

Worshipping Through the Stages of Faith

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Throughout this paper I hope to focus through the lens of worship on the two ideas of (1) Spiritual development and (2) the dichotomous need for both solitude and community in a healthy spiritual life. In this paper I am going to suggest that worshipping through Fowler's stages of faith might be an effective way of meeting our spiritual needs.

There is a certain integration that naturally occurs between Fowler's stages of faith and the ideas of the dichotomous need for both solitude and community. Approximately half the stages tend to lead us to worship more in community and half lead us to worship in solitude. If we are able to worship through each of the stages, rather than just the stage we find ourselves in, then we become able to meet our spiritual needs for both solitude and silence.

I have spoken a great deal about worshipping through Fowler's stages of faith; what do I mean by this? I believe that each of us has a primary stage in which we spend most of our time; we have a stage that is our comfort zone. Throughout the course of our life, our comfort zone may shift to a different stage, but there will usually be one primary stage we work out of. This, however, does not mean that we are unfamiliar with, or incapable of working out of, the other five stages.

To worship through Fowler's stages of faith is to attempt to connect to the part of ourselves that best operates at each stage. I can worship God through the innocent faith my parents bestowed upon me; I can worship God through the critical faith of my twenties (even if I am well past that age and stage). It is useful to discover and worship God through these different lenses.

This raises an obvious question: is it possible to worship God through a stage which we have not yet been through. I am not willing to give an answer to that question at this time, but I believe that it can stretch us to try. I believe that stretching, that effort to connect to God, will help each of us grow in our faith.

Worshipping through the stages of faith is not something that you can do each week. It may be something that you can only do over the course of a year or even a decade. I think to effectively worship in this way the individual must take a prearranged length of time (at a minimum three weeks) and decide that for that period of time, they are going to focus on worshipping God through a given stage of faith. Then there should be an interval of time, not less than the time spent worshipping in the stage of faith, in which the individual returns to their natural worship habits. After a period the individual may move on to the next stage of faith. This allows the individual to work out their spiritual muscles without destroying themselves. How does each stage of faith worship? How do you force your spirit to worship in a way that is contrary to your current natural state? These are both important questions. Below I shall take a look at each stage of development and examine how an individual can reflect on their faith and on God by using Fowler's six stages of faith.

Stage 1 is "the innocent." This is the stage we are born into. At this stage of faith, all that we know of God is what our parents have given to us. For some individuals there was great

instruction of God's love and care during these early years. For other individuals these early years were completely devoid of Godly influence. Either way it is good to contemplate how our parents formed our thoughts of God.

To worship through this stage is to reflect on the faith my parents gave me. This early faith was a simple faith when my only possible spiritual acts of worship would have been singing "Jesus Loves Me" or saying a simple prayer of grace at the dining table. For those who are worshipping through this faith stage, those are good activities to focus on. The simple songs and prayers of early childhood have a great power to them because they are sincere. To worship through this stage is to retreat into safety for a time. This was a time when we were loved and protected and all was right with the world. This was a time when our parents were all we knew. Focus on this simple faith and what it has to speak to you.

Stage 2 is "the literalist." This is the stage of early childhood when we "know" that everything that our respected authority figures tell us is absolutely true. This was a time of fantastic stories such as Noah and the arc, Daniel and lion's den, Joshua and the battle of Jericho, and David and Goliath. Our acts of worship were learning these stories and learning how God had cared for each of these people.

To worship through this stage is to reflect on the certainty I have in the faith. How could any part of these stories be false or embellished? To worship through this stage is to accept the beauty of these stories and imagine them as fantastic tales of God's work. Take children's picture books and try to recapture the imaginative flourishes you gave these stories when you were young. Rememberize John 3:16 and try to understand it like you did when you were six years old.

To worship through this stage is to retreat into certainty for a time. A time when you could ask an adult a question and they could tell you the answer, and they were always right. During this time of worship take time to write out what the Bible tells me I should believe and what the adults of my church tell/told me I should believe. And then...try to believe it. For a time try to accept it as a six year old child would accept it.

Stage 3 is "the Loyalist." This is the stage of conformity and comfort in groups. In this stage people do not like to be alone or outsiders. At this stage of faith we cling to creeds and statements of faith. We can hold these and, as a group, affirm them to be what we believe. Staying with the group assures us that we have not strayed into heresy or sin. To worship through this stage is to reflect on the confidence my community gives our faith. I can boldly proclaim what is true and what is false because those around me will support me and back me up. Write down your community's creeds and statements of faith. Learn them, memorize them, and treasure them. These are valuable aids to worshipping God.

To worship through this stage is to retreat into community for a time. It can be very difficult for a person whose comfort zone is stage 4 to accept that there is some validity in the community. This is a chance to discover the truth your community is willing to proclaim. This is a time to ask the question: are there things that I only believe because my community believes them? That's okay. Take time to rest in the comfort of your community.

Stage 4 is “the Critic.” This is the stage of rejecting the norm and exploring divergent viewpoints. In this stage, people begin to wonder if what their community believes is really true. They often ask the question, “is this all there is?” At this stage of faith we explore God in new ways, through new communities and through new methods.

To worship through this stage is to reflect on the fallibility of faith. Just because I believe something does not mean that it is true. There are all sorts of avenues of faith to explore. The Christian right, the Christian left, non-Christian spiritualists, pacifists, humanitarians, deists, humanists. To worship through this stage is to spend time asking all of the “unaskable” questions. To worship as “the critic” can be very uncomfortable. There are no assurances of anything being true, right, or Godly.

To worship through this stage is to retreat into chaos for a time. Through the chaos God’s perfection is perceivable. Through the chaos we can be led to a stronger sense of God than can be had before the chaos. All those “unaskable” questions will not be answered but your spirit and your faith will be better off for asking them.

Stage 5 is “the Seer.” This is the stage that people move to when they have moved beyond the chaos to a place of synthesis. At this stage people have made their faith “their” faith, but because of the journey they have been through they are able to comfortably rub elbows with people who do not necessarily share their faith.

To worship through this stage is to reflect on “my” faith. This is a time for direct personal interaction with differing spiritual contexts. Go to a monastery and explore the life of a monk, go on a mission’s trip to a radically different culture and embrace the people. This is a time to explore where faiths converge.

To worship through this stage is to retreat into assurance of my faith for a time. A time when I can interact with communities I do not necessarily agree with because I know what my faith is. During this time write out what your faith is; explore why it is your faith and what events in your life brought you to this point. Take time to go where you would not have previously gone for fear of “losing” your community’s faith.

Stage 6 is “the Saint.” This is the stage few people ever reach. At this faith stage the person is no longer motivated by their faith or beliefs, but rather by a total commitment to the guiding presence of God in all aspects of life. For people at this stage, God is all. There is no other way of expressing it that I know of. God is all. An example of this stage might be Jesus praying on the Mount of Olives in Luke 22:42, when he says, “not my will but your will be done.”

To worship through this stage is to reflect on God’s faith. To worship here is to move beyond my faith, your faith, or their faith. At this stage the only faith that exists is the faith of God. Allow God to do what he will do with you. One of my favorite stories is “The Pilgrim’s Tale,” which is about a man searching for how to pray without ceasing. He walks and walks and walks trying to find God’s leading. To worship through this stage we need to forsake all the world and walk, write, fast, pray, read, do without ceasing until God shows us his will. To worship through this

stage is to retreat into God for a time. To worship here is to allow God to be all. The sum total of your thoughts, desires, wants. Everything you are working for.

That is how you worship through Fowler's stages of faith; taking each step carefully over the course of many months or years. Stretching and strengthening your spiritual self. The other issue I wish to focus on is the need for both solitude and community in a healthy spiritual life. It is interesting to note that three of the six stages are best done in community (those stages being 1, 2, and 3). The other three stages require times of both solitude and community.

To have healthy spiritual worship we must take time to commune with God alone and we must take time to commune with God corporately. If we neglect either we are hurting our own spiritual walk and the walk of those who depend on us. There is not Christianity without Christians coming together to be the church. In order to worship God we must be the church community. In order to be the church community, we must be healthy spiritual individuals. I believe that an excellent way of exercising our faith and our ability to worship God is to worship always, in both solitude and community, and to worship through the six stages of faith. This will help to keep us strong Christians who are part of a strong Christian community.