



How Spirituality Develops through Our Lifetime

| *Maturing in the Christian life of body, mind, and spirit*

Introduction

People grow and change over time. This is an obvious statement that can be confirmed with our own eyes. We watch children grow from infancy to adulthood. We're conscious of our own bodies and minds changing as we age. When it comes to our spiritual lives, however, we are dealing with things that are not quite so easily observed. Yet our souls, bodies, and minds are all connected as they work together to form our faith.

This study endeavors to gather the thoughts of many people about how our faith in God changes over time. You will probably find things that you agree with in these pages, and you may also have memories and experiences that challenge these age-based assumptions. In Scripture we see many instances where God chooses the unexpected, seemingly unripe believer to be a spiritual leader. What we are exploring here is a human creation and thus imperfect; however, you may find some help here in understanding those of varying ages and likely ways that they can be nurtured in their faith.

Many believe that the study of human growth and development is a fairly recent phenomenon. If we confine ourselves to the psychological study of humans, they may be right. But even the ancients had words to refer to the ages of humans. For instance, in the Greek New Testament there are different words for infants, young children until about age seven, and children (even if adults) in relationship to their parents. Early Christian leaders like Augustine created categories linked to age. Parents and educators of every time have realized that there are different capacities and methods of learning



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for different ages. Much of this traditional knowledge has been confirmed scientifically and has been shown to be shared by humans across cultures and history.

Young Children

We begin at birth. Are infants born with faith? What do we mean by faith? If we're talking about a set of doctrines to be memorized and recited, then obviously the infant does not have this type of faith yet. But if we conceive of faith as something we do, a relationship that we form with another, then what closer bond can we observe in most infants than the link between the child and its mother or primary caregiver? Luke 18:15 states that people brought "even infants" to see Jesus so that he might touch and hold them. Perhaps Jesus showed us that our faith is a relationship with God that begins as an infant. It may not begin as a faith statement but rather as trust without words.

If we accept this notion, how do we measure the faith of children who are too young to voice their beliefs? Observation would seem to be our primary method. We watch them interact with their environment and we note

Characteristics of Young Children (Ages 3–7)

Body: growing control over motor abilities, proud of markers such as toilet training and shoe tying

Mind: intuitive thinkers, blend fact and fantasy, curious and prone to wonder

Spirit: dwell deeply in stories and play, value rituals and repetition, develop an image of God that may resemble characteristics of parents and other important caregivers

behaviors that seem to indicate trust, a connection to their caregivers, and a belief in things they can't see. Even a simple game of peekaboo reinforces that the world remains constant even when the infant's eyes are closed.

Young children, too, use observation to learn about the world. They may not use words to express what they are seeing, but they are taking in the objects and people in their environment. What will they overhear in the family regarding matters of faith? Will they see a family ritual of prayer? Will there be objects that indicate the religious belief of the family, such as photographs, Bibles, crosses? What does a child's-eye view of the church look like? Are there church symbols and other objects they can see at their eye level? Are there places of welcome for them? Are there opportunities to hear the Bible read and songs of faith sung?

As children begin to acquire language and grow in mind and body, we have more ways to assess their faith. We can begin to have simple conversations with them about Jesus, the church, prayer, and other topics of faith. We can see things in their drawings that may speak more deeply about their faith than their words do. Parents can keep journals of conversations of a spiritual nature that occur. Sometimes these will be prompted by a shared experience, like seeing a dead animal or experiencing a baptism. At other times a conversation may be initiated by a child who has been pondering questions of faith. From these methods, developmental theorists have observed some commonalities in the faith of young children that may assist us as parents and teachers.

What does this mean for those charged with the care of young children? Think about the environments where young

children spend their time. Are there materials that nurture potential abilities? How much structure is there for the young child? Are there opportunities to repeat favorite Bible stories, to wonder about God's creation, and to experience the rhythm of the worshipping congregation?

Older Children

For older children, language becomes the dominant means by which we assess their faith. We quiz their knowledge of the books of the Bible. We offer memory verses, catechism questions, and children's choir anthems to develop the vocabulary of faith. Older children may find programs tailored to their learning, such as Sunday school, vacation Bible school, or church camps. These offer opportunities to interact with other children who share some of the same values and beliefs. Here faith seems to become a blending of Christian knowledge acquisition and relationship building.

What does this mean for those nurturing this age? Older children, because of their concrete ways of thinking, may have trouble believing in things they can't see, so faith will center around tangibles like church, Bible stories, and the symbols of faith. They are likely to seek approval by memorizing and reciting Bible verses and faith statements like the Apostles' Creed. They probably want to draw with pencils and erasers, as they are trying to reproduce what they see and so will not likely be as free in their artistic representations as younger children. Older children also look toward more leadership roles in the church and so enjoy becoming acolytes, liturgists, ushers, and musicians in living out their faith.

Characteristics of Older Children (Ages 8–12)

Body: increased muscle control that often leads to athletic ability, wider experience of the world through school and other institutions

Mind: concrete thinking, rule conscious, increased short-term memory

Spirit: can tell stories of personal experiences, gain self-worth through accomplishments, may form deep friendships, increase identification with church family

Youth and Young Adults

The teenage years are times of growth and often times of challenge for all concerned. The bodily changes that happen between ages 13 and 18 are almost as great as those that happen in the first five years of life. Relationships with parents that were so formative in the child's life may be more distant as the adolescent's world expands to increasingly include their peers and other significant adults like teachers, coaches, and youth pastors. In many traditions this age is often a time of decision making concerning faith. Will I be baptized or confirmed? Can I embrace the beliefs that my parents hold or do I need to find my own path?

What does this mean for those who serve this age group? Youth are most interested in activities that involve their peers. Study, recreation, worship, and community building all engage their capacities. Their passion for helping others is often fostered in local and global mission work. Harnessing the power of these experiences for faith transformation is an ongoing important task for home and church.

Youth seek authenticity even at the time when they are hiding their true selves from others. Adults nurturing the faith of youth need to think about how to create a safe environment where questions and doubts can be voiced. Nurturing the youths' public voice when it comes to their faith is also a task of preparation for baptism or confirmation. "What am I willing to stake my life on?" is a question worthy of reflection with this age group.



Young adults may be confident in many areas of their life and work, but seek guidance for their spiritual lives.

As you think about the "ideal" age for baptism or confirmation, ask, "Do I want this youth to simply affirm the doctrines of the church or do I want him or her to develop a personal statement of faith that may even conflict with established traditions?" If you chose the first goal, this ritual could be accomplished even in older childhood, before adolescence. If the latter is your goal, this is a task of sifting and sorting that is usually done toward the end of adolescence or the beginning of young adulthood.

With the onset of young adulthood, the profound physical changes that came with earlier ages are mostly resolved. Mental acuity is at an all-time high. Identity may be found in a variety of roles, such as college student, employee, spouse or partner, parent. This is often a time of reawakening to spiritual matters as these roles fall short of expectations or as the pull to nurture children in the faith brings the individual back to the church. The literature on young adulthood as a distinct period in the life cycle continues to increase, as the age boundaries of this period also continue to stretch.

Characteristics of Adolescents (Ages 13–18)

Body: puberty, many bodily changes (external and internal), gender awareness, often peak performances in athletic ability

Mind: beginning of abstract thinking, math and science ability may reach their peak, identity formation

Spirit: present the story of themselves they want the world to see, often care passionately for causes that benefit others, mirror the beliefs of those around them, may begin to think critically about their beliefs

Characteristics of Young Adults (Ages 19–35)

Body: reaches peak development; consumerism and overall health advocate maintaining this young mature body as long as possible

Mind: reaches peak development; lifelong learning advocates maintaining intellectual capacities as long as possible

Spirit: reconnection to Bible and stories of faith, search for balance and spiritual practices, seeking a spiritual mentor

What does this mean for those nurturing this age? Young adults may be confident in many areas of their life and work but seek guidance for their spiritual lives. While this can still be a time of questioning and doubting, it is also often when the person returns to church seeking answers and meaning. Issues of discipleship or the daily living of a Christian life often come to the fore. The desire to know how to pray and worship both for themselves and for their children often drives young adults in search of small groups, spiritual direction, or conversations with the pastor or other sages of the faith. The busy lives that many lead may preclude programming and prompt more individual or technological forms of communication. The seeking of this age will prompt an inward turning in the next step in the human life cycle.

Middle and Older Adults

In middle and older adulthood we notice changes in body, mind, and spirit that may be different but not greater than previous stages. For instance, we can't run as fast or recall names as quickly as we did earlier. For the spiritual life, many theorists see a change from religious development to more of an inward spiritual development during these years. It doesn't mean that our previous encounter with the external church is better, but there is a difference when we begin to focus more inwardly.

This is not to say that we cease learning after the age of 35 and all life is a gradual decline, but that much of our spiritual energy is turned away from the observable and external world and turned to the inward journey of faith. This passage from the anxieties and stresses of the material world to an interior deep relationship with God was chronicled long before the advent of developmental theory. In medieval times this journey moved from the external pilgrimages to sacred places to the interior journey found in the labyrinth and contemplation. In the present many have written about this period of life as a time of passing on to the next generation the wisdom gained over a lifetime. It is also a period of reassessment of the past in the light of the eternal, looking for a sense of purpose, integrity, and unity.

What does this mean for those nurturing this age? Listening comes to the forefront among those nurturing middle and older adults. One listens to help individuals connect

Characteristics of Middle and Older Adults (35 and Older)

Body: coming to terms with lessening physical ability, learning to live and thrive with a changing body

Mind: spiritual practices such as meditation and contemplation lessen stress and point to God; hobbies and leisure learning continue to keep mind active

Spirit: stories of faith become legacies to the next generation; often a second exploration and encounter of faith where previous symbols and beliefs become important in new ways

their inward journeys to the larger faith community, to assess their desires and abilities, and to help them prepare for the journey that continues after death. Sometimes discussing dreams, both those fulfilled in the past and those that are yet to be, can be an entry point to this interior world of the spirit.

As physical abilities change, older adults in particular will look to the church for some stability. This may come across as being unchangeable and static, but anchor points of ritual in a sea of change will offer older adults a sense that some things they have known will remain constant even when they are no longer present. Being conscious of the limits of deteriorating eyesight in preparing printed matter and attentive to physical limitations in movement will help older adults know that they are still a part of the worshiping community.

Concluding Remarks

In our journey through the life cycle, you may have found things that resonated with your experience and other things that challenged your beliefs about how people grow in faith. One religious educator who has turned a critical eye to the work of development theorists is Craig Dykstra. In his book *Growing in the Life of Faith*, he states three reasons why Christians should have reservations about developmental theory: (1) with God at the center of faith, how can theories that place growth in the hands of humans alone be adequate? (2) the power of sin and evil make it difficult to posit faith stages that are the same for all people; (3) each person's

relationship with Christ is unique, making a consistent definition of faith difficult.¹

Even so, with knowledge of these theories you can choose appropriate books and curriculum for children, youth, and adults; understand what you hear in someone's story of their faith; and perhaps look back at your own life with new eyes. God works with, through, and in God's people to bring faith, hope, and love to the world.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 36.