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Faith Journeys in the Lives of Baby Boomers

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

FAITH JOURNEYS IN THE LIVES OF BABY BOOMERS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

WILLIAM HENRY STEWART, JR.

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“What a long, strange trip it’s been...” I never did warm up to the music of the Grateful Dead, but that line from their song “Truckin’” has always stuck with me. Sometimes I am not sure how I ended up on this journey, and all I can say is that it is a “God thing.” I do not know what is next, but I know it will not be boring.

My wife Karen has been incredibly supportive even knowing how involved I can get in schoolwork to the exclusion of other parts of my life. She’s great at bringing me back to reality when I need it, and keeping me focused when I want to pursue “rabbit trails” that would take me way too far from the topic at hand. I love you Sweetheart!

My daughter Isabel (Izzy) has suffered through times of my writing when I was not there for her. I could not attend some of her events because I was facing a tight deadline. Thanks for putting up with the absences!

Dr. Michael Moore, a First (Old) Testament scholar, Semitic language expert, and a good friend, opened my eyes to the richness and depth of the wilderness accounts and the entirety of the Tanakh. He is one of those people who prod the Christian Church to reclaim the full Gospel, which starts from Creation rather than coming into existence *ex nihilo* at the birth of Jesus Christ. Some of Dr. Moore’s comments from classes of several years ago provided the initial idea to connect the Hebrew people’s journey from Egypt to the faith journeys of baby boomers.

My advisor, Dr. Carol Hutchinson, kept me on track with generous support and prodding. On several occasions, she asked for major rewrites of sections when I really did not want to do the work. The result is much better—the sections really needed rewrite.

Sometimes I joke that hanging around with Dr. Len Sweet and the LEC/SFS 7 cohort has made me “revolutionary.” Western Christianity is in a major transition and if we do not think radically, we will be in the part of the Christian Church that will vanish. Thanks for having me along for the journey and thanks for expanding my outlook many times. I am still working on being a better semiotician!

A number of people generously contributed their time for interviews and discussions that kept me focused or opened my eyes to different possibilities. They include Bill Burden, Debbie Cannon, Jamie Cronin, Gary Fluharty, Lorelei Hillman, Troy Miller, Crystal Miller, Joe Powers, John Rae, and one who wishes to remain anonymous.

Paul reminds us of the hope we have on the journey:

I’m absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us (Rom. 8:38-39 MSG).

ABSTRACT

Baby boomers are a cusp generation entering into the twenty-first century during the ending of the enlightenment era. As they enter different life stages and situations, baby boomers undergo changes in their faith. As supported in the biblical witness, faith is a journey with a trajectory that cannot be precisely defined or categorized. These elements support the premise of this work: *Christian faith is a journey for the baby boomer generation.*

Chapter 1 introduces the problem through baby boomer narratives, substantiated by statistical studies and sociological research. I establish that many current churches concentrate on salvation and the priestly role of Jesus Christ to the elimination of the rest of the Gospel and do not support growth in faith and Christ. In chapter 2, I present the biblical foundations of faith as a journey. God guided Abraham, the Hebrew people, and the prophets who gained strength in the wilderness as travelers who trusted in God. These themes continue in the New Testament through the teachings of Jesus and the faith journeys of Paul.

The third chapter presents faith journeys found in early Christian and medieval writings, pilgrimage accounts, and Augustine of Hippo. Those writers and pilgrims found God by not looking for him.

In chapter 4, I present the techniques found in James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* as a tool to analyze the faith movements of baby boomers. I discuss criticisms, strengths, and weaknesses in application. Additionally I analyze baby boomers that leave church using *Stages of Faith*.

Chapter 5 applies the results from earlier chapters to explore the journeys of baby boomers through interviews with the lens of *Stages of Faith*. The concluding chapter explores possible solutions in light of the inability of many churches to accommodate people on a faith journey or to establish vibrant Christian communities within the congregation.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Because I have become so disillusioned with the church in the last few months, even years, certainly in the last year, I would more shy away from calling myself a religious person because I have come to equate the church and religion.

—Todd Wright (pseudonym), interview with author, September 11, 2010

Identifying the Problem

A long-term follower of Christ and a very active participant in Christian church life said these words to me. The speaker, however, is not a Gen X-er, Gen Y-er, or a Millennial as might be expected. Rather the speaker is a baby boomer, born in the early 1950s.

Recently, baby boomer author Anne Rice made headlines when she “quit Christianity” and announced it on her Facebook page. Many media commentators stated, or suggested, that she was moving from a belief in Christ into agnosticism or atheism,¹ but consider what she said in a later post:

¹ For examples see “Anne Rice Leaves Christianity,” CNN Belief Blog, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/07/30/anne-rice-leaves-christianity/> (accessed September 19, 2010); Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Q & A: Anne Rice on Following Christ Without Christianity,” Christianity Today, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/augustweb-only/43-21.0.html> (accessed September 19, 2010); Jessie Kunhardt, “Anne Rice: ‘I Quit Being a Christian’,” The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/29/anne-rice-i-quit-being-a_n_663915.html (accessed September 19, 2010).

My faith in Christ is central to my life. My conversion from a pessimistic atheist lost in a world I didn't understand, to an optimistic believer in a universe created and sustained by a loving God is crucial to me. But following Christ does not mean following His followers. Christ is infinitely more important than Christianity and always will be, no matter what Christianity is, has been, or might become.²

Is Anne Rice no longer a follower of Christ, or is she simply no longer associated with a specific denomination?

Recently, I spoke with a parachurch ministry leader who shared the following story.³ He checked references for Joe, a potential hire into the organization. The leader received glowing references from numerous people who shared how Joe reached into the community, volunteered in “extreme” ministries, and embodied a personal walk with Christ. Then he called Joe’s pastor and heard a very different account. The pastor said he was unsure of Joe’s Christian walk because he saw Joe only during the weekly worship service and Joe rarely attended other church activities. Actually, Joe was busy in other areas of ministry beyond the church walls.

The pastor did not know Joe very well and, perhaps, did not understand that ministry and serving occurs beyond the boundaries of church buildings. He, like many church leaders, may experience severe myopia and cannot conceive of good things

² Anne Rice, “Important Information on Anne’s Decision to Quit Chirstianity in the Name of Christ,” <http://www.annerice.com> (accessed September 16, 2010).

³ Interview with a ministry leader, August 5, 2010.

happening in the world. Perhaps the pastor emphasized whatever church activities were on the calendar for that week. Like the two previous examples, Joe is a baby boomer.

The western Christian church is in trouble. Attendance is rapidly declining, and I believe the available statistics do not reveal the magnitude of the loss because many church leaders ignore the problem and mask the losses with misleading data. George Barna writes, “After nearly two decades of studying Christian churches in America, I’m convinced that the typical church as we know it today has a rapidly expiring shelf life.”⁴

Definitions

Christian Faith

Christian faith embraces the Nicene or Apostles’ Creed. The Apostles’ Creed begins:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; . . . ⁵

⁴ George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1998), 1.

⁵ Episcopal Church, *1979 Book of Common Prayer Readers Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 53-54.

The Nicene Creed conveys the same core beliefs with different words:

We believe in one God,
 the Father, the Almighty,
 maker of heaven and earth,
 of all that is, seen and unseen.
 We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
 the only Son of God, . . .⁶

For the purposes of this work, the definition of Christian faith is intentionally broad. A series of propositional statements cannot define the boundaries of Christian belief.⁷ A relationship with God and following Christ is more foundational than a precise adherence to a set of human generated statements.

Modernity and Postmodernity

Enlightenment thinking, also known as modernity or modernism, had its origins in the work of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant.⁸ Descartes started from a position of doubt and sought certainty at deeper and deeper levels. His breakthrough came when he formulated his famous phrase, “*Cogito ergo sum*,” or “I think, therefore I am.”⁹ He added a secondary argument that humans could not exist possessing the idea of God unless they

⁶ Ibid., 326-327.

⁷ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 170.

⁸ Craig A. Phillips, “Postmodernism,” in *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 4:296.

⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. “Descartes, René.”

derived their existence from God. Descartes' formulation interpreted Genesis 1:26, "So God created man in his own image," to mean that God gave people intellects in the image of God. Thus the modern age, or era of modernity, emphasizes "reason and individualism rather than tradition."¹⁰

Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodern¹¹ or emergent thinking as "incredulity towards metanarratives,' the grand totalizing narratives of modernity that include 'history' and 'progress.'"¹² Interpretation of narrative and story becomes localized, specific to a community. The philosophy rejects or offers a corrective to the perceived excesses of modernity. Modernity advocates claim to operate in a sphere of "scientific detachment" as rational observers, but actually assume an understanding of knowing that defines the desired objectives and the results achieved.

Polanyi argues for "*personal participation* of the knower in all acts of understanding."¹³ Walter Brueggemann states, "Christian interpretation in preaching and liturgy is *contextual, local, and pluralistic*."¹⁴ This definition implies a different lens for

¹⁰ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. "enlightenment."

¹¹ I do not differentiate between "postmodernism" and "post-post-modernism" in these definitions. The contrast between modernity and postmodernity is the important factor for this work.

¹² Philips, "Postmodernism," 4:299.

¹³ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), vii.

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 9.

reading Genesis 1: 27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.” In postmodernism, relationship (or the heart) is the key for people made in the image of God,¹⁵ as opposed to modernity in which knowledge (or the intellect) is the key.

Generational Labels

Figure 1 illustrates the United States birth rates from 1909 to 1999. Members of the Silent Generation, or Builders, were born between 1925 and 1945.¹⁶ Baby boomers, or boomers, were born during the 1946-1964 post-World War II birth surge, and the US Census Bureau adopted this definition.¹⁷ Generation X, Gen-X, or baby busters were born from 1965 to mid 1970s.¹⁸ Generation Y, Gen-Y, or Millennials follow the Gen-X group through the early 2000s.¹⁹

¹⁵ Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful, Divine Designs for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 132.

¹⁶ “The Younger Generation,” *Time* (Nov 5, 1951), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,856950,00.html> (accessed October 24, 2010).

¹⁷ United States Census Bureau, *Selected Characteristics of Baby Boomers 42 to 60 Years Old in 2006*, 2009, [http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/age/2006 Baby Boomers.pdf](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/age/2006%20Baby%20Boomers.pdf) (accessed October 24, 2010).

¹⁸ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Generation X.”

¹⁹ Ellen Neuborne and Kathleen Kerwin, “Generation Y,” *Business Week* (February 15, 1999), http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99_07/b3616001.htm (accessed October 23, 2010).

US Birth Rates per 1,000 Population

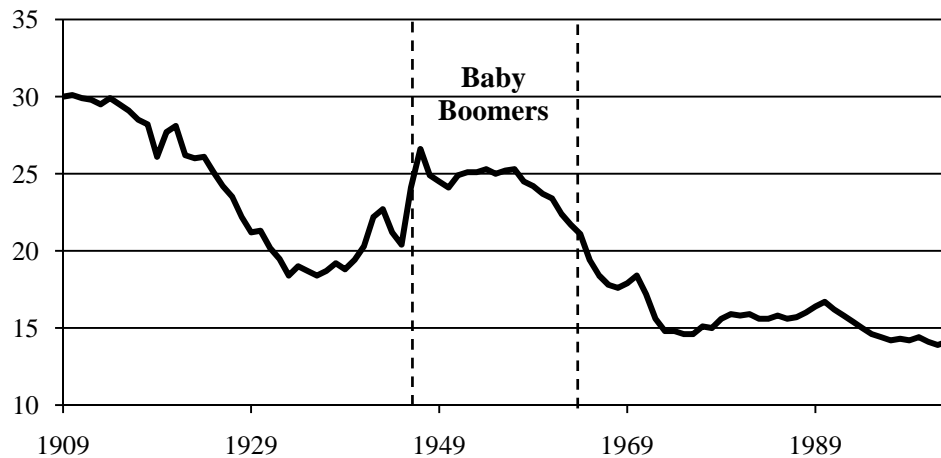


Figure 1. United States birth rates from 1909 to 1999²⁰

The Context

The generational split between the builders and the baby boomers is very deep.²¹

The builders learned about life during the Great Depression and World War II when many people had little control over the direction of their lives. They were constrained by global crises and circumstances. The low economic base and high unemployment during the Great Depression forced many people into unexpected deprivation that typically continued until World War II.

²⁰ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Live Births, Birth Rates, and Fertility Rates, by Race: United States, 1909-2003*, 2004, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/statab/natfinal2003.annvol_01.pdf (accessed September 6, 2010).

²¹ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 50.

The early baby boom cohort, called the Vietnam Generation, was born from 1946 to 1955.²² It was the first group that encountered the intense cultural turmoil that brewed under the surface for a long time. Major cultural trends developed in the early twentieth century and broke to the surface in the post-war era. Roof writes about the social and political turmoil of the 1960s:

Few historians would question, in fact, that the ten-year period from President Kennedy's assassination in 1963 to Watergate in 1973 was one of the most turbulent, chaotic periods of American history, which left its imprint on the entire society, and particularly on those at a formative stages of their lives at the time. A major consequence was the plummeting of confidence among the young in all the dominant social institutions—political, economic, cultural, and religious. Politically, that loss of confidence is well-known and associated with declines in voting and lack of party loyalty; religiously, it is less obvious but yet catastrophic in some ways.²³

These sociological changes marked the beginning of the unraveling of modernism.²⁴

Enlightenment thinking in the twentieth century did not prevent two major world wars, the rise of totalitarian regimes, the Great Depression, or the genocide of millions of people by Germany and the Soviet Union.

Baby boomers are a lead generation located on the cusp of change that launched the world into the twenty-first century. Roof writes, "A more complex, heterogeneous world makes for an environment in which human loyalties and commitments often pull at

²² Ibid., 50-51.

²³ Ibid., 51.

²⁴ Ibid., 54.

one another simultaneously, and where the psychological integrations of work, family, citizenship, beliefs, and values pose formidable challenges.”²⁵ Philip Schwadel provides additional evidence of baby boomers’ cusp generational status in a higher probability of increased religious disaffiliation over their lifetimes than either older or younger cohort groups.²⁶

Baby boomers are also the generation that feels the dichotomy most dramatically between modern and postmodern philosophies. Jack Miles, the author of *God: A Biography*, had numerous conversations with people on his book promotion tours. He comments,

Over time, what struck me most about these conversations was a note of defiance, the defiant rejection of the widespread assumption that doubt and religion are incompatible. “Take it (belief) or leave it (religion)”—this was the dilemma I heard brusquely rejected in favor of a third alternative: *If I may doubt the practice of medicine from the operating table, if I may doubt the political system from the voting booth, if I may doubt the institution of marriage from the conjugal bed, why may I not doubt religion from the pew?*²⁷

In a postmodern view embraced by an increasing number of baby boomers,²⁸ the rejection of metanarratives as illustrated by Miles’ conversations leads, paradoxically, to

²⁵ Ibid., 294.

²⁶ Philip Schwadel, “Period and Cohort Effects on Religious Nonaffiliation and Religious Dissaffiliation: A Research Note,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 2 (2010): 311-312.

²⁷ Jack Miles, “Religion Makes a Comeback. (Belief to Follow.),” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 7, 1997, 58.

²⁸ Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 118.

greater faith. That faith encompasses both belief and doubt through a process of personal participation.²⁹

Between 2003 and 2007, Willow Creek Community Church undertook a series of surveys to answer the question, “Could scientific research help us understand and perhaps measure spiritual growth?”³⁰ Initially, the Willow Creek staff conducted face-to-face interviews with sixty-eight church members to establish a qualitative baseline model concentrated on individuals in more advanced stages of spiritual growth.³¹ In a second phase, the staff e-mailed surveys in conjunction with seven geographically and culturally diverse churches with fifty-three sets of questions.³² Those question included topics such as attitudes toward Christianity, personal spiritual practices, overall church satisfaction, barriers to spiritual growth, and participation in church activities. The church received 4,943 completed surveys from a wide range of churches.

The results surprised and unsettled Willow Creek leaders and many other churches because the results indicate a lack of correlation between increased and continued participation in church activities and spiritual growth.³³ People more involved

²⁹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, vi.

³⁰ Greg L. Hawking and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You? The Answer Will Transform Your Church* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2007), 91.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

³² *Ibid.*, 93.

³³ *Ibid.*, 13.

in church activities showed no greater love for God than those less involved. Other results suggested a strong possibility of a negative correlation. This was a major shock because it suggested increasing the number of programs and activities might impede people's discipleship growth.³⁴

The study also found twenty-five percent of their survey respondents were in groups labeled "stalled" or "dissatisfied."³⁵ The stalled group reported they were not growing in their Christian faith. The dissatisfied group members reported they were fully committed to Christ, but were unhappy with the role of the church in their faith life. Twenty-five percent of the stalled group and 63 percent of the dissatisfied group seriously considered leaving the church.³⁶ The study did not find a correlation between age and grouping.³⁷ The Willow Creek founders are baby boomers and they targeted the baby boomer cohort,³⁸ and trends evident within that congregation are similar to those reported by other baby boomer ministries.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid., 35.

³⁵ Ibid., 47.

³⁶ Ibid., 49-53.

³⁷ Ibid., 33.

³⁸ Lynne Hybels and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 210-211.

³⁹ Julia Duin, *Quitting Church: Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What to Do about It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 9-25.

Alan Jamieson’s research into church leavers also points to a lack of personal growth in many churches. He states that a large percentage of churches “through their structures, beliefs and faith packages, and particularly their public teaching, worship, and governance patterns encourage adults to become settled [at a single development stage].”⁴⁰ Leonard Sweet arrives at the same conclusion by a different route: “[Western Christianity’s] churches are inward focused; its primary community expression is the worship of worship; and its people are afraid of others unlike them.”⁴¹ Julia Duin quotes one of her friends who commented on the difficulty of finding a growth encouraging church with substance, “All these thirsty people and no watering hole.”⁴²

An article on the Barna Group’s website describes survey research directed by David Kinnaman:

It is difficult for many faith leaders to relate fully to the spiritual lives of people who struggle with their faith, particularly those who are younger. Clergy are typically older than those going through significant questions about their faith and are less likely to have personally experienced a period of major faith re-orientation themselves. What’s more, not every person goes through a crisis of faith, so individuals who are going through spiritual transitions often go unnoticed. Staying in tune with people’s questions and doubts—at whatever age they occur—is an increasingly important part of being an influential faith leader.⁴³

⁴⁰ Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys beyond the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2002), 122.

⁴¹ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 37.

⁴² Duin, *Quitting Church*, 17.

⁴³ The Barna Group, “Do Americans Change Faiths?,” Barna Group, <http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/412-do-americans-change-faiths?q=americans+change+faith> (accessed September 19, 2010).

Kinnaman recognizes that contemporary clergy and churches have major difficulties in dealing with people who change. The dramatic sociological changes in the latter half of the twentieth century, the results of the Willow Creek study, the ending of the modern era, the decline of church attendance, and numerous books about leaving church suggest that baby boomers ask difficult questions and experience faith crises.⁴⁴

Changes occur in life. People realize that decisions have consequences, their parents age and die, workers lose jobs, children leave home, and good health declines with age. Baby boomers face their own finitude. Faith develops or evolves through life stages and a person's perception of God and Christ changes over their life.⁴⁵ These life stages affect our relationships to a church and with others. Denial of change ignores the biblical witness about transformation. The Hebrews' wilderness wanderings were a key factor in precipitating and their transformation from a group of slaves to a cohesive people group.

The biblical witness suggests faith is a journey, a series of stages moving along a variety of trajectories rather than a static pathway. The concept of a faith journey is inherently emergent and relational because the journey cannot be precisely defined or

⁴⁴ Two examples are Duin, *Quitting Church*; Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

⁴⁵ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981), xiii.

categorized. This supports the thesis of this dissertation that Christian faith is a journey for the baby boom generation.

A Proposed Solution

Tim Keel believes the current modernist version of evangelical Christianity does not provide a way of dealing with faith journeys. It emphasizes the priestly aspect of Christ's message to the exclusion of the rest of the Gospel.⁴⁶ Many churches focus on the atonement as the single doctrine of the church, and their proponents fall into the trap Karl Marx warned about: religion can be the "opiate of the masses."⁴⁷ Marx believed religion that emphasized the afterlife continued the proletariats' oppression and mistreatment.⁴⁸ Christians who promote Christianity as only "fire insurance" for eternal salvation while ignoring the "kingdom of God" (Mark 1:15, Luke 17:21) available today have an incomplete view of the Christian faith.

The desire to check the box by having someone say the "sinner's prayer" reflects an obsession with atonement. Recitation of the prayer confirms evangelicals' sense of task based success and does not require involvement in converts' lives. If converts seek

⁴⁶ Tim Keel, "Reframing the Gospel," *Q Shorts* (2008), <http://www.qideas.org/shorts/sample/keel500.pdf> (accessed May 1, 2009).

⁴⁷ Max L. Stackhouse and David W. Miller, "Economic Ethics," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 2:17-18.

⁴⁸ Alan Jamieson, *Journeying in Faith: In and Beyond the Tough Places* (London: SPCK, 2004), 34.

growth and maturity, the church rarely entertains their questions and their desire to do things other than traditional worship.

Amy Hanson writes that many church leaders judge those on a journey as uninvolved and in danger of losing their Christian faith. Some leaders complain that baby boomers drop out and no longer want to serve. Perhaps, however, baby boomers are on unique faith journeys.⁴⁹ Baby boomers' behavior may not reflect crises of faith; rather, their behavior may reflect job loss, illness, death of parents/siblings/spouses, empty nesting, or other factors. Perhaps they recognize their jobs' meaninglessness or the lack of fresh thought presented in traditional worship services.

The refrain of the 1965 Rolling Stones song "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" captures many baby boomers' view about the church:

I can't get no satisfaction
 I can't get no satisfaction
 'Cause I try and I try and I try and I try
 I can't get no, I can't get no

Mick Jagger commented on the song:

And it captures a spirit of the times, which is very important in those kinds of songs. . . . Which was alienation. Or it's a bit more than that, maybe, but a kind of sexual alienation. Alienation's not quite the right word, but it's one word that would do.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Amy Hanson, *Baby Boomers and Beyond: Tapping the Ministry Talents and Passions of Adults Over 50* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), Kindle e-book, location 212.

⁵⁰ "Songfacts, (I Can't Get No) Satisfaction by The Rolling Stones," <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=449> (accessed September 6, 2010).

Many boomers feel alienated from church.⁵¹ Based on their journeys, baby boomers question the relevance and validity of the contemporary church. The programming, structure, and solutions presented by many churches reflect modernist thinking in contrast with boomer thinking. Subsequent generations continue the move away from enlightenment/modernist thinking. Although baby boomers pioneered the idea of constant change that subsequent generations embrace, boomers are not fully comfortable with the thinking. Nevertheless, boomers share much in common with the generations that followed them.

Alan Jamieson conducted survey research in New Zealand on the topic of people who leave the evangelical Pentecostal charismatic (EPC) church.⁵² Traditionalists assume those who leave a church lack mature faith and fall away from Christianity;⁵³ however, Jamieson's initial interviews with church leavers surprised him. He met people who had been very highly involved in the church's ministry but who developed a general malaise and dissatisfaction. Jamieson reports that those people rarely turned away from Christian faith; instead, they embarked on a journey to discover their faith. Many people wandered in a wilderness state for months or years, but usually Christian faith remained a very

⁵¹ Alan Jamieson, "Churchless Faith: Trajectories of Faith Beyond the Church from Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches to Post-Church Groups," *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 365 (2003): 217.

⁵² Alan Jamieson, *Chrysalis: The Hidden Transformation in the Journey of Faith* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007), 23-24.

⁵³ Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 11.

important part of their lives. They may disagree with their particular denomination or theological roots, but they report their faith as usually unambiguously Christian.

Jamieson uses a metaphor of a swim club that meets at the beach.⁵⁴ The swimmers playing in the water look very exciting to someone going to the beach for the first time. A newcomer joins the swim club, learns what it offers. He or she experiences great joy in the activities. Eventually, the newcomer looks at the buoys marking the edge of the club and wonders what is beyond. The individual may meet a group of deep-sea anglers who tell amazing tales of life in the deep. The individual longs to explore the unsafe waters beyond the boundaries and becomes discontent and disillusioned. People in the swim club sense this attraction, and suggest the individual attend swim meets. Swim meets relieve the discontent temporarily, but it comes back even more pronounced, and the desire to go to the swim club declines even on meet days. Then it finally happens. The individual pushes beyond the boundaries and begins exploration of wild and unknown areas. The individual senses danger everywhere, but continues the exciting exploration. The explorer investigates every new beach, island, waterfall, cove, and current. The journey continues without a specific destination.

One day the swimmer realizes swimming brings great pleasure. All the dangers in the ocean and the opportunities to explore different directions reinforce the swimming urge. The dangers and wonder of surprising unknowns magnify the swimmer's

⁵⁴ Jamieson, *Chrysalis*, 23-24.

appreciation of swimming. Whirlpools and rip currents could drown the devotee, but survival strengthens the swimmer and makes the dangers seem worthwhile.

The adventurous swimmer finds the swim club uninteresting, boring and rule bound, but holds no animosity or ill will toward the club. The swim club no longer entices the swimmer, and the swimmer encourages and guides others on similar adventurous, uncharted journeys without determined routes, times, and outcomes. Guidance for such a journey may help avert major dangers.

Jamieson's research reported in *A Churchless Faith* demonstrates that the majority of people who journey from the church remain in the Christian faith, which implies the need for only a rough map with outlines of waypoints and semi-defined outcomes. A well-defined and scripted journey may have less value. For example, a tour group with a closely defined schedule may offer less adventure and discovery. Journeyers see new things, but well-defined outcomes may limit their awe and wonder. Other non-scripted types of journeys allow detours, visits to people's homes, walks beyond tourist areas, exploration, and schedule changes. These journeyers sense adventure, look into rarely seen places, experience the world with new eyes, enjoy the sense of danger, and may learn how God sees things.

The Hebrew people's wilderness wanderings after escape from Egypt and entry into Canaan offer a biblical example of a promising adventure. The journey required only a few weeks by a direct route, but God guided them for forty years before he allowed them to settle down. Chapter 2 provides biblical foundations for the thesis statement:

Christian faith is a journey for the baby boom generation. It examines biblical and extra-biblical accounts through the lens of journey. In the extra-biblical accounts, the journeys traveled away from certainty into destruction in the wilderness. In the biblical accounts, God guided Abraham, the Hebrew people, and the prophets who gained strength in the wilderness as travelers who trusted in God. These themes continue in the New Testament through the teachings of Jesus and the faith journey of Paul. Churches that recapture a vision of God's provision in the wilderness may be more receptive to faith as journeys that are not static and predictable.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation examines faith journeys from the apostolic fathers through the medieval mystics. The desert fathers and the medieval mystics understood that persons who sought God frequently did not find him; instead, they found God when they did not look for him. They found the dark night not a time of terminal trouble, but a time of darkness when Christ was the only light. They embarked on an internal journey and emerged into the light of Jesus Christ. Augustine of Hippo wrote about his faith journey in a way that remains relevant today. Medieval Christians sought God on pilgrimage journeys and frequently encountered Christ in the mundane details of the journey itself.

Chapter 4 explores James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* as a tool to analyze the faith movements of baby boomers. The judicious application of Fowler's methods provides a snapshot of a person's development along a faith continuum. His interview technique uncovers the underlying foundations of a person's belief system. This chapter also

describes some of the criticisms and limitations of Fowler's method. The Stages of Faith offer insight into Alan Jamieson's research into church leavers.

I interviewed baby boomers using Fowler's Stages of Faith and present the results of this inquiry in chapter 5. The baby boomers' stories and insights illustrate the nature of Christian faith journey for baby boomers. They present examples of how faith develops as boomers mature while undergoing life changes. Their comments provide signposts that illuminate possible church responses.

Chapter 6 of this dissertation presents possible ways churches can reconnect with baby boomers as they move along their faith journeys. The modernist, enlightenment approach of propositional truth distilled down to the sinner's prayer does not connect with many baby boomers. If churches cannot connect with baby boomers, they cannot connect with younger generations who move even further away from modernist thought and its static view of faith. Some churches can make the transition, but others will not, and will likely suffer the short life Leonard Sweet postulates.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 18.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL MATERIAL

Wilderness, as a reflection of the richness and beauty of the Creator, reminds us of untamable and unpredictable realities. Are we ready for this larger world, this universe that by its very character challenges us to open ourselves up to risk? What kinds of risks will the God of nature require of us? What will it cost us?

—Luci Shaw, *The Crime of Living Cautiously, Hearing God's Call to Adventure*

Many people seek certainty and comfort in times of wilderness and uncertainty.

Human understandings of event or outcome certainty rarely appear in the biblical witness, except with the divine intervention from God. The Bible depicts many unpredictable and inconsistent human events that depended on the whims of rulers, economic conditions, political alliances, the uncertainties of weather, and the frequently indefinable nature of human behavior.

The testimony of biblical writers centers on a theme of exiting bondage and deliverance into God's promises. For example, God said to Moses: "Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Exod. 33:1). That theme of deliverance and promise in Adam and Eve's exit from the garden (Gen. 1:24) echoes throughout the Bible and concludes with the promise of a "new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 22:1). These promises involve journeys, and the faithful receive the promises only when they journey

with God where he leads. They must leave their comfort zone and follow God down unknown paths they cannot see.

This chapter presents biblical evidence that faith is a journey based on selected biblical accounts. Faith in God includes journey, and many biblical accounts focus on following God when the outcome is unclear. God reveals himself in the act of journeying, and the Bible is the journey's narrative. Extra-biblical sources such as the Canaanite tradition recorded in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle and the Dead Sea Scrolls show how journey may point toward destruction or apostasy and not be a component of a faith journey. Jesus' life was a journey, and he never remained long in one place during his ministry. He did not wait for crowds to come to him, but traveled constantly seeking out new people to experience the journey into the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15,30,9:30; Luke 7:28,9:2,13:20; John 3:3-5 et al.). Paul's writings reflect his dramatic conversion and his formative years in Arabia.

The Canaanite Tradition

In the early 1930s, a cache of Canaanite texts unearthed from Ras Shamra near the west coast of Syria contained major portions of the Ugaritic Baal Cycle. These writings contain stories about the primary god Baal and other deities in the Canaanite pantheon. The accounts help scholars understand the environment in which the Hebrews

became a distinct people group.¹ The word Baal refers to one of various Canaanite storm and fertility gods and means “owner,” “lord,” or “husband” in various Semitic dialects, and Baal functions as the “husband” of the earth.² Many references in the Old Testament use Baal as a term for the fertility lord or deity of a specific location related to non-Hebraic, non-monotheistic people groups.³

One of the accounts in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle covers the conflict between Baal and Mot, the deity of the barren wilderness.⁴ The wilderness represents the underworld and Mot is the god of death. Mot causes the heat during the summer and drought by swallowing up Baal who dies each summer in a place of hopelessness and returns to the underworld. The rain stops falling, the land dries up, and the crops die along with Baal. At the end of the Baal cycle, the chief of the gods, El, celebrates Baal’s return from the wilderness death into the life of the fall and winter annual rains.

Mot: I will send him [Baal] in a great pit in the Earth [Netherworld]. And you, take your clouds, your winds, your bolts, your rains . . . with you, Pidray, Daughter of Light, with you, Tallay, Daughter of Rain . . . and descend into Hell, the House of Freedom. Be counted among the inmates of Hell; and you will know, O god, that you are dead.⁵

¹ Simon B. Parker, ed. *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, SBL Writings from the Ancient World, vol. 9 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), 81.

² Ludwig Koehler and others, *The Hebrew and Aramic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Electronic ed. (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1999), 142-143.

³ Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, vol. 5 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word, 2002), 27.

⁴ Parker, ed. *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 82.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

EI: Baal is dead! What of the peoples? The Son of Dagan! What of the multitudes? After Baal I will descend into Hell.⁶ Let the heavens rain oil, the wadis run with honey—Then I will know that Mightiest Baal lives, The Prince, Lord of the Earth is alive.⁷

The Ugaritic Baal Cycle is strongly agrarian. All activities occur with the seasons, and the concept of a journey that leads to an end destination is largely absent. The seasons and gods are cyclical, the gods are arbitrary, and additional knowledge of them does not result in a closer relationship.⁸ This cyclical view of existence was the dominant worldview in the ancient world, and monotheistic Yahweism was a radical departure from this type of thought.⁹

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Khirbet Qumran was the location of a settlement near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. It was associated with the people who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in caves on the hills above the settlement. Archaeological evidence suggests that some form of community lived at Qumran from approximately 150 BC to possibly as late as AD 74.¹⁰ Some of the writings suggest that community members saw themselves

⁶ Ibid., 151.

⁷ Ibid., 157.

⁸ Ibid., 83-84.

⁹ Mark W. Hamilton, "Israel in the Ancient Near East," in *The Transforming Word: A One Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Mark Hamilton (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2009), 39.

¹⁰ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Qumran, Khirbet," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 5:590-592.

as the repository of the true Jewish path that followed the “Teacher of Righteousness” into the wilderness. The community judged the temple priests as apostates and the entire temple hierarchy as corrupt. The bulk of the community probably journeyed from Jerusalem to Qumran in the century preceding Jesus’ birth.¹¹

The Teacher of Righteousness was a leader and rabbi in the tradition of Moses. The Peshier on Habakkuk records, “Its interpretation concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God has made known all the mysteries of the words of his servants, the prophets.”¹² In the wilderness, the community could engage in what the adherents considered true holiness and worship and be on the journey’s right path. The community rule reflected the spirit of the wilderness experiences at Sinai, and the organization mimicked the desert organization of the tribes: “In third place all the people shall enter in order, one after another, in thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, so that each Israelite may know his standing in God’s Community in conformity with an eternal plan.”¹³

It is possible that the group chose the community location above the Jordan River because they would be the first to join the Messiah as “the sons of Levi, the sons of

¹¹ James VanderKam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 30.

¹² Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, vol. 1 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 73.

Judah, and the sons of Benjamin, the exiled of the desert.”¹⁴ The Messiah would come from Babylon, entering Jerusalem to conquer and re-claim his rightful throne.¹⁵ Qumran community members wanted to recapture the spirit of Mount Sinai and journey up the mountain with Moses and his surrogate, the Teacher of Righteousness.¹⁶ They attempted to avoid the apostasy of the Hebrew people left below the mountain by formalizing rules, and almost any falling away from the community discipline resulted in expulsion. They sought to keep the community pure and holy and experience the blessings of God. This philosophy includes no concept of growth and change while on the journey because the community was the true guardian of right doctrine and practice, and growth and change were unnecessary.

Journey in the Old Testament

Abraham

The story of Abram begins abruptly in Genesis 11 with a statement of his genealogy. In the opening verse of chapter 12, God asks Abram to leave his people, household, and country to journey toward Canaan. The account does not provide a

¹⁴ Ibid., 113.

¹⁵ Alison Schofield, “The Wilderness Motif in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Israel in the Wilderness: Interpretations of the Biblical Narratives in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Kenneth E. Pomykala, Themes in Biblical Narrative: Jewish and Christian Traditions (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 46.

¹⁶ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Teacher of Righteousness,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 6:340.

narrative interplay usually found with other instances of divine call.¹⁷ The text simply states, “So Abram left” (Gen. 12:4). He continues to wander in Canaan as a Bedouin-like tribal chieftain in a difficult environment. The text provides no insight into Abram’s view of God at this time but records he listened to God and built altars.¹⁸ His later interactions with God suggest he did not fully believe God earlier in his life, and his motivations for moving to Canaan are unclear.

Pharaoh took Abram’s wife Sarai into his harem when Abram journeyed to Egypt, moving the tribe there to escape a famine (Gen. 12:10-20). Abram did not tell Pharaoh that Sarai was his wife and half-sister. Abram did not outright lie, but he assumed the interests of the tribe outweighed the necessity of telling the complete truth. Pharaoh recognized that Sarai was Abram’s wife and sent her back.

Genesis 20 records a similar event after God changed their names to Abraham and Sarah. After another of Abraham’s journeys, Abimelech, king of Gerar, took Sarah into his harem. He returned her untouched when he learned Sarah was Abraham’s wife. In both harem incidents, Abraham’s moral code fell short of the rulers’ moral codes (Gen 12:18-19, 20:9). The text strongly implies that Abraham did not yet fully believe and trust God, and Abraham laughed at God when God told him about his forthcoming son:

¹⁷ “In the OT call narratives occur frequently with prophets (Isa. 6:1–13; Jer. 1:1–10; Ezek. 1:1–28) as well as others (e.g., Moses; Exod. 3:1–4:17). Interestingly, a consistent feature of OT call narratives is the reluctance of the person called (e.g., Moses, Exod. 4:10–13; Gideon, Judg. 6:15).” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), s.v. “Call, Calling.”

¹⁸ Michael S. Moore, *Reconciliation: A Study of Biblical Families in Conflict* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994), 38.

“Abraham fell flat on his face. And then he laughed, thinking, ‘Can a hundred-year-old man father a son? And can Sarah, at ninety years, have a baby?’” (Gen. 17:17 MSG)

Abraham already had a son, Ishmael, who had the right of a firstborn:

“Recovering, Abraham said to God, ‘Oh, keep Ishmael alive and well before you!’” (Gen. 17:18 MSG) Abraham did not believe even a deity could give him a son through Sarah, and she laughed when she heard the news (Gen. 18:12).

Abraham experienced personal challenges as a tribal patriarch. For example, Abraham let his nephew Lot keep the better land on the Jordan River plain when they parted ways. Abraham rescued Lot when Lot became a slave of war and lived in Sodom, Lot’s new hometown (Gen. 14). God told Abraham about the pending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:17-21). Abraham’s bargaining with God, however, did not reflect a chieftain protecting his tribe, but rather a philosopher who argued the rightness of divine punishment (Gen. 18:23-32). Abraham never raised the issue of Lot and his family during this discussion.

To this point, Abraham did not behave like the father of nations and a leader of even his own family as they journeyed under God’s direction. He distrusted God to give him a son and placed his faith in a backup plan. If God could not deliver on the promises, then Abraham himself would ensure the fulfillment of the promises. Abraham believed that he would be the father of nations as promised by God, but his actions strongly suggested he would become the father through a combination of God’s power and Abraham’s personal power.

God tested Abraham greatly after the birth of Abraham's son Isaac (Gen. 21:2). God asked Abraham to journey to a mountain and sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:2), but Isaac was the son of promise through whom Abraham would become the father of nations. Ishmael had left home, and Abraham's hope rested in Isaac.

Child sacrifice was common in the surrounding cultures, and scriptural evidence suggests that such sacrifices occurred in Hebraic culture: "Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:7-8). This passage provides evidence that child sacrifice was at some point in time part of Israelite practice.¹⁹ If child sacrifice were required, the Hebrew God might become just another god in the Canaanite pantheon. Until God provided the ram for sacrifice (Gen. 22:12), the story outcome was unclear and could have resulted in the effective demotion of God.

The dénouement of the relationship came when God said, "Now I know that you [Abraham] fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Gen. 22:12). Abraham's physical and faith journeys with God slowly deepened his relationship. He embarked on a journey, stumbled repeatedly, and did not live up to his roles as husband, father, tribal chieftain, and father of nations. He showed that he did not fully trust God, and his internal and external conflicts interfered with his faith.

¹⁹ Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 359-362.

Abraham moved into faith through a journey. He did not experience faith's fullness until he relinquished everything willingly. He had to prove to himself, and possibly God, that he was willing to sacrifice the most precious thing in his life, the son he received when he was very old. For Abraham, faith was a journey with many twists and turns.

The Hebrew Tradition

The biblical witness shows how the close presence of wilderness affected the Hebrew people deeply, and time in the wilderness was a metaphor for a faith journey.²⁰ The close proximity of wilderness to the land of Canaan reminded them constantly of their heritage and journey. Wilderness was a key component in their understanding of journey.

The Hebrew tradition recognized two main views of the wilderness, and by implication, journey. The first was a negative view of wilderness as a place of scorpions, serpents, and thirst where demons and evil spirits prevailed. Aaron sent the scapegoat away from the camp so it would carry the sins of the people into the void of a "solitary place" (Lev. 16:20-22). Edom turned into wilderness because of her sins: "Thorns will overrun her citadels, nettles and brambles her strongholds" (Isa. 34:13-14). Jesus commented about wilderness, "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it" (Luke 11:24).

²⁰ Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 50-52.

The second major Hebraic view was positive. For example, time in the wilderness in the Pentateuch was a “betrothal period” of journey that ended with the settlement of Canaan. Hosea spoke of Israel and quoted God:

And now, here’s what I’m going to do:
 I’m going to start all over again.
 I’m taking her back out into the wilderness
 where we had our first date, and I’ll court her.
 I’ll give her bouquets of roses.
 I’ll turn Heartbreak Valley into Acres of Hope.
 She’ll respond like she did as a young girl,
 those days when she was fresh out of Egypt. (Hosea 2:14-15 MSG)

The author of Jeremiah wrote, “I remember your youthful loyalty, our love as newlyweds. You stayed with me through the wilderness years, stuck with me through all the hard places” (Jer. 2:2 MSG).

Out of Egypt

The forty-year wilderness journey out of Egypt eliminated the Israelite’s existence under slavery, and they encountered God in unexpected ways. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Much that is certain at the center is up for grabs in the wilderness, while much that is real in the wilderness turns out to be far too feral for the center.”²¹ Salvation and relief came in the freedom of the wilderness outside the strictures of Egypt and city life. God lived in a desert tabernacle when the Hebrew people wandered toward Canaan rather than a royal palace like the future Jerusalem temple. Disobeying God, however, may have

²¹ Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, 172.

resulted in death in the barrenness, but obedience led to a continued journey toward a new life in the Promised Land.²²

The Hebrew nation of slaves lived for 450 years in Egypt and left the only life they knew. They had even lost an understanding of Abraham, the father of nations. The first reference to Abraham in Exodus is a parenthetical comment about God's thoughts (Exod. 2:24). The rest of the references to Abraham show God speaking to Moses directly (Exod. 3:6, 3:15-16, 4:5, 6:3, 6:8, 32:13, 33:1). In the text, the people never use Abraham's name. God sent plagues on Egypt, violating civilized concepts since each plague was increasingly feral. Each one pushed further away from cultural norms. Journey became more and more likely when the death of the first-born spurred Pharaoh to free the slaves (Exod. 12:31-32).

The journey quickly became more difficult and terrifying, and Pharaoh's pursuing army trapped the Israelites against the Red Sea. Those events made no sense to the people: "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" (Exod. 14:10-12). God resolved the problem by parting the waters and drowning the pursuing army (Exod. 13-14).

The Hebrew people expressed the same lament when they faced the possibility of starvation: "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to

²² Thomas B. Dozeman, "The Book of Numbers," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 18.

starve this entire assembly to death” (Exod. 16:3). God responded and provided manna for them in the uncertainty of the journey. The Hebrew people lacked food on their journey until God provided it.

God had limits, however, for what he tolerated on the journey. God provided support during an extended wandering time, but he demanded the people’s holiness and obedience as they explored faith. The Hebrew people tested those limits and experienced the consequences of crossing the boundary from holiness into apostasy:

The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!” (Num. 11:4-6)

God provided quail on his terms: “You will not eat it [meat] for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it—because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you” (Num. 11:19-20). God ensured that the people would remember their complaints and their questioning of his goodness: “The anger of the LORD burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague” (Num. 11:33).

This same pattern of provision and questioning on the journey occurred when spies went out into Canaan to learn the condition of the land. Ten of them came back with tales of the Canaanites’ strength and city fortifications. They reported the land flowed with “milk and honey, [but] all the people we saw there are of great size. . . . We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (Num. 13:32-33). Joshua and Caleb, two of the spies, disagreed and reported that the land was full of

powerful cities, but “their protection is gone” (Num. 14:10). Again, people sent their complaints to God: “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? . . . We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt” (Num. 14:2-4).

The Hebrew people finally entered the land of Canaan after forty years of wilderness journey. They transitioned from a group of fearful slaves into a people who fulfilled God’s promise to Abraham during their faith journey. They persevered even though they preferred the tame gods of Egypt to the untamable God of the Hebrews who accompanied them throughout their wilderness journey.

Elijah

The accounts of the prophets contain numerous examples of journeys. For example, the stories of Elijah present a dominant theme of conflict between Elijah and the kings of Israel over syncretistic Baal worship (1 Kings 17:19-21; 2 Kings 1-2). Elijah fled from Ahab after he told the about a forthcoming extended drought. Ravens fed Elijah during his wilderness journey and exile (1 Kings 17:4-6), and God told him to see Ahab again after three years in the wilderness although it was a dangerous act: “Is that you [Elijah], you troubler of Israel?” (1 Kings 18:17) Elijah challenged the 450 prophets of Baal to a contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:20-22), and Elijah rebuilt an old altar in the middle of Baal’s own high place after the successful contest.

The narrative passages in 1 Kings contain one of the most biting satirical interactions in the Old Testament.²³ When the Baal prophets could not call down fire on their altar, Elijah taunted them and said, “Shout louder.” Elijah suggested their god Baal was drunk and sleeping off a hangover, or possibly stuck in the latrine (1 Kings 18:27). After dousing God’s altar with water, which was a profligate waste during a time of severe drought, Elijah called on God: “Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again” (1 Kings 18:37). God consumed the altar with fire (1 Kings 18:38).

Elijah fled quickly because the crowd killed the prophets of Baal, and Ahab’s wife Jezebel swore an oath to kill Elijah (1 Kings 19:2). The biblical writer records, “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life” (1 Kings 19:3). He journeyed to the desert and cried out to God: “I have had enough, LORD. . . . Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kings 19:4). After Elijah slept and ate what God provided, Elijah was still afraid for his life: “I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (1 Kings 19:10).

Next, God promised that he would pass by and Elijah would see him (1 Kings 19:11). God was not in the wind, or the earthquake or the fire; God was in the “gentle whisper” that followed (1 Kings 19:12). Even though Elijah had largely defeated the forces of Baal, he needed encouragement to understand God was still with him.

²³ Thomas Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 84.

Elijah lived his faith in a journey. He battled depression constantly and appeared to dislike the role of prophet (1 Kings 19:3-4, 19:14). Constantly afraid for his life, he survived those in Israel trying to kill him because God sustained him through all his journeys and adventures. The journey experiences transformed Elijah and fulfilled God's plan, even when Elijah was afraid that God would not protect him. God never abandoned Elijah even when he questioned his ability to continue.

Jonah

The book of Jonah encapsulates the underlying biblical message that faith is a journey. Jonah was a reluctant prophet who fled when God instructed him to travel to Ninevah and “preach against it” (Jon. 1:1). Instead, Jonah boarded a ship bound for Tarshish, probably located at the western edge of the Mediterranean Sea.²⁴ Jonah headed away from Ninevah and attempted to place as much distance between him and Ninevah as possible. God sent calamities on the ship including a massive storm, and the sailors tossed Jonah overboard. God provided a great fish that swallowed Jonah, vomited him out, and saved his life. After Jonah returned home, God told him again to go to Ninevah. This time he obeyed and reluctantly traveled to the city (Jon. 3:1-3). Jonah, however, was unhappy because he perceived the Ninevites as evil and the enemies of the Hebrews. He

²⁴ David W. Baker, “Tarshish (Place),” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 6:332-333.

told God, “It is better for me to die than to live” (Jon. 4:3), and he continued sulking until the conclusion of the book.

Two central themes emerge from Jonah’s journey. Jonah’s prayer while he was in the fish points to an essential truth: “Salvation comes from the LORD” (Jon. 2:9). God’s grace allowed Jonah to try again and illustrates that journey is essential for faith. Jonah was a reluctant prophet and listened to God only after he realized his salvation was not under his control. Jonah may have refused to go to Ninevah without the experience of his first ship journey.

God stated the second theme asking Jonah twice if Jonah had a right to be angry (Jon. 4:4, 4:9). God never fully answered Jonah since God decided the course of action independent of Jonah’s opinion. God gave Jonah the task to save Ninevah, and the composition of the book of Jonah emphasizes the value of a faith journey. Jonah did not understand the full purpose of the journey just as believers do not understand the full purpose of their journeys. Faith development depends on the journey.

Journey in the New Testament

The journey concept is a large component of the four gospels. They do not present an image of a hermit-like holy man in the desert, a temple based priest, or even a discontented radical hiding from the authorities. He and his disciples traveled frequently from Galilee to Jericho and then up to Jerusalem (Matt. 20:17; Mark 10:32-33; Luke 6:17, 9:28-33, 13:22, 18:31; John 2:13, 5:1, 12:12). He even walked through Samaria, a journey that was anathema to most Jews of the time (Luke 9:52, 17:11; John 4:4-5). “The

Jews answered him, ‘Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?’” (John 8:48).

The gospel writers also promoted a sense of constant motion. For example, Mark emphasized the journey aspect of Jesus’ ministry by his grammar choices.²⁵ He frequently connected sentences with the Greek word *kai* (and), creating a sense of anticipation by breathlessly introducing a new sentence.

In first Century Palestine, Judaism was a temple-based religion.²⁶ The vast majority of religious practices occurred within the Jerusalem temple or the synagogues in other towns, with very little worship or other practices outside those settings. Jesus, however, chose to meet people in their everyday settings, and he met them in the marketplaces, along the roads, in the synagogues, at parties, and other places where people gathered. Jesus met people outside the temple and synagogues, and he encouraged them to think in terms of journey because he encountered them where they were (Mark 10:23-24, 12:34; Luke 13:28 et al.). People did not have to meet the temple or synagogue standards to encounter him. Prostitutes, gentiles, tax collectors, drunkards, and the unclean were unwelcome in the temple, but they had life changing faith experiences after meeting him (Matt. 8:5-13, 9:9-13, 11:16-19; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 19:1-9).

²⁵ In the fourth edition United Bible Society Greek text of Mark, 376, or 64.5% of the sentences start with *kai*. Paul Ellingworth, “The Dog in the Night: A Note on Mark’s Non-Use of *Kai*,” *Bible Translator* 46, no. 1 (1995).

²⁶ J. Andrew Overman and William Scott Green, “Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 3:1039.

Jesus' Wilderness Time

The writer of Matthew 4 recounted Jesus' journey in the wilderness at the start of his ministry after his baptism. Like the Israelites who spent forty years wandering, Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the desert. His time in the wilderness recalled the journey of the Hebrew people out of Egypt and into Canaan. This echoing of the wilderness trek helps demonstrate faith as a journey. The Hebrew people failed at many points, yet God kept them as the chosen people (Josh. 1:6-9). He winnowed out the first generation and those unwilling to follow him.

Jesus met Satan in the wilderness, and Satan offered Jesus shortcuts to accomplish Jesus' mission on earth:

After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt. 4:2-4).

Jesus quoted accounts of the Hebrews' wilderness journey after they escaped from Egypt. For example, "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut. 8:3).

The second temptation scene placed Jesus on the top of the Jerusalem temple. Satan suggested Jesus throw himself off to prove God's love and mercy (Matt. 4:5-6). Like the people in the desert, Jesus had to decide if he would risk God's wrath by forcing God's hand. Jesus knew God would save him, and he quoted Deuteronomy: "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Matt. 4:7).

In the third temptation, Satan took Jesus to a high mountain and offered Jesus the world's kingdom and glory if Jesus worshipped Satan (Matt. 4:8). Jesus could abolish hunger and injustice and make the world a better place for the price of his soul (Matt. 4:9). Jesus quoted Deuteronomy for a third time: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Matt. 4:10).

Satan's offers were tempting, and Jesus took them seriously. If Jesus had not faced true temptation in his wilderness journey, his testing would have simply highlighted the differences between sinful people and Jesus as a non-corporeal deity. The reference to manna in Matthew 4:4 would have made no sense if Jesus was only spirit, and not flesh. The temptations formed a necessary component in Jesus' character so that believers could have confidence in following him as they travel on their faith journeys. Through real temptations Jesus showed empathy with those who struggled with challenges in their lives.

The Parables of Jesus

Jesus' parables describe faith as a journey, and he frequently used parables as a teaching tool to describe the kingdom of God.²⁷ An English definition of *parable* refers to "a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson,"²⁸ but this does not capture the richness of the Gospel parables. In the biblical context, a more complete definition of

²⁷ K. R. Snodgrass, "Parable," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 591.

²⁸ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "parable."

parable is “an extended metaphor with polyvalent meanings.”²⁹ One single interpretation does not express the metaphor fully. Leonard Sweet suggests parables are not uniform throughout, but unfold and reveal multiple layers similar to an orange’s peel, pulp, seeds, and juice.³⁰ The different levels and meanings contain elements of truth and meaning, just as a faith journey illumines truth and meaning in different aspects as the journey unfolds.

Journey is a prominent feature in many parables as characters in the parables encounter crises that force them to act. They change through the parable and become different people. For example, the merchant who found a pearl of great value sold everything to buy it (Matt. 13:45-46). The persistent widow found justice through constant badgering of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). Those who rejected the invitation to the wedding banquet regretted their decision, and those on the street were invited and rejoiced (Matt. 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24). The shepherd who left the flock in danger, looking for a lost sheep, ignored the common wisdom and underwent a transformation when he found the lost sheep (Matt. 18:12-14; Luke 15:1-7).

The parable of the prodigal son illustrated a faith journey from multiple viewpoints (Luke 15:11-32). The younger son demanded his inheritance from his father and risked the entire family’s well being because the son sought a luxurious life (Luke 15:12). The son returned from his journey wanderings after he squandered his share of

²⁹ Snodgrass, “Parable,” 593.

³⁰ Leonard Sweet, “Engaging Leadership Concepts” (Lecture, LEC 517, George Fox Evangelical Seminary, Portland, OR, August 27, 2008).

the inheritance and expected treatment like a hired servant (Luke 15:19). The father, however, welcomed the son and said, “He was lost and is found” (Luke 15:32).

The son underwent a faith journey, and his wandering led back to his father who always loved him. Other characters in the parable underwent their own faith journeys. The father accepted the son back and ran to meet him (Luke 15:20). Both actions were unacceptable responses in the Jewish culture of the time.³¹ The older son complained and sulked, but the father said, “Everything I have is yours” (Luke 15:31). The servants were uninvolved, but they reported the events to the older brother and witnessed the impact of the son’s journey home (Luke 15:27).

The Pauline Corpus

Acts 9 describes Paul’s instantaneous conversion through a direct encounter with Jesus from a person who “breath[ed] out murderous threats” (Acts 9:1) to a follower of Christ. Paul commented, “Christ Jesus took hold of me,” and he emphasized the instantaneous nature of his conversion (Phil. 3:12). Blinded during the encounter on a journey, he regained his sight three days later in Damascus (Acts 9:18).

He shared his new understanding that “Jesus is the Son of God” a few days later (Acts 9:20) and shortly journeyed to Arabia: “I went immediately to Arabia and later returned to Damascus” (Gal. 1:17). He was there for three years before he traveled to

³¹ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, vol. 35B of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word, 2002), 790.

Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18). The Arabia mentioned in this passage is not the current Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but rather the kingdom of Nabataea, centered on Petra.³² He did not remain in quiet contemplation in Arabia thinking about what happened to him on the journey to Damascus but pursued active ministry while in Arabia: “In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me” (2 Cor. 11:32). The king was ruler of the Nabataean kingdom, and Paul’s reputation as a troublemaker probably preceded him. In addition, the Damascus Jews complained about him (Acts 9:23-25).

A life-changing crisis of faith completely rearranged Paul’s thinking and his understanding of God (Gal. 1:13-17). Paul’s journey to Arabia gave him opportunity to think through the consequences and implications of Christ’s message and to develop a greater understanding, but he did not engage in extended quiet contemplation on faith journeys. The people and cultures he encountered in his Arabian journey helped him define his faith and understanding of Jesus Christ and his message.³³ The pattern of deepened faith and increased understanding continued throughout his life journey, travels, beatings, imprisonments, and conflicts with others.

³² F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 81.

³³ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New York: Yale University Press, 1983), 10.

Conclusions

The Ugaritic Baal Cycle and the Dead Sea Scrolls depict journey, especially into the wilderness, as a path toward destruction or apostasy. On the other hand, faith as a journey is a consistent biblical theme. Abraham left his home, wandered, and doubted God until he was willing to give his son to God. The slaves of Egypt fulfilled God's plan for the chosen people through their journeys in the wilderness. The prophets were constantly in danger and, sometimes reluctantly, embarked on God-directed journeys. Elijah was afraid that God would not protect him from those who wished to kill him. Even in the showdown with the Baal priests and in his frantic fleeing for his life, God always journeyed with Elijah and protected him. God redirected Jonah's journey, turning it from a hiding into a discovery of God's power.

Jesus journeyed in the wilderness, an experience reminiscent of the Hebrew people's wandering in the desert. He never settled down and traveled continually. Jesus' parables examine faith and describe faith journeys and the radical nature of the journeys. Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus radically changed him, and his sojourn into Arabia confirmed the depth of God's call on his life.

The biblical witness shows that faith is a journey, appearing in both the Old and New Testament. The selected passages are only a small sampling of the Bible's accounts of journey. These accounts give further credence to the thesis that baby boomers are traveling on a Christian faith journey. They are undergoing faith journeys similar to those

in the biblical accounts. The next chapter examines faith journey as encountered in the era from the apostolic fathers to the medieval mystics.

CHAPTER 3

FROM THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS TO THE MEDIEVAL MYSTICS

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

—Matthew 11:29-30 *The Message*

This chapter presents evidence that faith is a journey as expressed in the writings of the apostolic fathers, desert fathers, Augustine of Hippo, medieval mystics and medieval pilgrimage participants. The writers and participants sought closer communion with God and found it through a long process of searching. Their searches pointed them in God's direction, but they did not find a fully satisfying communion until they stopped searching for God and became open to God revealing himself. This material supports the thesis that Christian faith is a journey for the baby boom generation.

This search is not a direct path, but rather a journey much like the movement of the Hebrew people out of Egypt into Canaan. The examples in this chapter illustrate the difficulty and uncertainty of the journey and illustrate that people on a journey can do little by themselves. God provides most of the effort. God accompanies them on the journey, but they must empty themselves and let God find them.

The Apostolic Fathers

Early Christianity spread rapidly from its Jewish sect roots into the broader Greco-Roman culture.¹ The faith journey concept, however, became less prominent during this cultural transition. The Semitic journey definition implied movement through the wilderness like the wandering of the Hebrew people out of Egypt,² but journey for many early Christians implied movement into apostasy, away from Christian tenets.³

Seeking peace and prosperity through geographical stability (*land theology*) replaced journey as movement through the wilderness for second and third generation Christians. God granted land to his chosen people as he promised Abraham and Moses, and the blessing became a right passed to Christians through their inheritance of God's blessings. The physical promises of land theology encompassed the entire earth as illustrated in several New Testament passages. For example, the meek shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5), the Lord would bring salvation to all the earth (Acts 13:47), and the realization of a new heaven and new earth would come soon (2 Pet. 3:13).⁴

¹ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 579-582.

² G. I. Davies, "Wilderness Wanderings," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 6:914.

³ Clayton N. Jefford, "The Wilderness Narrative in the Apostolic Fathers," in *Israel in the Wilderness: Interpretations of the Biblical Narratives in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Kenneth E. Pomykala, Themes in Biblical Narrative: Jewish and Christian Traditions (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 157.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

The apostolic fathers rarely wrote about faith journeys because of the reduced emphasis on wilderness journey. Concurrently, Christians experienced increasing persecution,⁵ and their comfort frequently came from remembering God's favor toward them. For the early Christians, journey implied movement into the barren wilderness away from the Promised Land. Journey became a metaphor for leaving belief in God.

The First Epistle of Clement (1 Clement) and the Epistle of Barnabas (Barnabas) contain two main references to the wilderness traditions.⁶ In chapter 53, the writer of 1 Clement reinterpreted Moses' speech about the making of "molten idols" (Exod. 32, Deut. 9) and extended the passages into a corrective message for the Corinthian Church. The writer used the wilderness journey as a metaphor to represent apostasy with the objective of re-establishing traditional ecclesiastical authority over the church. This was in response to a faction within the Corinthian Church that removed existing elders to install themselves into leadership positions.⁷

The re-interpretation occurred in the conflation of Moses' speech with an added offer of removal from the "book of the living":

And Moses said: "May it not be so, Lord. Forgive this people their sin, or else wipe me also out of the book of the living." What mighty love! What unsurpassable perfection! The servant speaks boldly with his Master: he asks

⁵ Tacitus reported the earliest recorded persecution of Christians by the emperor Nero, who blamed them for the great Roman fire of AD 64 (*Annals* 15.44.2-8). See Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 556-557.

⁶ All 1 Clement and Barnabas quotations are from Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

⁷ Jefford, "The Wilderness Narrative in the Apostolic Fathers," 162.

forgiveness for the multitude, or demands that he himself also be wiped out with them. (1 Clement 53:4-5)

The biblical account stated Moses interceded for the people: “Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people” (Exod. 32:12). The author of 1 Clement used this conflation to suggest that the Corinthian ecclesiastical leaders should sacrifice themselves as Christ did and because Moses had offered a similar self-sacrifice.

The author of Barnabas examined the Hebrew wilderness experience and exposed Jewish errors stemming from the weaknesses of their traditions.⁸ From the author’s viewpoint, these weaknesses led to the crucifixion of Christ and the subsequent replacement of Judaism with Christianity. The author of Barnabas believed the Hebrew people broke the covenant with God: “And Moses understood [God] and hurled the two tablets from his hands, and their covenant was broken in pieces, in order that the covenant of the beloved Jesus might be sealed in our heart, in hope inspired by faith in him.” (Barnabas 4.8) The new covenant in Jesus Christ replaced the old, broken covenant.

Barnabas articulated a different view of the Decalogue problem later in the text. The writer claimed Jesus Christ the Messiah was the only way to deal with the Hebrew people’s sinfulness represented by the broken tablets:

So, Moses received it, but they were not worthy. But how did we receive it? Learn! Moses received it as a servant, but the Lord himself gave it to us, that we might become the people of inheritance, by suffering for us. (Barnabas 14:4)

⁸ Ibid., 168-169.

The suffering of Christ replaced the concept of a faith journey in this passage, and the Hebrew people's sinful nature prevented them from receiving God's blessings.⁹ The varying interpretations of journey found in the apostolic fathers illustrate the diminished importance of journey in the early Christian church. The lack of significant references to wilderness and journey themes elsewhere in the writings of the apostolic fathers suggests the early Christian church reduced the significance of the Semitic wilderness journey concept.

The Desert Fathers

Roman persecution of Christians effectively ceased by the early fourth century AD. According to Eusebius, co-emperors Constantine and Licinius ensured toleration of Christianity in the empire through the Edict of Milan in 313.¹⁰ Latourette states, "Constantine had already granted religious freedom and . . . whatever was done at Milan was by Licinius and was intended only for the eastern portions of the Empire where Licinius was in control."¹¹ Regardless of the edict's purpose, official policy tolerated Christianity. The religion became fashionable and a path to government service.

⁹ Ibid., 167.

¹⁰ Eusebius *The Church History of Eusebius* 10.5; *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "Milan, Edict of."

¹¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1: to A. D. 1500*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1975), 92.

Christians no longer met in secret under fear of arrest or torture, and being at home in the world supplanted the concept of temporary residency in the world.¹²

The Council of Nicaea in AD 325 clarified core Christian beliefs including the concept that God created the world from nothing, *ex nihilo*.¹³ “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Gen. 1:2). The action of the Council solidified the Christian break with Platonic philosophy that assumed an unbridgeable gap between the spirit and the material, or the soul and the body. The Platonic path of contemplation could not lead to God, as defined by the Council.¹⁴ Yet at the same time Constantine’s official toleration of Christianity implied a union between the soul and the body under the political state known as the Roman Empire.¹⁵

The tension created by Christianity’s newly established legitimacy was one factor that precipitated a re-examination of the relationship between Christians, society, and government. Some Christians reacted to this tension by leaving civilization behind and

¹² Louth, *The Wilderness of God*, 54-55.

¹³ Patrick J. Gallacher, “The Cloud of Unknowing: Introduction,” in *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1997), <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/clunintr.htm> (accessed July 29, 2010).

¹⁴ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Traditions: From Plato to Denys*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75.

¹⁵ Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1*, 1:91-93.

moving into the desert as hermits focused on God. The term *desert father* describes an individual who moved out of civilization into the desert to seek God.¹⁶

The Nicæan clarification deeply influenced many of the desert fathers and gave them hope for union with God through the search for nothingness in apophatic theology. Apophatic theology, or negative theology, does not attempt to define God within the limits of concepts and seeks God in nothingness.¹⁷ The soul rejects all ideas or images of God and enters the “darkness that is beyond understanding,” where it is “wholly united with the Ineffable.”¹⁸

The desert fathers believed language and other concepts describe God inadequately, and they sought God through their faith journeys in desolate places. They felt a kinship with Job and his friends by confronting the insurmountable challenges of defining the nature of God in words. Job finally realized that words were completely inadequate: “Then Job answered the LORD: ‘I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more’” (Job 40:3-5). The desert fathers let their existence speak their theology.

¹⁶ Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Rev. ed., vol. 59 of *Cistercian Studies Series* (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1984), xiv-xv.

¹⁷ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Kindle e-book, location 965.

¹⁸ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v “Apophatic.”

Many desert fathers lived in the Egyptian desert beginning about the third century and continuing until the fifth century.¹⁹ They left the ease of life in the Roman Empire or other civilized settings for profound isolation where they worshipped God without distraction. Hermits were most common in Lower Egypt. In the less remote parts of Upper Egypt, communities of brothers lived in semi-hermitic communities, and many extreme ascetics dwelled around Nitria and Scetis. Outside Egypt, some lived in the region of Petra in Arabia, Syria, or the Palestinian desert.²⁰

Most who chose the hermitic life came as young men, although a few women lived in the desert.²¹ They modeled their self-discipline after Jesus' fasting (Luke 4:1-13) or John the Baptist's lifestyle (Luke 3:1-18). They believed desert residency would remove them from the world, allow them to follow God's call, and keep their faith journey free of distractions.

Few of the desert fathers left writings, and most of the available information comes from sayings and anecdotes recorded by visitors or followers.²² The following examples of Anthony, Moses, Sisoës, and Augustine demonstrate how some of the desert fathers viewed faith journeys. This supports the thesis that the journey concept is legitimate for baby boomers.

¹⁹ Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, xvii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

²¹ Gerald L. Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 86-87.

²² Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, xx.

Anthony

Anthony, also known as Anthony the Great, was the best known of all the desert fathers. Born in AD 251, he moved to the desert about AD 285. His reputation attracted followers, and he became their spiritual father, or the precursor to a monastic abbot.

Athanasius wrote his biography, called *Life of Anthony*. That work was a primary factor in the birth of the monastic movement.²³

The following quote from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* provides insight into Anthony's life:

One day some old men came to see Abba Anthony. In the midst of them was Abba Joseph. Wanting to test them, the old man suggested a text from the Scriptures, and, beginning with the youngest, he asked them what it meant. Each gave his opinion as he was able. But to each one the old man said, "You have not understood it." Last of all he said to Abba Joseph, "How would you explain this saying?" and he replied, "I do not know." Then Abba Anthony said, "Indeed, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said, 'I do not know.'"²⁴

The unknowing is a major step in a faith journey.²⁵ Growth is impossible until individuals recognize they cannot understand from their own abilities and seek understanding from God. This frank acknowledgement of unknowing is remarkable considering the desert fathers had most of their days available for prayer, contemplation, and study of the Bible.

²³ Ibid., 1.

²⁴ Ibid., 4.

²⁵ Sittser, *Water From a Deep Well*, 82.

Moses

Moses was a freed slave who had formerly been a robber. Later in life, he became an ordained priest, and moved into the desert of Scetis. He retired to Petra, where invaders martyred him.²⁶

A brother came from Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”²⁷

Abba Moses said, “The man who flees and lives in solitude is like a bunch of grapes ripened by the sun, but he who remains amongst men is like an unripe grape.”²⁸

Like Anthony, Moses discovered that knowledge of God comes from God revealing himself rather than an individual’s activity in the world. Teaching occurs in the everyday events and profound moments.

Sisoes

Sisoes learned the desert way from another father named Or in Scetis. Sisoes left the area after Anthony died because he believed the area had become too popular. He moved to a mountain and lived there alone for seventy-two years.²⁹ “Abba Sisoes said, ‘Seek God, and do not seek where he dwells.’”³⁰ Sisoes seems to suggest that travelers

²⁶ Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 138.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

should stay focused on the destination; stay focused on Christ. Neither the dark nor the desert is full of demons, but any lapses in focus may cause believers to veer off course.

Augustine of Hippo

Augustine of Hippo was the first medieval theologian and continues to influence Christian thought after sixteen centuries.³¹ He was born in AD 354 to a Christian mother and a pagan father in what is now Algeria, and he became a teacher of literature and rhetoric in Carthage, Rome, and Milan. While in Carthage he had a son by a woman of low social status, and they remained together for fifteen years. A crisis resulted when they separated because their relationship made him unsuitable for a high government position.³²

Augustine followed Manichaeism during the first decade of his adult life. Manichaeism embraced a Gnostic dualism that denied Jesus' physical crucifixion and assigned God responsibility for good and evil.³³ This philosophical framework did not satisfy him, and he converted to Christianity in 386 while in a Milanese garden after an arduous spiritual journey. Augustine wrote *Confessions* in his early forties. It was the first autobiography written in the western world and traced his life through his conversion to

³¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), Kindle e-book, location 45.

³² *Ibid.*, locations 105-148.

³³ *Ibid.*, locations 118-128.

Christianity. Although not a complete autobiography since it was written relatively early in his life, it provides insights into his faith journey.³⁴

A faith journey from self-centeredness and alienation to a heart resting in God was the central theme of Augustine's *Confessions*.³⁵ Throughout the work, he echoed the comments of the author of Hebrews: "They admitted they were aliens and strangers on earth" (Heb. 11:13). In his younger life, Augustine sought meaning and love in philosophy, Manichaeism, music, and women. These pursuits left him "tired of living and scared of dying" (Augustine *Confessions* 4.11). For example, he found that his earlier dependence upon astrology no longer functioned as a predictor of the future (7.8-7.10). He finally could not accept the tenets of Manichaeism.³⁶

Augustine continued searching. Based on his early life, Augustine introduced *Confessions* with the statement: "You stir man to take pleasure in praising you [God], because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (1.1). Augustine believed humans were "deeply inquisitive, like a sea in a stormy swell, restlessly unstable" (13.28).

He believed that a soul that did not know God was rootless and unanchored. He wrote, "From this may the soul, whose pilgrimage is far off, understand if it has the experience of thirsting for you" (12.13). Divine intervention from God satisfied the

³⁴ Ibid., locations 1-9.

³⁵ Ibid., location 54.

³⁶ Ibid., location 105.

insatiable human longing for transcendence: “So I may cease to be wretched in myself and may find happiness in you [God]” (11.1).

Augustine adopted Christianity during a garden experience in Milan: “I heard a voice from a nearby house chanting . . . repeating over and over again, ‘Pick up and read, pick up and read’” (8.29). He realized that God spoke to him and had always been with him as he struggled through life. His faith, though it was initially weak, gave him great strength (8.30).

Augustine underwent a faith journey, searched constantly, but found no satisfaction for his soul until he came to God and experienced God in a fresh, new way. His initial faith trajectory in the world was similar to the faith journeys that numerous baby boomers undergo.³⁷ His writings are a source of strength because they illustrate the wanderings that occur as persons seek God.³⁸

The Medieval Mystics

Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Ávila, and John of the Cross were medieval mystics whose lives exemplify spiritual journeys. Their writings contain some of the deepest and most profound insights concerning faith journeys. Seeking union with God was a dominant theme among the mystics, but many did not willingly seek such a quest. Events typically forced them to embark on the search. The medieval mystics did not seek God

³⁷ Jamieson, *Journeying in Faith*, 1-2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

through increased knowledge, but sought to know him intuitively, beyond the rational mind. Their hearts yearned for God while their heads despaired of looking for God. Knowledge about God was insufficient, and union with God was the ultimate aim of their lives.³⁹

Julian of Norwich

Sittser writes that Julian of Norwich lived from approximately AD 1342 to 1416 in a time of great suffering, the Black Death, and the Hundred Years War between France and England. She became an anchoress, or hermit, in the Church of St. Julian, Norwich, England, in her early twenties, lived apart from the world in an apartment attached to the church, and engaged in prayer and spiritual counsel for the community. A window toward the church allowed her to participate in the services, and another window to the outside allowed her to interact with the outside community.⁴⁰

Julian asked God for three gifts: an understanding of Christ's death and resurrection, a major physical illness, and three wounds, or stigmata. She believed this gift combination would enable her to identify with Christ and understand his love. She almost died from an illness at age thirty and subsequently had a series of visions of Jesus Christ as recorded in her book *Showings*, also titled *The Revelation of Divine Love*.

³⁹ Sittser, *Water From a Deep Well*, 166.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

Written shortly after her recovery, Julian provided a more extensive view of her visions approximately twenty years later in a longer version of *Showings*.⁴¹

Julian believed in her faith journey and realized she saw God only dimly through her own abilities. God showed himself as he wished because “we can never seek God until the time when he in his goodness shows himself to us.”⁴² God’s love for even the most insignificant things expressed his deep goodness. Julian wrote,

And in this He showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.⁴³

Julian explored the union of the soul with God as a re-creation of the community that existed between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit before time began.⁴⁴ The following passage encapsulates much of Julian’s vision that believers journey toward God and experience the holiness that comes from union with God:

And all this notwithstanding, we can never come to the full knowledge of God until we first clearly know our own soul. For until the time that it is in its full powers, we cannot be all holy; and that is when our sensuality by the power of

⁴¹ *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), s.v. “Julian of Norwich.”

⁴² Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 193.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

Christ's Passion can be brought up into the substance, with all the profits of our tribulation which our Lord will make us obtain through mercy and grace.⁴⁵

Julian believed that people could know God only if he led them into knowledge that was beyond all understanding. Like many baby boomers, she embarked on this journey not knowing the ultimate destination. People on such a journey can examine themselves and ultimately know themselves, which can only come from God.

Teresa of Ávila

Teresa of Ávila (AD 1515-1582) was born in the province of Ávila, Spain.⁴⁶ Her grandfather was a Jew forced to convert to Christianity by the Spanish Inquisition. Her mother Beatriz died young, and Teresa's older sister stepped into the role of mother. When Teresa was sixteen, her sister married, and Teresa entered an Augustinian monastery. She remained a year and a half with the Augustinian nuns and experienced a religious call on her life. At age twenty, she entered the Carmelite convent near Ávila. At first, she was an observant nun, although not particularly spiritual and rarely prayed. Later she fell very ill with paralyzed legs that kept her bedridden for three years. Prayer miraculously healed her.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid., 289.

⁴⁶ St. Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel*, 3rd enl. ed., trans. David Lewis (London: Thomas Baker, 1904), xxix.

⁴⁷ Ibid., xxix-xxx.

In about 1556, she had visions of Jesus Christ that continued for approximately two years. The nuns wondered if her visions were from the devil, and Teresa began to believe the suspicions and turned on herself to avoid any such possibility. Her confessor, Francis de Borja, convinced her that the visions were authentic, and Teresa experienced them frequently for the next two years.⁴⁸

Teresa wrote three major works, *The Life of Teresa*, *The Way of Perfection*, and *The Interior Castle*.⁴⁹ *The Interior Castle* viewed the journey to God as a series of seven concentric circles, with God at the center. The spiritual life was an inward journey moving from the body, through the senses, and into prayer. The inner levels involved deepening levels of prayer, and she drew on her experiences during her illnesses and visions. The first step was the “recollection prayer,” leading to a “prayer of quiet,” and then to a “prayer of union” (Teresa *Interior Castle* 4-5).⁵⁰ The prayer of union was a rapture-like ecstasy of becoming “one” with Jesus Christ. She wrote, “God places the soul in His own mansion which is in the very centre of the soul itself” (7.2.12). Teresa described the rapture of the union: “On returning to itself, the mind can recall what has been seen but is unable to describe it” (3.4.9).

⁴⁸ Ibid., xxxi.

⁴⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. “Teresa of Ávila, St.”

⁵⁰ All *Interior Castle* quotations are from St. Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*, 3rd ed., trans. The Benedictines of Stanbrook (London: Thomas Baker, 1921).

Teresa invoked remembrances of the Hebrew people's travel through the wilderness. The journey toward union with God contained hints and signposts along the way that remind travelers of the benefits of the journey. She wrote, "Those children of Israel who were sent on first to the Land of Promise brought back tokens from it; so here our Lord seems to seek to show the soul something of the land to which it is travelling, to give it courage to pass through the trials of its painful journey, now that it knows where it must go to find rest" (6.5.11).

Christ was Teresa's center: "Let us first turn our thoughts to His prayer in the garden, then allow them to continue the subject until they reach the crucifixion" (6.7.13). Her union with God occurred within a strong Trinitarian structure: "All the Three Persons here communicate Themselves to the soul, speak to it and make it understand the words of our Lord in the Gospel that He and the Father and the Holy Ghost will come and make their abode with the soul which loves Him and keeps His commandments" (7.1.9). Her comments demonstrate her visions were not about an amorphous spirituality path, but rather her visions pointed to a faith journey within a Trinitarian framework. She believed strictly intellectual knowledge of God in a propositional nature was not what God desired. Rather, God desired the oneness and union that stems from a very close relationship (5.1.7). She believed God was there throughout her faith journey and had never abandoned her even when she did not sense his presence.

John of the Cross

John of the Cross lived from AD 1542-1591. He was born to a textile merchant's son and a weaver's daughter, growing up in poverty. His father died shortly after John was born, left the family destitute, and John moved into a church orphanage school. He entered the Carmelite order in Medina Del Campo in 1563, apparently fulfilling a life-long desire.⁵¹

John's life and Teresa of Ávila's life intersected when Teresa met him in 1567 soon after she joined the convent at Medina del Campo. She persuaded him to remain in the Carmelite order and assist her with reform efforts. The reforms were controversial and, as a result, other Carmelites kidnapped John in 1577 and imprisoned him in a Toledo monastery.⁵²

Gerald G. May writes that John's cell measured six feet by ten feet and the monks beat him frequently in an attempt to thwart the reform efforts. After two months, he moved to a slightly better cell with a very small slit for light and air. He began composing many of his works mentally because his jailers did not allow writing paper in the early stages of his imprisonment. After nine months, John escaped by unscrewing the lock on

⁵¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "John of the Cross (1), St."

⁵² *Ibid.*, s.v. "John of the Cross (1), St."

his door. He took his writings and climbed out a window using a rope made from his bedding and traveled to areas more hospitable to his reform efforts.⁵³

John's poem "The Dark Night" was an account of finding union with God through the journey of a night escape (stanzas 1-2), the amazing wonders along the way (3-5), and communion with the beloved (God) during the night at the end of the journey (7-8). *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* was his prose commentary on the poem. In this work, he describes "three different kinds of places, I find, by which God usually moves the will" (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.42.1).⁵⁴ The first place was a "beautiful site" in which people "wander around looking for delight and gratification" (3.42.1). In the second place, God "moves the will to devotion" (3.42.2). The third place was one in which "God chooses to be invoked and worshipped" (3.42.5). John cited the examples of Mount Sinai (Gen. 22:2, Exod. 24:12) and Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19), high places in the midst of desolation, and he comments, "God alone knows why he chooses one place in which to receive praise more than another" (3.42.6).

John included a diagram as an aid to understanding the poem that depicts the path up the mountain. Those paths that led astray pointed to pursuits such as "goods of

⁵³ Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperOne, 2003), 30-36.

⁵⁴ All quotations from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* are from Saint John of the Cross, *Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991).

heaven,” “joy,” “knowledge,” “consolation,” and “rest.” The path that led to the top (The Perfect Spirit) is labeled *nada, nada, nada*, Spanish for “nothing, nothing, nothing.”⁵⁵

John referred to the darkness as *la noche oscura*, the dark night of the soul, as something that is unknown and mysterious. This darkness, however, was not evil or a force of evil like that found in *la noche tinieblas*, a night of trouble or evil. Rather, John described a time at which the rest of the world was obscure and the soul focused on what is important. John experienced vision and clarity in this darkness and explained, “This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which the contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology” (2.5.1).

The dark time contained two parts: the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the spirit. In the dark night of the senses, or an “active” darkness, the senses underwent an emptying process. John wrote, “The necessity to pass through this dark night . . . to attain divine union with God arises from the fact that all of a person’s attachments to creatures are pure darkness in God’s sight” (1.4.1). During this time, the person was an active participant who decided to journey toward the emptying. The darkness focused attention on the distractions of “light” that could be jettisoned in a period resembling dusk.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 110.

The dark night of the spirit was similar to midnight, a time of *nada*, or nothing, and the person could no longer do anything. In this experience, God freed people from the idols they made of possessions, relationships, feelings, and behavior during this “passive” time.⁵⁶ “The passive way is that in which one does nothing, but God accomplishes the work in the soul while the soul acts as the recipient” (1.13.1).

John continued the explanation of “The Dark Night” in another prose work, *The Dark Night of the Soul*.⁵⁷ It examined the passive part of the night in more detail: “The first purgation or night is bitter and terrible to the senses. But nothing can be compared to the second, for it is horrible and frightful to the spirit.” (*The Dark Night of the Soul*, 1.8.2).

This work maps journeys of unplanned discovery that can be extremely painful. They were journeys of liberation, recognition that life had become meaningless or tasted bitter. John claims that faith journeys may last many years, and those who travel may not realize they were on a journey until they reach its later phases.

Pilgrimages

According to Gerald L. Sittser, some pilgrims embarked on journeys during the medieval era to perform penance, pray for miracles, recover from devastating losses, or

⁵⁶ May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 86.

⁵⁷ John of the Cross, *Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 353-354.

visit a place well known for its holiness.⁵⁸ Wealthy pilgrims traveled to distant locations, most notably the Holy Land. For example, Egeria, a nun from Spain or Gaul, visited the Holy Land between AD 381 and 384 and wrote an account.⁵⁹ The pilgrimage moved her greatly when she saw where Christ walked, talked, and suffered, and this experience convinced her of the salvation available through Christ.⁶⁰

Sittser writes that less wealthy people embarked on shorter trips. These were worthy ventures if the spiritual quality of the destination suggested it for a pilgrimage site. For example, travel to Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain was almost as desirable as travel to the Holy Land. Some traditions held that James went to Spain after Pentecost where he proclaimed the gospel for ten years. After James' death, his followers carried his body back to Spain and built a mausoleum for him. That mausoleum was lost for eight hundred years, and miraculously rediscovered in the ninth century.⁶¹

The trip to Santiago de Compostela is popular for contemporary pilgrimage travel, and current day travelers' comments may be similar to those on medieval journeys.⁶²

Martha Stortz writes,

⁵⁸ Sittser, *Water From a Deep Well*, 152.

⁵⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "Egeria, Pilgrimage of."

⁶⁰ Sittser, *Water From a Deep Well*, 153.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 155.

You do walk your own Camino; you can't walk someone else's. Nor can you let anyone else set your pace, carry your pack, or deal with your demons. . . . Pilgrim feet are not at all beautiful. They are bandaged, blistered and wrapped in gauze. . . . This is not the spirituality we anticipated; it's the spirituality we got. Is this *real* spirituality?⁶³

Faith is a journey and the very mundane task of making the day's travel forms the overriding metaphor.⁶⁴ Pilgrims learn to discard or give away excess baggage and identify the minimum needed to continue.

A similar process of discarding excess spiritual baggage along the way occurs on a pilgrimage, which focuses them on the essentials of faith. They look toward the Godhead as the only meaningful expression of faith worth retaining.⁶⁵ Like the Hebrew people in the wilderness and the medieval mystics, the pilgrims learned to focus on God in the times of nothingness. God stripped the Hebrew people of their slave nature by forcing them to depend on him alone in the wilderness. Through trials, deprivations, and illnesses, the mystics could only focus on God because spiritual darkness surrounded them.

Pilgrimage travel is also a way of moving through a faith journey physically.⁶⁶ Pilgrims do not return the same as they left. The journey removes unimportant items from their hearts and minds, allowing them to focus on important matters. The rigors and

⁶³ Martha E. Stortz, "Pilgrimage," *Santa Clara Magazine*, Summer 2010, 20-26.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

repetitive nature of constant travel gives pilgrims a sense of faith through the ordinary events of the journey.

Conclusions

The apostolic fathers' writings do not contain much evidence of faith journeys because they considered such journeys a movement away from orthodox Christian faith into a wilderness of apostasy. On the other hand, the desert fathers, pilgrims, and medieval mystics sought God on their journeys and in empty places. These empty places could be either wilderness locations or dark nights. In empty places, the believers could focus their entire beings on God without any distractions. Their searching was not easy, and the paths were unclear because the journeys included many twists, turns, and detours.

The examples presented in this chapter describe faith journeys that were neither straight nor predictable. They started from undefined places, led toward undefined destinations, and resembled random walks when observed closely. In looking back, however, the spiritual travelers realized God was closest when they were totally lost or in the greatest wilderness. Their time of darkness allowed them to focus on God and see God working in their lives. Their experiences support the thesis that Christian faith is a journey for baby boomers, and is an integral part of their religious development. The next chapter describes the Stages of Faith described by John Fowler in his faith development concept.

CHAPTER 4

STAGES OF FAITH AND CHURCH LEAVERS

The first naïveté is the precritical. It believes everything, indeed too much. . . . It is a glad reception of community, but unaware of hurt. . . . But the second naïveté is postcritical, not precritical. The second naïveté has been through the pit and is now prepared to “hope all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). But now hope is after the pit. It knows that finally things have been reduced and need to be reduced no more.

—Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*

This chapter discusses James Fowler’s faith development theory and its underlying assumptions as presented in his book *Stages of Faith*.¹ The chapter also includes criticisms of Fowler’s work. Another section discusses Alan Jamieson’s research with church leavers using Fowler’s method as an analytical tool. This application shows the usefulness of Fowler’s faith development theory as a lens for examining the faith journeys of baby boomers.

Stages of Faith

The Faith Development Theory of James Fowler provides an analytical framework for examining how a person’s faith undergoes transitions through life. He states, “Faith, rather than belief or religion, is the most fundamental category in the

¹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 133.

human quest for relation to transcendence. Faith, it appears, is generic, a universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents of religious practice and belief.”² He concluded that the faith development process is independent of a person’s belief system because belief and religion are secondary, driven by faith. There is nothing inherently Christian or even monotheistic about the faith development process. The same process applies if a person “believes” in science, the environment, social systems, the nation, materialism, or other overarching transcendent realities.

Fowler uses a hierarchical framework to categorize a person’s faith stage, built upon the development psychology theories of Piaget (Cognitive Structural Development), Erikson (Stages of Life Theory) and Kohlberg (Moral Development Theory).³ He presents the basis for the faith stages:

These stages, which try to describe uniform and predictable *ways* of being in faith, are not primarily matters of the *contents* of faith. We are not suggesting that a person goes through a succession of world views and value systems, if we mean by those terms substantive beliefs, themes, images, and stories of faith. Rather, we are trying to identify and communicate differences in the *styles*, the *operations of knowing and valuing*, that constitute the action, the way of being that is faith. Our stages describe in formal terms the structural features of faith as a way of constructing, interpreting, and responding to the factors of contingency, finitude, and ultimacy in our lives.⁴

² Ibid., 14.

³ Ibid., 16.

⁴ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 52.

The separation of faith and belief is a key element in Fowler's work because the framework applies independent of belief systems and doctrinal differences within a specific belief system. Faith is not a simple assent to a propositional belief or "truth," but rather the entire collection of a person's conscious and subconscious intellect coupled with the "way of being."⁵

Alan Jamieson explains that faith is not a static concept. It is dynamic and changes as a person experiences life in its triumphs and disappointments, promises and unmet expectations, structure and surprises. For Fowler and Jamieson, faith is not a noun as customarily expressed in English. It becomes a verb and approaches a Hebraic sense of "to be" in meaning.⁶ Eugene Peterson writes, "When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush in Midian and Moses asked him for his name, the answer he got was not a name."⁷ God responded to Moses saying "*ehyeh asher ehyeh*" or "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod. 3:14). "I am" is the first person form of *hayah*, "to be." "I AM" is the whole of creation and humanity is part of it.⁸

Faith is an inherently relational "to be" verb. It does not happen as a "me and Jesus" experience nor is the statement "my faith is private to me" meaningful. Drawing

⁵ James W. Fowler and S. Keen, *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith*, ed. J. Berryman (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 18.

⁶ Alan Jamieson, "A Churchless Faith: Faith Outside the Evangelical Pentecostal/Charismatic Church of New Zealand" (PhD diss., University of Canterbury, New Zealand, 1998), 63.

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), Kindle e-book, location 2780.

⁸ *Ibid.*, locations 2781-2785.

on philosopher Josiah Royce and theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, Fowler identifies faith as beginning in relationship: “Faith . . . implies trust in another, reliance upon another, a counting upon or dependence upon another.”⁹ Faith is a triangle that includes the individual, the transcendent truth, and other people (society). Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola write that for Christians the transcendent truth is Jesus, or expressed more simply: Christianity is Jesus.¹⁰

James Fowler’s Six Stages of Faith

James Fowler proposes a set of six faith stages that exhibits properties of being sequential, hierarchical, and invariant. The stages always occur in sequential order so higher numbered stages always follow lower numbered stages. Each stage is hierarchical and builds on the previous stages. The stage progression is invariant with no skipped steps, but these properties do not mean that every person progresses through all six stages. Terminal states range between stages 3 and 5 for most people and stage 6 is very rare.

Stage 1, called Intuitive-Projective faith, “is the fantasy-filled, imitative phase in which the child can be powerfully and permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions, and stories of the visible faith of primally related adults.”¹¹ It begins at approximately age two or three. At this age children have independent mobility, begin to

⁹ James W. Fowler, “Faith and the Structuring of Meaning,” in *Faith Development and Fowler*, ed. Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986), 16.

¹⁰ Sweet and Viola, *Jesus Manifesto*, xvi.

¹¹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 133.

develop language ability, and can investigate and question by themselves. Their lives are a seamless world of fantasy, stories, experiences, and imagery. Self is the center of experience, with no internally developed models for understanding experiences. Life is a mélange of unconnected and disorganized images. These images include the real events of daily life and imaginary fantasy life. Fowler writes, “Deep and long-lasting images can be formed, which can result, for better or worse, in impressing a permanent cast on the emotional and cognitive funding of faith.”¹²

The transition to the next stage involves differentiation between real events and fantasy life.¹³

Stage 2, called Mythic-Literal faith, exhibits a strong confidence in the fairness, justice, and reciprocity of the universe. Beliefs, moral rules, and attitudes have literal interpretations. Symbols are one-dimensional and literal in meaning. In this stage, children move into the cognitive developmental level of “concrete operational thinking.” They develop concepts of space, time, and causality, and their worlds become linear, orderly, and predictable. The ultimate environment of the universe has a “built-in, divinely constituted, natural lawfulness.”¹⁴

Stage 2 includes the ability to understand the perspective of others, which leads to a strong sense of fairness. The size of the child’s world widens to include school, peers,

¹² Fowler, “Faith and the Structuring of Meaning,” 28.

¹³ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 122-134.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

television, movies, internet, reading, and related arenas. Because of this expansion, the variety of influences that affect the child increase. Symbols are one dimensional and literal in their meaning, and children typically make strong associations with “people like us” as opposed to those who are different.¹⁵ “Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience.”¹⁶

The first two stages are typically part of the childhood and early teenage years; however, some adults remain in stage 2. They continue to view the world literally and have difficulty accepting dissonance in their faith structure and the world.¹⁷ A delayed move from stage 2 to stage 3 can result in significant challenges as a person becomes an adult. A perceived lack of fairness of life frequently results in a bitterness that impedes a person’s transition to fully functioning adulthood.¹⁸ The next three stages are more applicable to an analysis of adult faith.

Stage 3 – Synthetic-Conventional faith is a time when “a number of spheres demand attention: family, school or work, peers, street society and media, and perhaps religion. . . . Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for

¹⁵ Fowler, “Faith and the Structuring of Meaning,” 34-35.

¹⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 146-149.

¹⁸ I have encountered this faith stage frequently in my prison chaplaincy ministry. The missing stage 2 to stage 3 transition is common among adult males classified as high security risks and housed in special management units. When an inmate remains in stage 2, others are perceived as always out to “get” the person. The inmate’s initial response is to “get” others before they are “gotten” themselves. It is preferable to be the aggressor rather than the aggressee.

identity and outlook.”¹⁹ This stage arises in adolescence and is frequently a permanent place in adulthood. Fowler uses “synthetic” to mean that the individual attempts to draw together the various parts of life into an integrated identity. The person’s central locus is no longer the family, and the individual must operate in a number of spheres such as work, school, and family. At this point, the faith is conventional because the person derives values and beliefs from peer groups or significant others. A stage 3 person typically accepts those beliefs with little examination:

[Individuals at this stage are] acutely tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others, and as yet do not have a sure enough grasp of their own identity and autonomous judgment to construct and maintain an independent perspective. . . . At stage 3 a person has an ‘ideology,’ a more or less consistent clustering of values and beliefs, but he or she has not objectified it for examination and in a sense is unaware of having it.”²⁰

Individuals hold beliefs and values strongly and implicitly in this stage. They do not become explicit until stage 4.

Fowler believes symbol and ritual are the main ways of interacting and finding meaning with the transcendent in stage 4. Religious organizations function well in their institutional role if a high percentage of their adherents are in stage 4. Leaders become the sources of meaning as trusted external authority figures,²¹ and adherents have a strong

¹⁹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 172.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

sense of loyalty and are committed workers. Innovative thinking and questioning is rare at this stage.

Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective faith, is a time of tensions and struggle. The person develops individual identity and worldview, differentiated from others, and internally recognized. The transition between stage 3 and 4 typically occurs in the early to mid 20s; however, for some people it comes in their 30s and 40s, if at all.²² The transition involves two essential factors. First, there must be a shift away from the previous value system: “The ‘tyranny of the they’—or the potential for it—must be undermined.”²³ Individuals must be willing to break away from the crowd, or question the positions of previously revered authority figures. Second, the executive ego must emerge. The person internalizes the value locus and takes responsibility for actions rather than accepting externally imposed values. Personal decision-making becomes important for people in stage 4.

Some people do not complete both parts of this transition and remain in an interim position for an extended period. They move away from the group setting the values but do not internalize their locus of authority. Travel, moving, or employment changes may have removed them from their previous peer group but they have not taken internal responsibility for their beliefs, actions, and decisions. They still rely on external authority

²² Ibid., 182.

²³ Ibid., 179.

for decision-making. Others develop an executive ego but retain the values of their previous group.

Stage 4 individuals respond to different leadership methods from those in stage 3. Independence is valued over dependency, and they struggle with a leadership style that encourages dependence. Criticism and debate is more accepted, and they entertain the question: “But what does it *mean*?”²⁴

Stage 5, Conjunctive faith, (mid-life crisis) acknowledges paradox and transcendence reuniting reality and symbolic/conceptual meanings in a “second naïveté.” Defeat becomes a sacrament recognized as the result of irrevocable commitments and acts.²⁵ Fowler states he has difficulty explaining this stage and approaches it with analogies representing the emergence into the conjunctive stage:

Realizing that the behavior of light requires that it be understood both as a wave phenomenon *and* as particles of energy. . . . Discovering that the rational solution or “explanation” of a problem that seems so elegant is a painted canvas covering an intricate, endlessly intriguing cavern of surprising depth. . . . Looking at a field of flowers simultaneously through a microscope and a wide-angle lens.²⁶

These analogies illustrate what Fowler calls dialogical knowing. He writes,

In dialogical knowing the known is invited to speak its own word in its own language. In dialogical knowing, the multiplex structure of the world is invited to disclose itself. In a mutual “speaking” and “hearing,” knower and known converse in an I-Thou relationship. The knower seeks to accommodate her or his

²⁴ Ibid., 180.

²⁵ Ibid., 197-198.

²⁶ Ibid., 184.

knowing to the structure of that which is being known before imposing her or his own categories upon it.²⁷

At this conjunctive stage, Fowler says the “firm boundaries of the previous stage begin to become porous and permeable. The confident conscious ego must develop a humbling awareness of the power and influence of aspects of the unconscious on our reactions and behavior—the individual, the social, and the archetypal unconscious.”²⁸ This transition coincides with a realization of the power and reality of death.

Persons typically do not reach stage 5 before mid-life. Stage 5 requires that persons know the “sacrament of defeat and the reality of irrevocable commitments and acts.”²⁹ By this time friends or family members have died, which forces persons to consider the limited nature of life and the reality of death. Physical attributes and abilities change with the process of growing and looking older. Children reach teenage or adult years and frequently move away from home. Persons develop an increasing awareness of unchangeable aspects in their identities, and multi-dimensional self-knowledge results.

Stage 5 conjunctive faith exhibits several key elements.³⁰

1. [There is] an awareness of the need to face and hold together several unmistakable *polar tensions* in one’s life: the polarities of being both *old* and *young* and of being both *masculine* and *feminine*. Further it means integrating

²⁷ Ibid., 185.

²⁸ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 64.

²⁹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 198.

³⁰ Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 76.

the polarity of being both *constructive* and *destructive* and the polarity of having a conscious and a shadow self.³¹

2. Conjunctive faith brings a felt sense that truth is more multiform and complex than most of the clear, either/or categories of the Individuative stage [stage 4] can properly grasp. In its richness, ambiguity, and multidimensionality, truth must be approached from at least two or more angles of vision simultaneously.³² [Stage 5 individuals] are generally prepared to live with ambiguity, mystery, wonder, and apparent irrationalities.³³
3. Conjunctive faith gives rise to a second naiveté, a post critical receptivity and readiness for participation in the reality brought to expression in symbol and myth.³⁴
4. A genuine openness [develops] to the truths of traditions and communities other than one's own. This openness, however, is not to be equated with a relativistic agnosticism (literally a not knowing). . . . This is to help overcome blind spots as well as the tendencies to idolatry (the over identification of our symbolizations of transcending truth with the reality of truth) to which all our traditions are prone.³⁵

Stage 6, Universalizing faith, “is exceedingly rare. The persons best described by it have generated faith compositions in which their felt sense of an ultimate environment is inclusive of all being.”³⁶ Fowler describes two key items in the transition to universalizing faith: the “de-centering from self” combined with a widening of the circle

³¹ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 65.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 81.

³⁴ Ibid., 65.

³⁵ Ibid., 65-66.

³⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 200.

of “those who count.”³⁷ These individuals view the world through the eyes of those who are quite different from themselves. Persons in stage 6 move the locus of value away from their personal values. Their sense of the common good outweighs personal good, even at the expense of their own safety. Only rare people with the characteristics of a Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, and Mahatma Gandhi achieve this transition.³⁸ These individuals give up self for the sake of the community.

Criticisms of Stages of Faith

Fowler’s Model Is a Developmental Psychological Model rather than a Faith Model

Marlene M. Jardine and Henning G. Viljoen believe that Fowler’s Faith Development Model “separates the content of faith (belief and values) from psychological factors that facilitate the operation of faith within the personality (e.g., cognitive, affective, and social development).”³⁹ Fowler does not include theological and transcendent considerations in his model; therefore, the model does not deal with “faith”

³⁷ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 55.

³⁸ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 201. In 2009 at the Q Conference, I attended a talk by Gregory Berns, a neuroeconomist at Emory University. He spoke about the nature of iconoclastic thinkers. Gregory Berns, “Iconoclast Thinking” (Lecture, Q Conference, Q Ideas, Austin, TX, April 28, 2009). Such thinkers did “something that others say can’t be done.” He mentioned several of the people cited by Fowler as examples of iconoclastic thinkers. Berns presented the results of recent dynamic MRI brain scan research illustrates the difficulty of making truly major thinking pattern shifts. Apparently iconoclastic thinkers have different brain patterns, and it may be that Fowler’s stage 6 individuals are iconoclastic thinkers. Other possible sources include the prompting of the Holy Spirit, maturing brain function, or an amalgam of the two.

³⁹ Marlene M. Jardine and Henning G. Viljoen, “Fowler’s Theory of Faith Development: An Evaluative Discussion,” *Religious Education* 87, no. 1 (1992): 75.

and he does not examine the salvific power in Christ. Fowler's model is a developmental psychology model devoid of theology. Fowler considers the ego as the only source of movement along a faith trajectory; he does not consider the movement coming from a transcendent truth such as Christ.⁴⁰

From one standpoint, these are valid criticisms because Fowler's model does not include movement along a specific doctrinal or theological trajectory. From another standpoint, the criticism is not appropriate because Fowler does not intend the stages to represent movement toward a specific theological goal. Faith development theory offers useful insights because it does not exhibit a specific theological or doctrinal viewpoint.⁴¹

Timothy Paul Jones examines Fowler's use of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's understanding of the terms "faith" and "belief" in the early church.⁴² Jones finds Smith's analysis to be incomplete and, consequently, he questions the theological basis of Fowler's Stages of Faith. Jones believes faith in the pre-modern, or early, church was not simply a matter of faith as allegiance or loyalty as presented by Smith, but includes assent to specific propositional claims.

Jones' evidence and list of citations in this article are brief and do not include a full spectrum of patristic writing and related works. Although his argument is not

⁴⁰ J. E. Loder and James W. Fowler, "Conversations on Fowler's *Stages of Faith* and Loder's *The Transforming Moment*," *Religious Education* 77, no. 2 (1982): 133-148.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴² Timothy Paul Jones, "The Basis of James W. Fowler's Understanding of Faith in the Research of Wilfred Cantwell Smith: An Examination from an Evangelical Perspective," *Religious Education* 99, no. 4 (2004): 345-357.

persuasive as presented, he may be correct. The distinction between the positions of Smith and Jones is a matter of degree rather than a substantive distinction.

Jones makes a questionable leap of logic by applying concerns about Smith's definition to Fowler's premises conflated with doctrinal issues. Jones writes, "If an evangelical understanding of faith requires affirmation of specific content, whereas Smith's and Fowler's understanding of faith represents a fundamentally different phenomenon, to what degree is it possible to utilize Fowler's research in evangelical Christian education?"⁴³

Jones concludes that Fowler's Stages of Faith are not a model of Christian faith development but rather a model of psychical development. He believes development stages were necessary preconditions to Christian faith development. In these conclusions, he is correct since Stages of Faith do not presuppose a specific theological viewpoint.

*Viewing Faith Journeys through Stages of Faith
Encourages People to Leave the Church*

One of the concerns in classic evangelical arenas is that approaching faith as a journey minimizes the salvific nature of believers' relationship with Christ.⁴⁴ The church leadership of such congregations asks itself, "If faith continues to 'grow,' will it 'outgrow' dependence on Christ?" This fear arises because major parts of the evangelical church find themselves in a dead-end corner. That dead-end is the assumption of

⁴³ Ibid., 353.

⁴⁴ Jamieson, "A Churchless Faith (PhD Diss.)", 72.

salvation in Christ as the final or only important event in a person's walk with Christ during this life rather than the first event and part of a process. If salvation is the only important event, it precludes the need for personal growth and renders growth undesirable from a church's standpoint.

The concept of a theological journey may frighten those who hold this view because it implies persons change throughout their lives, and they might leave their current church as they grow and change. Church leaders fear loss of church membership if people grow in their walk with God, which may signal good reasons for leaving that church. Leonard Sweet suggests that this fear infects leaders in churches that do not "turn loose disciples." Sweet believes these leaders keep congregants dependent because loss of members and control implies personal loss of prestige.⁴⁵

Fowler's Stages of Faith Is Inherently Modern Because It Separates Form from Content.

Categorization by separating form from content is common in modernist thinking since it implies objective distance and universal definitions.⁴⁶ A number of postmodern thinkers hold that form and content are inseparable in the areas of self-definition, faith,

⁴⁵ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 234.

⁴⁶ John McDargh, "Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Problem of Foundations," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 11, no. 3 (2001): 185-199.

and belief. Faith is not meaningful separate from experience in an individual's life and thus structural analysis of faith is misapplied.⁴⁷

Paradoxically, the recognition of different faith stages is postmodern.⁴⁸ Faith and faith journeys are inherently relational rather than propositional. Symbolism, sound, and imagery are key components of faith. Sharon Parks believes the correct application of analytical methods, such as Stages of Faith, is critical and allows visualization of the growth in stage transition processes. Careless application of the tool ignores the power of symbol and image.⁴⁹

*Faith Development Theory Does Not Address the
Movement between Stages*

Movement between stages can be painful and lonely, and the dismantling and reconstruction of an earlier belief superstructure is uncomfortable. Beliefs may not change, but people's understandings of those beliefs can change. Individuals' movement from a mono-cultural tribal church environment to a more independent existence may remove them from the comfort of shared values, cultures, and experiences.⁵⁰ They may believe they are losing their Christian faith because the worship service no longer seems

⁴⁷ James E. Fowler, "Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 11, no. 3 (2001): 165-166.

⁴⁸ McDargh, "Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Problem of Foundations," 194.

⁴⁹ Sharon Parks, "Imagination and Spirit in Faith Development: A Way Past the Structure-Content Dichotomy," in *Faith Development and Fowler*, ed. Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986), 138.

⁵⁰ Jamieson, *Chrysalis*, 55-56.

relevant. For example, previously enlightening pastoral messages become dull and boring, the music seems stale and repetitive, and church activities bring no joy. The U2 song “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” captures the sense of discontent.⁵¹

Fowler does not address the transitions between the stages. His research deals with people who are in stable or semi-stable stages and focuses on persons between stages 2 and 5. The transition between stage 4 and 5 is particularly difficult and is a major turning point for some baby boomers in their faith journey as they age.⁵²

A Churchless Faith

In *A Churchless Faith*, Alan Jamieson examines the characteristics of people who left Evangelical Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (EPC) in his home country of New Zealand.⁵³ He restricted the sample to EPC churches and did not include mainstream or traditional churches in his study. The book illustrates some religious and cultural practice differences with the United States; however, those differences are minor and do not affect the applicability of the research results to the United States.

Jamieson conducted face-to-face interviews with 108 church leavers from 1995 to 1996.⁵⁴ The respondents were strongly committed and involved adult members of the

⁵¹ Ibid., 16-17.

⁵² Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 118-119.

⁵³ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁴ Jamieson, “A Churchless Faith (PhD Diss.)”, 250.

churches they attended, with an average involvement time of 15.8 years.⁵⁵ Forty percent of the 108 were involved in full time Christian work or theological study.⁵⁶ Ninety-three percent of the people interviewed were between thirty and fifty years of age at the time of the interviews,⁵⁷ which aligns closely with the 1946 to 1964 birth date range of the baby boomer cohort.

Fowler's Stages of Faith provide a lens for understanding how respondents' faith changed during the leaving process and insight on whether they left the Christian faith. The figure below illustrates Jamieson's research compared with the Fowler faith stage of analysis.

⁵⁵ Jamieson, "Churchless Faith (Intl. Rev. Miss.)," 217.

⁵⁶ Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

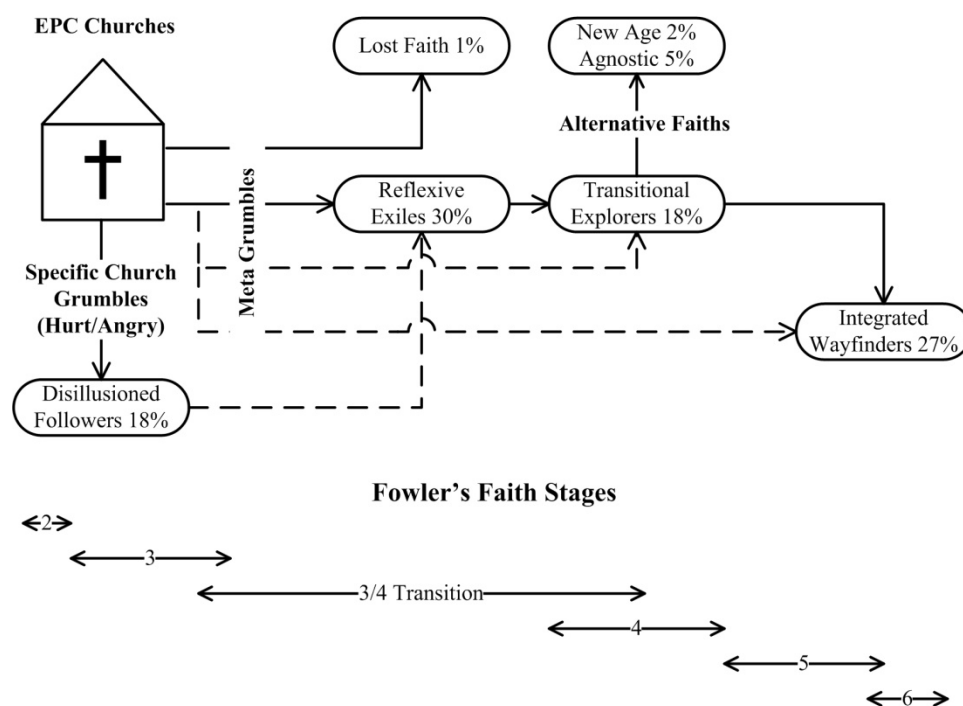


Figure 2. Jamieson's research illustrated⁵⁸

“Disillusioned followers” constitute about 18 percent of respondents. They left the church recently and remain hurt or angry about their church experience.⁵⁹ They retain an affinity for the church even though events and circumstances encouraged them to leave the congregation. They have specific complaints about their former churches. Their complaints, however, do not include EPC doctrine or the tenets of their basic faith; instead, they maintain the faith they practiced in the church.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁹ Jamieson, “Churchless Faith (Intl. Rev. Miss.),” 217-218. Jamieson also uses the term “displaced followers” for this group.

“Reflexive exiles” leave church for different reasons and comprise 30 percent of respondents. They typically leave over a period of eighteen months or more and profess an increasing sense of unease and irrelevancy between the church and their lives. They are in the process of deconstructing their initial faith and express counter-dependency with the church. People in this phase exhibit “meta-grumbles” that Jamieson defines as deep-seated uneasiness and questions about their foundational faith.⁶⁰ Some disillusioned followers move into the reflexive exile group.

“Transitional explorers” are in the process of reconstructing a faith.⁶¹ They retain portions of their previous faith, and add in new portions of self-owned faith. They tested the various parts of their faith and found them sufficiently credible. Their process of reconstruction may involve theological and philosophical research and debate or may be more intuitive based on looking inward and trusting their feelings. The members of this group are positive about their faith and show confidence in it. A small percentage of individuals move from this stage into alternative belief systems such as new age (2%) or agnosticism (5%).

“Integrated wayfinders” complete the task of reconstructing their faith into an integrated whole and include 23 percent of respondents.⁶² People in this group integrate their faith into all facets of their lives, and they are aware of their personal flaws that

⁶⁰ Ibid., 219.

⁶¹ Ibid., 219-20.

⁶² Ibid., 220-21.

interfere with their faith. They have a more stable faith location that includes times of significant re-examination. These people are in a “second naïveté” in which they can accept paradox by understanding the deep-seated origins of those paradoxes.⁶³

Faith Stages of Church Leavers

Figure 2 above relates Fowler’s Stages of Faith to Jamieson’s church leaver stages. Jamieson locates EPC churches within Fowler’s stage 3, because those churches “through their structures, beliefs and faith packages, and particularly their public teaching, worship, and governance patterns encourage adults to become settled at this third stage.”⁶⁴ A number of the individuals within these churches can be in stage 4 or 5, but the public practices of the church direct them toward a stage 3 group. Reflexive exiles are associated with stage 3 to stage 4 transitions, while transitional explorers and integrated way-finders map to stages 4 and 5/6 respectively.

Jamieson discovered that leaving is not typically caused by a lack of Christian faith, but rather by a “disconnect” between the objectives of the church organization and a deep, heart-felt call of God.⁶⁵ Few of his study subjects rejected their Christian faith,

⁶³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 25; Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 187-188.

⁶⁴ Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 122.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

although their views matured and no longer aligned with their former churches. Several observers joked that people leave the church to keep their faith.⁶⁶

Because of the timing and age characteristics of the study population, Jamieson's interviewees were mostly baby boomers who had not reached midlife, which is an age of major life stage transitions.⁶⁷ The earlier discussion of Fowler's Stages of Faith illustrates how these transitions are trigger points for faith re-evaluation, which suggests an accelerated pace of church leaving by aging baby boomers. Jamieson's study also suggests that active church attendees do not want to hear church leaders say, "shut up, and sit down" when they question policies and doctrine.⁶⁸

Conclusions

Fowler's Stages of Faith are measuring rods for examining faith as a journey and provide snapshots of persons' faith at specific points in time. The stages provide an effective way of mapping baby boomers' faith journeys as they go through life transitions. On the other hand, the Stages of Faith do not examine the ongoing process of journey nor do they examine the nature of a person's faith. Rather, it is more a measure of how a person approaches faith.

⁶⁶ For other examples see the interviews in Duin, *Quitting Church*.

⁶⁷ Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 12.

⁶⁸ A few years ago, I was attending a regional meeting of a mainline Protestant denomination as a local church representative. During the discussion time, another participant and I spoke in opposition to the leadership's views on an issue under discussion. From the podium, the presiding Bishop told us to "shut up and sit down."

Jamieson's work includes practical illustrations of how baby boomers undergo faith journeys when they leave churches, and Fowler's Stages of Faith can help analyze the journeys. These studies support the thesis that Christian faith is a journey for baby boomers and suggest the pace of faith journeys will accelerate in the future, as baby boomers face midlife changes. Jamieson's research also suggests that faith journeys will become more prevalent as baby boomers encounter clashes between life changes and the stage 3 attractional model prevalent in EPC and similar churches. The next chapter presents interviews with six baby boomers about their personal faith journeys.

CHAPTER 5

BABY BOOMER INTERVIEWS

A joke in the Alpha study series concerns two caterpillars sitting on a leaf watching a butterfly flying past. As the two caterpillars watch, one says to the other emphatically, “You’ll never get me in one of those.” The one-liner reminds us that the life story of the caterpillar is one of major and significant change: so too are many people’s journeys of Christian faith.

—Alan Jamieson, *Chrysalis*

This chapter presents the results of interviews conducted by this paper’s author with seven baby boomers using the lens of Fowler’s Stages of Faith. Their stories demonstrate how their faith changed as they underwent life transitions. The accounts support the thesis that Christian faith is a journey for baby boomers. The comments contained in this chapter suggest ways churches can respond to the faith journeys of baby boomers.

Interview Method

The author conducted seven face-to-face interviews between September and November 2010. The interviews lasted between forty-five and one hundred minutes, and a digital recorder captured the conversations. Speech recognition software generated the initial written record that underwent a manual editing process to generate the final transcription of the interviews.

The Appendix lists the interview questions that are a slightly modified version of the faith development interview questions found in *Manual for Faith Development Research*.¹ The faith development interview examines how a person finds meaning in life and how that meaning changes over time. The interview questions are partially open-ended because the desired results go beyond simple factual statements. An exploration of the reasoning behind the responses is one of the interview goals, and follow-up questions allowed deeper exploration of the topics.

The questions asked provide material that sheds light on the interviewees' deep convictions and sources of meaning. Analysis of the interviews may help locate interviewees in Fowler's Stages of Faith and Jamieson's church leaver stages. The interview questions also illustrate faith as a journey because they focus on faith and life transitions, and they elicit comments from the interviewees about painful and troubling times in their lives.

The Interviews

The people interviewed were born in the years 1947-1958. Five (Melody Carl, Peter Hobart, Brandon Howard, Will Murphy, Todd Wright) of the seven participants are members of the early Vietnam generation cohort. The other two (Michelle Myers, Jim Trout) are part of the later baby boomer cohort. All the names used in the chapter are

¹ James W. Fowler, Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller, *Manual for Faith Development Research*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta, GA: Center for Research in Faith and Moral Development, 2004), 63.

pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the interviewee, and some place and church names were changed.

Michelle Myers is an ordained pastor, and the rest are laypersons. Each attended a Christian church at the time of the interview. Most started attending church as children, and some dropped out but returned later in life. Only one, Todd Wright, has been associated with his current church for longer than four years. All the interviewees are currently married with children ranging from ages four through adulthood. Some also have grandchildren.

Will Murphy²

Will Murphy grew up in a middle-class family in the southern United States. His father was a sales representative who traveled all week, and his mother was a special needs teacher. He grew up in the Catholic Church. Will explains that at twelve years old “I pretty much got sidetracked.” A few years later, when he was seventeen, “I was baptized in the Church of Christ. It was pretty miraculous to me. For the first time in my life, I could pick up a Bible and read out of the Bible [and] just totally understand it. There’s something about being in the grace of God and reading his word, because it all makes sense.” Shortly thereafter, he married for the first time:

I turned my back on the Christian life, ended up getting divorced and just going wild. From there I spent probably thirty years of doing drugs, drinking. I dealt; [I’ve] been busted three times. And through all that, I knew that God’s presence

² Will Murphy (pseudonym), interview by author, September 18, 2010.

was still there even though I had turned my back on Him. He still had my back, because with the things that I did. Really and truly, I should have been dead. But like I said, even though I turned my back, he never turned his. And he carried me through all that. I always knew I had to get back to a Christian life and a faith.

During this time, God seemed distant to Will, and he rarely thought about God. He spent thirty years in the barren, thorn bush-filled wilderness looking for meaning in many different places and never finding it. Through all the turmoil, he recognized that God did not abandon him at any time. He compares God's love to that of parents: "No matter what I did, no matter what I put my parents through, they always loved me, and they never gave up on me. And God doesn't give up on you."

Will and his father constantly argued when he was young. He underwent corporal punishment for some infraction during the week when his father came home at the end of each week. Will fantasized about killing his father: "I really had that much hate for him at that point in time. . . . [It went away] over the years as I matured, which took a long, long time." His journey with his father moved to another level last summer when his father fell and broke his hip. He comments,

I spent eight days with him [Will's father] in the hospital, twenty-four hours a day. I don't think that he ever thought I would do that. . . . There was a couple of times I told him [that] I love him. His response to that was, "I know you do." It wasn't, "I love you, too," or anything like that. And I mean I didn't expect anything else from him, but it kind of hurt. After he got out of the hospital . . . he told me, "You'll never know how much I appreciate it. I'm serious. If I tried to let you know how much I appreciated it, I could never do it, until I die." And that meant a lot to me that he did appreciate it. And I think that we definitely got closer through all that.

As part of his faith journey, Will and his family now attend church. After being away from the church for thirty years, he works hard at staying connected with his Christian faith. He remembers the faith he discovered as a youth of seventeen:

I've been married five times. And when I married my present wife I knew that if I was going to make the marriage last, I couldn't live the way I'd been living. Obviously I'd been married four other times and divorced for a reason. That reason was the lifestyle that I led. [With] her having a daughter, I knew that there was no way I was going to be the husband and father I had to be, without having God in my life.

Will described the one thing he would change in his life: "The thirty years I lost. It's a mixed emotions thing, because if I didn't do those thirty years, where would I be today? Would I be in the same place? I have a wife that I love with all my heart. I have a daughter that I love with all my heart. Had I done those years differently, would I have the same things I have today?"

Will Murphy's responses suggest he does not fit the traditional idea of a church attendee, nor would he be comfortable in many churches. He lived "on the edge" for much of his adult life, and like Jacob, he recognizes God when he looks backward: "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it" (Gen. 28:16). His understanding of God is much more personal because he knows he could have died at many times in his wilderness wanderings. He also understands that his Christian faith journey is very dependent on God. Without God, his faith journey would have taken a different path. He will likely continue to transition into different faith trajectories as the changes in his life unfold.

Michelle Myers³

Michelle Myers is an ordained pastor in one of the larger mainline denominations, but her service in a Phoenix area church ended recently because the church lost grant funding for her position. She has always questioned authority and external control: “I’m anti-authority. I struggle with authority and with discipline and things like that. So that’s defining of my personality, I think.”

Her mother was Catholic, and her father was an atheist. Born in Saudi Arabia, she remained there until she came to the United States in the ninth grade to attend a girls’ boarding school. Michelle’s father “did not want us to be brainwashed” by Christian churches while she and her sister were growing up. Yet, she started on her faith journey early in life. Michelle comments,

My first memory of God is a dream that I had when I was a very little girl. It was very vivid and I still remember that I dreamed I was walking across the desert. And I lived in the desert, so I knew what that was. I walked over a sand dune and there was a little temple. I went into the temple and it was full of animals who were having a great party with party hats and . . . balloons and the nine yards. The giraffe came up to me and said, “You should go into this room.” And there was a little room in the center of the temple. The giraffe said, “Go in, and you’ll meet God.” And I walked into the room and woke up. Some strange sense of the presence of God, there was something holy about God and special. God was joyful [and] it was a joyful kind of a setting. That was about all I knew.

The origins of faith began appearing, and Michelle sensed God was real. Her faith development moved slowly with a good friend of her parents who spoke with her within the confines of her father’s dictates. The friend introduced her to Jesus and did not talk to

³ Michelle Myers (pseudonym), interview by author, September 27, 2010.

her about church. The next stage in Michelle's journey occurred after she left home, and she describes a major transition in her life:

I was fifteen, in boarding school, and away from my family for the first time permanently. I had been away from them before, but not permanently. I really had a kind of a breakdown and there were girls at my girls' boarding school who introduced me to the Gospel. That was a huge turning point for me. It wasn't definitive in the sense that it didn't stick really well. It was a very basic uneducated faith. It was a simple sharing of the Gospel and not much more.

She met her husband, who was a Christian, a year after she finished college.

Neither of them attended church until their first child was two years old, but Michelle wanted her children to have a church experience that she had missed. She and her husband attended church and slowly became more active in church activities. After moving to Arizona in 1991, she began to sense a call to ordained ministry and started attending seminary about six years later. In the process, several friends and mentors helped increase her understanding of scripture and church history. Michelle comments, "That process [of understanding] continues today."

In the midst of these transitions, her family underwent a very painful wilderness experience. They started attending one church shortly after the lead pastor left the pulpit under undesirable circumstances. He then returned and most of the church immediately left the congregation. The church they subsequently attended was a new church development, and it encountered major dislocations soon after it installed its first pastor. Michelle comments, "[The first] pastor turned out to be trouble. . . . It was a terrible, terrible situation for everybody. There were times . . . that I felt completely abandoned." Because of the situation, her husband now refuses to participate deeply in any other

church, and her children no longer like church. Michelle, however, grew through this painful situation: “But through the process . . . I began to understand that it didn’t matter what had happened. God had not left the building. But that was really painful, and that lasted for year and half or two years of struggle.”

Based on the interview, her struggles with authority likely stemmed from her relationship with her father. They argued frequently when she was growing up, and the relationship did not improve appreciably over the rest of her father’s life. He passed away about three and a half years ago, and Michelle comments about their relationship:

I’d always wanted to have a good relationship [with my father], and didn’t know how to make that happen. I continued to pray that God would help me to forgive, . . . [the relationship] would be healed, and somehow that would happen. One day I was in the shower and I was praying that prayer again because I was really struggling with my feelings for my father. Very, very suddenly I just felt completely at peace. I still regret that we didn’t have a good relationship, but I feel like things are mended between us somehow.

She learned how to deal with her father’s death during this life transition, and she continued her journey with a breakthrough experience. Her peace transcends the limits of time and space and stems from God’s grace.

Christian faith is a journey for Michelle Myers. She has grown more and more convinced of the truth that is God and Christ, but her disdain for doctrine creates challenges for many churches. Consider her closing interview response:

I do also see faith as a journey. I know my understanding of God has changed drastically from the beginning of my life until now. It will probably continue. I hope it will continue to change because God is so overwhelmingly more than anything my brain can contain. I hope I am continuing to discover new things about God all the time. And everything I discover about God from day-to-day and through the years of my life has just been better and better. So it gets to the point

where I struggle with, really struggle with, the doctrine. I really struggle with church teachings, things like that, because they are limited in time, in space, in context. I struggle even a lot with Scripture because of the context and time limits that are placed on it. And more and more as I grow older and older, I am unwilling to say things about God that . . . I would not blame on my worst enemy. So for God to be vengeful and hateful and arbitrary, I don't believe it. And I don't want to say it, because to me that's heresy.

Michelle fits into Jamieson's definition of an Integrated Way Finder. She works within a "second naïveté" of paradox as she faces transitions in leaving her current church position and seeking other outlets. Based on the interview, she will likely continue to change as she travels on her faith journey focused on Jesus Christ.

Todd Wright⁴

Todd Wright grew up in a Christian home, attended church consistently while growing up, and his parents were very active in their church. After college, he became engaged to his girlfriend, but the relationship ended after three and a half years. Todd then entered a period of deep depression and alcohol abuse. A few years later, he moved to Arizona and slowly began to come out of his depression. He started watching the local Trinity Broadcasting Network channel, and he "kept hearing the phrase 'born again.'" He asked a friend's wife, "What is this born again thing anyway?" She explained much more clearly and bluntly to me that this is what you have to do." Within two weeks, he prayed to accept Christ and has followed Christ for almost thirty years.

⁴ Todd Wright (pseudonym), interview with author, September 11, 2010.

Todd has maintained a consistent faith position until recently when some profound disturbances reshaped his life. One of his daughters graduated from college and sought a job in another state near where her boyfriend attends medical school. His other daughter, Bonnie, and her fiancée survived a major automobile accident with almost no injuries. He says:

Right after Bonnie had the accident was a huge time of questioning. “Why? Wow, I don’t believe it!” . . . I was trying to make sense of that and those things really threw me into . . . a cocoon, where you just kind of batten down the hatches. There was perhaps very little sense to be made out of it except that God was with us and with me and I was not hurt either. Crisis — only in my own mind I guess. God is good all the time. . . . [These events] definitely caused a greater, a greater introspection into how God is working in my life. I can’t go beyond that right now.

Shortly thereafter, Todd’s wife Fran lost her leadership position at their long-term church home:

[My wife’s] life is in a huge transition also, she would say. She told me that this right now [is what] she will call her “fallow period.” She basically was forced out of her job . . . by politics of the church. It was mostly the senior pastor cleaning house. She was deeply hurt by that and wants very much to be there for both of her daughters in this transition period. And so, for Fran — I don’t know, I try to be there for her, but she hasn’t done much communicating this far as what she’s going through.

Todd coped by working more hours to keep his mind off the challenges he faced.

At his family’s church, he serves on Sunday and is beginning to realize that he treats Sunday as just another day of work. He expresses deep frustration with the direction of the church:

Because I have become so disillusioned with the church in the last few months, even years, certainly in the last year, I would more shy away from calling myself a religious person because I have come to equate the church and religion. I have

come back so much to the idea of just my relationship with Jesus Christ as the important part of who I am, my discipleship as being the most important part. My support of the church has been sorely tested lately.

Todd may be entering a wilderness period in his life that could cause him to become a church leaver. He has seriously considered replacing church based worship attendance with small group Christian camping and hiking. He does not exhibit signs of doubting the Christian faith, but he considers the leadership of his current church to be self-aggrandizing and self-centered rather than Christ-centered.

This questioning may lead Todd into a challenging faith journey. He has not found it necessary to ponder the relationship between Christ, himself, and the church for almost thirty years. The pain of his wife's termination is deep, and she will need a lot of time to recover. His daughters are on the verge of leaving the area permanently as they establish their own lives and identities. Together this tsunami-like group of changes may cause him to re-examine some deeply held faith tenets. He may discard some of those foundations and strengthen others as he continues on his faith journey and transitions from a Jamieson's displaced follower to a reflective exile.

Jim Trout⁵

Jim Trout, the youngest of nine children, grew up in a Catholic family. He served as an altar boy and in other positions in the parish. Life was very placid for Jim until he was sixteen when his father suddenly died. His father was an attorney, and his mother did

⁵ Jim Trout (pseudonym), interview with author, September 9, 2010.

not work so the family income stream stopped suddenly. They moved from a suburban style home into an apartment. Jim could not qualify for college tuition assistance, and he entered the Coast Guard prior to attending college.

His father's death had a profound influence on his faith journey. Up to that point, he had not thought very much about the larger questions of life since he was still a teenager. Now he descended into despair and thought about how life's opportunities can vanish so rapidly. The funeral pointed to a different reality: God taking tragedy and shining through it. Jim talks about his memories of the service:

So I remember my brothers and me bearing his coffin out of the church at the end of the funeral and the reality of that. This isn't TV, this isn't make believe. The weight of this casket is my father's body. This isn't pretend, this isn't a high school play. I remember putting the casket in the back of the hearse and at that moment feeling like this is the coldest, darkest day of my life. I turned towards the church knowing that my mom was about to come out, just dreading this moment. I knew she'd just be crying and upset. The doors opened up and she came out. She was smiling. All of a sudden, the sky felt blue, sunny, and warm. She just looked up to the sky and said, "Thank you God for Jesus!" All of my dad's suffering was over. He had gone on to eternal life. It was her faith at that moment that I saw so vividly. It was just glowing. That moment — you know you have those little impressions that stick in your brain. That moment God cemented right in the front of my brain for the rest of my life, her taking what was a horrible situation in life, and really showing the right light on it.

Jim and his family started attending what he describes as "Bible based churches."

Several of them were heavily Pentecostal, and he saw people speaking in tongues and slain in the spirit who "scared the crap out of me." He describes one pastor who believed that the earth was the center of the universe and stars were actually peepholes that God used to watch people on earth. He discovered that the teachings in one church did not agree with those of another church, and they might be completely opposed to the other.

The differences did not make sense to him, yet he did not walk away from faith in disgust. He says, “I always had an interest, a thirst to really find some answers.”

Jim’s next step along his journey came during Coast Guard basic training:

One of the first moments when I really felt the strength of God was when I was at a breaking point in basic training. . . . All of a sudden, I was calmed and I felt a maturity. I felt a confidence, a release of my anxieties and my fears; I was in God’s hands. I was being watched and being cared for but I wasn’t alone. I remember to this day I was double-timing back from the mess hall to the barracks. It just kind of hit me, “What am I getting so upset about?” I’m being taken care of here. That was probably the first time I felt God. I truly felt God’s presence in my life.

Later in the Coast Guard, he experienced significant challenges to his faith, but the memory of this calming experience sustained him through those challenges. During this time, Jim underwent a wilderness experience that he still remembers as difficult. “I was struggling with my religion, struggling with my belief in God and Jesus Christ. . . . Now it’s not as much of an issue because . . . I’ve matured.”

One of Jim’s sisters received a cancer diagnosis when she was a senior in high school. She was “in and out of remission” for approximately fifteen years, and she passed away at the age of thirty-two. He remembers her as a person who always sought the fullness of life, and that perspective gives him wisdom in looking at death and tragedy.

Recently a neighbor prayed for healing in the life of a family member who had a terminal illness. After the family member died, Jim recounts her reaction: “She now questions if there is a God. How could God be so mean to take him?” Jim comments, “[What] I’m praying for is that the person who is ill has found God. . . . [I pray that the person] has faith in God and has accepted Jesus Christ.” Jim reflects themes found in

Julian of Norwich and John of the Cross, and Jim shows remarkable insight into ways of seeing God:

Sometimes I don't try to perceive God in anything that I can actually perceive. In other words, I don't try to fit God into any form or color or shape or size. I see God as a source of power, strength, and enlightenment. . . . [He] has a love that is for everyone, a grace for everyone and offers a life for everyone who accepts his son who he sent to us. I can't even imagine entirely what God is. [He is] beyond my comprehension. I'm not trying to avoid answering the question. I don't see how I could set a limit on his being. Description can often set limits.

Jim is currently attempting to move from his current house into a neighboring community. He and his wife decided that since their daughters left home, they need a smaller home. He states that the move will help them financially in the future, and this move continues the theme of journey in his life. Because of his circumstances, Jim underwent many major faith transitions earlier than most people do.⁶ He may continue a transition process after he moves, but he may also be in a stable faith journey location.

Brandon Howard⁷

Brandon Howard is the oldest of six children, and he attended twenty-three different schools because his family moved frequently when he was a child. He joined the Air Force at nineteen and retired after twenty years of service. He attended church as a child and left the church for a while when he was in the Air Force. He came back to the church while in the service and developed a greater understanding of the Christian life.

⁶ The stage 3 to 4 transition occurred much earlier than the typical mid-twenties to forties. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 182.

⁷ Brandon Howard (pseudonym), interview by author, September 25, 2010.

Brandon's biological children are grown and have their own children. He and his wife are foster parents for special needs children. They have adopted three of them, and are now adopting a fourth. Currently, they have six children living in their home.

The death of a foster child illustrates Brandon's faith journey, and he comments about the pain of loss:

We had a little girl that was severely ill and we prayed for healing. We felt for sure that God was going to heal her. She had an incident that really diminished her. For four years, we took care of her under the assumption that God was going to heal her. Then one day she died, unexpectedly. God healed her by taking her. He didn't heal her and let her continue to live. So we don't know God's plan. We don't know why we had to take care of her for four years with the assumption that she was going to live, when she could have died four years earlier. So it doesn't matter what we do, God does what God wants to do.

The child depended on a tracheotomy tube for breathing. One night she pulled out the tube and the resultant oxygen deprivation caused seizures. She partially recovered over the next four years, but she stopped breathing unexpectedly and died. The Howards were in the process of adopting her and received the final approval a day or two after she passed away. Brandon looks back on the effect of her death:

I think having a death of a close one . . . has changed my perspective of life's meaning, because life only means as much you put into it. We're only going to be on this earth for so long. I think when people say, "How are you", and their response is, "Well I'm fine because I'm on this side of the dirt." That's not what I strive for. I strive to be with the Lord, and if I'm on the other side of the dirt, then that means I'm with the Lord.

This loss profoundly affected Brandon and his family for many years. They went through so much pain that they decided never to take a tracheotomy child again.

However, they did accept one, whom they have now adopted, and her tracheotomy opening is now closed.

Over the last two years, Brandon and his family have transitioned from an evangelical to a Pentecostal worship style, which was a major transition for them. He formerly worried if people were worthy to take communion, but he no longer asks that question. He comments, “I do not know the mind or heart of anybody who takes communion. So I try not to be judgmental like I used to be. Instead of looking outwardly, I try to only look inwardly for myself.” His faith journey is continuing, and a significant factor in his continuing journey is his continuing re-examination of his understanding of God in light of their child’s death.

Melody Carl⁸

Melody Carl grew up in the upper Midwest, the youngest of four siblings. Her father, who suffered from multiple sclerosis, was a second-generation German immigrant farmer. He liked to joke that in the summer, he was a Methodist and in the winter, a Unitarian because a creek that froze in the winter provided a shorter path to the Unitarian congregation. Her mother was Roman Catholic and very rarely attended Mass. Melody describes her as a “classic Catholic” who “didn’t go to church, but she blamed it on the fact that the Pope banned Latin.” When Melody was 10, the family moved to the warmer

⁸ Melody Carl (pseudonym), interview by author, November 30, 2010.

climate of Arizona to alleviate some of her father's symptoms. She has lived in Arizona ever since.

Melody was rebellious growing up. "I was a rebel, I was a smartass, and I was also a good kid, all wrapped into one." Her rebellious nature showed up more in comments to other people rather than in her actions. The majority of the students in her high school were members of the LDS faith, and their missionaries frequently spoke to her attempting to bring Melody within their faith. She enjoyed telling them that she was an animist, because the missionaries did not know how to respond.

She married just after graduation from high school, and that first marriage lasted only three years. After the divorce, Melody did not wish to attend Roman Catholic services, and investigated a congregation in another denomination. At her first meeting with the Senior Pastor, he unequivocally stated she would not be welcome because of her divorce and Roman Catholic background. She refused to attend church or have other spiritual outlets for a number of years.

Melody has been married to her second husband for 31 years. Their only major crisis occurred about a year after their marriage. For one year, they lived under the threat of a \$250,000 IRS judgment from a business bankruptcy. During this time, her father was also in the hospital with a terminal illness. At the end of that year, a court vacated the judgment completely. Since that year, she has undergone few transitions, her husband has rarely changed jobs, and they have not moved very often.

After her two children were born, Melody told her husband that she was willing to embark on a faith journey and reconsider her earlier refusal. They started attending the church which her husband attended as he was growing up, which was also the same place where she had been rejected earlier. Melody shares some of her decision criteria for selecting a church:

When we first started going to church, my personal philosophy was, we needed a good, solid, kind religion that's not too judgmental to raise our children with, so they can be kind, loving children. And if they grow up and change religions, they won't join a crazy one or a nasty one. That was kind of a baby boomer attitude, I guess.

Melody's children attend college now. When they were growing up, she volunteered at their schools. She comments: "Most of my time I've spent raising my kids. Since they are both grown and gone off to college, I've been doing a lot of volunteer work at church."

She and her family have continued to attend the same church. She is now in a leadership role there during difficult transition times. A few years ago, the congregation underwent a difficult transition when the pastor left under accusations of moral failings. Then a series of interim pastors made poor financial decisions, and the net effect of these events is a major decrease in giving levels. The current pastor asked her to take a leadership position, and her term is now ending, and she is not sure what will happen next. "I haven't quite figured out what happens next. I'm looking more at taking care of myself, I guess. I don't know. I haven't figured it out."

Melody is somewhat of an exception baby boomer since she has not experienced many of their typical major life changes. Her life has much more of the stability usually associated with the builder generation. The time of major journeys may start in the next few months when both the reality of her children leaving home and the ending of her church position leave her searching for meaning.

Peter Hobart⁹

Peter Hobart's journey started on the East Coast, where he grew up and attended church. He "wandered from the church a little bit" as an older teen but decided to return after a few years. He met his wife in high school and they dated about four years before they married. They remain married and have two adult children and four grandchildren.

Compared to some of the other interviewees, Peter's life has been much more stable. He has not undergone as much turmoil in work, family, and faith as others report. In addition, his personality does not show as intense reactions to stress as some of the other people interviewed. His answers during the interview reflect a deep maturity in the Christian faith.

Peter's faith journey underwent a transformation during a mission trip to Limón, Costa Rica, during the aftermath of the Nicaraguan Civil War (1979-1990).¹⁰ He joined the trip shortly before it left for Costa Rica, when another person dropped out. He reports,

⁹ Peter Hobart (pseudonym), interview by author, September 25, 2010.

¹⁰ Hans-Jürgen Prien, "Nicaragua," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 3:751-752.

“We traveled to Costa Rica and worked with the Nicaraguan refugees. That was a particularly eye-opening time for seeing what the missionaries deal with in third-world countries, and that stays with you.”

This trip was the first time Peter experienced another culture in depth, and he became acquainted with the local inhabitants. He grew significantly by being able to look at life and faith through the eyes of other people. Like many baby boomers that experience the dichotomy as transition generation members, he discovered that personal relationships meant more to him than accomplishing the assigned work goals of the trip.

Peter recalls,

To me, just the fact of being there was important, but while we were there . . . we went out cold into the neighborhood. . . . They [Costa Ricans] were just so open to the gospel, more so than the people here in the United States. That impressed me a lot, that they were receptive to our efforts there. We were helping with the Bible school for the Nicaraguans, but I think we brought back more than we took there.

Peter is an example of a person who has not undergone major faith crises initiated by traumatic events in his life. He says,

I’m kind of unique in the fact that that I grew up in church, and my image of God has not changed. You know, the things I learned as a child have stayed with me. The relation to God has grown stronger over the years. . . . You make smarter decisions when you get older. . . . My relationship has gotten closer to God; it hasn’t changed drastically.

Like Brandon, Peter grew up in the church and found a stable faith in that environment.

Unlike Brandon, his family did not move during his childhood, and he enjoyed geographical and cultural stability during his formative years. After he became an adult, he moved several times in his occupation and sought stability in a local church. He and

his wife are still friends with people they met through churches many years ago and remained in the same denomination for most of their adult lives. They thrived spiritually in that environment.

Peter has a mature faith but does not fit the typical Stages of Faith pattern of movement in response to crises experience by many baby boomers. He received a deep faith early in life and it has not left him. His interactions with people while in Costa Rica gave him a “second naïveté,” and he can accept paradox within a very traditional church environment.

Conclusions

The interviews support the thesis that Christian faith is a journey for baby boomers. All are in faith locations different from the earlier parts of their lives, and some have undergone major faith transitions. Their stories reflect the breadth of varying understandings of God and Jesus Christ by believers who hold an orthodox Christian faith.

The key transitions in their faith journeys usually occurred at times of crisis. They faced paradoxes or situations where their understanding did not provide satisfactory answers. The wilderness times of spiritual dryness allowed them to focus on the nature of God and matured their faith. Like pilgrims on a journey, they shed unneeded spiritual baggage along the way. They reflect the tumult of the culture as they matured, and this illustrates how baby boomers are a cusp generation with both modern and post-modern characteristics.

In their accounts, the interviewees echo the insights found in the Bible and the medieval mystics. Some wrestled with God and wrenched a hip (Gen 32:25) as a signpost of their struggle. They look back and marvel at how God never abandoned them as they tried to run away from God.

The people interviewed fall between Fowler Stages of Faith definitions of stage 3/4 transition through stage 5. Many modernist churches function best when most of the people are in stage 3.¹¹ This discrepancy suggests difficulties for baby boomers in churches that have not learned how to create space for people at stage 4 to 5. The next chapter presents ways in which churches can connect with baby boomers that have moved far along on their faith journey.

¹¹ Jamieson, *Journeying in Faith*, 108-109.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

We have developed a church that lost the basic understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ, but understands what it means to be a business. We have developed unmotivated people sitting in our pews who expect the “paid staff” to do all the work. We have developed a system where members of different churches do not speak to each other, or connect in any way, because “they don’t think like us.” We have developed a system that encourages just a few to do all the work, and burn out. We have developed into a people who do not think for ourselves, we have become followers of our pastors and not of Christ.

—John O’Keefe, “Leadershift in the Church,” www.johncokeefe.com

This dissertation presented evidence that baby boomers undergo faith journeys as they transition through different life phases. Their faith does not remain static through their lives. These changes rarely lead them away from the foundational aspects of the Christian faith, assuming they held such a faith earlier in life.¹ In undergoing wilderness times and transitions, they re-evaluate the doctrinal stances in their particular “brand” of Christianity, and they may reject or modify those teachings.

Chapter 2 traced the concepts of journey and wilderness found in the Scriptures and related writings. The Ugaritic Baal Cycle provided socio-historical contexts and contrasts for better understandings of journey, wilderness, and deliverance in the Hebrew

¹ Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 123.

Scriptures. These themes were dominant in the Pentateuch, prophets, and writings. The New Testament continued the same themes, and journey and wilderness concepts appeared frequently in the Gospels and Pauline corpus.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation examined faith journeys as viewed through an early Christian lens and the medieval period. The desert fathers, medieval theologians, pilgrims, and medieval mystics understood journey and wilderness as different aspects of the faith movement toward God. They discovered that, during their darkest time of journey and wandering, Christ found them when they stopped looking for him.

Chapter 4 presented James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*, an analytical interview tool that measures faith movement as snapshots along a person's faith trajectory. The interview technique and questions facilitate an understanding of the underlying foundations of a person's belief system. This chapter also discussed Alan Jamieson's research into church leavers and his use of Fowler's techniques.

Chapter 5 contained interviews with baby boomers illustrating their Christian faith journeys. All of the subjects demonstrated a deep Christian faith, yet each arrived at that faith through different routes. The interviewees matured in their Christian faith through changes in life situations and learned to embrace the paradoxes inherent in churches and faith.

Faith journeys are not a new or postmodern phenomenon. The witness of Christian scripture and extensive Judeo-Christian experience affirm the validity of journey and wilderness times. The downplaying of journey in contemporary Christian

practice resulted from the extreme application of what Len Sweet calls “propositional belief.”²

Baby boomers are the cusp generation that marks the division between the enlightenment and the postmodern eras. In the United States, they lived through one of the most socially tumultuous times in the country’s history. For many baby boomers, their movement along Christian faith journeys is similar to younger generations’ experiences, rather than their parents’ generation.

Many current churches resemble secular businesses with a CEO (lead pastor), paid staff (pastors and directors), hierarchical control (administrative board and staff hierarchy), and high overhead expenses (pastoral salaries and rent/mortgage). In *Boneyard*, John O’Keefe refers to these organizations as industrial churches that grew out of the industrial revolution corporate model. O’Keefe believes this type of church develops leaders and seeks numerical growth at the expense of growing disciples.³ Congregants are fungible and a benefit because they provide “noses and nickels” as long as they remain exclusively loyal to a church. Such organizations treat baby boomers and other people as caterpillars when some are in a chrysalis stage and some are butterflies “moving quickly and easily between many Christian groups.”⁴

² Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 18.

³ John C. O’Keefe, *Boneyard: Creatives Will Change the Way We Lead in the Church* (Sacramento, CA: DeadFish Publishing, 2010), 13-15.

⁴ Jamieson, *Chrysalis*, 107.

Can churches that focus on caterpillars learn to welcome people on faith journeys? This change is unlikely in most such churches. The leaders are often interested in maintaining their status, egos, and pensions at the expense of relationships. Organizations and fellowships have a life cycle that includes a time to die, and radical rebirth occurs only after a death. Death is frequently the better option and leads to rebirth rather than a long, lingering decline into inward looking irrelevance.

Churches that welcome baby boomers on a journey need a dislike for doctrine. Following Christ and making Christ the head of the church are essential and foundational: “So reach out and welcome one another to God’s glory. Jesus did it; now *you* do it!” (Rom. 15:7 MSG) Following Christ as expressed in the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed is the core and the single faith proposition defining a Christian Church. Len Sweet and Frank Viola write, “So what is Christianity? It is Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less.”⁵ Doctrine and the definition of appropriate worship forms are distant, secondary issues. Views on baptism, spiritual gifts, election, and the second coming of Christ do not matter in the kingdom of God.⁶ Baby boomers in Fowler’s stage four or five recognize many human limitations of doctrine and its artificial limitations that restrict Christian fellowship.

⁵ Sweet and Viola, *Jesus Manifesto*, xvi.

⁶ Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), Kindle e-book, locations 1029-1020.

Recently a frustrated church leader said, “We should be known as a church of ‘do’s,’ not a church of ‘don’ts.’”⁷ If a person must ask permission before embarking on ministry, their church may have placed their pastor as its head rather than its true head, Jesus Christ. Some churches use their resources for wrong purposes such as focusing excessively on worship services. This is an inward rather than an outward focus. As they age, many baby boomers enter a life phase when they seek a higher purpose for their lives. They question whether activities such as setting up chairs or making sure drapes and furniture match the master worship plan are a waste of time and effort.

Daniel Pink refers to baby boomers and observes, “When the cold front of demographics meets the warm front of unrealized dreams, the result will be a thunderstorm of purpose the likes of which the world has never seen.”⁸ He envisions a tripod of motivational factors: autonomy, mastery, and purpose.⁹ Autonomy is the recognition that people are valued individuals of a community, and thrive when treated accordingly.¹⁰ Pink defines mastery as “the desire to get better and better at something

⁷ Interview with a ministry leader, November 22, 2010.

⁸ Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), Kindle e-book, location 1781.

⁹ *Ibid.*, locations 177-180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, locations 1185-1125.

that matters.”¹¹ His term mastery would equate to discipleship growth in a Christian context. Purpose is “our yearning to be part of something larger than ourselves.”¹²

Many churches that wish to connect with baby boomers would benefit from adapting Pink’s motivational framework. He captures much of essential human motivation viewing it from a self-determined framework. The major shift needed in the approach is shifting the source of motivating drive from inherent human nature to a God inspired source. In his writings, he has shown how treating the individual as valuable and unique allows people to flourish. When churches revalue baby boomers and others, lifting them up from a low worth, fungible existence as Jesus did, amazing results occur:

There was a woman present, so twisted and bent over with arthritis that she couldn’t even look up. She had been afflicted with this for eighteen years. When Jesus saw her, he called her over. “Woman, you’re free!” He laid hands on her and suddenly she was standing straight and tall, giving glory to God. (Luke 13:11-13 MSG)

Baby boomers seek a sense of purpose, and some move through different Stages of Faith as they undergo life changes. Churches focused on a single stage of faith cannot create a sense of community that comes from valuing all people. Some of those organizations become inward looking, focusing on worship, children’s ministry, or other pursuits and exclude showing the love of Christ to the world. They act as “colonial” churches with well-defined boundaries rather than “Missional” churches with much more

¹¹ Ibid., location 1460.

¹² Ibid., location 176.

fuzzy boundaries.¹³ Baby boomers will leave and look elsewhere if they cannot find an outlet for their God-inspired purpose through church affiliation.

Baby boomers long for community. Many of their parents grew up, attended school, worked, and retired in the same geographical area, but many boomers left their childhood home area to attend college or accept a job. During the 1970s and 1980s when boomers experienced rapid job promotions, the average person moved every three to five years, and many boomers will make three to six major career changes during their working years.¹⁴

Boomers' mobility destroyed their relationship networks and commitments that develop through many years of association, and many boomers lack the support of continuing relationships. They miss the church and work-related long-term commitments enjoyed by their parents. They enter midlife, sense the need for friends and supportive networks, and long for such a community as expressed in the *Cheers* theme:

Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name,
And they're always glad you came;
You want to be where you can see,
Our troubles are all the same.¹⁵

¹³ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 18-19.

¹⁴ Gary L. McIntosh, *One Church, Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), Kindle e-book, locations 737-748.

¹⁵ Gary Portnoy, "The Story Behind the Cheers Theme," <http://www.garyportnoy.com> (accessed November 27, 2010).

Many churches recognize the need for community, but many struggle to offer some form of small group programmatic component. The programmatic approach is marginally successful, and I have heard pastors describe their challenges with small groups. The shared life needed for true community does not develop quickly and assigning people to groups for short times does not show positive results. Perhaps community formation can flourish only in smaller, organically based groups.

The literal meaning of *ekklesia*, the Greek word for church, is “called out” consisting of the preposition *ek* (out of) and the verb *kaleo* (to call).¹⁶ In the Greek context, it is an ordinary word referring to a gathering of people without religious significance.¹⁷ This definition suggests churches are the people of God who meet as communities without pretense and with minimal organization. Eugene Peterson comments, “It is significant that there is not a single instance in the biblical revelation of a congregation of God’s people given to us in romantic, crusader, or consumer terms. There are no ‘successful’ congregations in Scripture or in the history of the church.”¹⁸ He continues his description of the true nature of church:

All I am insisting is that if we want to embrace a truly Spirit-formed church, we must embrace the messy conditions—the complexity of relationships both interpersonal and Trinitarian, the many levels of maturity and immaturity, the ever-present vulnerability of everyone to sin—out of which the Holy Spirit is

¹⁶ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 303-304.

¹⁷ Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, Kindle e-book, locations 1938-1942.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, locations 360-362.

working. If we are serious about church and want to participate in what the Holy Spirit is doing, these are the conditions. Get used to it.¹⁹

Peterson recognizes that people are on a faith journey. They need room to grow and explore different avenues. The industrial church is rapidly dying. The rebirth is occurring in communities of believers on a pilgrimage. The head of that community is not a pastor, but Jesus Christ. Baby boomers will insist on an egalitarian approach to the community with little or no hierarchy. They will jettison the excess baggage of structure that stifles the working of the Holy Spirit. The community will resemble anarchy at times, yet in the anarchy, Jesus will be evident. Chaos produces order, and order produces chaos in the inverted economy of the kingdom of God.

George Barna sees a future for American Christianity in which people continue moving away from the church as their primary means for expressing their faith. He predicts that only 30-35 percent of Christians will base their faith at a church compared with 70 percent in 2000.²⁰ Barna comments, “You don’t have to like this transition, but you must deal with it. You can approach it with a defensive, negative attitude, or you can deal with it in the hope of learning and experiencing great breakthroughs in your life.”²¹ Since they are the pioneers riding the cusp between modernism and postmodernism, baby boomers can possibly be in the forefront of this redefinition of church.

¹⁹ Ibid., locations 2540-2544.

²⁰ George Barna, *Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005), Kindle e-book, locations 425-440.

²¹ Ibid., location 441.

Faith is truly a journey for baby boomers, and in that journey, we meet Christ. As Peterson says, life in the spirit is messy and intense. May the Holy Spirit inhabit our churches, whatever form they take in the future, and may Christ be head of our churches as we welcome all who seek after God, inviting them on the journey.

APPENDIX

FAITH DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Based on the list found in *Manual for Faith Development Research*, these are the questions asked during the faith development interviews.¹

1. Could you please give me a brief biographical sketch of your life?
2. Reflecting on your life, identify the most important event. What other chapters and events stand out as especially important?
3. Are there past relationships that have been important to your development as a person?
4. Do you recall any changes in relationships that have had a significant impact on your life or your way of thinking about things?
5. How has your image of God and relation to God changed across your life's chapters? Who or what is God to you now?
6. Have you ever had moments of intense joy or breakthrough experiences that have affirmed or changed your sense of life's meaning?
7. Have you experienced times of crisis or suffering in your life, or times when you felt profound disillusionment or that life had no meaning? What happened to you at these times? How have these experiences affected you?
8. How have your parents influenced you in the past? Has your relationship changed with them over the years? If so, what caused the change? How would you describe your current relationship?
9. Are there any other current relationships that seem important to you? This could include relationships with persons living or dead.
10. What groups, institutions, or causes, do you identify with? Why do you think that these are important to you?
11. What gives your life meaning?
12. If you could change one thing about yourself or your life, what would you most want to change?

¹ Fowler, Streib and Keller, *Manual for Faith Development Research*, 17-21.

13. Are there any beliefs, values, or commitments that seem important to your life right now?
14. When or where do you find yourself most in communion or harmony with God or the universe? Do you find yourself in conflict?
15. When you have an important decision to make, how do you generally go about making it? Can you give me an example? If you have a very difficult problem to solve, to whom or what would you look for guidance?
16. Do you think that actions can be right or wrong? If so, in your opinion, what makes an action right?
17. Are there certain actions or types of actions that are always right under any circumstances? Are there certain moral opinions that you think everyone should agree on?
18. Do you think that human life has a purpose? If so, what do you think it is? Is there a plan for our lives, or are we affected by a power or powers beyond our control?
19. What does death mean to you? What happens to us when we die?
20. Do you consider yourself a religious person? What does this mean to you? Would you rather describe yourself as spiritual? As a believer?
21. Are there any religious ideas, symbols, or rituals that are important to you, or have been important to you? If so, what are these and why are they important?
22. Do you pray, meditate, or perform any other spiritual discipline?
23. What is sin, to your understanding?
24. How do you explain the presence of evil in our world?

The following is a list of the original questions found in *Manual for Faith*

*Development Research.*²

LIFE TAPESTRY/LIFE REVIEW

1. Reflecting on your life, identify its major chapters. What marker events stand out as especially important?
2. Are there past relationships that have been important to your development as a person?
3. Do you recall any changes in relationships that have had a significant impact on your life or your way of thinking about things?

² Ibid., 63.

4. How has your image of God and relation to God changed across your life's chapters? Who or what is God to you now?
5. Have you ever had moments of intense joy or breakthrough experiences that have affirmed or changed your sense of life's meaning?
6. Have you experienced times of crisis or suffering in your life, or times when you felt profound disillusionment, or that life had no meaning? What happened to you at these times? How have these experiences affected you?

RELATIONSHIPS

7. Focusing now on the present, how would you describe your parents and your current relationship to them? Have there been any changes in your perceptions of your parents over the years? If so, what caused the change?
8. Are there any other current relationships that seem important to you?
9. What groups, institutions, or causes, do you identify with? Why do you think that these are important to you?

PRESENT VALUES AND COMMITMENTS

10. Do you feel that your life has meaning at present? What makes life meaningful to you?
11. If you could change one thing about yourself or your life, what would you most want to change?
12. Are there any beliefs, values, or commitments that seem important to your life right now?
13. When or where do you find yourself most in communion or harmony with God or the universe?
14. What is your image or model (an idea or a person) of mature faith?
15. When you have an important decision to make, how do you generally go about making it? Can you give me an example? If you have a very difficult problem to solve, to whom or what would you look for guidance?
16. Do you think that actions can be right or wrong? If so, what makes an action right in your opinion?
17. Are there certain actions or types of actions that are always right under any circumstances? Are there certain moral opinions that you think everyone should agree on?

RELIGION

18. Do you think that human life has a purpose? If so, what do you think it is? Is there a plan for our lives, or are we affected by a power or powers beyond our control?
19. What does death mean to you? What happens to us when we die?

20. Do you consider yourself a religious person? What does this mean to you?
21. Are there any religious ideas, symbols or rituals that are important to you, or have been important to you? If so, what are these and why are they important?
22. Do you pray, meditate, or perform any other spiritual discipline?
23. What is sin, to your understanding?
24. How do you explain the presence of evil in our world?
25. If people disagree about a religious issue, how can such religious conflicts be resolved?

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