

Stages of Faith Analyzation

“You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.” – Psalm 139:2 (NIV)

Ron is 57 years old and a committed Christian and member of Redemption Church for over 13 years. He serves as a board member, leads our tech team, attends a small group, and rarely misses a worship service. He is a great example of a disciple of Christ and leader in the body.

In the years I have known Ron, I have seen him grow in his faith and enter new stages of spiritual development. It is useful to note that much of his growth has coincided with difficult times of loss and disappointment. These periods have ushered him onward from stage 3 to stage 5.

-2012 Ron was in Fowler’s Stage 3 – synthetic conventional faith.

Erik Erikson refers to “identity crisis of adolescence,” (Stages of Faith 154) a time where one steps beyond the family boundary they were born within and steps within new spheres of influence like school, work, peers etc. It is a time of dissonance between “the images of self and value reflected by our significant others.”

Ron was committed to church and church leadership; they represented the fresh boundaries he had stepped into and accepted as his highest value system. He was committed to his local assembly and pastor, and he had little patience to those who were not as committed. If you were to complement him on his job in the tech booth and thank him for his hard work, he would respond with a reference to duty toward the pastor and the church.

Although he revered Jesus as Lord, Ron would reference the pastor more than Jesus. He would quote something a pastor had said, rather than quote straight from God’s Word. While he had a mature knowledge of scripture, he was more committed to the preacher and doing the good things that Christians should do in church. Ron’s faith was best expressed by being productive in his local church.

Many people never leave stage 3 faith development because it becomes their “permanent place of equilibrium.” (Stages of Faith 172) Ron was in a system that was foundational, but he could easily become stuck in that place. He was in danger of becoming “permanently dependent” upon his system and could experience the “tyranny of they,” where he would be more concerned with what his community and church leaders (they) thought or spoke.

As Janet Hagberg would assess, Ron was in **stage 3: the Power Stage & The Productive Life Stage**.

“The transition from Stage Three to Four is one of the most difficult ones to make, since it represents the most far-reaching change of any stage movement.” How would Ron make this most far-reaching transition? (Hagberg)

Moment of Loss: Loss of a pastor and a Church on the edge of collapse

The pastor he was so committed to, had a moral failure. It was ugly. It was sudden. It was shameful.

How would this affect his commitment to church leadership?

The Church he worked so hard within was in great trouble. Many people followed the pastor out the door and those brave enough to remain wondered if the Church would close its doors.

How would this affect his commitment to the church? How would he express his faith if it was not through his productivity at a church?

Hagberg states that the transition from step three to step four requires “Either a personal or faith crisis [that] shakes our strongly held beliefs or assumptions; we feel adrift.” In this adrift state we begin reflecting on bigger faith questions than simply doing our next work task. (Hagberg)

In this moment of loss, Ron grew in faith over the course of about a year.

Ron developed a faith that existed despite pastoral failure. He started viewing pastors as brothers and sisters whom he served alongside, rather than under. He could still love and appreciate the past service of his former pastor, and at the same time see and define clear mistakes made by that man. This is very healthy. In leaving stage 3 and growing into stage 4, “pastors are seen as co-learners or facilitators and this change can stimulate much personal reflection.” (Hagberg)

Ron developed a faith that worked in the church, but his faith was not dependent on the success of the church.

Ron had established a faith that worked with Church leaders, but did not work FOR Church leaders, rather, Ron now worked FOR the Lord.

Ron had grown from Stage 3 to Stage 4.

-2013 Ron was in Fowler’s Stage 4 – Individual reflective faith.

Ron started to reflect on important questions like, “what is a pastor?”, and “what is the purpose of the church?”, and “how can he play an individual role in the kingdom?”

Welcome to stage 4 Ron!

The way Ron viewed others changed. Before he had little patience for those who were not as committed to the church & leaders’ system, but now he felt responsible for those people. Like a late adolescent, he began to “take seriously the burden of responsibility for his own commitments, lifestyles, beliefs, and attitudes.” (Stages of Faith 182) This “new” Ron in stage 4 was ready to disciple others, because he had actively wrestled with questions himself and seen progress.

This transformation was apparent as Ron transitioned from attending small groups to leading small groups. Ron in stage 3 answered faith questions with simply blunt “Yes” or “No,” but now this more reflective Ron answered these same questions with more care and nuanced consideration. Ron used the phrase “maybe God is...” a lot more when talking with others further showing a reflective stage. “Maybe God is trying to show us something.” “Maybe God is also dealing with our enemies.” “Maybe God’s will is more open ended that I knew.”

Hagberg notes that in stage 4, “we become aware, perhaps for the first time, of an inner spiritual and personal path, one that is not necessarily predicated on what our community espouses.” (Hagberg) Unlike stage 3 focusing on church leaders and tasks, stage 4 produces new direction and new self-identity. Ron had found new direction and identity, and his family, the new pastor, and the rest of the church were better off for this change in Ron. It would be clear sailing from here on...

THE WALL

Ron ‘s progress in stage four met a wall.

“The Wall is the stopping place between Stages Four and Five. It is the place where our wills meet God’s will face to face and we are asked to relinquish our egos, our wounds, and all else that stands between us and God.” (Hagberg)

Moment of Loss - Loss of wife (cancer)

Ron entered a long season of loss. His wife Ruby was diagnosed with cancer and for years struggled. Ron describes it as “losing her a little bit every day.” This was a devastating time at “the wall” for Ron that went from 2015-2019 when Ruby passed into the better life.

“In the Wall we have no idea what our lives will look like on the other side and there are strong fears about not being enough or not being willing to relinquish what we cling to. One thing becomes clear to us; we can’t go on with the inner life that we have now. We know it is time to face our fears about God and it is time to heal. The Wall may become our Wailing Wall, giving voice to the myriad of nameless, yet powerful emotions.” (Hagberg) These thoughtful words by Janet Hagberg perfectly describe Ron during this period.

The gradual loss of Ruby to cancer brought Ron to the wall. Here he faced fears and questions of faith. As his pastor, I heard some of his questions. “Why didn’t God heal Ruby? I prayed and believed, why did she still die? Is this somehow God’s will? What does that say about God if it were His will for Ruby and me to suffer?”

Ron is not one to show emotion, but the wall draws all the emotions to the surface.

Hagberg describes the way forward from the wall is to “let ourselves experience what we are so afraid of and embrace God’s forgiveness, acceptance, and love. As we move forward, our intimacy with God will increase manifold and we will begin to experience deeper solitude in God’s grace.” (Hagberg)

By facing his fears, disappointment, and loss, Ron was able to scale the wall and grow toward stage 5.

2020 Ron is in Fowler’s Stage 5 - Conjunctive Faith (Awareness of perspective)

Ron had a new perspective that was gained through reflection and time at the wall. Others in the congregation were ministered to by Ron’s testimony. His time at the wall has given him the perspective to minister to those experiencing bereavement. He knows how to patiently listen to those in their disappointment. He realizes that their time at the wall is not to hear a lecture, but to experience fear and God at the same time, and to choose to hold on to one and allow the grip on the other to lessen.

Ron, in stage 5 desires that others receive the deep healing that he has received. He has helped many to hold tightly to God and let the grip of the past lessen.

Ron is soon to be re-married to a wonderful Christian woman who also has lost her spouse due to health issues. Ron and his fiancé have both gained perspective in their faith through time at the wall. They have both experienced a “reclaiming and reworking of *their* past.” (Stages of Faith 197)

The past moments of loss did happen. Ron would not wish such pain on his worst foe. Yet, in faith, God has a way of redeeming everything, even those things we would rather not remember. God has a way of taking the worst experiences, redeeming them, and then they become testimonies. This requires conjunctions...

A conjunction is the joining of multiple ideas, themes, lessons, and truths.

Ron has developed a conjunctive faith that testifies “loss is difficult AND God is still good.”

Conclusion

Ron has been a great help to his church community in stage 3, 4, & 5. He has had a heart to aid in each phase. The difference is not in Ron’s motivation, but in the growing depth of his person. Even in loss, Ron has gained. This is a true testimony of Redemption.

So, what is next? Ron is more equipped than ever to affect the spheres of his influence. He has a beautiful life in front of him that he is blessed to live. Given his losses, Ron may have cycles where he revisits the wall. He must continue to have a conjunctive faith that can regret the loss AND thank God for being present in his journey.

Ron and his new bride can work together to deepen their intimacy with God as well as each other. They should continue to practice spiritual disciplines together, such as, attending and leading small groups together, prayer, and accountability. They should be ready to share the wisdom they have gained as well as learn new lessons.

There is a Stage 6 of spiritual development, and this is how Janet Hagberg suggests one may grow into this new height.

“It is helpful at this stage to just let God move. There is no need to strive, to work, just let your life keep evolving, growing deeper. Ask for wisdom and more intimacy with God. And reflect on what it means to be Christ-like; to allow God to have as much say in your life as Jesus allowed God to have in his life.”

(Hagberg)

May we “all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” – Ephesians 4:13 (NIV)

Works Cited

Fowler, James W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development*. Harper Collins, 1995.

Hagberg, Janet “*Stages of Faith Descriptions*” Accessed on June 15, 2023.

www.janethagberg.com/stages-of-faith-descriptions.html.