

Stages of Faith: A Map for the Spiritual Journey

Stages of Faith

A Map for the Christian Journey

If you want to get somewhere - especially a place you have never visited - you need a map. A map is a tool to ascertain your current position in respect to your desired destination. It allows you to plot a course that is reliable by highlighting known reference points.

Maps not only record travel over land, but also progress in the journey of life. Mapping stages of human growth is a common way to evaluate a person's current place in life. We instinctively distinguish between the stages of physical human growth: infancy, toddlerhood, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, old age. Each stage is common to all human beings (although our personal experience of each stage is unique). A fundamental grasp of the respective advantages and challenges of each stage helps us to recognize that we are "not alone" in our human development - the things we experience are "normal."

Mapping Spiritual Growth

Just as we map physical growth, we can also map spiritual growth. The "twelve steps" of Alcoholics Anonymous is one of the most recognized. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, written by John Climacus in the seventh century, is one of the most ancient. In this book, Climacus describes thirty distinct stages in the Christian life, culminating in the life of love.

The classic mystic pattern of growth is more streamlined, involving three stages: purgation, illumination, and union. Put even more simply, the active life (purgation) leads to the contemplative life (illumination, union). St. John of the Cross modified the classic three-fold pattern by adding "the dark night of the soul" between illumination and union. In a more contemporary vein, Brian McLaren presents a simple map in his book *Finding Faith*: simplicity, complexity, perplexity, humility.

All faith maps recognize the importance and potential of further spiritual growth. The difference between a living and dead entity boils down to one fundamental truth: living things grow. A person is not alive simply because he or she was born sometime in the past. A person is alive if he or she thrives in the present. This is especially true for the Christian journey. The Christian journey allows for no standing still. If you are not growing in the Christian life, you are dying. There is no middle ground. Therefore, a biblical understanding of what constitutes spiritual growth is vital to healthy Christian development.

The Scriptures speak of graces capable of growth. The virtues the Holy Spirit implants in the heart of the Christian are capable of increase.

- Faith: "Your faith is *greatly enlarged*" (2 Thes. 1:3). "As your faith *grows*" (2 Cor. 10:15)
- Love for other Christians: "As to the love of the brethren... *excel still more*" (1 Thes. 4:9-10). "The love of each one of you toward one another *grows ever greater*" (2 Thes. 1:3)
- Love for all people: "*Increase and abound* in love for one another, and for all men" (1 Thes. 3:12)
- Knowledge of God: "*Increasing* in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10)

- Christlikeness: "Grow up in all aspects into Him" (Eph. 4:15). "Christ is *formed* in you" (Gal. 4:19)
- Knowledge and Discernment: "Your love may *abound still more and more* in real knowledge and all discernment" (Phil. 1:9)
- Obedience: "You ought to walk and please God... *excel still more*" (1 Thes. 4:1)
- Salvation: "Grow in respect to salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2)
- Grace: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:17-18)

All of this growth is a product of the process of renewal begun and sustained by the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:2; Col. 3:10). We are "being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). This transformative work will never come to an end. It continues "from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18).

In *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, authors Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich offer a model to help understand and navigate growth in the Christian life. I find their model most helpful because it incorporates insights from the last two thousand years of the Christian spiritual tradition. This results in a complete map that covers all the highlights of the Christian journey.

According to Hagberg and Guelich, the "critical journey" is "life itself," an "individual's spiritual journey" which the authors define as "our response to or faith in God with the resulting life changes" (xv). Because our relationship with God is fluid and dynamic our experience is continual and expanding. The "reception of God into our lives effects a continual process of growth rather than a point of arrival" (4). Spiritual growth is neither instant nor easy. It is a journey, and a "journey involves process, action, movement, change, experiences, stops and starts, variety, humdrum and surprises. For us a journey implies more than a quick trip from point A to point B" (5).

An Introduction to "Stage Model" Theory

In order to benefit from the six-stage model Hagberg and Guelich propose in *The Critical Journey*, one must possess an introductory knowledge of "stage model" theory.

Stage model theory is descriptive rather than prescriptive. The authors do not "offer any formulas for spiritual growth" but rather hope to "describe the various phases of our spiritual journey and illustrate how people act and think when in those phases" (xviii).

The stages are "sequential and cumulative." Like the rings of a tree, each stage builds developmentally on the previous stage (8). Just as in normal human development, later stages are not necessarily better: "we are not inherently better people as adults than we were as children" (8).

Each person possesses a specific "home stage," a stage "where we operate most of the time and which best characterizes our life of faith" (9). However, our experience is not quite so tidy.

The stages on the journey are very fluid. We move back and forth between them regularly, and we can experience more than one stage at the same time. The orderliness of the model (stages 1-6) suggests only the sequence in which we experience the stages as we proceed on the journey. For instance, we do not begin the journey at stage 3. We begin at stage 1. (7)

When we revisit earlier stages, our experience will often be deeper or more personal than the first time: "we experience more depth each time we recycle through the stages at a higher place on the spiral" (9).

According to stage theory, we can intellectually grasp the stage immediately ahead of us but not truly comprehend a stage that is two stages further along than our own. Therefore, those at later stages will often be misunderstood by those at earlier stages. Likewise, those at later stages will be tempted to look down upon those at earlier stages.

The authors clearly admit that stage model theory has limitations. The model is "a loose guide" (xix) that is "fuzzy" with "much overlap" (xx). It is but "one way to illuminate the path of faith... [but] by no means the only way" (6). Certainly, individuals will experience each stage differently than others, yet, in spite of the differences, there is enough similarity in the spirituality journey that an accurate map is useful in providing direction.

The First Three Stages: The External Journey



The critical journey is composed of six stages. The first three are primarily external; the second three, internal.

In the first three stages, our faith or our spirituality takes its expression most frequently in ways that are prescribed by external standards, whether by the Church, a specific spiritual leader, a book, or a set of principles... Stages 4 through 6 represent a difficult personal transformation and reemerging that require a rediscovery on a different level of what faith and spirituality are all about. These are inner healing stages (spiritually and psychologically) for which the journey cannot be prescribed. (11)

Stage 1 "is the discovery and recognition of God" (33). Accepting the reality of God can begin while one is young, or it can occur later through a religious experience or conversion. This conversion can be instantaneous or can occur over a long period of time.

Our first experience of God is wonderful and refreshing in its newness.

Regardless of our age, however, it seems true that most begin the journey in a childlike way. We come to it with an innocence, a freshness, that is seldom ever as vivid or vital. Consider the way we feel during the first stage of a romance or new friendship. Swept away by the experience of the relationship, we do not look at any of the negative aspects. (33)

Stage 2 is "a time of learning and belonging" labeled "the life of discipleship" (53). It primarily involves learning in a community setting from spiritual leaders or religious writings. "Now, we stumble upon a set of ideas, a belief system or a group of people who show us the light and answer our questions. It is such a big relief and feels so safe and secure - like a haven in a storm. And for now, that is what we need." (46)

Stage 3 is "the productive life" and involves consciously serving God through one's spiritual gifts. The truths learned at stage 2 find an outlet in service at stage 3.

Most evangelical models of Christian growth stop here. The implication is that the pinnacle of Christian maturity is faithful, committed service (usually in the context of a church). The most committed people serve professionally in the church. However, it is obvious that a person can arrive at this stage and still be self-serving, legalistic, immature, and inwardly unhealed. Christian service is not the best determiner of spiritual maturity. This is the value of Hagberg and Guelich's model. According to them, "the productive life" is important, but it is not the goal. Indeed, on the map of the Christian journey, those at this stage are only half-way there!

Stage Four: The Journey Inward

Stage 4 is "the journey inward" - "a deep and very personal inward journey" that "almost always comes as an unsettling experience yet results in healing for those who continue through it" (93). In this stage, our former views of God are radically challenged. The disruption can be so great that we feel like we are losing our faith or betraying loyalties.

At this stage, we face an abrupt change (at least many do) to almost the opposite mode. It's a mode of questioning, exploring, falling apart, doubting, dancing around the real issues, sinking in uncertainty, and indulging in self-centeredness. We often look hopeless to those around us. (93)

This newfound (and often surprising) uncertainty is usually precipitated by a crisis. "The move from stage 3 to 4 is more likely precipitated by a crisis in our life or our faith. That crisis makes many of the former truths and answers inadequate or inappropriate for the next phase in the journey" (83). The crisis "shakes our strongly held beliefs or assumptions and we feel adrift on a restless sea, fending for ourselves. Our sense of God is shaken and we can find no new direction, only more questions" (197).

The crisis shocks our system. We lose comfort and question our convictions as our previous faith-supports crumble before our very eyes.

For the first time, our faith does not seem to work. We feel remote, immobilized, unsuccessful, hurt, ashamed, or reprehensible. Neither our faith nor God provides what we need to sooth us, heal us, answer our prayers, fulfill our wishes, change our circumstances, or solve our problems. Our formula of faith, whatever that may have been, does not work any more, or so it appears. (94)

Why does advancing to this stage usually demand a crisis? The reason is simple: No one would choose this kind of experience on their own!

Most of us are so comfortable and self-sufficient at the previous stage (called the productive or fruitful life) that we have no natural tendency to move at all. In fact, stage 4 does not even look like part of the journey for those of us at home in stage 3. It does not appear to be an extension of our faith and growth. Consequently, we are not drawn in this direction. (94)

Our aversion to stage 4 is increased because of the very real dangers that accompany this stage. "Sometimes people drop off the journey totally at this point. Overwhelmed by pain or crises in our lives, we absolutely cut ourselves off from God" (107).

The end of stage 4 involves an experience of "the Wall" - "a face-to-face experience with God and with our own will" (93). It is impossible to go over, around, or under the Wall. One can only go *through* it. "The Wall experience is the place where... psychology and spirituality converge. Up to this point, one can be religious, spiritual, or fruitful *and not* be healed psychologically, or vice versa" (115).

At the Wall, we become "aware of all the lies we have accepted about ourselves" (121). We are forced to "face the truth" in order to move forward. "The Wall invites us to integrate our spiritual selves with the rest of us. And that

involves facing our own and others' demons. We must face that which we fear the most, and that is why it is so unsavory, and why so many people only enter the Wall under duress" (233).

Only through self-acceptance and surrender to God's will can one go "through" the Wall to deeper levels of spiritual growth. "The power behind the transformation at the Wall is this: learn to embrace your whole story with loving, forgiving detachment" (234). We must accept ourselves with all our wounds and imperfections. We must experience God's love and acceptance of us as we are in all our weakness and humanness. And then we must fully and completely surrender to God's will, even though we remain in the dark.

An example of the spiritual/psychological healing and transformation that occurs is the realization that fixing others, overhelping others, codependency, or excessive enabling of others is not selfless service. These motivations have unhealthy roots. They betray a sense of low self-esteem, a desire to control. (119)

If the description of the experience of the Wall and the solution to the challenges it provokes seems ambiguous, it is intended to be. The authors are aware of the great amount of mystery that surrounds this point of the Christian journey.

So the mystery of the Wall remains a mystery. We sit in awe of the process of surrendering and going through the Wall. But, as we emerge, we are able to move along on our journeys with much less clarity about the direction and much more assurance of not having to be in charge of our lives. We are being transformed, turned inside out. (128)

Surprisingly, through doubts and difficulties we come to know God and ourselves better. Communicating this stage to others who have not experienced it is difficult. People at stage 1 can't imagine such an experience. Those at stage 2 view it as a lack of conviction. Believers at stage 3 wonder whether we have become apostate altogether. It is hard for those at previous stages to recognize that doubt is not disbelief - doubt is faith taking itself seriously. Willfulness, not doubt, is the opposite of faith.

The Journey Outward Again: Stage Five and Stage Six

Stage 5 is "the journey outward" where our "focus is outward, but from a new, grounded center of ourselves" (133). At this stage, "we surrender to God's will to fully direct our lives, but with our eyes wide open, aware but unafraid of the consequences" (133). We possess a new-found confidence that God loves us fully, just as we are. "There is a human tendency to think that if God really knew us God would not love us... At stage 5 we grow into the full awareness that God truly loves us even though we are never fully whole. God loves us in our humanness" (134).

With newfound inward resources, we "venture outside our self-interests to others" (133). We are weak, but whole. Aware of our faults, we are confident that God will work through us.

Wholeness looks a lot like weakness at this stage. Wholeness does not make us stronger; it allows God to work through our weaknesses. Wholeness means being very aware of our faults but not letting them trip us... God can use us most in our brokenness, a truth that was very hard to accept until the Wall experience. (135)

To those still at earlier stages, we appear impractical, inefficient, and out of touch.

Frequently, we appear to be impractical and out of touch with reality. The way the world functions around us, people who are other directed, whole, selfless, and called by God are counterculture. When we love people despite their having failed miserably in our society for whatever reason, we are called naïve; when we stay with the grieving, we are considered caretakers; when we give money away, we are considered poor managers; when we yield, we are considered noncompetitive; when we let go, we are considered weak. We just do not fit with the realistic expectations of a world that is out to be productive and to win. Even the productive Christians at earlier stages in the journey think we at stage 5 have lost our edge...

At stage 5 we are not as oriented toward productivity with outward signs or products. Consequently, we appear less productive and slightly isolated. We are in fact quite active. But we have a tendency to do things behind the scenes or on a one-to-one basis. We never realize that we are hardly noticed. This style can be very confusing and even frustrating for those who want us to be leaders in the more traditional way. (144-145)

Stage 6 is "the life of love" where God's love is demonstrated through us "to others in the world more clearly and consistently than we ever thought possible" (152). By losing ourselves, we find ourselves. God's presence is experienced in all relationships.

Our times alone with God come during the quiet times away as well as in the everyday, unceasing conversations. We have little ambition for being well known, rich, successful, noteworthy, goal-oriented, or "spiritual"... We are Spirit-filled but in a quiet, unassuming way. (153)

We love with great compassion modeled after God's love. We live with less and delight in doing menial tasks.

At stage 6 we can reach far beyond our own capacity and love our fellow human beings with deep compassion, because we know that all come from and are loved by God. As Jesus was compassionate even in Gethsemane, at his trial, and on the cross, so we are compassionate under extreme hardship...

At stage 6 we become aware that the more of God we have, the less of everything else we need. We do not renounce material possession. We simply learn to need them less; we become detached from things and people as props or bolstering devices...

We are full of surprises because we are so free, so full of God, and so whole. We can say or do preposterous things because we are not afraid of death. We can deliberately give up our lives, materially, physically, mentally, and emotionally for the service of others without feeling afraid of the deep loss. (154-155, 156)

Our expression of love is selfless rather than needy. We love without the need to be loved in return. We passionately

love others in a dispassionate (disinterested, detached) way. We are not egocentric (self-centered), but theocentric (God-centered), christocentric (Christ-centered), and eccentric (others-centered). We love others, not for our sake, but for their own sake; not with our goodness in mind, but with their goodness in mind.

Having shed the false self - a self rooted in possessions, accomplishments, and human acceptance - we embrace our true self, that of being eternally and fully loved by God.

Insights from the Six-Stage Model

Embracing Hagberg and Guelich's six-stage model sheds light on the Christian journey. It demonstrates that:

The stages are normal. For those who are unfamiliar with the normalcy of stage 4 in Christian experience, their newfound doubts feel like an abandonment of faith rather than faith's rediscovery and enriching. A faith-map that helps them see this as a normal and necessary step along the way to the life of love is priceless.

Growth is painful. Ask any person who is currently transitioning between childhood and adolescence and he or she will affirm this wholeheartedly. Growth comes at a price. It involves more than enthusiasm. It involves commitment, determination, and perseverance. Although we may desire to grow rapidly, our awareness of the difficulty involved in the transition from one stage to another should curb our desires to move ahead too quickly.

After reading about the stages on the journey, you may find yourself wanting to move because it looks better or will move you further along on the journey. This for many is a natural response, especially at stages 2 and 3. But look at some of the consequences. Moving from one stage to another always causes confusion. We are in a time of limbo between two stages. We may find it exhilarating and exhausting. Nothing seems certain. Something undefined lies ahead. Frequently, the move means loneliness, and can be very upsetting... though the change may be welcomed, it leads over an emotionally rocky road. (14-15)

Maturity takes time and experience. There is no quick fix to spiritual maturity. There is no silver bullet to a deep, intimate relationship with God. Instant intimacy is an oxymoron. Just as in any human relationship, deeper trust and intimacy only comes through trials, struggles, and periods of doubt. The "critical journey" proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that real growth only comes through the crucible of suffering.

A Higher Call Than Service

Most, if not all, contemporary evangelical models of growth climax at stage 3. For example, the "Purpose Driven Church" model assumes that a person is spiritually mature when they are part of the "committed core" - serving in and through the church according to their gifts.

But it is entirely possible (and indeed, quite probable) that many people minister for selfish reasons. Church activity is not an indicator of maturity. Busyness in church activities does not automatically lead to spiritual growth.

The church primarily focuses on stages 1 through 3 because the contemporary church is best equipped for these stages.

The church is generally best at working with people in stages 1 through 3, so the fact that the highest number of people is in stage 2 fits with how the church sees itself. It does raise some issues through, as to what and how the church relates to people beyond stage 3. So many people leave the church when they experience stage 4 or the Wall, since there are few resources or programs available for them, and they feel estranged when the faith they held dear does not work for them any more. (187)

In his book, *Exit Interviews*, William D. Hendricks demonstrates that most of the dechurched (those who formerly attended or even served in a local church but have since left church-life altogether) have not lost faith in God. They have lost faith in the church. They have "grown disillusioned with the church and other institutions of Christianity" and have "lost the energy and enthusiasm they once had for programs of spiritual development." Consequently, they "are now looking elsewhere to meet their deepest spiritual needs" (*Exit Interview*, 11).

The dechurched leave primarily because they are disillusioned with the church. They claim it is not "spiritual" enough - that it is stunting their growth.

Perhaps we should take their criticism seriously. Maybe the dechurched have exposed a very real weak spot in many evangelical churches - a stunted model of spiritual formation that leaves little room for questions, doubts, and rediscovery. Could it be that the stunted growth of the evangelical church comes from a stunted model of spiritual formation?

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