

**Stages of Faith  
By Jon Paulien**

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From time to time, I have made presentations on stages of faith, how people of faith develop through the seasons of life. Many people have asked me to put some of that in writing, so I am posting a summary of these presentations here.

There is a whole body of literature out there on the subject, some of which is more helpful than others. Some of the best-known names are Fowler, Kohlberg and Maslow. While all of them are helpful to a degree, the version that has been the most helpful to me is found in *The Critical Journey*, by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich (who passed away before the second, fuller edition). Credit where credit is due. I probably would never have heard about this book had it not been for a recommendation by a former colleague at Andrews University, Skip Bell. Thanks, Skip, this did me a lot of good.

In what follows you will note significant differences from Hagberg. I have thought through her system and evaluated it by my personal experience, my experience as a mentor, and my study of the Bible and other trusted literature. So what I offer here is both dependent on others and uniquely my own perspective. Take it for what it is worth. There are six stages in all, with some points of transition. I begin with a quick summary and then handle the stages in more detail one by one.

The first stage is initial acquaintance with God. I sometimes call this the “romance” stage. It is a time of “first love” with great joy in walking with God. At the same time there is not a lot of knowledge, so the person is vulnerable to superstition. The key at this stage is connecting with a community that can nurture and train the new believer in a healthy way.

The second stage I call the learning or discipleship stage. It is a time when new believers explore, study, and learn how to fit into their new spiritual community. Finding the right mentor is crucial at this stage, as people are eager to learn and can be often led astray. This is a time of high confidence, where new believers feel that they have found the truth and can become somewhat legalistic and inflexible.

If people find a healthy mentor they will continue to grow, moving from disciples to teachers and leaders. This third stage can be called the success stage, a time when believers help others learn what they have learned. Their leadership is often praised and rewarded and they feel like they have “arrived.” It is often a confident stage, the pinnacle of what people expect from spiritual growth and leadership. If things ended right here, everyone would be happy. But it is

not so.

At some point in the third stage, usually somewhere between the age of 30 and 50, most people of faith experience what I call the “dark night of the soul.” This is a personal crisis where past certainties become inadequate, where you begin to question everything you have ever believed and find God to be silent or distant. This frightening experience is not destructive, but a doubt that leads to greater faith, because it strips away the subtle selfishness that permeated the success stage without our being aware of it.

Some people back away from the dark night as if it were not from God and others blame their spiritual community for all that seems to be going wrong, but those who drink in this suffering as a call from God move on into the fourth stage, which I call the journey inward. Up until this point, we accepted the purpose of the church or our own ambitions as the purpose of God, but the dark night drives us to understand and embrace God’s unique purpose for our lives. Our faith moves from the head to the heart and becomes much more relational. It is like a second conversion.

The fifth stage I call the journey outward. At this stage we go back into the world and do the kinds of things we did in the success stage, but with different, more selfless motives. People will often change ministries at this stage and become willing to go smaller, humbler, and riskier. They are now living God’s purpose rather than that of an institution or others.

At this point a surprising thing happens. We would have thought that deepening spirituality would be recognized and supported. Instead, the closer we come to God the more out of touch we seem to be with the “system.” This often provokes a second dark night of the soul, which wrings the hidden selfishness out of our spirituality.

In the sixth stage followers of God are ruled by unconditional love. They have learned to see people through God’s eyes and love them the way God does. One would think this would be a popular stage in any religious institution, but the opposite is the case. The one thing most people will not tolerate is for you to love their enemy, whether that enemy is an abuser, a different ethnic group or an annoying relative. Unconditional love often proves disruptive in relationships.

By this time you probably wish I had stopped at stage three. We would love for the ladder of faith to lead from triumph to triumph. But that is not the way things go. In this broken world the closer we come to God the stranger we become to others, even when the others are “in the faith.” In what follows I take each stage, one at a time, and explore the implications for faith, leadership and mentoring. This is the most life-changing material I have ever learned or shared.

## **Stage One: The Romance Stage**

This is the stage where one's initial discovery of God occurs along with a personal commitment to Him. We come to recognize that there is a God, that He is real and that it truly matters to our lives. It is a time of "first love." There is great joy in the spiritual life. There is the sense that one has experienced a new start, been given a new lease on life. People at this stage are not particularly rational about their faith, they just know what they have experienced, and they order their lives accordingly. This is a stage of childlike trust in God. In the words of Jesus, "Unless you become like a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:18-17). Jesus didn't say "Stay like little child," there is a childlikeness to the initial perception of God and the commitment to God that follows. But it doesn't end there, as we have seen. You can recognize this stage in others by its newness, joy and simplicity.

People tend to find God in two basic ways; a sense of awe and a sense of need. Some people, particularly children, encounter God through an overwhelming spiritual experience of His presence. They encounter Someone way bigger than themselves, come to recognize that it is God they have encountered, and readily commit to Him. Adults, on the other hand, are more likely to come to God on the basis of need. Faith in God is seen as a way to resolve the personal pain of divorce, prison, illness, job loss, grief and/or loneliness. Many adults have to "hit bottom" before they are willing to give God a try. Either way, there is tremendous joy in the new life that comes from a relationship with God. Stage one may not be a one-time thing. We may return to this stage more than once in times of great need.

At every stage it is possible to "get stuck." Getting stuck happens when spiritual growth slows down and stops for whatever reason, often a reason unique to that stage of spiritual life. The biggest danger points in the first stage are a sense of unworthiness and lack of knowledge. People in this stage can be devastated by any slip back into former ways. They know that God freely forgave them once and gave them a new start, but now they have blown it and are unworthy of a "third" lease on life. This sense of unworthiness can freeze them spiritually and make it difficult to move forward. The other major danger point is a lack of knowledge of spiritual things. They may lack practical knowledge of the gospel and assurance in Christ. They may not know the power and support available in faith. They may be a prisoner of superstitions: "God will make me sick if I don't pray," or "If I pray I will get whatever I want." Superstition keeps one from moving forward spiritually.

How do you help (mentor) stage one people move ahead and grow spiritually? Three things stand out. First, help them feel accepted as children of God. The grace of the gospel is bigger than our failings. Every person is extremely valuable to God. When people begin to understand that value, they will be freed to move ahead wherever God will lead. Second, help them discover that they are supported by a community of believers. The transition to stage two involves connecting with a spiritual community that will provide teaching and support as they grow. To the degree that they lived their faith in isolation up to this point, it is time now to

connect with a living community. For all of its weaknesses, community is vital to spiritual growth. Third, it is critical that they develop a strong relationship with one or more spiritual leaders or mentors at this stage. Mentors can set a living example of the value of moving ahead through the stages. Having moved forward themselves, they are able to guide others in the path forward.

## **Stage Two: The Discipleship Stage**

In stage two, people who have fallen in love with God join a community of fellow believers. It is a time of learning and belonging. They want to learn and grow in every way they can. They also want to develop an identity with a group of fellow believers, so they explore, absorb and practice the belief systems of the community as they seek to draw closer to God. During this stage there is a strong sense of being right; they have found the “right” community and they are learning “the right way” and worshiping in “the right way.”

During this stage, spiritual growth is particularly stimulated by strong leaders, teachers and mentors. In some cases, the greatest mentors are found in books. A strong, biblical example of this stage would be the relationship between Paul and Timothy, and between Jesus and His disciples. Since this is a stage where mentoring is extremely important, new believers need a lot of help to find the “right” mentor. Unhealthy mentors can guide new believers into dangerous digressions. If your spiritual mentor is named Osama bin Laden or David Koresh, your very life could be at risk, so it is imperative that new believers be guided to mentors appropriate to their stage of spiritual growth.

How would you recognize that someone is in stage two? Stage two believers have a strong desire to follow. They will attach themselves to anyone who seems able to teach them and help them. They are eager to learn and very respectful of authority, at least within that particular community. Strangely, this openness to learning is combined with a high degree of self-confidence. Even if they don’t know everything they “know” they are on the right track. So stage two believers can suffer a bit from spiritual inflexibility. But this is not a problem unless they get stuck in stage two. Normally as people mature spiritually, the inflexibility will lessen, it is a natural stage in a growing spiritual experience. Another weakness of this stage is a tendency to like easy answers. Stage two believers are not very fond of nuance. But as they grow spiritually, they will want more and more solid food.

There are some points of concern with this stage. It is very common for people to get spiritually stuck at this point and have difficulty moving forward. Stage two believers can become very legalistic and judgmental. Their lives can be governed by “should” or “ought” or “must” and they can be quite frustrated with believers who don’t see things quite the way they do. If they don’t grow out of their initial inflexibility and simplicity of thought they can become rigid in their approach to faith. If they have been taught one particular perspective by an influential

teacher or mentor, they may conclude that their teacher's way is the only way to think or act. They may feel that everybody needs to do things that way. They may even be inclined to "punish offenders" if they are in a position to do so. And worst of all, they cannot see their own rigidity. They see things in terms of black and white, us against them. They feel right and strong, while other perspectives are wrong and weak. Every spiritual community has some stage two members that have become stuck there.

So what can spiritual leaders do about it? How can mentors help stage two believers to move ahead spiritually? While stage two believers who are stuck can be unpleasant to deal with, the only way forward is through nurturing relationships with the community and with godly mentors. Rigid believers have placed head ahead of heart and certain beliefs ahead of relationships. Such rigidity will remain unless through spiritual nurture they gain some self-awareness of what is wrong and the find encouragement to repent and renew relationships that have been broken. The mentor must resist the temptation to strike back in kind, but instead be gentle, humble and teachable (2 Tim 2:24-26).

Another important element to growing stage twos is providing opportunities for them to serve. Help them discover their spiritual gifts. Give them opportunities to discover leadership gifts. This will involve some risk, but the reward is also great. Help them to become contributors and not just spokespeople for certain viewpoints. As they learn and grow for themselves and find God using them in positive ways, they can begin to make the transition to the third stage.

### **Stage Three: The Success Stage**

The third stage is what I call the "success" stage. The believer senses God's call to move from being a disciple to being a leader. They begin to teach others the things that they have learned. As people show a giftedness for spiritual leadership, they will often be pushed into it, even if they are not spiritually or emotionally ready. They more and more gain confidence in their ability to lead as they get the opportunity. It is the stage of spiritual production, where they are changing lives and accomplishing important spiritual tasks. Their followers grow in number, contributions rise, people applaud their efforts and they win awards. Leaders at this stage discover their spiritual gifts and assume roles in religious institutions that are effective and appreciated. Moses at the burning bush and Peter at the Sea of Galilee are biblical examples of individuals moving into stage three.

How do you recognize this stage in others or yourself? In this stage you feel as if you have "arrived." There is a strong sense of making a difference in the lives of others. There is a lot of spiritual satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment that comes with spiritual success. Like stage two this is a stage where there is a high degree of confidence. You know you are doing good, and you know you are where you are supposed to be. A weakness at this stage is that it is the most resistant stage to mentoring. Stage three leaders don't feel a need for mentoring. They

are now experts who mentor others, but have little need to learn from others. They are at the top of the mountain, there are no further stages to climb. As far as most religious institutions are concerned, people at this stage have reached the top, this was the goal and it has now been achieved. If the stages of faith ended with stage three few would be surprised.

Such confidence, of course, leads to a number of points of concern about this stage. Although God is the focus of all spiritual ministry, there is a tendency for stage three leaders to serve God in their own strength, motivated by secular goals such as numbers, acclaim, awards and financial growth. They love achievement and recognition. Life sometimes feels like a performance, where all they do is for the benefit of those who are watching them. Stage three people are often hooked on perfection, they want to be the best; the best pastor in a conference or diocese, the best teacher in the school, the best leader in the church, the most successful evangelist. Stage three leaders love feeling busy, but that busyness is often a mask that covers inner anxieties and wounds. Where this is true, they will often be the last to know, as they do not go out of their way to seek genuine feedback. Stage three leaders can become weary and burned out, they can feel unappreciated and become resentful of it. Secretly they may resent the community they lead or even God for using them at the expense of what could have been an easier life. These are some of the dangers of spiritual success.

Most religious institutions are stuck at stage two or three. One reason is that the majority of all followers in a religious institution are relatively new and just beginning the journey themselves. A second reason is that religious institutions over time focus more and more on preservation of the institution rather than on the glory of God. Institutions crave and document all signs of success. But those successes are often measured in human terms more than God's terms. Religious institutions can come to crave power and wealth as much as any individual, but find it even harder to repent than most individuals do! More on religious institutions later.

How can stage three leaders move forward? The first step is to surrender to the full control of God, as far as anyone is capable of that at this stage. This means a willingness to surrender one's ego, one's desires, even one's leadership position so that God will be glorified rather than us. Stage three leaders need to recognize that God calls everyone to face the truth about themselves, to work on their distorted images of God, to gain recovery from childhood wounds, from unhealed past experiences and from the lack of forgiveness toward others who have hurt us. They need to practice personal spirituality; prayer, the study of sacred writings, the practice of spiritual disciplines and sharing with others what God has done in their lives. More than anything else, stage three leaders need to swallow their pride and seek out a mentor who is at stage four or above. High-level mentors are people who have faced the temptations of stage three and overcome. But finding such mentors will not be easy. If we look to those who have helped us in the past, we may find that they are inadequate guides for this part of the journey. People who have been through the success stage and moved on, people who have been trained to mentor others through these stages, are unique people and must be sought out. Whenever you find such a one, hang onto him or her, for that is a rare treasure.

In many ways stage three feels like the end of the spiritual journey, but it is not. In some ways the spiritual journey has only begun. It is around this point, usually between the ages of thirty and fifty, something stunning occurs in most people who are on the spiritual journey. It is the last thing that we would expect. It is usually an unwelcome guest.

### **Beyond Stage Three: The Dark Night of the Soul**

At the very height of spiritual success, something tends to happen that we least expect, usually between the ages of thirty and fifty. When followers are increasing, people are feeling blessed, funds are flowing in to support the ministry, and awards are being given, comes a very unwelcome guest. It is a personal crisis many have called the dark night of the soul. Past certainties suddenly become inadequate. We call into question everything we have ever believed and everything we have ever done. We feel like failures, like we can't do anything right. We are humbled. Our world caves in. Our faith, which sustained us powerfully up until this point, doesn't seem to work anymore. All of our answers are replaced with questions. God either vanishes from view or breaks out of the comfortable box we held Him in. We "hit bottom," we reach "the end of our rope." We "hit the wall" and can seem to go no further on the spiritual journey. We have saved others, but ourselves we cannot save. We feel completely alone and abandoned by God. As one person put it, "Just when I got it all together, I forgot where I put it."

There are many examples of this phenomenon in the Bible. The classic case is Job, who did nothing to deserve it, yet went through both real-life tragedy and an inner crisis of spiritual depression almost to the point of suicide (Job 3:1-26). I think of Jonah, whose life as a prophet was going just fine until God disrupted everything with a big fish. I think of Elijah, who at the point of his greatest spiritual triumph on Mount Carmel went immediately to the deepest level of discouragement (1 Kings 19:3-4). I think of Jesus, who at the very point His glorious mission is revealed to Him ends up forty days in the desert under attack by Satan.

The dark night of the soul seems like the end of all our spiritual hopes and dreams, but it is not. It is actually a summons to deeper intimacy with God. It reveals that all of our success, all the good things we have done, were to some degree motivated by ambition and selfishness or by a desire to please others. We discover that our strong sense of purpose in stage three was driven by others and/or the church as much as by God. We realize that, while the God we have known up until this point was real, we need to rediscover Him as if for the first time.

The dark night of the soul can be precipitated by many things. It could simply be a stage of life, what some people call "mid-life crisis." This often comes to people between the ages of thirty and fifty. It could be precipitated by an external event, such as a rebellious child, the loss of a job or the death of a loved one. Sometimes it is precipitated by an internal event, such as

physical illness or the resurfacing of an emotional trauma that was buried in the past up until this point. The dark night of the soul can simply be the sense that God has withdrawn His presence from our lives. We seek Him but we cannot find Him.

A young psychiatrist once asked me, “What is the difference between the dark night of the soul and clinical depression?” I agreed that there is such a thing as clinical depression, a darkness fueled by chemical imbalances or other disorders. But the dark night of the soul is a depression that comes as a call from God to go deeper with Him. It can be combined with clinical symptoms of depression, but includes a strong dimension of spiritual crisis.

Most spiritual people feel distressed about this development. They believed that God’s presence in the life should soothe the spirit, calm all fears, and bring joy to life’s journey. The dark night seems like a wrong turn, a sign that they have somehow lost their spiritual way. They are tempted to “defeat it” or back away from it. The ego rises up to resist the experience. They may feel guilt- or shame-ridden, feeling that they have deserved this experience. They may put themselves down or in some sense “enjoy” their misery.

Spiritual leaders may feel that dark nights are for the people, not for them. They are supposed to be strong and confident in God. They feel the need to hide the darkness from others, even from themselves. They may feel all alone, as if no one else is going through an experience like it. But in spite of how it feels, this darkness is actually a call from God, it is a positive sign. It is a sign that God is deeply engaged in your life. While doubt can be a negative thing for spiritual life, the dark night of the soul is a doubt that can lead to deeper faith.

You cannot deal with the dark night by working 60 hours a week or trying to ignore it. The pain is there for a purpose. God uses it to call people to drink it in and learn what needs to be learned. The best remedy for the dark night is lots of solitude in which to listen to God’s voice, to feel what He is trying to communicate, to think and reflect. A high-level mentor can also be an asset at this point, someone who has been through the dark night and survived it, who has moved on and incorporated the things God wanted to teach through it.

But there are two major points of concern that potential mentors need to keep in mind when someone is in the dark night. First, there is the temptation to back off from the experience and go back to stage three. That is the place where the individual was successful. That is the place when things were going well. That is the place where God seemed near. So there is the temptation to reject the dark night and go back to the place where we were successful. And this may seem to be a successful tack. You go back to what you did when you were successful. You do the things you did before. And most people will probably not notice the difference in your work. The problem is that you will know, deep down inside, that God called you and you said no. So the person becomes what I call a “hollow three,” a person who is going through the motions of leadership and success, but there is something missing. He or she has gotten stuck in the trappings of success, but the heart of the spiritual life is gone. From my experience

teaching thousands of pastors through the years I would estimate 50-60% of pastors take this course and that may be one reason so many churches appear to be spiritually dead.

Perhaps 25% of spiritual leaders go in a different direction. They see the dark night of the soul as calling into question their entire spiritual journey up to that point. They believe the reason for the dark night is not the call of God, but the failure and the error of the religious institution that they aligned with in stage two. The shattering of spiritual confidence that comes with the dark night can bring great disillusionment regarding the confidence of stages two and three. And this is normally a healthy thing. But the dark night results in a side-step if one gives up all that one believes in or abandons one's spiritual heritage in the illusion that some other institution will not have similar spiritual flaws. I don't mean to imply that it is never spiritually productive to change religions, but that one must do so for the right reasons. Perhaps a quarter of pastors, in my experience, leave the church during the dark night because they can find no suitable mentor, and interpret God's call as a call to leave one faith for another or leave the faith entirely.

Perhaps ten or fifteen percent of all who walk the spiritual journey stay the course, drink in the lessons God wants to teach them, and move on to stage four. With the help of a high-level mentor (stage four or beyond) they become increasingly aware of their own self-centeredness. They come to understand that all their spiritual efforts up until now were driven largely by self and by the expectations of others and the church. They learn to recognize the call of God in the dark night to break away from self and go deeper into the walk with God than they had ever imagined. They learn to see themselves as God sees them and accept their own humanness and limitations. They begin to learn how to forgive themselves and to forgive others. Their love for themselves begins to deepen (because of the deep love they discover God has for them) and with it an increase in love for others. They may have known these things intellectually before, but now they drink these insights deep into their soul and embrace them as persons who are becoming more and more whole.

How do you mentor someone who is going through the dark night of the soul? Very patiently. High-level mentors are a precious resource at this time. Suffering people will dump their hurt, frustrations, anger and loneliness on you. Don't offer answers the way Job's friends did, just be present with them. Avoid shock, just listen and empathize with them as they wrestle with traumatic memories and regret. Share your own dark night (if you haven't been through it you probably can't be much help). Assure them that what they are going through is normal in the walk with God. Share the stories of Elijah, Job, Peter and Jesus. Radiate your own acceptance of them as a token of God's acceptance. Forgive them as needed and encourage them to experience the forgiveness of God. In most cases the day will come when the dark night ends and they will be able to move on. Some people may have to experience the dark night more than once in order make it through, but eventually, if they stay the course, they can move on.

## **Stage Four: Discovering God's Unique Purpose**

Some have called this stage the journey inward. The result of the dark night of the soul is an inward journey to discover our true selves, our true purpose. We had a strong sense of purpose in stage three, but that purpose was driven more by the church and by our gifts and talents than by the direction of God. In stage four we spend more time alone, we love to study deeply and pray. We are eager for the kind of mentors who have walked this way before and can help us dig below the surface. While we have been in relationship with God, we crave something deeper now, both with God and with others. We become frustrated with shallow and surface relationships, we want to go deep with other people (many others will prove not ready for this).

We have been satisfied with a general sense of God's direction for our lives, but now we want a more personal direction from God. We want to discover our uniqueness, that unique purpose that God designed us for from the beginning, a purpose unlike any other on this earth. This is crucial to this stage of the spiritual walk. After all, if you are a dentist or a doctor, you will be out of a job in eternity. But if you have discovered God's unique purpose for your existence, you will continue to exercise that purpose throughout eternity. You may discover that many of the rituals and practices of your faith tradition don't work for you anymore, yet you are even more bonded to those in that tradition who have found their unique purpose as well. This is also a time to experience healing of unresolved psychological and spiritual issues. You are becoming a whole person, filling in the gaps and tasting something of what could be in a more intimate walk with God. In a sense this is a move from head to heart. It is like a second conversion. The sense of romance with God returns but at a much deeper level than before.

Since the fourth stage of spiritual development concerns relationship, let me briefly share a helpful summary of the stages of friendship. I owe these to my good friends Bill Underwood and Ed Dickerson. Each stage offers an increase in both intimacy and vulnerability. It is the increase in vulnerability that causes some people to be reluctant to get close with anyone. But people in the fourth stage of spiritual life are annoyed with shallow relationships and crave intimacy and vulnerability.

The first stage of friendship is the greeting stage. When it comes to strangers on the street, even this stage can feel vulnerable. Stage two is the exchange of facts and reports, as simple as "Nice day isn't it?" or "Have you heard the latest news?" The third stage of friendship is the exchange of opinions and judgments. One's opinions make one more vulnerable than the mere sharing of facts. If someone rejects my opinion, it comes a little closer to home than if they simply don't like my choice of shirt or a fact I got off the internet. The fourth stage of friendship is where we become comfortable enough in a relationship that we are willing to share how we feel. To be rejected for one's feelings is more painful than to be rejected for one's opinions, so this is a very vulnerable step. Stage five is where we are comfortable enough in a relationship that we are willing to share our faults with others. This is also the stage in our relationship with God where we confess our sins and receive salvation. What could be deeper than that? Stage

six is where we are trusting enough of another person to allow them to confront our faults. This is very deep relationship when it occurs both ways. But often in religious contexts people feel free to confront others when they have not earned the right to do so. Do unto others. . . The seventh stage is total intimacy, where there are absolutely no secrets between us. This level of friendship is rare on earth if it exists at all.

As we enter into relationships, we feel our way up this ladder, checking constantly to see if the other party is as willing to be vulnerable as we are. If a relationship is at stage two, the exchange of facts and reports, one party will throw out an opinion or judgment to see how the other party responds. If the relationship survives that move, it grows to that stage. If it does not, the venturesome party may pull back and relegate that relationship to the casual category. One of the problems in marriage is that one spouse will confront another, yet the other is not even willing to share feelings, much less faults. This is an unbalanced relationship. We must earn our way into intimacy with another. There are many other implications of these stages of friendship, but those will have to be explored at another time.

In the spiritual life, stage four people tend to be very impatient with shallow relationships. They want to push on to intimacy as quickly as possible. That is where the real growth happens. But most people are not equally willing, so stage four people often feel alone, or connect deeply with only one or two people, usually mentors. The cocktail circuit, where people move around a room and share facts, reports and an opinion or two (unless fueled by the agent of pseudo-relationship— alcohol), but keep the deeper levels of themselves locked up, has little interest for a stage four spiritual person.

How do you recognize that someone is in stage four? They are constantly asking challenging questions. While this can indicate lack of faith, in a spiritual person it is a sign that God is calling them deeper. Stage four people like to be alone, yet are eager for mentoring. Cavilers simply enjoy tripping people up with their questions, stage four believers are genuinely seeking answers. When they find the right person, they are quick to open their hearts. They are known by their desire for deep relationships. The caviler uses questions to avoid relationship with spiritual people, the stage four believer uses questions to determine who is willing to go deep in relationship.

There are points of concern with stage four as well, places where people can get stuck and stop growing spiritually. Stage four people can get stuck wallowing in negative thinking or discouragement. They are sometimes consumed with self-assessment. They spend huge amounts of time journaling, processing, and in self-absorption. They may be constantly wondering why and never finding answers. They may even enjoy the sense of spiritual ambiguity (this can drive their friends crazy). They feel that no one understands them (and sometimes they are right). They can become immobilized by the struggle. There is a doubt that leads to faith (the true stage four experience), but there is also a doubt that leads to more doubt. Stage four is wonderful as a transition to a deeper walk with God. But it can be a

miserable place to get stuck. How do you help people move on at this stage?

Encourage stage four people that their questions and doubts are not a scuttling of the spiritual journey, but a renewed call from God to a deeper relationship with Him. What stage four people need in their mentors above all else is acceptance and affirmation. They tend to be very hard on themselves. Help them know that God is with them in their questions, searching and even doubt. Encourage them to let God out of the box that He may have been placed in during stages two and three. Encourage them to be open to God's teaching and leading. Help them process past traumas honestly and if you are in over your head refer them to someone who is better equipped to help. With the help of a high-level mentor and much solitude, stage four people can be ready to grow to the next stage. They can hear God's call to move back out into the world again. The journey inward (and the dark night of the soul) helps us find our true purpose and prepares us for deeper service to others.

### **Stage Five: The Journey Outward**

In stage four a spiritual person wrestles to discover their own unique purpose in God's eyes. Selfishness is gradually stripped away, and God increasingly becomes the primary or even single focus of one's life. In stage five God points him or her back into the world and often back to the same kind of occupation held before (spiritual leader, teacher, doctor, counselor, etc.), but now that job will be performed with a new sense of vision and purpose. Stage four has produced inner change, now you go out to bring about change in the rest of the world. Transformed people can transform others.

But there is an additional difference in stage five. In the success stage (stage three) you were driven by the needs of your religious community, your family, your friends, and hidden voices from the past. In a real sense you were driven by various forms of self-interest. But in stage five your motivation comes out of a direct call from God, not from anyone else. Stage five spiritual leadership is a venture outside of self-interest. It is performed for the sake of others and with an eye to pleasing God and God alone. Pleasing people is seen as another form of self-interest (1 Thess 2:3-6). Stage five leaders work tirelessly for God. They are comfortable to toil for the success of a community or an institution without getting any credit for positive changes in the organization. Their efforts may have been instrumental to success, yet their work is often unnoticed, they are content in the knowledge that God notices. This new perspective is grounded in the growth and healing that takes place in stage four.

Outwardly, stage five leadership may not look all that different from stage three, but the motivation and the passion are more authentic. Arising out of a new vision and purpose there is an increasing focus on compassion. Those who have suffered deeply are attuned to the suffering of others. The focus is less and less on one's "success" or reputation, spiritual motivation at this stage comes from two things, the purpose of God and compassion for others. We discover that fulfilling God's purpose with our lives also fulfills our own deepest desires,

desires we may not even have been aware of before. In the past we were motivated by a sense of duty, but now we are motivated by a God-given love for others. In stage three people are often stressed and driven, stage five brings a calmness, a patience. When you put everything in God's hands, you can sleep at night knowing He is the one who is really in charge.

This God-focus often impacts the jobs one holds at this stage of spiritual life. Stage five people will often change direction in life to a vocation that is smaller, humbler, riskier or newer. Top leaders in an institution may resign their post and replace it with something small, isolated, seemingly far less important to the success of the institution. I am reminded of Albert Schweitzer. He was a world-recognized figure in three areas: music, biblical studies and medicine. He gave all that up to take over a remote mission station in West Africa and largely disappear from the world stage. Yet the example he set probably motivated many more people in positive spiritual directions than his music or his biblical scholarship ever would have.

How do you recognize this stage in someone else? It is similar to stage three, but the motives are different. The person is peaceful and patient, rather than stressed and driven. It is as if they have come out of a deep crisis, they are unafraid of people or whatever situation might come. I think of Daniel. After the lions' den, what king could possibly intimidate him? As mentioned above, people in stage five often change jobs, mission and/or location in ways that mystify others. But they are living God's purpose, not the purpose that others would set before them. As a result, stage five is much more misunderstood than stage three. The ways of human beings and human institutions are not God's ways (Isa 55:8-9).

What are the points of concern with people in stage five? Is it possible to get stuck here too? One thing that already stands out from the above is that stage five people may appear out of touch with everyone else. They march to a different drummer. They hear the still, small voice of God, which for most others is drowned out in the cacaphony of earthly voices and background noise. They may seem indifferent to some of the practical concerns of everyday life. They have become counter-cultural. They take their marching orders from God so they no longer fit in with the expectations of a world that is out to be productive and win. People at earlier stage may even think they have "lost their edge." "He (she) used to be really successful, but I don't know, they really lost it somehow." People at stage five may appear careless about things that "really matter" at earlier stages. They are no longer attracted to religious controversies. They are no longer interested in fighting over the details of creeds and rules. They may even seem less "spiritual." They connect with God naturally in the course of a day and don't feel as much need for rituals of devotion and discipline.

Mentors can help stage five people continue their spiritual development by encouraging them to look at everything and everyone through God's eyes and through the lens of His revelations. When others don't understand what God is doing in their lives, encourage them to have a sanctified "no care" attitude. It really doesn't matter what other people think when you are living out God's purpose in your life. The essence of stage five is to be driven by God's call and

the resulting passion to please Him, rather than the expectations of others. Stage five leaders are driven by compassion for those others don't care about and in so doing they are attuning their lives to the heart of God.

But at this stage, something happens that one would least expect.

### **Dark Night of the Soul II: The Sequel**

Up to this point, I have been cataloguing a series of stages in the spiritual life. We have observed people growing spiritually from an initial romance with God through periods of discipleship to success in spiritual leadership. That time of success brings in numbers and finances, all the marks of spiritual success, or so it would appear in human expectation. But at some point in this success comes a dark night of the soul that reveals hidden selfishness, mixed motives and a greater commitment to the human trappings of success than to the call of God. The dark night can begin to strip that self-centeredness away and connect a person with God at a deeper level than before. Instead of being motivated by an inner selfishness or the agendas of others or a religious institution, he or she hears the call to a deeper and more selfless walk with God. In stage four a person discovers the unique purpose God has for their lives. They add to a head knowledge of God and others a heart knowledge driven more by compassion than the facts. While in stage four they sought solitude and the attention of high-level mentors, in stage five they go back out into the world, doing many of the things they did before, but now with different motives and a different purpose. Their lives are driven by their connection with God more than by the consensus of committees or the direction of others. They put into practice what it means to "walk with God."

One would think that the closer you come to God, the more you are in tune with His will and His ways, the more you would be appreciated by others who are also on the spiritual journey, and the more you would be appreciated by religious institutions. But the opposite is often the case. The second dark night of the soul is the discovery that the closer you walk with God the more out of step you seem to be with religious communities and institutions. The less you are understood by others, even though they are also on the spiritual path. As the approval of God becomes deeper, the disapproval of others becomes a burden that you have to carry. It has been said of Jesus that He was neither elated by applause nor downcast by censure. But at stage five the pain of rejection is still felt and often precipitates a second dark night of the soul. The second dark night can arise for other reasons than rejection, but that is the major one. What is its purpose in the plan of God? Another opportunity to heal. Another opportunity to grow. Human beings are like onions, with layers upon layers of selfishness and hiding from God that need to be peeled away one at a time. In a real sense the dark night may manifest itself multiple times as God engages a human heart in a journey that leads ever-closer to Him.

I believe Scott Peck was on the right track when he observed: "We are attracted to a person who is one stage ahead of us. But we are perplexed by a person who is two stages ahead of us. That's why Jesus was killed, the Jews and Roman thought he was evil." Mentoring occurs best

when you are one stage ahead of the person you are mentoring. To be two stages ahead of someone is perplexing. They have no context in which to understand what God is doing in your life. Your attempt to engage them from that perspective may do more harm than good. But it gets worse. If you are three stages ahead of them, they will not praise you, they just might kill you! This is one of the great precipitants of the second dark night of the soul, the awareness that the spiritual journey does not lead us from triumph to triumph, but actually leads us to a deeper and deeper discovery of the suffering that Christ went through for us. By now you may have wished that I had stopped with stage three. But that would not be the truth. In the words of Bonhoeffer, "When Christ calls a man, He calls him to come and die."

This brings to mind the second dark night of Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus' first dark night came in the wilderness, where he fasted for forty days and nights seeking clarity regarding His mission in the purpose of God. There he was assaulted by Satan, but came out with a renewed vision and a clear sense of God's purpose for His life. But a far deeper dark night occurred in the Garden of Gethsemane. There He wrestled with the full cost of following God's plan, a plan that called Him to die for those who did not seem to care one way or the other. Gethsemane occurred in the presence of living evidence (His disciples) that those He would sacrifice Himself for did not understand or appreciate what God had called Him to do for them. In a real sense, the second dark night of the soul brings to human beings a taste of Jesus' ultimate experience. Through this experience our hearts are knitted more deeply to God's heart than any other experience could accomplish.

I should make it clear that each dark night of the soul is a reality and a necessary part of a deepening walk with God. We might wish it were not so. We might prefer the gospel of success in which money and praise flow constantly in the direction of those who are faithful to God. And this is not intended as a criticism of those who are "successful." At various stages of spiritual development we may experience success in human terms as well. But the dark night takes different forms for different people. For some it is a huge, overwhelming burden that occurs once or twice and never again. For others it may come in smaller increments that are repeated over and over. For some it is relatively mild and easy to bear. For others, like Mother Teresa, the dark night of the soul may last for decades. Why all the differences? It is in the hand of God who knows best what we need. The point in laying it out here is so that we might not lose heart, thinking that we are rejected by God in the ultimate sense. The dark night is actually good news. It is an indication that God is not finished with us yet, that there is more ahead, that His purpose for us is deeper and more connected than we can imagine now. When we drink in each dark night, we are readied for the journey that lies ahead.

### **Stage Six: The Life of Unconditional Love**

Those who work their way through the second dark night of the soul reach the sixth stage, the stage where unconditional love becomes the rule of one's life. Very few live consistently in this

stage for long. Stage six people are compassionate toward others, even under extreme hardship. God's love flows through them toward others in every direction. Stage six people reach out to those who have hurt them, even people who in earlier stages would have repulsed them, people they used to despise. They have allowed God to change their hearts, to experience His mercy and compassion even toward "enemies." Many people feel uplifted simply being in their presence. Stage six people have truly learned how to forgive. They see others through the eyes of God. God's behavior becomes their model (Matt 18:23-35). They treat others as if they were serving God Himself in person (Matt 25:31-46).

Stage six people may not completely renounce material things, but they certainly need them less than others do. They are free from the things that bring anxiety to others. If you don't need material things to be content, you won't fear losing them, and you won't fret if you **do** lose them. There is an inner peace, a contentment that nothing seems able to shake. Stage six people have little ambition to be well known, rich, successful, noteworthy, goal-oriented or even spiritual. They don't lose heart when others criticize them because their inner soul is grounded in the love and approval of God.

Since stage six is the goal of the journey, there are no humans left to mentor people in stage six. Instead, they are mentored directly by God. It also makes no sense to speak of "getting stuck" in stage six. The only issue would be maintaining one's place there. Like stage five, stage six people may appear to be out of touch with real life, neglecting their own personal needs, wasting their lives doing things that don't seem productive in worldly terms. Yet they are serene in the knowledge that they are following God's leading and mentoring. If God approves, it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks.

While stage six people are an enormous blessing to the world, they have an extremely hard time fitting in to religious institutions or even normal human society. One would think that unconditional love would cause them to be the most popular people on earth. But the reverse is the case. There is no more destabilizing behavior than unconditional love. Stage six people love everybody, including the people I can't stand, even my enemies. The one thing I will not allow you to do is to love my enemy. In fact, enemies have been known to reconcile with each other in order to do away with someone who loves everybody. That's what happened to Jesus. Pilate and Herod reconciled over the trial and condemnation of Jesus. People who love everybody often find themselves isolated from nearly everybody, because they seem to be a threat to a system that favors one person over another, one group over another.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is for stage six people. No one else would even know where to begin with that sermon. Stage six people know what it means to be poor in spirit, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness. You can smack a stage six person on the cheek and no rising up of fury responds. They may simply offer you the other cheek. This is not normal human behavior, it is Christ-like, God-like behavior. As I have said, few in this life live consistently at this level. Jesus was talking about stage six when He said, "Whoever finds his life

will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matt 10:39)

We might prefer that the stages of faith ended with stage three, the stage of success in human terms. We would like to believe that the closer we come to God, the more others will recognize that closeness and honor us for it, like they do the prophets of old. But the prophets of old were not honored in their lifetimes because they were so out of step with the accepted religious norm. Only at a distance can we clearly see the work of God in their lives. Their living presence would drive most of us crazy just as it did back in Bible times. The journey of faith does not lead to glory in human terms, but it does lead to glory in the eyes of God and that is what spiritual growth is all about in ultimate terms. It’s all about God, finding him, learning about Him, teaching others about him, learning to listen to Him, seeing the world through His eyes, loving others the way He loves them. It’s all about God.

### **Concluding Implications**

I’d like to conclude with some reflections on the big picture of these stages and their implications for making our way in a challenging world.

First, I don’t want to leave the impression that people march through the stages with lock-step precision. Things are more complicated than that. It is possible to live in more than one stage at a time. Everyone has a “home” stage at any given time, but we may move back and forth between stages; more like the progress of the stock market than a straight-line journey. The one clear progression is that each stage builds on the ones before it. One cannot leap forward to stage five from stage two, the stages in between are a natural development, like stages in the life of a plant. But it is possible to go back a stage or two, either a natural, unconscious slipping back if a new stage is too challenging, or a deliberate moving back for selfish or altruistic reasons. A certain amount of ambiguity is natural and normal. This underlines the fact the spiritual growth, like plant growth, must be natural, in God’s time, rather than a program forced on someone else or one’s self. Let God grow you at His pace.

Second, every one of these stages is natural, normal, good and appropriate. Later stages are not “better” than earlier stages. Each stage is the best place for a person to be in a natural progression of development. To be in a particular stage is only negative if one is stuck in that stage and becoming mired in the negative elements that can cause concern at each stage. Stage two, for example (the discipleship stage), may sound negative and inferior because of its tendency to rigidity and judgmentalism, but it is actually a beautiful stage of learning and growing and integrating into a spiritual community. It only becomes negative when people lose the courage to keep growing. “Higher stages” are wonderful in that they are more connected to God, less self-centered, and integrate heart along with head. These are things to seek after, but are not attained without the normal progression. Those who attain the more mature stages are the last people who would want to consider themselves superior. So while the “upper stages”

should be sought after, they should never be a basis for arrogance or superiority.

Third, it is extremely helpful for leaders and mentors to learn the characteristics of each stage so they can recognize where people they mentor are in this continuum. We are attracted to people who are one stage ahead of us. We are perplexed by people who are two stages ahead of us. And people who get three stages ahead sometimes get killed (Jesus Christ). So effective mentoring occurs when the mentor willingly goes back a stage or two in order to meet people where they are (at stages one, two or three). This is not hypocrisy, it is recognizing that people learn best when the information is in a form they are prepared to handle (John 16:12), which is usually at most one stage ahead of where they are at the moment. Moving backwards for the sake of others is an act of grace, not selfishness. It is an act of mission. On the other hand, to move backwards out of fear, selfishness or the need for control can lead to getting stuck or spiritual fossilization, a dangerous position to be in.

As you mature spiritually, the mentors get fewer, at least finding a mentor who can help is harder. But as you mature spiritually, the opportunities to mentor increase. We mentor those who are in earlier stages, we have been there and done that. We learn from those who have explored stages where we have not yet been. Mutual nurture takes place between people at the same stage of spiritual development. Stage six people are mentored by God alone!

Fourth, the Bible addresses all six stages of spiritual development and the dark nights of the soul that often accompany them. That's one of the reasons parts of the Bible are closed to us. They may speak to stages we have not yet experienced and, therefore, cannot fully understand. But as we grow spiritually, more and more parts of the Bible are opened to our understanding. I suspect that parts, at least, of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5-7) are written to those at stage six, the stage of unconditional love. How many people do you know who could be slapped in the face and yet feel no stir of resentment inside? How many people do you know who despise or resent absolutely no one in their hearts? How many people find it natural to bless those who curse them? For most of us, the Sermon on the Mount is aspirational but not always experiential. The good news is that the Bible has something for everyone who is on the journey of faith. That's why no matter how many times we have read the Bible, we still need to read it every day, seeking those insights we may have missed before. As we grow spiritually, the Bible grows with us, so to speak.

### **Implications of the Stages of Faith for Institutions**

Finally, do religious institutions mirror these stages of faith in their growth and development? The best research suggests so. Religious institutions reflect the spiritual stage that is the common denominator of the total membership. Since the vast majority of adherents to any religion would be in the earlier stages of faith, most religious institutions would be in stages one, two or three. The interesting question is whether any religious institution has ever moved

beyond stage three into the higher, more mature stages of faith. Or do religious institutions inevitably get stuck in one of the earlier stages?

What is a religion, or a religious institution? Religious institutions are a human response to the perception of God's work in the world. The institution is created out of that awareness (stage one?) and is intended to promote the work of God on earth and help people learn and grow in their knowledge and experience of God (stage two?). New religions are God-focused and God-honoring. But over time they become more and more occupied with self-preservation. The natural selfishness of individuals has its counterpart in corporate selfishness. Institutions become less and less about God and more and more about preserving the existence of the institution. This is rarely by anyone's intention, it seems to be a natural process that happens over time. Although religious leaders can be perverse, it usually seems to happen in spite of the best intentions on the part of leaders.

In a real sense the question is whether any religious institution is capable of growing past stage three, the success stage. In the success stage the institution grows in numbers and financially. It expands its operations and becomes an "empire." The bigger the institution becomes the more it can do for God, so growing and preserving the institution becomes increasingly the focus. But in order to move beyond this corporate focus a religion would have to go through a dark night of the soul, which would likely result in the destruction of the institution, at least in the form that people have grown accustomed to. Has any religious institution ever found life by dying? Has any religious institution ever "taken up the cross" in the full implications of that term (Mark 8:34-38)? I'm not sure any matured religious institution has ever done that (the early church of the New Testament made great strides in the bloom of the initial romance with Jesus, but in the second century that quickly faded).

So as a rule, religious institutions inevitably get stuck in stages two or three. That means that people who experience the dark night of the soul and enter stage four and beyond inevitably feel more and more out of synch with the religion they are part of. If you have experienced this you are not abnormal. This is probably as natural as breathing. People in stages five and six have no real home on this earth, their home is in heaven. They are often a source of perplexity and even amusement among those in the throes of spiritual success. How much more do they perplex those who have become stuck at stage two or three! These are enamored of their success and their theological correctness and cannot understand the shifting winds of the Spirit who creates unique, unpredictable spiritual partners of God.

So what is a person in stages four to six to do about this? If a religion has truly abandoned God in some perverse way, then they should leave it. But that doesn't mean that they will feel more at home somewhere else. God-following institutions are still subject to the law of the common denominator. So higher-stage followers of God are not likely to find a religious institution that fully affirms their walk with God. Fortunately, their spiritual nourishment is no longer dependant on the institution, it comes from those rare upper-level mentors and God Himself.

So, how to survive the sense of dislocation that is so common among stage four to six followers of God? The key lies in the mission principle of meeting people where they are. It is the mentoring principle. People are attracted to those who are one stage ahead of them. The high-level mentor can place himself or herself in the place where the individual or audience needing to be mentored needs them to be. Approach a stage two context from stage three. Approach a stage three context from stage four. That is easy for the higher-stage person to do since they have been through all the stages.

This is not hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is going back to an earlier stage for selfish reasons or to avoid losing control. Hypocrisy is about getting stuck in an earlier stage because the challenge of moving on is too threatening somehow. Mentoring is about going back for the sake of others, not for our own sake. We can be comfortable in our spiritual skin, at home with God in stages four, five or six. But we go back for the sake of mission, for the sake of others. This is the way people at the upper stages can remain useful and engaged with the institutions God has allowed and encouraged to be put into place.

Religious institutions are not bad things, in and of themselves. They started out with the purpose of honoring God and pointing people to His mighty activity in their midst. Institutions provide a great deal of organization and efficiency in the service of that mission. Even when they get stuck, God can still use them to reach individuals with a message that might not otherwise have come to them. But religious institutions are not an end in themselves. They are useful only to the degree that they point outside of themselves, to the great work of God on the earth. Such institutions need higher-level companions of God to keep them on track. They need the prophetic challenge to die to self and point all things toward God. Don't abandon your community because you no longer seem to fit. This sense of dislocation is likely God's call to a sacrificial ministry outside of one's comfort zone (in the upper levels of spiritual relationship with God). You can be true to yourself and still serve an institution that is imperfect.

One final point. My spiritual life has been nurtured in the Seventh-day Adventist tradition. That tradition was grounded in end-time reflection. Part of that end-time thinking is the concept of a "time of trouble" (some prefer the term "tribulation") through which God's faithful people must pass in order to attain their spiritual destiny (Rev 7:14). Some have called this view "final generation perfection." The view is inspired in part by the statement of a beloved mentor, "When the character of Christ is perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own (Second Coming)." (Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 69). Note, however, that White did not say "in His individuals" as if this perfection was a personal thing, she says "in His people," which sounds like a corporate thing, a community experience.

So while the Adventist view of end-time perfection has failed to attain its goal at the individual level (the very concept of end-time perfection seems to sabotage individual progress toward that goal), perhaps there is a corporate dimension to this expectation. Is it possible that God

will so arrange events that His faithful people from every nation, language and religion will find each other in a glorious end-time remnant (Rev 12:17)? That this remnant will collectively pass through a dark night of the soul and be taken to another level? That this level will demonstrate to the universe that sinful, selfish humans in community can connect with God at the most intimate level in spite of the obstacles to such on this earth? That God will be uniquely glorified in His end-time people (1 Thess 2:19-20)? Time will tell.

My dream is to see something never before seen in the spiritual history of this earth. A worldwide community of faith that has collectively passed through the dark night of the soul (the biblical concept of end-time tribulation) and has moved collectively into a sold-out, intimate faithfulness to God's purpose and God's mission. May I live to see Him come in the fullest sense of that term.