. Piaget (cognitive development), L. Kohlberg (moral development), E.H. Erickson (psychological development) and R.L. Selman (development of interpersonal perspective-thinking).

Four important questions can be asked in this regard. Firstly, did Fowler really succeed in integrating (Christian) theological insights in his effort to outline the psychological prerequisites for faith development? Stated differently: Could he separate the *how* (of faith development) from the *what* (the content of faith)? The author will return to this issue again under 4.10 below.

Secondly, did Fowler not try to yoke together disparate, incompatible psychological theories, for instance Piaget's theory emphasising the cognitive and Erickson's which stresses the affective aspects of the human being?

Thirdly, may theories designed to study other facets of human development be applied to faith/religious development (cf. Schweitzer, 1991: 80)? Because all the theories combined in Fowler's own theory are basically psychological in nature, the question may be raised whether faith is not being psychologised, in other words against its own nature reduced or even misformed to something merely psychological. (For examples, see different contributions in Malony, 1977. A more balanced and Christian approach is visible in Bussema, 1993 and Meyers & Feeves, 1987.)

Fourthly, an opposite outcome is also possible. Fernhout (1986) complains that, because of the many theories Fowler tried to combine, his theory became so broad that it gives the impression of describing the total development of the human person instead of his/her development in faith.

2.2 Is Fowler's theory of faith development not strongly influenced by the modern, secular Western idea of progress?

Moran (1991: 150 - 153) indicates that the idea of development is a religiously laden secular, Western belief in emancipation and progress

according to which everything – including faith – will in future develop to higher levels and therefore become better. This boils down to a dangerous secularisation of Christian eschatology.

The result is that development psychologists (just like development economists) are inclined to judge earlier stages negatively and later stages positively. Consequently a child's faith is regarded as of less value than that of a grown-up. However, as indicated already, a child's "underdeveloped" faith is just as real as the "developed" faith of an adult. Children may even show "greater" faith than grown-ups. On the other hand adults may find themselves in childlike stages of faith or slide back into them.

Schweitzer (1991: 80) rightly says: "The danger of the hierarchical stage theories … is that the lower stages – and especially the stages of early childhood – appear primitive and deficient. Such a view implies that the perspectives of adulthood is dominant while childhood is considered only a pre-stage or preliminary form of real life … But childhood is not just a pre-stage of life … Childhood is a stage of life with its own dignity and value … Its meaning and value cannot be measured by its contribution or relationship to adulthood".

May development of faith be depicted as a linear progression to greater perfection? Is it true that a person's growth in faith is a straight, continuous, upward line or can there also be regression and discontinuity? Can the different phases which are distinguished perhaps develop parallel in stead of consecutively?

Moran touches a weak point in Fowler's theory when he asks whether people who are most developed (physically, psychologically, cognitively and economically) are guaranteed to be the most religious. The most developed cognitively may or may not be the most developed religiously. "The poor, the lame as well as the unschooled may be religiously more advanced than those who are trained in logic, science and criticism" (Moran, 1991: 155).

The other side of the coin is that, because the different dimensions of being human are closely interrelated, underdevelopment or the wrong kind of "development" in other human aspects (like the psychic or social) do influence one's faith development. To what extent and exactly how this happens, poses difficult challenges to the researcher (see 1.6 above).

2.3 Can Fowlers six stages be accepted?

Apart from the idea of development as such, also Fowler's view of how faith development occurs (his six stages) can be queried. A few questions

in this regard are: How many should be distinguished? In what respects do they differ from each other? What sequence do they follow?

A serious question is raised by Hoehn (1983/84: 78) when he draws attention to the fact that most people's faith stop developing at Fowler's middle stages. According to Fowler only 7% of the subjects in his sample reached stage 5 and only 0.3% the final stage (6). Examples of his stage 6 are extraordinary persons like Gandhi and Mother Theresa who were committed to and lived according to a grand vision.

Hoehn's problem is the following: "There are millions, perhaps billions, of people who will by virtue of their socio-cultural situation never rise above Stage Three … does that give me the right to suggest by implication that their faith is childlike or immature? I can imagine a peasant shaking her fist at Fowler and saying: 'That's all well and good for middle-class people who live in America and teach at universities. My faith is as good as yours'. And it is just possible that she is right. It may be just as good for her as 'higher' stages are for others. It may even be the only level that would work in her situation; higher stages might fail there. The book (of Fowler) is not explicitly condensending. But the theory implicitly is …" (Hoehn, 1983/84: 79).

2.4 Is Fowler's theory not a reflection of his own preferences and circumstances?

In spite of the fact that Fowler states that it is necessary to combine in his theory thinking (the cognitive) and feeling (the affective), because they influence each other reciprocally, he still regards the rational aspect as of greater importance as is clear from his stage 4. This may simply be the result of his personal preference for a rational approach to faith. It is significant that development theories which favour an abstract, theoretical and critical stance at the higher stages, have being designed by white male university professors in the West. Jardine & Viljoen (1992:82) suspect the following: "It is possible that these theorists have inadvertently made their own personality preferences normative for the general public".

Hoehn (1983/84: 78) does not hesitate to state that Fowler's "stage six sounds like a sophisticated version of the orientation of middle-class academics" and elsewhere (p. 79) that Fowler's theory "seems … to have been too highly shaped by the lifeworld of the theorist".

Also Van Belle (2004) indicates how every model of faith development is clearly influenced by a scholar's own religion, personality, culture, age and experience.

2.5 Is Fowler's theory not a very narrow, one-sided approach towards faith?

Fowler's already mentioned emphasis on the cognitive, rational-theoretic aspect of faith development has serious implications. Jardine & Viljoen (1992: 80 - 81) mention that other researchers have indicated that approximately 75% of the adult population of the United States prefer a concrete and practical approach to a situation, while only about 25% prefer an abstract one. Most adults therefore run the risk of being relegated by Fowler's theory to the adolescent category (stage 3) on the grounds of their being concrete-operational thinkers.

The fact that cognitive criteria virtually define Fowler's levels of faith development leads to another uncomfortable conclusion: Because a person's cognitive ability is (according to Fowler) genetically determined, it follows that a person's potential to develop in faith is also genetically determined (cf. Jardine & Viljoen, 1992: 83)? Such a conclusion will not be acceptable to Christians and Christian theologians who like to emphasise that faith does not only entails a sure knowledge of God but an equally important element of unconditional trust in God (cf. Bavinck, 1980).

2.6 Can Fowler's theory be applied to women's faith experience?

This question is answered negatively by researchers like Gilligan (1982) and Slee (2000, 2003). Slee (2000: 6) objects to the fact that male development enshrined in the psychological accounts of Erickson, Kohlberg and Fowler are used as models for women. While men develop according to them through a process of individuation and separation from others, women's faith is essentially relational, rooted in a strong sense of connection with and care for others.

According to Slee (2000: 15) women can therefore not be neatly fitted into Fowler's theory but rather challenge it in the following three ways: In the first place: the dominance of concrete, visual, narrative and embodied forms of thinking over prepositional, abstract or analytic thought, clearly evident in women's faith experience, challenge Fowler's strong emphasis on the cognitive component of faith. Greater attention should therefore be given to the role of affect, imagination, symbol and narrative – not only in the so-called pre-logical stages and in the later, so-called post-logical ones, but throughout all the stages.

In the second place, Fowler will have to redraw his middle stages in the light of the centrality of the relational consciousness in women's faith life.

Thirdly, women's experience of powerlessness, alienation and impasse represent a key challenge to Fowler's notion of faith as progressive meaning-making, development, forward movement and ever higher stages.

2.7 Was Fowler's theory empirically tested for its reliability and validity?

Different writers have drawn attention to the fact that we have Fowler's conclusion (theory) without being able to review his evidence. Was his (limited) research sufficient to support his theory of six stages?

Because Fowler himself notes that his sample was not selected randomly, Jardine & Viljoen (1992: 83) suggest that Fowler's specific research sample may be biased in favour of abstract thinking in the adult years. If the majority of his subjects were chosen from his colleagues and/or students and their associates, it explains the preponderance of abstract thinkers. Therefore his research findings cannot be generalised to cover the total population.

However, as indicated already (see the beginning of point 2 above) many researchers have already applied Fowler's theory to different categories of people. These applications of his theory (in for instance, religious education and pastoral counselling), before it has been thoroughly tested and amended/corrected where necessary, cannot guarantee correct results.

2.8 Can Fowler's metaphor of faith development be replaced with a more appropriate image?

Since metaphors play such a decisive role in abstract scientific work, this facet of Fowler's theory should be corrected by replacing his progressive, linear, additive or **ladder**-image with something more appropriate to faith. Different options are available.

Moran (1991: 153 - 156) suggests the image of a **spiral**. It indicates that in our "development" of faith we do not only move upwards and forward, but can also circle downwards (cf. also Schweitzer, 1991); development proceeds from a center rather than a base; it also suggests the idea of human freedom instead of the limits and endpoint in the linear image of Fowler.

Howard (1999) prefers the image of the **sea** to describe the development of faith.

An even better metaphor is perhaps that used by Westerhoff (1976: 80 and 1980: 24), viz. the image of (the growth of) a **tree**. He explains the value of his metaphor as follows:

A tree that is one year old (with one annual ring) is just as complete a tree as one that is eighty years old (with eighty annual rings). The younger tree is no less a tree or less good. And the older tree is not more of a tree or a better one. They are *different* trees. Likewise the faith of a child is no less faith or worse faith or that of the grown-up is not superior or better. The faith of the grown-up is (like the tree) more extensive, maybe more complex.

Every tree has its own unique way of growing. However, no tree can grow without a favourable environment. It needs sunlight, water and fertile soil. If these things are not available, its growth is retarded. The same applies to growth in faith.

A tree grows slowly and gradually acquires more annual rings. This process cannot be "hastened" so that it could for example skip annual rings and develop from annual ring 2 to annual ring 5. In the same way a person gradually progresses from one phase to the next in the development of his/her faith without skipping one phase.

A growing tree does not lose the previous annual rings. New ones are added while the previous rings are retained. In the case of the growth of faith likewise the previous phases are not finally left behind. We don't outgrow them altogether. Problems in earlier phases, for example, have consequences for later stages. And even in later stages one can return to earlier phases of faith.

An even more appropriate image is one suggested by Van Belle (2004), viz that of different **seasons** of life through which one travel in one's life of faith. (He also uses the metaphors of the **chapters** of one's book of life or the **acts** or one's life's drama.)

In the light of the foregoing the concept of "*growth* in faith" rather than "*development* of faith" is preferred. At the same time it should be kept in mind that to replace a mechanical metaphor (that of progress) with an organic metaphor (that of biological growth) does not fully solve our problems. Faith and its development are something unique, totally different from other aspects of the multi-dimensional human being and therefore not comparable with something physical-mechanical or biological.

2.9 Can the growth of faith not be viewed from more angles than only the cognitive?

As indicated, Fowler's theory is primarily of a cognitive (logical)-psychological nature. Van Belle (2004) correctly indicates that the

development of one's life course of faith can – and has been – studied from a variety of viewpoints. He mentions the following: (1) the chronological (e.g. different "clocks"); (2) the biological (of growing and ageing); (3) the psychological (e.g. one's self-image); (4) the sociological (e.g. social behaviour appropriate to one's age) and (5) the cultural-historical. As examples of the last he mentions that prior to 1600 there were no real children who could (as we today) enjoy their childhood, but only "small adults". Because, during the 1930's one already had to start working after only primary or secondary school, young people had no experience of their adolescence.

All these approaches merely study *aspects* of the course of life. If they are over-emphasised they result in dangerous reductionistic viewpoints. According to Van Belle the only **encompassing** perspective is the religious. (He distinguishes between one's faith life as one of the aspects of religion which is the radical, total and integral surrender to God or a god.)

2.10 Is Fowler's theory compatible with Christian beliefs?

In order to decide whether they may apply Fowler's theory, it is in conclusion for Christians important to know whether Fowler's psychological scheme is reconcilable with the Bible and Christian doctrine.

Firstly, is Fowler's idea of faith (as the way people orient their lives towards the absolute in order to experience meaning) the same as that of the Bible ("being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see", Hebrews 11: 1)?

Secondly, does Fowler take account of sin? Does he distinguish between sin and "underdevelopment"? (The "underdeveloped" faith of a child is not of necessity sinful.)

Thirdly, similar questions may be asked about God's grace and human conversion. According to Christian doctrine, grace enhances a person, it is a power which can transform the self, the other and the world. If one is permanently caught in one of Fowler's lower (deficient) faith stages, then the power of the Holy Spirit to redeem and uplift a person will be largely ineffectual. The author agrees with Jardine & Viljoen (cf. 1992: 84) when they conclude that Christian theologians cannot be expected to agree with such a viewpoint, since it would seem to put limits to the power of God.

Fourthly, it may even be the case that God deliberately does not select the wise, scholarly or strong man/woman to work in His kingdom (cf. 1 Cor.

1:20 – 2:15). To put it bluntly: In which stage will Fowler place the heroes/heroines of faith described in Hebrews chapter 11?

2.11 Conclusion

After the review of Fowler's theory two concluding remarks have to be made:

Firstly, it is clear that Fowler's theoretical model cannot be accepted uncritically – especially not by Christians who want to understand their faith development in a scientific way in the light of the Bible. In the light of the ten points of criticism, Christians will have to look elsewhere for a theory (or theories) more compatible with their own beliefs.

Secondly, it became clear that all theoretical models (this will also apply to the Christian models to be discussed) are schematic and systematic abstractions. They can never fully capture the dynamics and complexity of real life. Because scientists are inclined to divide everything into neat categories or phases, their theories have to be handled cautiously – especially when they deal with the multi-dimensional human nature and something as fundamental as the life of faith.

3. Three alternative theories developed by Christians

Since they are developed from explicit Christian perspectives, in this section the theories of Van Belle, Westerhoff and Olthuis will be discussed. They will be treated in more detail, because they are not well-known as is the case with the theory of Fowler and his followers.

3.1 The five seasons of life and their different tasks

Van Belle (2004) takes God's cultural mandate (Genesis 1: 26 and 2: 15) as starting point. As humans we have the **task** to respond to God's **calling** – also in our life of faith. Since we move through different **seasons** of live, we also have different **tasks**. Accordingly Van Belle distinguishes between the following five types of religion:

• **The religion of childhood: trust.** The primary task of children is to learn to trust in God.

• **The religion of adolescence: commitment.** The task during this season is to choose for and finally commit oneself to God. (This includes commitment to an own worldview, lifestyle and identity.) Because serious decisions have to be taken, the time of adolescence can be a period of uncertainty and turmoil.

• **The religion of early adulthood: effective nurture**. The young adult has the task of turning the vision (s/he committed herself/himself to in his/her youth) into reality. The three main areas where this vision of serving God is to be realised are in relating (marriage), caring (family life) and working (vocational life).

• **The religion of the middle years: surrender.** During middle adulthood one's task changes to leading, counselling and encouraging others. (Self-absorption during this season or chapter of life is something wrong.) We should begin handing over to the next generation ("generativity").

• **The religion of the later years: review.** Van Belle describes this last "act" in the drama of faith as slowing down (retirement), letting go (the world may change without your consent), taking stock or reviewing your own pilgrimage of faith, and also looking forward, preparing yourself for your final home-coming.

3.2 Growth in faith explained in more detail

While Van Belle provides Christians with a broad perspective, Olthuis (1985) and especially Westerhoff (1976 and 1980), discuss the development of faith in more detail. Olthuis only explains the growth in faith of children. Westerhoff covers the entire lifespan. The two theories are combined to provide an overview of all the seasons of the life of faith. This is necessary because parents and grandparents, teachers and ministers, should know in which phase of faith they find themselves to give good guidance to the younger generation. Unless they realise that the things that matter in their own experience of faith is not the same in the case of younger people, they will be unable to give the right guidance.

3.2.1 Growth of faith up to about 3-5 years

While Westerhoff describes the faith of children up to five years as **experienced** faith, Olthuis (1985: 500) divides this "season" in more detail. (Compare also the following on faith in childhood: Blazer, 1989; Coles, 1990; Cully, 1979; Pierce & Cox, 1995 and Shelley, 1982.) He distinguishes the following four sub-phases:

• The need for **certainty** is of great importance as early as the first two months of a baby's life. Complete physical acceptance by especially the mother is of the utmost importance. The baby should feel that he/she is welcome, belongs somewhere, has a home in the world. The warmth exuded by the parents can ensure this. If it does not happen, the baby feels uncertain, unwelcome and that he/she has no right to an existence. This

has consequences later for mature faith life: the certainty of acceptance by God, our Father and Mother, is doubted.

• **Trust** develops in the baby during the fourth to the sixth month. The baby feels (especially in his/her alliance with the mother) the unconditional love and thus also learns trust and surrender. Or – because it does not receive unconditional love – the baby begins to distrust the mother with the resulting feelings of emptiness, helplessness, loneliness and fear. These feelings also have consequences for the later faith life in the person's relationship with God: Trust in God – an essential feature of faith – cannot really develop.

• **Power** is typical of the third sub-stage. At the age of 6 to 16 months the small child begins developing greater independence without the need for warm nearness disappearing. Again the parents have to handle this phase in the right way. If for instance the father is too strict, aloof and inaccessible the child or the grown-up later will also see God as someone who totally rules our lives in stead of seeing Him as Someone who acknowledges our independence, freedom and initiative.

• **Love**, according to Olthuis, characterises the fourth stage. From 16 months up to 3 years the need to be loved and to love is important. If this does not happen, the child feels worthless and not worthy of being loved. The result in adult life is that the person cannot love God spontaneously but keeps Him as it were at a distance and has a kind of impersonal relationship of faith with Him.

These stages are mentioned – without going into any details – to show how extremely important the task of the parents (and other adults) is right from the birth of their children. The religious upbringing of one's children does not start when one can tell them Bible stories or teach them their first prayers. Long before they can even understand one's language or before they can speak, non-verbal communication takes place (they interpret the tone of voice, the facial expression and the way the parents touch them) which has a decisive impact on the further development of their faith.

3.2.2   An overview of the growth of faith from birth to death

Westerhoff (1976: 91 - 97 and 1980: 25 - 29) distinguishes the following six stages of faith:

• **An experienced faith** during the pre-school period or early childhood (approximately 0-5 years).

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- **An affiliative faith** during childhood years and early adolescence (approximately 6-12 years).
- **A searching faith** during the adolescent years (approximately 13-20 years)
- **An owned faith** during early adulthood (20-35 years).
- **A creative faith** during the mature years (35 to 65 years).
- **An integrated faith** during late maturity (from about 65 years)

Although with every phase the age is given to denote the starting point and duration of the particular phase, it has to be borne in mind that it is not really possible to go by a person's age to determine the phase of faith in which a person finds himself/herself. Some people can grow and become mature in faith while with others it may not happen. Even those people who live through normal growth may find it necessary to return to the needs of earlier stages, live through them again and reaffirm them in order to have a complete and healthy faith life.

Although one can try and place oneself or someone else in one of the phases of this development pattern, it should be done with great circumspection and the necessary reserve. Because each person is unique, his growth in faith is also something peculiar to him. It cannot be neatly categorised.

The following is a brief description of how Westerhoff views the six different seasons of faith.

Experienced faith (approximately 1-5 years)

For children of this age *words* about faith are not nearly as important as the *experience* of the Christian faith. They have to sense in actual experiences with older people what it means to be a child of God. In particular they should experience love, trust and acceptance (cf. Olthuis above). They like to observe, explore, test, experiment and imitate.

So it is important for parents and other adults to share their faith in a spontaneous way with their children. They must also deliberately create opportunities for their children to experience what it means to believe. Children should not only memorise prayers, texts and songs (learn the words), but be admitted to religious activities (like going to church) so that they can experience it and develop trust (cf. Van Belle above).

Affiliative faith (6-12 years)

> In this phase, too, it is imperative that the child (now of school-going age) feels welcome, enjoys acceptance and security, feels

important and needed. If the community of believers do this, it helps the child to build an identity of his/her own.

Further, the child must get to know the traditions of the community of believers, or its "story". In this way s/he should learn what is important for Christians, what the final authority in their lives is according to which they organise their lives; what they regard as right and wrong, good and evil. Adults should aid them and deliberately create the opportunities for them to experience the story of the Gospel in different ways and repeatedly so that it becomes part of them, their very own. Here, too, it should be kept in mind that for children of this age "religion of the heart" (the emotional aspect of faith) is more important than "religion of the mind". Thus the ceremonies and the symbolic part of the faith life are important. Faith must not be abstractly intellectual but should be experienced in song, plays, drawing, painting, telling of stories and similar activities.

As indicated already, the community of believers in which children grow up plays a very important role during this phase. But during the next phase they will have to develop their own independent standpoint in faith. Affiliation in this phase may therefore not be forced, since it could create problems for the following more critical phase of faith. Authoritarian religious guidance (of ministers, teachers of (Sunday) schools, catechism classes and parents) can cause the child to remain fixed in this phase. Likewise, an attitude of "we alone know what the truth is" may later have detrimental results.

Searching faith (13-20 years)

As this phase is the "Sturm und Drang" period of the adolescent years, it will be dealt with in more detail (cf. also Loukes, 1961). The child is now becoming physically, sexually and intellectually grown-up. He is in a transitional phase between being a child and an adult. Seeking his own identity is thus very much in the foreground.

In the field of religion, too, this phase is characterised by doubt and critique. The reason for this is that having her/his own identity – including own identity in religion – demands that the adolescent no longer be dependent on the community of believers (to which s/he has been affiliated up to this point). He/she has to become more independent. This may explain why young people sometimes break away from the religious, social and moral norms of the community, leave the catechism class or Sunday school and youth group and no longer want to attend church – are "difficult" in all respects.

Therefore the earlier "religion of the heart" now changes to a "religion of the mind". Apart from the emotional issues, the intellect now plays a very important role. Adolescents want to argue, analyse, evaluate and reason. Besides, they want to experiment. They want to compare and test the faith with which they grew up with reference to other religions and viewpoints.

Young people also have a great need of commitment and surrender (cf. Van Belle above). But in this uncertain period their loyalty can shift quite fast. However, it is the only way of eventually learning full surrender to God.

Parents and other grown-ups often make the mistake of thinking that their children in this phase are losing their faith. Indeed, it does happen that young people in this stage take leave of the church and faith and that some of them do not come back. Adults should, however, understand that it is an essential stage – not to lose their faith, but for the exact purpose of really owning it up for themselves. So parents may never think that they have been rejected by their children or – worse still – have their children feel rejected by them.

Instead of trying to give their children faith – forcing it down their throats – they should encourage their children to own up the faith for themselves. Adolescents are searching for acceptance – not approval; empathy – not sympathy; sincerity – not pretence; the necessary freedom – not to be cooped up. In spite of the freedom, they are also looking for clear norms and guidelines for life. What they need most is the presence of older people who are prepared to share their doubt and the intellectual struggle for finding the truth from which they can live for the rest of their lives.

To be able to do this, adults will have to admit that deep down they often struggle with the same questions. (The various stages of faith cannot be subjected to watertight separation and it is not abnormal for a person in a later stage to return to an earlier phase.) Not only the three year old asks: Who am I? The adolescent also does it, and the forty year old also asks himself: Am I really satisfied with myself and my life? Perhaps many parents find it difficult to help their adolescent children because they themselves are still struggling with all the problems, uncertainties, doubt, dissatisfaction and lack of faith. The best way of helping your children is to start working in earnest on these issues and not to try and hide it from your children.

The last thing an adolescent should learn at this stage is that the Christian faith is a kind of escape or something anti-intellectual. So their parents should welcome their questions and thus help them to love God with their minds, too. The Bible should be studied together in great open-

mindedness so that the young people feel free to ask their questions – even though not all questions can be answered by the parents. For parents and other adults to admit that they themselves do not know all the answers either, is much more important than an attitude of "we must simply believe it".

In this phase, too, the example set by the parents is of the utmost importance. Their behaviour should testify to their integrity. The youth should be able to detect what their parents, teachers and ministers believe, according to which norms they live and for what they live. Simply acting in faith in whatever situation they are confronted with, is still the best and most important gift they can offer adolescents on their way to adulthood in faith.

Owned up faith (20-35 years)

After the critical, searching phase of the adolescence follows this calmer period in the growth of faith. The young adult has learned to accept God's authority. A personal faith in God has taken shape. Where s/he was formerly extremely critical towards the establishment, her/his own community of believers, parents and tradition, the emphasis now falls on adapting to or conforming with the community. The person is much more sensitive to the expectations and demands of the community than being set on his/her own viewpoint. You allow the group to determine your identity, for not being accepted by the group means isolation. Doctrine (credo, dogma) also plays a significant role in the determination of one's own identity. The attention in this phase is primarily directed outwards and there is a need to live the faith in everyday matters (cf. Van Belle's characterisation of early adulthood).

The risk attached to this phase is a certainty which is too comfortable, does not encourage questions or change, and ignores those who hold different standpoints of faith.

Creative faith (35-65 years)

In contrast to being focused outwards as in the previous stage, the believer who is in this phase is mostly focused inwards. He/she is conscious of changes within him-/herself, of unsolved problems, failures, sadness and many more things. (According to Van Belle one's task in this phase is to surrender.) The introspection is focused on the own inner needs of faith, like for instance how one subjectively experiences the working of the Holy Spirit in one's heart. It leads to a deepened faith in which renewed commitment, love and the struggle for justice take prominence. The

person now doesn't do things because society expects it, but from inner conviction and from a feeling of personal responsibility. The "inward" way therefore opens up possibilities to act "outwards" with new creative energy.

The risk attached to this phase, however, is that the believer could become fixed in living inwards and so become passive. Or as a result of a greater understanding of the relativity of all things could fall into relativism.

Integrated faith (from 65 years onwards)

During this phase our lives more or less come together, become integrated. One usually experience satisfaction and a strong feeling of fellowship with creation around us and especially with God Himself. This is coupled with distancing oneself from one's occupation, reviewing the past, letting go – coming home.

The obverse of this may, however, be a deepened cynicism, despair, anguish and bitterness towards God and towards other people.

The preceding pages provided enriching theoretical insights developed from a Christian perspective. Theory and practice can, however, never be totally separated. Already the previous theoretical material contains some suggestions about its practical applications. The following section will have an explicit practical nature.

4. From theory to practice

This section will have to answer to the six practical questions posed at the beginning of this article. How can they be answered in the light of the theoretical clarification provided in the two previous sections?

4.1 If parents, teachers, lecturers and ministers have to influence, but cannot determine the faith of the young, how then should it be done? (This question combines 1.1 and 1.2).

To believe is to love God, have fellowship with Him, to address Him (in prayer), to do His will (obey Him), offer oneself in service to Him and our fellow humans, to surrender one's entire life to Him. But faith is also to know Him.

Though no one will either be able to explain faith and its development analytically or succeed in convincing someone by means of logical arguments to believe, faith (a concrete act) has an analytical side. Through its analytical side (especially its content) we can approach faith thoughtfully. In reflecting on the content of their faith, young people's faith can be aroused, opened up, extended and deepened. And instruction

in faith by older people can stimulate this process of growth.

To grasp **how** adults should influence the faith of younger people, it is therefore necessary to understand this instruction or teaching process. Van Dyk (1990: 156) provides a simple but clear definition: teaching is a multi-dimensional formative activity consisting of the functions of guiding, unfolding and enabling. He explains as follows (cf. Van Dyk, 1990: 156 ff):

Adults are not in a position to form, shape or mould younger people, because only God's Word and Spirit can do so. They can, however, play a **formative role**, viz. a modest way of exercising an influence which points the young, as they develop in faith, in a certain direction.

To **guide** does not mean to grab someone by the scruff of the neck and forcibly compel him/her to go somewhere. It rather means in a gentle way to nudge him/her in a certain direction. The young should be guided according to Gods' norms into discipleship. To be a disciple is to hear God's Word and to live according to His will, to become His servant.

Unfolding in Van Dyk's definition indicates to open up to children and young people what they as yet do not know and cannot do. This contains a cognitive element, but the unfolding should never be reduced to merely facts to be mastered. Because faith contains an analytical element, the knowledge of faith can be approached thoughtfully, but can never be completely framed and mastered. To achieve this unfolding effectively at the appropriate level of the learner, teachers must have a keen understanding of the stages of human (including faith) development.

Enabling means to provide the child or student with the knowledgeable competence and willingness to function in this world as a disciple of his/her Lord. This is the ultimate goal of Christian education in general and also instruction in faith. Summarised: Older people should **guide** younger ones by way of **unfolding** into an **enabling** of discipleship.

4.2 How can adults be part of this process of instruction in faith?

To be able to motivate younger people towards discipleship, their parents and other teachers should model such discipleship themselves. But (as indicated in 1.3) because of the lack of a living, growing and mature faith, often grown-ups cannot effectively nurture the faith of younger people. In the words of Van Belle: "they are not aware of their specific task during the season of their life of faith. Neither do they know the characteristic needs and specific tasks of the younger people they have to guide, unfold and enable."

The fact is that we can only grow in faith **together**. God has ordained that the pilgrimage of faith should be a joint venture between the different generations. We therefore briefly look at five practical ways in which it can be achieved.

• **Reading the Bible together**

The Bible is a story, a love story between God and his people. The story of a covenant which was agreed upon, broken and re-established in Christ.

This story should be told over and over to the children, so that they get to know it better, can own it up for themselves and live it from their hearts. It must become their own story. It must give meaning to their lives – one of the most basic human needs.

Adults will have to become much better storytellers – especially for the sake of the little ones. Bible stories should not only be read out (cf. Griggs, 1981; Murray, 1993; Pardy, 1988; Van Ness, 1991 and Wiggins, 1975.) Apart from stories being told, they can also be experienced by the children themselves in different ways, as in games, songs, dancing, drama, drawing, painting and such like.

A second important way is:

• **Commemorating together**

Faith and ceremonies (the symbolic side of it) cannot be separated. Ritual is an inherent part of any religion. Usually it is expressed in prose, poetry, music and song. Other art forms like drama and the visual arts can be used as well. All of these are ways of getting a deeper understanding of our faith. (Words are not the only way of understanding.) As Olthuis have indicated, the child begins understanding at a more intuitive, emotional level. A child does not learn about God for the first time as a theological dogma but on an emotional level as someone whom he meets, who fires his imagination. Children learn by means of action and experience. Experience comes before reflection. Quite possibly the Reformed Churches' type of worship services are too intellectual and too much laden with words.

It may also be a mistake to keep children away from the worship service of the whole congregation – they understand much more than adults think, although it may not be on the intellectual level.

Is it correct that children should be absent when adults commemorate the Lord's Supper on the supposition that they will not understand its meaning? If the Lord's Supper really is a symbol, children will maybe

"understand" it better than adults.

In any case it is important that parents and other teachers in faith deliberately create such occasions for **experiencing together** the mystery and meaning of their common faith in a symbolic way and for really **celebrating** it. Do Christians radiate enough sincere joy and gratitude during our religious activities at home (for instance during devotions) and in the church?

A third important means of growing together in faith is:

• **Prayer**

One could call prayer the heartbeat of faith. This, too, is something children and parents should do together regularly.

Perhaps parents should be reminded again what prayer really is. It is a personal conversation with God in which they speak to one another and listen to one another. So prayer starts with a sense of God's presence. Then follows gratitude for his presence and love – one answer by saying that one also loves Him. God is then asked what it is He wants one to know and to do. After this one should listen to what He wants to say.

Important elements of prayer thus are **joy** of his presence; **thanksgiving** for everything He graciously gives us daily; **praising** his Name; **confession** of guilt and asking for forgiveness; **intercession** for ourselves and others and finally a promise of **commitment** to the Lord. Prayer can also mean just being quiet in the presence of God.

Parents and teachers are often worried when children cannot "say" their prayers, while they are not worried because they themselves do not have a personal relationship with God. Not only their children, but they as parents, too, will have to learn again to pray.

• **Talking and listening**

This may take place at the occasions mentioned above, but should not be limited to these. The important point is that it happens too seldom that parents and also other adults and children talk about their faith, and share their faith.

Children ask difficult questions and pray difficult prayers (cf. Hample & Marshall, 1991). When we were children, we had similar questions but we set them aside or suppressed them. Our children remind us of these questions once more – sometimes to our embarrassment. Our small and adolescent children's questions should be taken seriously. We should react to them - even when we cannot give final answers.

(The deepest questions of faith have no final answers.) What especially small children really are looking for, are not dogmatic answers, but that adults should open up and share their faith with them. Then they put at their children's disposal their experience of faith as a source of learning and growing. Neither should this happen in an authoritative way, from the top down. On the contrary, we struggle **with** them and **together** we look for explanations.

A last important means of growing together in the faith is:

• **Doing acts of faith together**

Faith is not just knowledge and trust. It also includes the deed – deeds of love, justice and peace. Faith which does not emerge in good deeds, is not true faith. Parents, teachers and ministers should remember that it is their actual deeds of faith which have the strongest appeal for the younger generation. And young people should learn that religion is not only something of the heart and mind but also of the hand or will. Their own will must be in harmony with God's will and it should actually be seen in their lives.

Christian faith is not something abstract, but a certain lifestyle. If adults want to share their faith with their children it simply means they must share their lifestyle with them. By their example they give their children a peep into what matters for a Christian. They should in particular share with them their life of service – and invite them to do it with them. There are so many opportunities for this that examples are not necessary.

The gravest danger today is that grown-ups occupy themselves with so many other things that they neglect their faith lives and their children's – while it should have been their first priority. The solution is a simple one: Adults have to **make** more time. The time to share a great treasure – the immeasurable treasure of faith – that will not devaluate, but become more precious as we grow together in faith.

In summary, adults have a grave responsibility towards themselves and younger people. They must live so near to God that the younger ones will be able to see Him in the lives of the grown-ups. And what they see of God in the lives of older people, should attract them so much that they will long to see and know more and in this way grow in faith every day.

4.3 How does one grow in faith towards maturity?

As indicated in the theories above one's life of faith develops through different (5 or 6) stages. Maturity is not only reached at the final stage.

During every "season" one has a task to complete. When this is done, one has reached one's appropriate "maturity". In the case of adults the theoretical models can therefore be of great practical value to assess their own status and growth in faith.

When adults guide, unfold and enable younger people in their faith, the adults will also be aware of the important fact that the younger ones live in and experience a quite different phase, they have a different task to fulfill. With the insight provided by the stage model, adults will also be careful not to guide children and adolescents in the same way. It will, for instance, be unfair to expect from children "a decision for Christ". They still have to learn **trust** (phase 1). **Commitment** is the task of the adolescent (phase 2). If trust does not precede one's commitment, "commitment" in children may at best be anxious obedience and (later in life) an effort to base one's righteousness on one's own goodness.

4.4 How should God's grace through the work of the Holy Spirit be acknowledged?

Apart form the fact that this question was asked at the beginning (in 1.5), it was also a major point of critique against Fowler's theory that it excludes God's role in the development of faith (cf. 2.10 above).

Certainly we cannot teach someone to believe. At the most we can teach or instruct a person what s/he ought to believe and what this could mean in her/his daily life. De Graaff (1966: 161) explains: "… instruction in faith may be one of the avenues by which a person reaches a greater insight into the total meaning and relevance of the Word of God, but the instruction as such cannot provide him with the full and integral knowledge. The instructor (parent, teacher, minister, etc.) cannot teach a person to believe in God, nor can he furnish him with the knowledge of Jesus Christ. In this particular nurture the instructor is limited to the activation, disclosure and deepening of the person's thinking about faith".

Van Dyk (1990: 161) concurs: "… ultimately no teacher is able to transform a student into a disciple of Christ. This … is the work of the Holy Spirit and the Word".

Recognising the indispensability of the Spirit does not, however, imply that parents and other adults do not have a responsibility and should not be concerned about guiding the young towards discipleship. On the contrary, their task is (cf. again Van Belle above) that of effective nurturing. They have to be co-workers of the Holy Spirit. Therefore they must make sure that they are creating the necessary human conditions whereby the younger ones can grow in faith.

4.5 How can we avoid distorted ideas about faith?

In all age groups (phases) the concrete act of believing has many aspects or dimensions, inter alia an emotional, mental and social. These different facets of the diamond of faith are not only inextricably connected, but they also mutually influence each other. To believe, therefore, is something extremely complex, never to be fully comprehended. However, because to believe has an analytic side, we can understand something about it, learn its content and teach it to others.

As a result of its complex nature, a permanent temptation is to try to reduce faith to one of its aspects. In Fowler's theory the cognitive element dominates. History provides many other examples of such reductionisms. Faith has been explained as something emotional, social, analytical, etc. However, to reduce living faith to one of its facets inevitably distorts its real nature. Two examples will explain.

The danger in the Reformed tradition is intellectualism. The element of knowledge (an inherent part of faith) is isolated (and overestimated) from the other aspects of the full, many-sided, integral faith experience. In reaction the Charismatic movement falls into another extreme, viz. emotionalism. This group of Christians tend to isolate (and absolutise) the psychic element (feeling, experience) of faith.

We will never grasp – neither on a theoretical nor on a practical level – faith in its complexity and totality. But theoretical reflection can have great practical relevance: it may help us to avoid one-dimensional and therefore distorted views of the immensely rich gift of faith.

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