

Christian Formation from A to G

Unlike the steps of a ladder or a staircase. . . the steps of our lives are much better imagined as steps in a dance, where there is movement backward and forward, turn and return, bending and bowing, circling and spiraling, and no need to finish or move on to the next step, except in our own good time, and God's.

—*Maria Harris, Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Stages of Women's Spirituality (New York: Bantam, 1991), xii.*

A for AGES (and stages)

In a pediatrician's office, it is typical to see a growth chart depicting developmental milestones from birth to age six. At each age and stage of a child's growth, there are developmental markers of physical, mental, social, and emotional health. Based on years of medical research, we've come to rely on these markers as indicators of a child's well-being. For example, we know when to expect a typical child to crawl and roll, or scribble with a crayon, or say her first words. We know that one cry represents a child's need for a diaper change, while a different cry communicates hunger.

Above a teacher's desk, there often is another kind of developmental chart. This one plots out the milestones of learning. Social scientists study children's progress from one grade level to the next and look for patterns in how they acquire knowledge, understanding, and reasoning. Learning theories influence the way we teach, not only in schools, but also in the church. For example, a young teen understands the use of metaphor and can appreciate what it means to say, "God is my rock." A preschool child is likely to pick up a literal rock and have no clue what it holds in common with God.

In the same way that social science has mapped our human development, there are studies of our spiritual development to determine the milestones of our growth in faith. The most famous of these studies is James Fowler's work, *Stages of Faith*, published in 1981. In 1986, Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks edited, *Faith Development and Fowler*, which presents a balanced critique of Fowler's research. Their collection of essays seems unified in concluding that while there are benefits to aligning our spiritual growth to changes in our physical or mental capacity, there are significant limitations to charting a stair-step approach to the work of the Spirit in our lives.

From a similar perspective, Christian educator and author, Maria Harris, encourages us to imagine our growth in faith more like the steps in a dance and less like steps up a ladder or staircase. In this dance, “there is movement backward and forward, turn and return, bending and bowing, circling and spiraling, and no need to finish or move on to the next step, except in our own good time, and God’s.”¹

B for BAPTISM

When Presbyterians baptize a newborn child, we enact a response to God’s claim on our lives. Baptism is a way of acting out our belief that God’s grace is at work even before we have the capacity to understand the meaning of salvation. In presenting a child for baptism, a family joins with the whole congregation to profess, “we belong to God.” Baptism begins a lifelong journey of discovering God’s purpose for our lives. The response we offer to God is both individual and communal, which is why the covenant (the promises we make) of baptism involves the whole church. Each member of the family who stands with a child, along with every member of the congregation, shares in guiding the baptized child in her or his Christian growth. Just like Jesus, a child matures, “growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people” (Luke 2:52).

C for CHRISTIAN

The New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us about the life of Jesus, of his suffering on the cross, and of his death and resurrection. Following the resurrection of our Lord, Mark’s Gospel tells us that “he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19). As Christians, we believe that the birth, life, death, and ascension of Christ are compelling evidence of God’s desire to be in relationship with us. Being “Christian” means patterning our lives after the example and teaching of Christ and to accept the Word of God as authoritative in ordering all of creation. While we have an active role in moving toward God’s purpose for our lives, we believe that it is the Holy Spirit who is God’s instrument of transformation. We are being “transformed into Christ’s image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

D for DISCIPLESHIP

Discipleship is about intentional relationships. To “disciple” another person is to be a spiritual mentor, walking alongside others who desire to follow Christ’s pattern for life. The Greek word, μαθητής (*mathētēs*), which is translated as “disciple,” comes from the New Testament and is most often used to designate Jesus’ followers. A disciple is a student, apprentice, or adherent, who receives instruction and guidance. The teacher or mentor equips, encourages, and challenges the disciple to grow toward maturity in Christ. Discipleship is joining together in God’s mission to share the hope we have in Christ through acts of mercy and justice.

1. Maria Harris, *Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Stages of Women’s Spirituality* (New York: Bantam, 1991), xii.

E for EDUCATION

Education is a process of receiving instruction. Often we associate education with the organized learning that takes place in a secondary school or college. The most meaningful approaches to education involve student-to-student interactions, as well as teacher-to-student interactions. *Christian* education is a process of receiving instruction in which the teacher and students learn together what it means to live and grow as Christ's disciples.

“Christian education today begins with someone telling a Bible story and then asking powerful questions. Can we love as Jesus loved? Does God ask me to be obedient like Abram and Sarai? Are we called to feed Christ's sheep? If so, what does this mean for us? The model of teaching is Jesus' model, but Jesus also taught while he healed the sick or as he moved away from the crowd to pray. We learn through his example and by our own experience.

“Christian education in its best form focuses on the result. Churches help individuals know what it means to be a Christian, guide people to tell God's story in relation to their own story, and prepare members to hear God's call to go and serve. Congregations help learners hunger for faith-filled conversations around Scripture and lives of faithful action.”²

F for FORMATION

Formation means to form, to shape, or to mold. In many respects “education” and “formation” are synonymous, but because we often link “education” to a curricular approach to learning, the church has shifted to the language of “formation” to increase our awareness of the many and varied contexts in which we learn and grow as Christ's disciples. “Christian Formation” does not happen in a cocoon. We grow in faith together with the whole family of God. We are formed through our participation in worship and celebration of the sacraments, through our community service and world missions, through our mistakes as well as our triumphs, through prayer and Bible reading, through sharing our faith and listening to the faith stories of others. Central to our Christian formation is a God-initiated relationship with Christ made alive in us by the Holy Spirit.

2. “What is Christian education?” on the Presbyterian Mission Agency website, <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/theology-formation-and-evangelism/curriculum/ideas-magazine/what-christian-education/>

G for GROWTH

The patterns of growth in our spiritual development look different from the patterns of growth in our human development. We cannot measure the impact of the Holy Spirit in our lives the same way we measure our physical, emotional, or cognitive development, and yet we can look for signs of spiritual depth and maturing. The milestones that mark our growth in faith are fluid, ebbing, and flowing throughout our lives, rather than fixed locations at specific ages or stages in our human development

In one sense, we might look at the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation as our map for spiritual development. Our spiritual journey begins at Creation and extends through to our destination in God's eternal home. Between our beginning and our end, there are milestones that mark our spiritual growth—an increase in our capacity to love, a hunger to learn from God's Word, and our transformation into the likeness of Christ. Spiritual milestones might be repeated in our lives. For example, the capacity to love or to learn from God's Word will look different for a five-year-old than it does for a fifteen-year-old, a fifty-year-old, or a ninety-year-old!

Christian educator, Maria Harris, wisely taught her students that faith should be an artistic process in which “the outcome, the endpoint, is not known.”³In other words, the map of our spiritual growth is not drawn as a straight line or a stairstep from Point A to Point B. The people of Israel on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land are a perfect illustration of faith's nonlinear trajectory. They traveled in the wilderness for 40 years—sometimes wandering in circles, sometimes climbing mountains, sometimes walking through desert, sometimes weary, and sometimes partying wildly.

The same is true for Christians in the 21st century. When we look at congregations in our own time, we see that spiritual vitality is sometimes robust and sometimes waning. Sometimes the church has a clear sense of mission, and at others times the church is divided in its sense of where God is calling. Like Israel, sometimes we wander in the wilderness before we reach God's promised destination. Even Jesus spent some time in the wilderness before God opened the way for him to begin his earthly ministry. We cannot perfectly map our growth in faith, but we can perfectly trust that God is with us every step of the journey.

3. Maria Harris, *Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Stages of Women's Spirituality* (New York: Bantam, 1991), xii.

Questions for Further Reflection

- When have you noticed spiritual growth in your own life?
- How do you understand the difference between spiritual growth that progresses in stairstep fashion and spiritual growth in which there is “no need to finish or move on to the next step, except in our own good time, and God’s”?
- What meaning does baptism hold for you? What could your church do better to celebrate baptism as an experience for the whole congregation?
- What Bible story holds special meaning for you because of a connection you see in your own life?

Writer: Tammy Weins
Copy Editor: J.Mark Stewart
Designer: Rebecca Kueber

Spanish Translation: Stephanie Vasquez
Promotion: Emily Odom
Project Manager: Gina Yeager-Buckley

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