Is the Faith of Faith Development Christian Faith?

Jack T. Hanford

The major research with a theological and developmental psychological perspective on the meaning and development of faith has been produced by James Fowler of Emory University and the Candler School of Theology. In this paper, I will present challenges by important critics who pose a significant question. Is this faith of the faith development research Christian faith? To provide an initial answer to the question, I will offer brief summaries of some of Fowler's writings that he has listed as most important for responding to the question. I will also present evidence from his writings and from the writings of other authors that he is indeed interpreting Christian faith.

James Fowler is currently the major writer in the area of faith development in human personality. Fowler interprets faith as a verb, that is, "faithing" or searching for meaning. Faithing functions to construct coherent world perspectives. This function of knowing, valuing, and giving meaning provides authority by way of reason, or the logic of conviction. Accordingly, faith implies committing, loyalty, and fidelity; and concrete symbols such as a cross or ring become meaningful representations of one's faith. The logic of conviction includes logic of certainty and extends toward a comprehensive knowing by faith. For instance, in and through faith the self knows itself, the neighbor, and God within a total and ultimate environment. In Fowler's (1986) own words, faith is

The process of... knowing
Underlying a person's composition and maintenance of
a comprehensive frame (or frames) of meaning
Generated from the person's attachments or commitments to

1Please address inquiries and requests for reprints to Jack T. Hanford, Johnson Hall 120, Ferris State University, Big Rapids, MI 49307.
centers of supraordinate value which have power to unify
his or her experiences of the world
Thereby endowing the relationships, contexts, and patterns
of everyday life, past and future, with significance. (p. 25-26)

The self through faith knows, reasons, unites, and integrates knowledge. Here, faith functions with imagination. In constructing faith stages, Fowler (1978) wanted his students to develop an understanding of their own faith as well as to interpret theology as an expression of faith. To do this, Fowler (1974) used the faith stages to make qualitative distinctions between various theologies such as black theology, liberation theology, or a balanced theology. Faith stages also function to order a person's imagining the meaning of God. Fowler's emphasis on the cognitive function of faith as faith-knowing included reason and therefore was not to be equated with mystical knowing. Growth and development in the faith stages represented an expansion of consciousness, greater inclusiveness of persons, and more tolerance of others. Fowler's highest stage, Stage 6 or universalizing faith, includes a commitment to the Kingdom of God, a Judeo-Christian conviction meaning the unity of all persons, and the fulfillment of human rights and justice. Thus, faith at its highest level includes advancement in moral understanding motivated by Christian biblical faith as evident in his heavy reliance on biblical language such as the Kingdom of God, God's sovereignty, and covenant.

And of course, the order of these well-known stages provides the meaning and definition of faith development from the beginning of life at Stage 1 to the peak of maturity in faith at Stage 6. Since faith grows and changes, there is faith development. Fowler views such change as mainly gradual but accepts the more sudden and drastic change of dramatic conversions. His view is both Catholic and Protestant, especially Methodist, which includes the very dramatic conversion of John Wesley. Thus the meaning of faith evolves through faith stages and education is the most potent factor promoting this advancement and growth of the person in faith and learning.

In summary, Fowler's (1990) definition of faith is marked by its complex dimensions. Its foundation is the experience of trust and loyalty underlying self and relationships. In this sense faith is a human universal, a generic quality of human beings . . . a holistic way of knowing and valuing . . . the unifying and life-directing response of persons . . . to the gift of divine grace. This radical understanding of "justification by grace through faith" is central . . . and . . . obedient assent to revealed truth . . . (1) in those branches of Christianity where doctrinal formulations are understood to conserve and express