

Faith Development

***Building
Faith
One
Child
at a Time***

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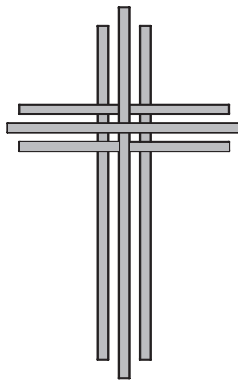
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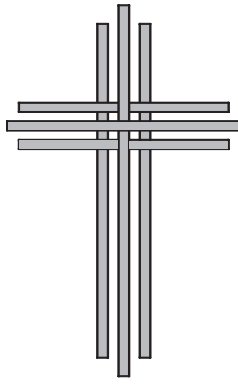


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Publisher's Preface

Why publish a book about faith development? Doesn't faith grow by the power of the Holy Spirit? And doesn't the Spirit work through God's Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper? Then why cloud the issue with psychological theories?

Faith does grow only by the power of the Holy Spirit. Nothing we do can cause faith to begin or grow in someone's life. Only God can do that. Everything in this volume must rest on that basic principle.

Faith development is clearly God's work, not ours. But God gave us the task of sharing the faith, and He encourages us to be more shrewd than the world in sharing the treasures of the Gospel (Luke 16:8). Even as the proper use of Law and Gospel involves rightly dividing their application, so Christian education involves some assessment of classes and students. Research on faith development helps us give milk and solid food, each at the proper time (Hebrews 5:12). This information is another resource, a tool we use to help prepare, plan, and implement good teaching methods. As God gives information, so we rejoice in the opportunities to use it as a blessing of His hand.

A caution is in order, too. Faith development language and strategies are not designed for judging whether or not faith exists in the human heart; only God knows its contents. Neither should we use this information as a template for evaluating "good" faith or "weak" faith. Saving, active, vibrant faith is God's gift, not a level of human development or application. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:8).

This book addresses the human development model and gives

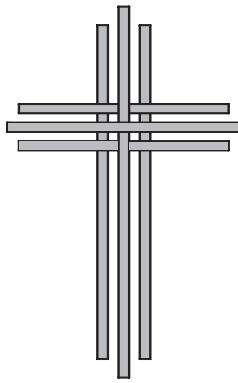
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teachers additional strategies for designing and developing age-appropriate lesson plans that properly match the level and abilities of the students. We here add form, substance, and helpful direction to the teacher who wants in every opportunity to *be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have* (1 Peter 3:15).

We find examples in Jesus' ministry that demonstrate that the context in which God's message is shared is significant; Jesus' words and actions fit the context. He emphasized the importance and faith of young children when adults brought these children to Him (Matthew 19:13–15; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17). He taught about the cause of suffering when He saw a man blind from birth (John 9:1–7).

So today we also consider the context of a learning situation as we design that experience. That context includes factors such as methods, materials, and the various developmental stages of learners. When learners cannot comprehend complex, abstract truths, we stick to simple, concrete messages. When learners are challenging authority, we attempt to provide an appropriate environment—one that allows them to challenge, but continues to demonstrate God's love and power through words and actions.

Thus, in Christian education we *always* rely on God to create and strengthen faith. As you provide Christian education opportunities that consider the context of the experiences, pray that God may mightily use you to proclaim His Word. May He bless you as you embark on this journey with us.



To Begin

Picture a block, like a child's building block. It's sitting on a table in front of you. You didn't put it there. Staring at it straight on, you can see the letter on the top and the letter on the face directly in front of you. With a slight lean to the left and the right you can view two more sides. Yet two sides remain hidden. If you were to walk around the table, one more side would be revealed. But the bottom remains obscured. Without the ability to pick it up (or a glass table), you will never know what's on the bottom of the block; the total picture of the block is incomplete.

Perhaps this explains our human view of faith and how it grows. Countless studies have been made in a variety of related fields. Experts have generated theories of cognitive learning, social growth, emotional maturation, and moral development that affect our understanding of faith. But just like the sides of a block, theory alone does not provide a complete picture. To grasp the reality of a three-dimensional block, more than one side must be visible.

Faith is a gift of God through the workings of the Holy Spirit. The theories of Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson, Westerhoff, and Fowler all attempt to lend to our understanding of faith. The Scriptures are filled with stories of the faithful, and every Christian can tell how he or she has experienced faith. But the complete picture of the block of faith remains a mystery in spite of all of our human efforts to get a clear picture. As St. Paul lamented, *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known* (1 Corinthians 13:12).

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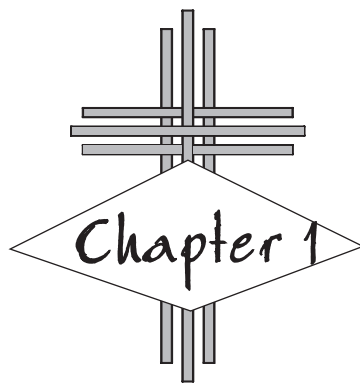
In examining the block of faith we will look at what God tells us in His holy, inspired Word. We will also consider individual stories of faith both from the modern world and those stories of the heroes and heroines of faith as found in the Scriptures. We'll explore what we think faith to be, what experts in a variety of fields have theorized, how their theories apply to faith development, and practical application of strategies that can assist in the growth of our students' faith. Perhaps most crucial to our understanding of faith is admitting that our grasp of this area of life is less than perfect. We are and always will be lacking in complete knowledge and emotion of the full view of faith, at least while yet in this world.

I invite you to think of this book as a workbook or journal. As I have struggled with the writing of it, I have spent much time contemplating my faith—not so much the content, but rather its structure and form. I realize that the journey has been an interesting one but one that I have sometimes taken for granted or even to which I've been oblivious. In various crises my faith development has regressed as well as grown. Those times of growth have often been painful, but necessary, as I struggle toward spiritual maturity.

As you read through the chapters, please take the time to examine your own faith life. Perhaps some readers will find it most useful to study in a group setting. Discussing the features of faith with others can broaden your horizons. Verbalizing your own faith and the route you have taken to this point in your life can itself be a growth experience.

This book isn't, and doesn't pretend to be, the final word on faith or spiritual maturity, but I pray that it is a worthwhile guide as you seek to better understand where you have been, where you are headed, and where you hope to lead others.

Becky Peters



What Is Faith?

You're a teacher. Not only are you a Christian teacher, but you teach in a Christian setting and you're expected to nurture your students in the Christian faith. In fact, faith is what your class is all about. Whether it's a Sunday school class, midweek school, vacation Bible school, a day school religion class, or confirmation class, some people would define your job as "teaching the faith."

Most Christians would agree that "teaching the faith" is more than just telling Bible stories and expecting students to memorize Bible verses. Teachers want students not only to know the story but to make it their own story by applying it to their lives. A teacher desires to guide students to see that the same God who rescued the Hebrews from the hands of the Egyptians is the God who rescues them from sin and the power of the devil. More than just to inform students how Jesus made a difference in the life of the man born blind, teachers want to help students experience how Jesus can open their eyes to the potential God has planned for them. A teacher aims not just to teach how the early Christian community of believers lived their faith in troubled times but to enable the students to participate in that faith community even in the midst of disaster.

How do we do that? How does faith start? How does faith grow? How does one move from a baptized baby to a confirmand to a committed adult Christian who strives to live his or her faith no matter what the situation? What influence or control does the individual Christian have in this matter? What is the role of Christian education?

So many questions need to be answered. This book attempts to assist you in finding the solutions.

A QUESTION OF FAITH

What is faith? How do you define it? It's one thing to explain the content of your faith—"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, his only Son ..."—but it's another to explain accurately what faith is, especially if you are referring to faith as it might apply to any of the world's major religions. Right now, before you read another word, grab a pencil or pen, and jot down your definition of faith.

Some people might explain faith as knowing something. Others might say that faith is believing to be true something that can't be proved. Yet limiting faith to just knowing or believing a body of knowledge, such as the Apostles' Creed, is incomplete. However, if we examine the history of the word *creed*, some interesting information is revealed.

The Latin word *credo* is usually translated into English as "I believe." The word *credo* comes from two different words, one meaning "heart" and the other meaning "put, place, set, or give." Thus the word *creed* implies more than just a belief about a set of facts. It reveals where we put our hearts or to what we give our hearts. Many other languages reveal a similar background when examining their words for faith. Through the centuries, especially in our scientific age, the word has been watered down to refer to merely accepting something as true ("I have faith that this detergent will get out grass stains") or putting our confidence in someone ("I have faith that my pastor will visit me in the hospital").

Dr. James Fowler, a researcher who has devoted his career to examining the concept of faith, explains faith as the way one gives meaning to life. More than just a way of knowing something, it is the lens through which we view our world. According to Fowler's theories, faith colors our entire perception of life. What one has faith in is what one is committed to. What one is committed to is evidenced by where one has placed one's heart. There you will find loyalty, trust, and love.

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Now do a little self-examination. (This could be painful.) Where do you put your heart? What has a high time priority? What are those things you wouldn't miss for the world?

Ouch! If you're like me, I look at my list and cringe. I make excuses. "I need some relaxation time—some downtime. God wants me to take care of myself. My (fill in the blank) is a gift from God, and I want to be a good steward." All these things may be true, but it still comes down to priorities. Do you make God a priority in your life? How often do you find yourself taking God and your faith for granted? How easy is it for you to forget that your relationship with God takes effort just like any other relationship? Thank God that He forgives us through Jesus when we put that relationship on the "back burner."

I am in a faith relationship with God, and I've known it for a long time. But it's not easy to explain exactly what that means to me. I believe in a God who loved me so much that He sent His only Son whom He dearly loved to die a horrible death on the cross so that I may be His own on earth and live eternally with Him in heaven. Even though my heart sometimes gets sidetracked by meaningless diversions, I know with all of my being that God loves and cares for me. I know this "knowledge" at a deeper level than I know any other fact I might be able to prove in a scientific manner. This "knowledge" forms a core part of my being; indeed, I can't perceive me being "me" without it.

I base this knowledge on a trust unlike any other trust relationship in my life. This trust is difficult to explain. Some would say it doesn't make sense, especially in the eyes of the world. My solid trust does not depend on what I know in my brain but rather on what seems to be rooted in my heart. The roots of this trust are firmly entrenched and reach deep into my being. It is not invincible, but it is resistant to disease. Most of all, I do not base my trust on anything I have done. It seems to thrive in spite of myself.

THE CONCEPT OF TRUST

When some people look at trust, they see it as something a person does, something that is self-initiated, something I *do*. There are some people I trust; however, that trust usually depends on their past performance. I trust my husband to be faithful to our marriage vows. He has never given me reason to doubt him. But I suppose that could change if circumstances were to change. For 20-some years I trusted my father to be all that God wanted him to be as a husband and father. He had always modeled the Christian life to his family, his neighbors, and his congregation. But that changed when he strayed from his marriage vows. Then I no longer trusted him.

When looking at trust this way, the concept of trust as a synonym for faith is weak. I choose to trust my husband, and that trust is based on both of our behaviors. My trust could easily break down if I happen to misinterpret events even if he has done nothing to break the trust. I can choose to trust or mistrust someone based on the way I choose to interpret events.

If one defines faith as trust, we must approach it differently. The Bible tells me that faith comes through the Holy Spirit; I can do nothing to initiate it on my own. Yet investigate the word *faith* and you'll find that it comes from the Latin word *fidere*, which means "to trust." Where is the source of this trust?

Many people have tried to discover precisely where faith begins. There are several theories. Two key components of faith dominate these debates: knowledge and trust.

Some people believe that faith begins with knowledge. In the Christian faith, this knowledge comes from hearing the Word of God. In His Word we discover all that God has done for us. He created and preserves us. He sent His Son to atone for our sins and promises eternal life to all believers. Through the Gospel (this Good News) the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens faith in the Christian's heart. The individual could choose to reject this work of the Spirit, but when the Spirit is not rejected, faith grows. The Christian hears God's Word and trusts it through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Other people reverse the components of faith. They believe that trust is the beginning of faith. God the Holy Spirit plants the trust in the heart of the believer. Once that trust is acknowledged, the believer seeks more understanding of this reliance and strives to

WHAT IS FAITH?

build the base of knowledge. Faith can begin at any age; however, some think the idea of faith beginning with trust can best be explained by looking at a young child. An infant experiences trust when her parents consistently provide for her needs. Trust appears to develop before knowledge. Consider also a person who has just fallen in love. In love at first sight, young people fall in “love” without knowing the object of their desire very well. But an important part of being in love anticipates discovering all there is to know about the beloved. The same might be said of the new believer in Christ. Trust can exist without a broad base of biblical knowledge. Trust results in an intense search to deepen the relationship by getting to know more about God the Lover.

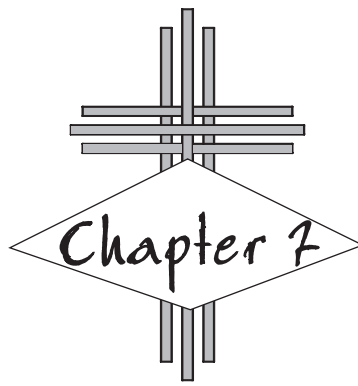
HEAD VS. HEART?

We often talk about head knowledge versus heart knowledge. The idea of trust (heart) versus knowledge (head) seems to fit right into the debate. Heart knowledge reveals the relationship we have with our God. Head knowledge reflects the content of our faith. Which is more important?

All people are an interesting blend of intellect and emotion in an infinite variety of combinations. Some people operate on their feelings while others base decisions on logical explanations. Although most individuals have a dominant way of looking at the world, a few are so strong on one side or the other that they never consider the weaker area. When the combination of intellect and emotion is totally one-sided, the effect can adversely impact the person's life.

People perceive a person with all intellect and no emotion as cold and uncaring. His life is based on reason, and if reason can't answer the question, he discards the question. Apply this to the spiritual side of life. A person might have extensive knowledge of the Bible and the attributes of God and yet have no commitment to the Christian faith. This type of knowledge alone does not lead to salvation.

All emotion and no knowledge, on the other hand, leads to a shallow understanding of God and His plan for people. When challenged, this person's faith has little to fall back on. Just as the seed sown on the path was trampled and eaten by birds, a lack of head knowledge provides no anchor for the storms of life. See Luke 8:5–15.



Faith of Elementary Children

***B**efore you read this chapter, review the Publisher's Preface. As you design learning experiences, remember that you can provide the context for faith to begin and grow. Only God can provide the power for that growth.*

We often refer to grades four, five, and six as the elementary years. Students in these grades are usually 9–12 years old, which is the period some call the preteen years. Children of this age like to keep busy. The organized, motivating teacher directs their energy into worthwhile projects. When this energy isn't tapped into interesting endeavors, chaos can rule.

While most 8-year-olds have a love of learning, many 11-year-olds consider school, or at least certain subjects, boring. Students who struggle with academics may make fun of their more able classmates and label them “nerds.” Some students are no longer concerned that the teacher likes them. Pleasing an authority figure has fallen in importance to pleasing oneself and one's peers. Sometimes intentionally irritating the teacher is the criteria for peer esteem.

By fourth grade, most children are quite aware of male-female differences, and some are already fascinated by these distinctions. Girls are growing at a different rate than boys. It's not unusual for preteen girls to be taller and heavier than preteen boys. Some of the girls have already hit puberty, which often reduces the boys to hysterics and bathroom jokes. Girls will look at these immature boys with disdain and pass notes complaining about them. At the same time, the girls begin to get more interested in the opposite sex and pass notes with a simple message to the favored few. The message often reads, “Check *yes* if you like me, *no* if you don't.”

How does an adult best relate to the elementary-aged student? How can a teacher build a positive relationship and yet still clearly be in charge? What can a teacher expect of these preteens anyway? They seem like such a contradiction in terms. What is typical pre-teen behavior, and how does a teacher deal with inconsistencies?

THE FOURTH GRADER

Jonna came home from her first day of fourth grade with a pout on her lips and a strategic tear rolling past her freckles. "Mom," she begged, "call Mrs. Folsom and tell her to move me into the other class." After some discussion as to why a phone call to the principal might be necessary, Mom finally figured out the problem. Jonna had been best friends with Carrie all through third grade. Now Carrie was in the other fourth grade class, and she chose to eat lunch with Brittney instead of Jonna. Jonna admitted that she had originally wanted to be in Mr. Street's class, but now that didn't seem so important. What she really wanted was not to lose her best friend.

By mid-November, Jonna had adjusted to being in a different class than Carrie. They still played together both during and after school, but Jonna realized she also enjoys the company of Nikki. Jonna, Nikki, Carrie, Brittney, and Laura all play on the same softball team. They spend the night at each others' homes and giggle late into the night. One night Brittney confided that her mom had bought her a bra. Jonna went home the next day and asked her mother if she could have a bra, too. Her mom valiantly stifled her laughter and asked the nine-year-old to write down all the reasons she wanted a bra. Jonna listed: (1) Brittney wears a bra. She stared at her paper for about 10 minutes and then crumpled it up and threw it away.

Although Jonna is slender, she is one of the tallest students in the class. She hates it when the boys call her "Stringbean." In the 4A vs. 4B softball game, she hit a grand slam home run; now some of the kids call her "Slugger."

Jonna's biggest challenge this year has been learning long multiplication. There are a few facts that simply elude her. When Mr. Street announced that no calculators were allowed unless he handed them out, she felt he was being unfair. After all, her father worked with a calculator all the time, and he got paid for it. But