

**James W. Fowler's Stages of Faith
and Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Gefuehl*
as Spiritual Transcendance:
An Evangelical Rethinking of Fowler's
Model of Faith Development**

Timothy P. Jones

Senior Pastor

First Baptist Church of Rolling Hills

Tulsa, Oklahoma 74108

The task of the Christian theologian has been described as *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”). Alongside—perhaps even prior to—the task described by Augustine and Anselm, a second task, less obvious but equally vital, also occurs.¹ This correlative pursuit may be summarized as *quaerens intellegere fidem* (“seeking to understand faith”). The task of *fides quaerens intellectum* is a prescriptive task that seeks to answer the question: “*What* should a Christian believe?” This task presupposes the presence of Christian faith and is primarily concerned with its proper content. The task that this research refers to as *quaerens intellegere fidem* is a descriptive task that seeks to answer the question: “*How* does a Christian believe?” This task concerns circumstances not only preceding but also succeeding Christian faith and is concerned with the structural-developmental features of Christian formation.

Despite the importance of the latter task, contemporary evangelicalism has granted scant attention to *quaerens intellegere fidem*. A perusal of current evangelical interests reveals an abundance of studies articulating the content and external consequences of faith, coupled with a scarcity of studies that grapple with the structural-developmental processes by which faith develops.² Evangelical theological works may,

¹ It is acknowledged that a lengthy development in the church's understanding of “faith” occurred between Augustine of Hippo, Anselm of Canterbury, and modern structural-developmental models of faith. See e.g. A. Fitzgerald, *Augustine Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 347–48, and J. Healey, “Faith, O.T.,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* vol. 2 (ed. D. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 744. This development, however, stands beyond the scope of this study.

² See e.g. Sally Stuart, *Christian Writers' Market Guide* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Shaw, 2003). The most popular topics in the evangelical book market are

in their expositions of the *ordo salutis*, articulate carefully the process by which faith begins while virtually ignoring the specific structural processes by which faith develops.³ As a result, the prevailing models for the structural-developmental study of faith have emerged not from evangelicalism but from mainline Protestant theology and the social sciences. In the opening decade of the twenty-first century, the social-scientific model proposed by James W. Fowler in the early 1980s remains a dominant paradigm for faith-development studies.

The overarching goal of this research is to contribute to the construction of a structural-developmental model of Christian formation that is biblical in its basis and evangelical in its orientation. The specific, twofold purpose of this study is (1) to determine the most appropriate theological category for the phenomenon to which James W. Fowler referred as “faith,” and (2) building on this determination, to clarify the most appropriate function for Fowler’s research in an evangelical model of faith-development.

Research Overview

Following a brief survey of the essence of Fowler’s understanding of faith, this study will suggest that the theological concept that relates most closely to Fowler’s “faith” is not faith but the phenomenon described by the nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher as *das schlechthinnigen Abhängigkeitsgefuehl* (“the awareness of absolute dependence,” hereafter referred to as the *Gefuehl*). After delineating six specific points of contact between Fowler’s “faith” and Schleiermacher’s *Gefuehl*, the study will conclude with a recommendation for the most appropriate function of Fowler’s stages in evangelical theology, utilizing as a paradigm the function of the *sensus divinitatis* (“sense of divinity”) in the theology of John Calvin.

“Faith” in Fowler’s Model

The genesis of James W. Fowler’s structural-developmental model may be traced to interviews that he conducted in the 1970s at a spiritual retreat center in North Carolina. During these interviews, Fowler observed the presence of a common psycho-spiritual developmental phenomenon—which he identified as “faith”—in subjects’ retellings of their spiritual journeys.⁴ Fowler described this phenomenon as follows:

“inspirational” and “spirituality.” Topics such as “discipleship,” “faith,” and “Christian education” do not even appear in the top ten.

³ See e.g. M. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 944–59; S. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman, 1994), 594–600; C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986), 324–27.

⁴ J. Fowler and S. Keen, *Life Maps* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1978), 16.

a disposition of the total self to the total environment in which a trust and loyalty are invested in a center or centers of value and power which give order and coherence to the force-field of life, which support and sustain (or qualify and relativize) our mundane and everyday commitments and trusts, combining to give orientation, courage, meaning, and hope to our lives, and, to unite us into communities of shared interpretation, loyalty, and trust.⁵

the person's or group's way of responding to transcendent value and power as perceived and grasped through forms of the cumulative tradition.⁶

During the late 1970s and the early 1980s, Fowler identified and empirically validated a succession of six distinct stages through which this phenomenon develops in individuals.

"Faith" and "Belief" in Fowler's Model

As he developed his model, James W. Fowler, relying heavily on the research of religious historian Wilfred Cantwell Smith, drew a sharp distinction between "faith" and "belief."⁷ According to Smith and Fowler, the term "belief" describes the acceptance of certain facts as true. To have "faith" is, on the other hand, to regard another person with a certain ultimate loyalty and to set one's heart on a relationship with that person. Faith implies, from the perspectives of Smith and Fowler, a personal engagement that requires no propositional assent, a means of knowing that neither necessitates nor implies agreement to any specific knowledge.⁸

The Concept of Faith in the New Testament

At this point, the reality to which Fowler referred as "faith" stands in stark discontinuity with the understanding of faith found in the New Testament. Faith, as presented in the New Testament, comprises two distinct but inseparable aspects. One aspect involves subjective commitment to the person of Jesus Christ; this commitment necessarily engenders obedience to God's self-revelation, perseverance in God's will, and charity toward God's people (John 3:36; Rom. 5:1-5; 1 Cor. 13:2; 1 John 3:10). The other aspect involves objective confidence in the

⁵ J. Fowler, *Trajectories in Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 137.

⁶ J. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 9.

⁷ Fowler, *Stages*, 9-13.

⁸ See e.g. W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 180-202; W. C. Smith, *Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them* (rev. ed.; Princeton: Princeton University, 1998), 5-6, 12, 61, 77, 108, 118.

conditions, promises, and events that constitute divine revelation, especially the events surrounding God's consummate self-revelation in Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:9; Heb. 11:3, 6; 1 John 5:1).⁹

According to the authors of the NT, if either aspect of Christian faith is compromised, the result is something other than Christian faith. According to the NT, to make an orthodox confession of faith without exhibiting a transformed life is to have a faith that is "dead" (Jas. 2:18-26). To exhibit subjective commitment to Jesus Christ without affirming specific, orthodox convictions concerning Jesus Christ is to be a "deceiver" and "antichrist" (1 John 1:18-22; 2 John 1:7).

Fowler's Model of Faith in an Evangelical Context

Despite the discontinuity between the presentation of faith in the NT and Fowler's model of faith, a host of evangelical theorists have sought ways in which Fowler's theory may be amended to coincide with an evangelical perspective. Perry Downs' perspective is typical:

Ultimately, evangelicals must offer an amended version of [Fowler's] stage descriptions and validate them empirically to make this theory more compatible with a distinctly biblical perspective. A more biblically derived version of the ultimate stages of faith would yield a theory more useful for our purposes, one that is exclusivistic in its orientation.¹⁰

What will be asserted here is that offering "an amended version" of Fowler's descriptions is not enough. Based not only on the present study but also on qualitative and quantitative research presented elsewhere, this researcher has concluded that the phenomenon described by Fowler as faith is *not* faith—at least not in the sense described in the NT.¹¹ With this in mind, what will be suggested here is that the theological category that most resembles Fowler's "faith" is not Christian faith but the *Gefuehl* of Friedrich Schleiermacher's theology.

⁹ For a fuller exploration of these themes, see T. Jones, "The Necessity of Objective Assent in the Act of Christian Faith," in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (forthcoming, 2005).

¹⁰ P. Downs, "The Power of Fowler," in *Nurture That is Christian* (ed. J.C. Wilhoit and J.M. Dettoni; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 84.

¹¹ T. Jones, "An Analysis of the Relationship Between Fowlerian Stage Development and Self-Assessed Maturity in Christian Faithfulness Among Evangelical Christians" (Ed.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003); T. Jones, "The Basis of James W. Fowler's Understanding of Faith in the Research of Wilfred Cantwell Smith," in *Religious Education* (forthcoming, 2004).

Fowler's "Faith" and Schleiermacher's *Gefuehl*: A Comparative Analysis

Before articulating the common threads that tie together Fowler's "faith" and Schleiermacher's *Gefuehl*, a brief overview of Schleiermacher's theology will be helpful.

Overview of Schleiermacher's Theology

Often termed "the father of Protestant Liberalism," Schleiermacher elevated "intuition and awareness" (*Anschauung und Gefuehl*) from the position of an existential response of the individual to the position of theological paradigm.¹² In Schleiermacher's thought, the essence of faith may not be located in any reality external to the believing subject (such as, e.g. the Scriptures or the historical person of Jesus Christ). The "core of religion" is, rather, the subjectivized awareness (*Gefuehl*) of one's dependence on an overarching transcendent reality; this subjective awareness is present in varying levels of intensity in all people and ties together all religious experiences. The *Gefuehl* develops in three distinct stages.¹³ The phenomenon is not distinctively Christian; it is a universal awareness of the infinite and eternal dimensions that undergird all of life. Through this awareness, persons gain "a sense and taste for the Infinite" and experience "the universal being of all things in and through the Infinite."

Points of Contact Between "Faith" and Gefuehl

Although their terminologies differed, Schleiermacher and Fowler devised strikingly similar visions of spiritual development. Schleiermacher's *Gefuehl* and the reality to which Fowler has referred as faith are substantively identical in at least six key areas.

First, Schleiermacher's *Gefuehl* and Fowler's "faith" represent a series of human responses to that which exhibits infinite or transcendent value. For Schleiermacher, the *Gefuehl* was the means by which persons experience and respond to that which holds infinite value.¹⁴ Similarly, for

¹² F. Cross and E. Livingstone, eds. "Schleiermacher, Friedrich," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3d ed; New York: Oxford University, 1997), 1463-64.

¹³ F. Schleiermacher, *Die christliche Sitten nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhang dargestellt* (Berlin: Reimer, 1843), 5:1-3; 34:1 (hereafter, e.g. *Glaubenslehre* 5:1-3; 34:1). See also C. Christian, *Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979), 67, 83-84; F. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (trans. J. Oman; New York: Harper, 1958), 208-09, 276.

¹⁴ M. Redeker, *Schleiermacher: Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 42; Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 79, 82, 93.

Fowler, faith represents “the person’s or group’s way of responding to transcendent value and power.”¹⁵

Second, Schleiermacher’s *Gefuehl* and Fowler’s “faith” are transcognitive phenomena—that is, they describe an experience of the transcendent realm that goes beyond cognitive assent. Both Schleiermacher and Fowler clearly separated the content of faith—“dogmatic propositions” (Schleiermacher) and “beliefs” (Fowler)—from the individual’s experience of the transcendent realm. In both cases, the result is an understanding of the spiritual life that regards every expression of faith or religiosity as a relative apprehension of a single transcendent reality.¹⁶

Third, although neither Schleiermacher’s *Gefuehl* nor Fowler’s “faith” requires specific knowledge, each one describes the way in which persons structure their knowledge to make sense out of their life-experiences. In other words, while neither Fowler’s “faith” nor Schleiermacher’s *Gefuehl* determines the content of an individual’s beliefs, these phenomena do comprise the structure within which those beliefs develop¹⁷—the structure by which, to utilize Schleiermacher’s categories, an individual’s internal knowledge (*Insichbleiben*, “abiding-in-self”) develops into a pattern of external actions (*Aussichheraustreten*, “passing-beyond-self”).¹⁸ The result is a way of knowing that does not require specific knowledge.¹⁹

Fourth, Schleiermacher’s *Gefuehl* and Fowler’s “faith” represent a universal experience, rooted in human nature. According to Fowler, faith is “a universal human concern,” “an essential human quality,” “an apparently genetic consequence of the universal burden of finding or making meaning,” and “a generic *human* phenomenon—a way of leaning

¹⁵ Fowler, *Stages*, 9.

¹⁶ C. Christian, “The Concept of Life After Death in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Tillich” (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1965) 205–06; Christian, *Schleiermacher*, 78; *Glaubenslehre* 3:4, 15:1-16:2; Fowler, *Stages*, 11–15, 119–21, 205–09.

¹⁷ Downs, “Power of Fowler,” 76; J. Fernhout, “Where is Faith?” in *Faith Development and Fowler* (ed. C. Dykstra and S. Parks; Birmingham: Religious Education, 1986) 69; J. Fowler, “Faith and the Structuring of Meaning,” in *Faith Development and Fowler* (ed. C. Dykstra and S. Parks; Birmingham: Religious Education, 1986) 25–26; J. Fowler, “Faith, Liberation, and Human Development,” in *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development* (ed. J. Astley and L. Francis; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 11–12; *Glaubenslehre* 3:3; Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 82.

¹⁸ *Glaubenslehre* 3:3; Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 82.

¹⁹ Christian, “The Concept,” 205–06; Fowler, *Stages*, 11; J. Fowler, “Dialogue Toward a Future in Faith Development Studies,” in *Faith Development and Fowler* (ed. C. Dykstra and S. Parks; Birmingham: Religious Education, 1986) 278; Fowler, “Faith, Liberation, and Human Development,” 11.

into or meeting life."²⁰ Similarly, the *Gefuehl* is "a universal element of life. . . . It does not rest upon any particular modification of human nature but upon the absolutely general nature of humanity."²¹

Fifth, Schleiermacher's *Gefuehl* and the reality to which Fowler refers as "faith" develop in stages that become increasingly open to that which is "other"—i.e. to that which is unlike oneself and to the ultimate reality that is "Wholly Other."²² According to Fowler, advanced development according to his stages "generates and maintains vulnerability to the strange truths of those who are 'other.' [It becomes] ready for closeness to that which is different."²³ This vulnerability involves an increasing openness to ultimate, transcendent value.²⁴ Likewise, for Schleiermacher, an essential element of the *Gefuehl* is the individual's awareness of a "coexistence with the Other"; this awareness grows through increasing reciprocity between the human subject and "the corresponding Other."²⁵ Those that attain the highest developmental stage of Schleiermacher's *Gefuehl* have learned to synthesize their awareness of their unity with others with their awareness of themselves in contrast to others.²⁶

Finally, Schleiermacher's *Gefuehl* and Fowler's "faith" both develop in stages that become increasingly communal. For example, at the second stage of the development of the *Gefuehl* and at Fowler's Synthetic-Conventional Stage (Stage 3), the individual becomes conscious of herself in contrast to her context.²⁷ This self-awareness creates new possibilities for the individual's involvement in particular groups.²⁸ In more advanced stages, Schleiermacher's *Gefuehl* and Fowler's "faith" enable individuals to become simultaneously aware of their places in

²⁰ Fowler, *Stages*, xiii, 5, 33; J. Fowler, "Stages of Faith: Reflections on a Decade of Dialogue," in *Christian Education Journal* 13 (1992): 13–24; J. Fowler and A. Vergote, *Toward Moral and Religious Authority* (Morristown: Silver Burdett, 1980) 52; Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 129. Cf. D. Hay and R. Nye, *Spirit of the Child* (Loveland: Fount, 1998) 10.

²¹ *Glaubenslehre* 33:1.

²² Cf. E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (trans. O. Wyon; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950) 158; S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (trans. W. Lowrie; Princeton: Princeton University, 1941) 207.

²³ Fowler, *Stages*, 198; see also G. Allport and J. Ross, "Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice," in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 5 (1967): 434–35; A. Black, "The Impact of Theological Orientation and of Breadth of Perspective on Church Members' Attitudes and Behaviors," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24 (1985): 93; C. Green and C. Hoffman, "Stages of Faith and Perceptions of Similar and Dissimilar Others," in *Review of Religious Research* 30 (1989): 247–53.

²⁴ Fowler, *Stages*, 9.

²⁵ *Glaubenslehre* 4:1–2.

²⁶ Christian, *Schleiermacher*, 83–84; *Glaubenslehre* 5:1–3.

²⁷ *Glaubenslehre* 5:1–3; Fowler, *Stages*, 153; see also Christian, *Schleiermacher*, 83–84.

²⁸ Fowler, *Stages*, 172.

particular faith-communities and in the universal community of humanity.²⁹ As the *Gefuehl* develops, persons become increasingly communal and more aware of their places “in a universal nature-system.”³⁰ Likewise, at Fowler’s Universalizing Stage (Stage 6), the individual becomes keenly cognizant of his or her vocation within the “universal community” of humanity.³¹

*Schleiermacher’s Gefuehl and Fowler’s “Faith”
as Spiritual Transcendence*

After considering the close correspondence between Schleiermacher’s *Gefuehl* and Fowler’s “faith,” it seems that both thinkers were describing a single phenomenon—Schleiermacher, from a theological perspective, and Fowler, from a structural-developmental perspective. The term that I have chosen to denote the phenomenon mutually described by Fowler as “faith” and by Schleiermacher as *Gefuehl* is “spiritual transcendence.”³² The operative definition of spiritual transcendence in this study is as follows: It is the sequence of human responses to transcendent reality by which individuals become increasingly aware of and open to that which is sacred or “other.”³³ (One wonders if this sequence is also the phenomenon that David Hay, in his seminal study of children’s spirituality, has referred to as “relational consciousness” and has defined as the awareness “that there is something Other, something greater than the course of everyday events.”³⁴) If indeed Schleiermacher’s *Gefuehl* and Fowler’s “faith” correspond to the phenomenon described here as spiritual transcendence, the evangelical theorist is compelled to ask, “What part should spiritual transcendence play in evangelical theology and education?”

²⁹ See e.g., Christian, *Schleiermacher*, 67, 84.

³⁰ *Glaubenslehre* 34:1; see also Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 208–09, 276; *Glaubenslehre* 5:1–3.

³¹ Fowler, *Stages*, 15, 23, 205.

³² This term has been derived from R. Piedmont, “Does Spirituality Represent the Sixth Factor of Personality?” in *Journal of Personality* 67 (1999): 985–1013. Piedmont’s research defines spiritual transcendence as “a fundamental capacity of the individual” that involves “connection with a larger sacredness.”

³³ Fowler, *Stages*, cover, 9–13. For one’s relationship with that which is “other” as essential to spirituality, see E. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (trans. B. Bergo; Stanford: Stanford University, 1998); E. Levinas, *God, Death, and Time* (trans. B. Bergo; Stanford: Stanford University, 2000). The essence of Levinas’s philosophy was “to see the face of God in the face of the other.”

³⁴ Hay and Nye, *Spirit*, 54. Hay offers this description of the developmental possibilities inherent in relational consciousness: “Each of us has the potential to be more deeply aware of ourselves and of our intimate relationship with everything that is not ourselves” (Hay and Nye, *Spirit*, 9).

The Place of Spiritual Transcendence in Evangelical Theology

What will be proposed in the remainder of this paper is that the function of the *sensus divinitatis* ("sense of divinity") in Calvin's theology provides a paradigm for the most adequate function of spiritual transcendence in evangelical theology. This is not to say that the *sensus* of Calvin's theology is identical to the *Gefuehl* of Schleiermacher's theology or to the reality to which Fowler referred as "faith." (The phenomena do seem to be conceptually related, but Calvin's derivation of his anthropological categories from Plato and Aristotle³⁵ did not allow for a transcognitive developmental phenomenon such as Schleiermacher's *Gefuehl* or Fowler's "faith.") It is, rather, to say that the most appropriate functions of the two phenomena in their respective contexts are analogous.

**The Function of the *Sensus Divinitatis*
in the Theology of John Calvin**

In the theology of John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis* is a natural instinct, universally present in every human being. The *sensus* arises from the divine imprint of *conscientia* ("conscience") upon the human intellect and discloses to humanity that there is some deity (*esse aliquod Deum*) that created the cosmos.³⁶

This knowledge of a divine creator would have, apart from the primal fall (*si integer stetisset Adam*), led humanity into authentic knowledge of God.³⁷ The primal fall, however, so profoundly affected humanity that the awareness of God now available through the *sensus* is "transient and on the verge of vanishing," "confused" and clearly distinguishable from "the reverent devotion from which true religion is born."³⁸ Instead of leading humanity into authentic knowledge of God, this "meager taste of divinity" produces only momentary flashes of light, flashes that fade before the proper path is seen.³⁹ "We discern that there is a Deity," Calvin wrote, "then, we conclude that we must worship this Being, yet

³⁵ R. Muller, "Fides and Cognitio in Relation to the Problem of the Intellect and the Will," in *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 (1990): 212, 217.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae religionis* (1559 ed.), in *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia* (Brunswick: Schwetschke and Bruhn, 1863–1900) 1:3:1, 3; 1:6:1; 1:10:3; 2:6:1–4; 3:2:1 (hereafter, e.g. *Inst.* 1:3:1, 3; 1:6:1; 1:10:3; 2:6:1–4; 3:2:1). Cf. R. Zachman, "The Awareness of Divinity and the Knowledge of God," in *Revisiting the Past* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992) 136–38.

³⁷ *Inst.* 1:2:1; 1:15:7.

³⁸ *Inst.* 1:3:3; 1:4:4.

³⁹ *Inst.* 2:2:18.

our discernment fails before it determines who or what God is.”⁴⁰ At best, this discernment leads to recognition of divine wrath.⁴¹ For the pre-regenerate person, the result of this recognition is not repentance but rebellion. For this reason, Calvin could claim that, alone, the *sensus* produces only the vilest fruits.⁴²

For the individual who has exercised faith in Jesus Christ, however, the *sensus divinitatis* has a wholly different function: The amorphous awareness of divinity that once led to idolatry becomes *knowledge of God*—which is to say, for Calvin, *faith in God*—as the gracious creator.⁴³ “For the godly, the dispositional response elicited by this doctrine is joy”—joy at the presence of divine grace in the individual’s life long before the individual was willing or able to recognize it as grace.⁴⁴ In this way, what once served as the foundation of condemnation is transformed into a fount of worship and adoration.

The *sensus divinitatis* is, therefore, simultaneously *necessary* for knowledge of God and, yet, *not descriptive* of this knowledge. The *sensus* cannot describe the knowledge of God because, apart from the knowledge of Jesus Christ as divine redeemer, the *sensus* only leads individuals deeper into idolatry. At the same time, the *sensus* is necessary for the knowledge of God because it is the universal means by which persons experience an initial awareness of a higher power in which they may believe. The knowledge of God has its basis in the *sensus*, but, prior to faith, it remains only potential knowledge, with a wholly negative function.⁴⁵ Building on this formulation, one might state that the *sensus* provides the *context* for the knowledge of God but that

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Commentarii*, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia* (Brunswick: Schwetschke and Bruhn, 1863–1900) Rom 1:20 (hereafter, e.g. *Comm. Rom* 1:20).

⁴¹ *Inst.* 1:3:3.

⁴² *Inst.* 1:4:1–4. At this point, Calvin’s understanding of the *sensus* and *conscientia* departed from the Scholastic theologians. According to the Scholastics, following the dictates of *conscientia* and *sensus* could lead to a full life, lacking only the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. For Calvin, it was precisely the theological virtues that made life full. Apart from faith in Jesus Christ, no fullness of life is possible—only the rebellion and idolatry (A. Verhey, “Natural Law in Aquinas and Calvin,” in *God and the Good* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 82; cf. W. Klempa, “Calvin on Natural Law,” in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform* [ed. T. George; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990], 84; J. McNeill, “Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers,” in *The Journal of Religion* 26 [1946]: 180).

⁴³ *Inst.* 1:2:1; 2:6:1; see *Inst.* 3:2:7, 19.

⁴⁴ S. Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 29–31.

⁴⁵ *Inst.* 2:2:18; cf. *Inst.* 1:4:2; 1:3:1; 1:6:1; 1:10:3; 2:6:1–4; 3:2:1; W. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford, 1988), 104; R. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 103, 137–38.

the *sensus* does not and cannot provide the *content* that comprises that knowledge.

Christian Faith and Spiritual Transcendence

Like the knowledge of God in Calvin's theology, Christian faith necessarily entails commitment to particular content and to a particular person; therefore, spiritual transcendence cannot be descriptive of Christian faith. At the same time, because Christian faith requires a precedent awareness of that which is "other," spiritual transcendence is necessary for Christian faith. In other words, the phenomenon of spiritual transcendence describes the context from which Christian faith emerges, but the contents and structures of the two phenomena remain fundamentally distinct.

It is now possible to return to the earlier question: "What part should spiritual transcendence play in evangelical theology?" The simplest paths are those of rejection or accommodation. Both paths are, however, problematic: To reject the cultivation of spiritual transcendence within the context of evangelical Christianity is to reject the contextual foundation from which Christian faith emerges. Yet, to accommodate either phenomenon to the other is to compromise the very content—whether the particularity of Christian faith or the universality of spiritual transcendence—that comprises the phenomenon's essential structure.

It is at this point that Calvin's perspective on the *sensus divinitatis* becomes crucial. Previous to authentic knowledge of God, the *sensus* has a wholly negative function, leading only to idolatry and condemnation. After the personal reception of divine grace, however, the *sensus* becomes an inner call to worship. Although the essential nature of the *sensus* remains the same, the function of the *sensus* is transformed. As such, whether the *sensus* is a positive or negative phenomenon depends not on the phenomenon itself but on the status of the individual with reference to the grace of God.

It is the contention of this researcher that contemporary evangelicals could view spiritual transcendence in similar terms. Prior to Christian faith, the cultivation of spiritual transcendence leads only to idolatrous allegiances. Whether to nature or to angels, to peace with oneself or to peace with others, such allegiances—apart from faith in Jesus Christ—endow penultimate entities with ultimate concern and, therefore, constitute idolatry.⁴⁶ Following the personal reception of divine grace,

⁴⁶ While interest in spiritual matters has increased in recent years, involvement in Christian community has decreased. For statistical descriptions of this phenomenon, see L. Sweet, *Post-modern Pilgrims* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 37–41; R. Cimino and D. Lattin, "Choosing My Religion" in *American Demographics* (April 1999): 64.

however, this longing to enter into vulnerable, existential encounter with that which is “other” becomes the inner compulsion that drives the believer toward deeper intimacy with God and others.⁴⁷ The *essence* of spiritual transcendence remains unchanged; however, through the event of Christian faith, the *function* of the phenomenon is transformed. Like the *sensus* of Calvin’s theology, whether spiritual transcendence functions positively or negatively depends not on the phenomenon itself but on the individual’s status with reference to God’s grace.

If this hypothesis is correct, a comprehensive understanding of Christian formation would entail the recognition and articulation not of one phenomenon but of two—Christian faith *and* spiritual transcendence. Christian faith represents the soteriological event and the sanctifying process, rooted in allegiance to a particular person and in assent to specific content, by which persons become conformed to the character of Jesus Christ. Spiritual transcendence represents the broader psychological context, with its own content and developmental structure, within which Christian faith emerges but from which faith remains distinct.

To reject spiritual transcendence because of its discontinuities with Christian faith is to diminish Christian development to the single phenomenon of faith. To accommodate either phenomenon to the other is to rob Christian development of its multidimensional richness. In both cases, without adequate recognition of the “other-awareness”⁴⁸ that emerges from deepening spiritual transcendence, it is my suggestion that Christian faith tends to become individualistic rather than communal, a habit of doing rather than a process of being, an exercise in cognitive reductionism rather than an existential encounter with triune mystery.

Foundational Thoughts for the Formation of an Evangelical Model of Christian Development

In sum, Fowler’s model does not depict Christian faith but spiritual transcendence, a phenomenon that is simultaneously *distinguishable* from yet *necessary* for Christian faith. As such, Fowlerian stage-development may neither be equated with Christian faith nor amended to correspond to Christian faith. An adequate, evangelical model of Christian development would require a structural-developmental model that recognizes, clarifies, and integrates both phenomena.

If these contentions are correct, perhaps evangelical faith-development theorists should rethink the current tendency of seeking either to adapt Fowler’s stages for evangelical usage or to replace Fowler’s stages with a developmental model that more clearly reflects

⁴⁷ Cf. Hay and Nye, *Spirit*, 113–14.

⁴⁸ See Jones, “An Analysis,” 9–10.

the contours of Christian faith. Perhaps the first item on the agenda should be, instead, to recognize the distinctive developmental features of each phenomenon and to articulate more clearly the relationship between them.