SPIRITUAL FORMATION: OR, THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAITH

By Dr. Glenn A. Jent[1]

This article is about faith--how it forms, what commitments are appropriate for specific age levels, the types of problems that may disrupt desired development, and what parents and teachers can do to have positive influence in the formation of the faith of a learner, particularly a child or adolescent. It is my hope that this article will stimulate educators to provide more specific help to parents and teachers who are concerned about and actively involved in the lives of their children.

WHAT IS FAITH?

Faith, as it is used in this article, is based upon two Greek words in the Bible. The first word, "pistis" (πιστις), a noun, appears 244 times in the New Testament and is translated "faith" 239 times. The word signifies a trust or confidence in a person or a body of truths. In Christian terms, the person is Jesus Christ; the body of truths is the content of the Christian faith. The second word, "pisteuo" (πιστευω), the verb form of the first word, appears 248 times, 128 of those in the gospels, of which 99 are in John. It is translated "believe" 239 times. This word signifies the active process of accepting, trusting, basing one's life upon the faith one has in Jesus Christ and in the content of the Christian faith. This believing-in, or "faithing," process can only occur in direct response to a personal confrontation with the Holy Spirit of God. This confrontation, or revelation, leads to a sense of one's sinfulness because of the revelation of the righteousness and holiness of Jesus Christ. This sense of sinfulness, or conviction of sin, ideally leads to a turning from sin, or repentance, and a turning to God through believing in Jesus Christ and His death on the cross for that sinfulness. This action is the personal acceptance of Jesus Christ into one's life as Savior and Lord. It has many descriptive names: a commitment of faith, a conversion experience, a salvation experience, being saved, becoming a child of God, and many other phrases. This faith experience is the

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beginning of a life-long journey of faith and should lead to other types of commitments appropriate to specific age levels.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The key question that I deal with throughout this article is at what age a person may be ready to make such a faith commitment. In the light of developmental thought and concerns, the issue becomes even more significant, especially in churches or church groups that emphasize evangelism. This problem is particularly acute when it relates to children. There are many problems related to this issue.

The Problem of Overzealous Church Evangelism

To demonstrate the seriousness of the problem, preachers and children's workers in my own denomination (Baptist) sometimes get caught up in "the numbers game." How many people gave their lives to Christ in Vacation Bible School, in church camp, in revivals, in year-end reports? How many did the church baptize? Reports are tabulated, put in statistical charts and tables of every conceivable type, and honors and awards are given for a variety of statistical "successes." Thus, some churches and pastors emphasize the *number* of converts, and the *age* of the convert is less important than the fact that there is one more convert to count. Churches hire children's workers to work with special children's worship services. Some of these workers are hired because they "get results"--i.e., have many converts (more baptisms!)--not because they have formal training that has prepared them to do effective ministry. Unfortunately, more and more five-, six-, and seven-year-old children are being baptized than ever before in my denomination. Is this the way God intends for His people to do Christian education? I do not think so.

The Problem of Overzealous Parents

Another problem that occasionally arises is that parents may actually "compete" with other parents to see whose child will make a commitment at the youngest age. There is a certain amount of parental pride involved in such "conversions." I know one parent who boasted

that his child was converted at three and one-half years of age. The child, now an adult, claims the same thing. However, that person is involved in the New Age Movement and teaches advanced yoga classes. The implications of such situations are that Christian people may often act improperly, even from the wrong motivation.

The Problem of How to Deal with Doubts

Another problem is that parents and teachers often see their children struggling with the reality of their earlier conversion experiences. They begin to doubt whether they truly committed their lives to Christ. Parents and teachers need to be able to give wise counsel in such times. They need to have well-thought-out answers before children or adolescents raise such questions.

I propose that we as Christian educators must give guidance to parents and teachers who struggle in the pits, sometimes in the gutters, with children and adolescents. Adults are in desperate need of counsel and guidance, and a steady diet of pious platitudes and simplistic suggestions will not suffice.

The Problem of the Lack of Biblical Guidelines

A part of the problem is that the Bible does not speak about the time when a child can or should become a personal believer in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament mentions on a few occasions that children are included in religious gatherings (see Joshua 8:35, 2 Chronicles 20:13, Ezra 8:21, and Nehemiah 12:43), but this fact has nothing to do with a personal commitment of faith. The New Testament rarely mentions children in the letters to the churches, although Jesus occasionally mentions them for purposes of illustration when speaking with other adults about their own spiritual needs. Of course, Christian educators would remind us that the Bible is an adult book written specifically for adults. Therefore, some say that children may not benefit much from study of the Scriptures, especially at too early an age. As a matter of fact, they believe that premature use of the Bible may be boring or confusing. On the other hand, Jesus told His disciples, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom

of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14). Does this and other similar sayings of Jesus indicate that a child can be converted? If they do, at what age can a child be converted? How old were these children that were coming to Jesus? If these sayings do not refer to a child being converted, what do they mean? Furthermore, do the views of some Christian educators contradict the sayings of Jesus? What is the basis for such views? What do the educators have to say that may be helpful? A wise educator has answers to these questions and can give hope to parents and educators.

The ideas of many educators today are developmental in nature. They are based upon the writings of several prominent developmental thinkers. Perhaps it would be helpful to present a brief sketch of the developmental thought that is prevalent in many educational circles today and then consider the specific views of a few of the leading developmentalists.

WHAT IS DEVELOPMENTAL THOUGHT?

In order to help you understand developmental thought, I believe it would be most instructive if I present the general characteristics of developmental thought and the main ideas of selected leading developmental thinkers: Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler, and Robert Havighurst. Following the presentation of this information, I will present my own developmental views of commitment, or spiritual formation.

The General Characteristics of Developmental Thought

Donald Miller says there are five basic characteristics of developmental thought. The first characteristic is "a ground plan," or "a structure through which every individual moves." The second is "the idea of invariable sequence," which assumes that one stage of life leads naturally to the next. The third is "the integration of increasingly complex elements," with more complex learning building upon the simpler learning experiences of the previous stages. The fourth is "interaction between the individual and the environment," which gives "a sense of reality" and "of selfhood and responsibility." The last

characteristic is that development has "a particular goal," or "some final level of complex integration, which is usually referred to as maturity."[2]

The most significant characteristic may be that development proceeds in a predictable pattern, or sequence. This sequence may be identified as stages, ages, periods, levels. Every person moves naturally from one stage to the next, with no stage being omitted. Fowler describes how this development occurs: "Development results from efforts to restore balance between subject and environment when some factor of maturation or of environment has disturbed a person's equilibrium."[3] If there were no sense of uneasiness caused by the changes of maturation or environment, there would be no progress from one stage to the next. A person would remain in the same stage throughout all of life. However, assuming there are no abnormal conditions or circumstances, these challenging times do occur and cause change, or progress. These times of change are often called "teachable moments," or "readiness for learning." This idea implies that no learning can or will take place until the learner has reached the right intellectual, emotional, and physical level of maturation. Such maturation "allows skills to be learned, previously impossible, because the physical co-ordination was lacking, intellectual powers were inadequate or the child was emotionally unready, in that he was uninterested and unmotivated regarding the skill to be learned."[4]

There are several main proponents of this developmental thought, and each one has made a unique contribution related to a specific area of human life.

Leading Developmental Thinkers

Some of the major ideas of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, Fowler, and Havighurst give further insight into developmental thought. Each of these contributors has had a unique impact upon developmental thinking in educational circles.

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[2]Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller, *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1982), 76-77.

[3]James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 100.

[4]Goldman, 42.

JEAN PIAGET

Jean Piaget's contribution has been to demonstrate the development of the intellect, or cognitive development. Several translated books present his views: *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (1952), *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (1954), and *The Development of Thought: Equilibrium of Cognitive Structures* (1977). He says that there are four periods of development: sensory-motor (birth to two), preoperational thought (ages two to seven), concrete operations (ages seven to eleven), and formal operations (ages eleven to fifteen). During the sensory-motor period, cognitive development "evolves as the child <u>acts</u> on the environment."[5] During the period of preoperational thought, cognitive development is "no longer primarily restricted to immediate perceptual and motor events. Thought is truly representational (symbolic) and behavior sequences can be played out in the head rather than only in real physical events."[6] During the period of concrete operations, the child "attains the use of logical operations for the first time" and is "able to logically solve concrete problems."[7] During the period of formal operations, the child "is able to think logically in relation to all classes of problems. He can solve hypothetical problems, verbal problems, and he can use scientific reasoning."[8]

Interestingly, Piaget says there is no further structural development following age fifteen, only improvement in "content and function."[9]

ERIK ERIKSON

Erik Erikson describes the life cycle in terms of psychological development in *Childhood and Society* (1950, 1963). He says there are eight ages of human life and that they are all related to the search for identity. The eight ages are fairly self-descriptive and contain a desired positive attitude paired with the possible negative attitude that may result from life experiences. Each age also includes a positive strength

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[5]Barry J. Wadsworth, *Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1971), 62.

[6]Ibid., 88.

[7]Ibid., 100.

[8]Ibid., 107.

[9]Ibid., 101.

that the person should gain. The first age (birth to two) is "trust versus mistrust," with the strength being "hope." The first age has to do with learning to trust self and others, thus creating hope for the future. The second age (about eighteen months to three years old) is "autonomy versus shame, doubt," with the strength being "self-will." This age is a time of learning to be independent through self-control. The third age (from three or four to seven or eight) is "initiative versus guilt," with the strength being "purpose." This age describes the learning of one's roles in life. The fourth age (ages seven to eleven) is "industry versus inferiority," with the strength being "competence." In this age, the child needs to experience success in making things, in doing things well. The fifth age (adolescence) is "identity versus identity confusion," with the strength being "ideology." This age is a time when the adolescent seeks to discover who he or she really is and what he or she believes. The sixth age (early adulthood) is "intimacy versus isolation," with the strength being "genitality." During this age, the person is seeking a mature "fusion," or ‘‘joining," with another person in a spirit and attitude of love. The seventh age (middle adulthood) is "generativity versus stagnation," with the strength being "creativity." At this age, the person's main concern is to create and to guide the next generation. The eighth age (older adulthood) is "integrity versus despair," with the strength being "wisdom." This age is spent making order and meaning out of all of life in the light of its approaching end.[10]

The last three ages received little discussion from Erikson, since he was concerned primarily with the psychological development of childhood and adolescence.

LAWRENCE KOHLBERG

In *Moral Education in the Schools* (1966) and numerous articles, Lawrence Kohlberg presents his views on the development of moral character. He describes six stages of moral development, with two stages being attached to each of three levels. He draws upon the work of Piaget in creating this developmental model. The first level is "preconventional morality." Stage one is "punishment and obedience orientation," which is characterized by a self-centered obedience "because the adults have superior power." Stage two is "individualism, instrumental purpose, and exchange," which is characterized by self-gratification ("what brings pleasant results") and by what is fair. The

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[10] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 91-141.

second level is "conventional morality." The two stages in this level are called stage three and stage four. Stage three is "mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and interpersonal conformity," which is characterized by attempts to please others and win their approval. These attempts often involve conforming to expected roles and behavior. Stage four is "social system and conscience (law and order)" and is characterized by doing one's duty, respecting authority, and upholding the social order. The third level is "principled or postconventional morality." Stage five is "social contract or utility and individual rights" and involves a mutual respect for the rights and welfare of the community as a whole. At this stage, "the teenager or adult is aware that there are different views and values, that values are relative." Stage six is "universal ethical principles" and is based upon personal acceptance of universal principles. It also involves a conscience that dictates according to a mutual respect and trust. When there is a conflict between law and conscience, "conscience dominates."[11]

JAMES FOWLER

In *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, James Fowler describes the development of faith. He presents seven stages of faith consciousness built upon the developmental thought of Piaget and Erikson. The first stage is "primal faith," which occurs in the womb and during infancy. It enables the child to endure separations from parents without experiencing exaggerated fear. The second stage is "intuitive-projective faith," which appears during early childhood. The child with this type of faith creates a highly imaginative conception of religion and life. The third stage is "mythic-literal faith," which emerges during the elementary school years. The child at this stage of faith is able to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary. The fourth stage is "synthetic-conventional faith," which begins to develop during adolescence. During this stage of faith, the adolescent is capable of forming beliefs and values and of making commitments based on those beliefs and values. The fifth stage is "individuative-reflective faith," which typically occurs during adulthood if the person develops beyond the fourth stage. In this stage, the person's faith is characterized by conscious, critically-assessed choices, or commitments. It is a time for

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[11] Helen Bee, *Lifespan Development* (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1994), 268.

clarifying and reconceptualizing one's faith and may involve the rejection of cherished "myths" and beliefs. The sixth stage is "conjunctive faith," which may emerge during the middle years, beginning around the late thirties. During this stage, the person begins to examine and accept those opposites in life, especially faith traditions that are different from one's own. The seventh stage is "universalizing faith," which also emerges in the adult years. In this stage, the person experiences a oneness with the ultimate reality and becomes immersed in working to bring about justice in the world.[12]

ROBERT HAVIGHURST

One other developmentalist I want to present is Robert Havighurst. In *Developmental Tasks and Education* (1948, 1972), Havighurst identifies numerous tasks for each of six age levels: infancy and early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle age, and later maturity. Developmental tasks may be defined as "those things that constitute healthy and satisfactory growth in our society."[13] These tasks have three points of origin: "physical maturation," "cultural pressures of society," and "personal values and aspirations of the individual."[14] When these three sources all converge at the same moment, that time is called a "teachable moment." Prior to this time, either learning cannot occur, or will be severely limited in value.[15] Havighurst indicates that "some developmental tasks are practically universal but that "other tasks are found only in certain societies, or they are peculiarly defined by the culture of the society."[16] Because of this limitation, I have chosen not to include the various developmental tasks that are listed in his book, although the concept of developmental tasks is relevant. One further interesting detail is that "success or failure in developmental tasks at a given age leads to success or failure in the tasks of a later age

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[12] James. W. Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 57-77.

[13] Robert J. Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education*, 3d ed., newly revised (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1972), 2.

[14] Ibid., 5.

[15] Ibid., 7.

[16] Ibid., 37.

period."[17] Therefore, tasks must be learned and mastered at the appropriate age level; or they will have to be learned and mastered later in order to succeed at other age levels.

With this foundational understanding of developmental thought, I will now present my own developmental view of age-level faith commitment, or spiritual formation.

My Developmental View of
Commitment, or Spiritual Formation

It is my belief that there are definite commitments that are appropriate for each stage of life. In early childhood (birth to five), the defining commitment is to love Jesus--i.e., to return love for love. The basic assumption is that the child has developed the ability to trust and, thus, is capable of receiving and giving love. This love for Jesus is the beginning of spiritual formation in the life of a person. In later childhood (ages six to eleven, or during elementary school years), the defining commitment is commitment of life to Jesus Christ. This commitment can only occur when a child experiences conviction of sin because of the revelation of the Holy Spirit of God. This conviction of sin leads to a turning from sin (or repentance) and turning to Christ as personal Savior and Lord. This experience marks the actual entry into the Family of God. Up until this time, a child is under divine protection, somewhat like a covenant relationship. In adolescence (ages twelve to seventeen, or during junior and senior high school), the defining commitment is commitment to the basic tenets of the Christian faith and to the Christian heritage. This is no casual acceptance or mental assent, but an acceptance based upon critical thought and evaluation. Of course, this commitment is not possible until the adolescent has first come to love Jesus and has made a personal faith commitment to Him. In early adulthood (from the end of adolescence to the end of the thirties), the defining commitment is the commitment to live the faith, to practice what was examined and accepted in adolescence. This commitment becomes more urgent to young adults when there are little children in the home, as the parents become increasingly aware of their spiritual responsibility toward the little ones. During middle adulthood (forties and fifties), the defining commitment is the commitment to

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[17]Ibid., 41.

deepen one's faith. This deeper faith is characterized by a renewed desire to understand the faith and to improve one's relationship with Jesus Christ. There is a growing sense that one's faith needs to be deepened because of the increasing number of crises experienced as one ages--e.g, death of parents, death of friends, loss of physical youthfulness, "empty nest" syndrome, divorce, and a host of other undesired crises. During later adulthood (sixties to death), the defining commitment is commitment to the eternal--i.e., to prepare for departure from this life and entry into the next.

"DEFINING COMMITMENTS"

It is helpful to remember that each succeeding commitment builds upon and must be preceded by appropriate commitments in the previous age levels. I call these commitments "defining commitments" because they are the ones that are essential for that particular age level. They represent the highest levels of commitment, or spiritual formation, at a specific stage of development. Other commitments may be made that are appropriate for that age level; but, if the defining commitment is not made, the defining commitment for the next level will not be possible to make. Therefore, these defining commitments are developmental stages of commitment, or spiritual formation.

The Value of
Developmental Thought

I subscribe to the assumption that life is basically developmental in nature--i.e., that life develops from simple to complex. Life develops from childhood to adulthood. Thought develops from concrete to abstract. Knowledge develops from accepted to tested. Faith develops from infantile belief to mature action. This developmental approach is very useful in helping adults and children understand themselves, their relationships, and their faith. Subscribing to this developmental approach does not imply acceptance of developmentalism, the belief that life is locked in to certain, prescribed patterns that are unalterably true in every circumstance in every cultural setting. Without dealing with the positive or negative aspects of such a belief, one can accept certain developmental characteristics that appear to be reflective of life. Even Fowler, one of the leading proponents of developmental thought, recognizes weakness in his approach when he

says, "Faith development theory, focusing resolutely on the human side of the faith relationship, comes up against the fact that the transcendent other [God] with whom we have to do in faith is not confined by the models we build or to the patterns we discern."[18] This statement is an acknowledgment that God is capable of breaking in at any moment in the life of a person--whether child or adult. God's Holy Spirit is not limited by our perceptions of patterns or schemes or trends.

Specific Developmental Concerns
in Working with Children

However, in dealing with children, it does seem prudent for parents and teachers not to expect God to break His creative pattern in the salvation process. Realizing that God can work a miracle at any time but that He ordinarily works within the recognized laws of nature, parents and teachers should expect that a child will be more likely to become a child of God through appropriate developmental growth. Thus, they should provide proper preparation that will help the child be ready to make a commitment to Jesus Christ at the right time —the time of accountability based upon maturation and divine revelation leading to conviction.Fowler points out the basis of development:

> Development results from efforts to restore balance between subject and environment when some factor of maturation or of environmental change has disturbed a previous equilibrium. Growth and development in faith also result from life crises, challenges, and the kinds of disruptions that theologians call revelations. Each of these brings disequilibrium and requires changes in our ways of seeing and being in faith.[19]

When the child has sufficiently matured to the time of accountability, the Holy Spirit will do what is necessary for the child to respond in faith, assuming that parents and teachers have laid the foundation for that expression of faith. It is an unwise adult who unfairly expects a child to make a commitment of faith before the child is capable of

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[18]James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1981), 302.

[19]Ibid., 100-101.

understanding what sin is and what sin does. But it is also unwise for an adult to think that a child is capable of making a commitment of faith only in the adolescent years. Each child matures at its own pace, and some children will be ready in the last half of later childhood, while others will not. Therefore, parents and teachers must be closely involved in the life and thoughts of each child. They must watch closely for changing abilities and interests. They must observe carefully for signs of spiritual formation. If parents and teachers are not perceptively involved with each child, they will likely fail to capitalize on many teachable moments and, perhaps, that special time (or times) when God is calling the child to a commitment of faith. Thus, parents and teachers must develop and maintain a close relationship with each child.

IMPORTANCE OF INVOLVEMENT
IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

Parents and teachers must also understand that the child (and an adult, as well) will learn most efficiently when involved personally in the learning process. They must not expect the child to listen to and heed authoritarian lectures. They cannot expect the child to pay close attention to long lessons that require little movement. There must be much use of *active* participation. Goldman reinforces this truth:

> With all ages, it is essential to involve the pupil a personally as possible in what he learns. The most effective learning occurs when children do not passively receive what is given to them but are actively engaged in the learning process. A failing of so much religious education at all levels of development is that much of it has tended to be teaching of an instructional kind which has not sufficiently engaged the pupils in active personal search. When we consider that religion is essentially a personal quest, it is surprising that heuristic methods used in other subjects taught have not readily been used in religious education. This in part stems from the misconception that we are solely engaged in handing over a body of truth, but, of course, in order to be a "truth" it must be recognized as truthful in the experience and conviction of the

child. This is why education as a personal encounter is at the heart a basic method of religious education.[20]

Thus, parents and teachers must realize that they should not lecture a child about religious truth, nor tell long stories depicting religious truths. They must involve the child in the telling, in the acting out of what is being taught. This participation will give greater assurance that learning is actually occurring.

RELATIONSHIPS AND CONTENT

Then, too, let the parents and teachers never forget that what is being taught is not what is most important. Goldman says, "The quality of human relationship is the major formative influence in childhood and adolescence, and all that is taught stands or falls by the kind of relationship that exists . . . ."[21] There is an old saying that what one says may be important, but it is not nearly as important as what one does. In Christian education and spiritual formation, the truth is that what one says may be important, but it is not nearly as important as the relationship between the adult and the child involved in the learning process. The truths taught may be exactly what the child needs to hear and learn; but, if the relationship between adult and child is fractured or broken, the child may choose to ignore, or even reject, those truths.

Genuine learning and spiritual formation can occur in any setting if a wholesome relationship exists. The parents may have little money, provide few educational enhancements, live in a poor environment. Similarly, teachers may be a part of a church setting wherein there is little money available for provision of an appropriate educational setting. Yet, if they create the proper climate for a healthy relationship with the child, they have given the best gift possible to promote spiritual formation. It is not in the provision of things. It is in the giving of self in a selfless, loving way that makes possible and enhances spiritual growth.

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[20]Ronald Goldman, *Readiness for Religion: A Basis for Developmental Religious Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965; New York: Seabury Press, 1968), 118.

[21]Ibid., 194.

AN ASSESSMENT OF
SPIRITUAL FORMATION

An assessment of the spiritual formation of the involved persons in this process may be described in many ways. It seems most practical to describe the spiritual formation of persons in two categories: positive and negative.

Positive Spiritual Formation

The positive category consists of persons who are experiencing a *progressing spiritual formation.* I was tempted to use "progressed" since the next category has four groups identified with past participles. However, that word would imply that spiritual formation was a completed reality, whereas spiritual formation is never completed in this life. The child of God who is experiencing positive spiritual formation is one who is making progress in its journey on life's road that leads to heaven. Therefore, the proper modifier must be a present participle. Spiritual formation, to be positive, must be active in the present time. John Bunyan had the right concept when he named his most famous work *Pilgrim's Progress.* The Christian is to be making progress in his pilgrimage to heaven. To be otherwise is to fall into the negative category of spiritual formation.

Negative Spiritual Formation

Negative spiritual formation may be classified into four groups. I have chosen the following designations as descriptive of each group: arrested spiritual formation, regressed spiritual formation, unaddressed spiritual formation, and compressed spiritual formation.

ARRESTED SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The first group is made up of persons who are experiencing *arrested spiritual formation.* Persons in this group may be described as persons who are spiritually not living up to their capability. Examples of such persons may be found in nearly every age level. For instance, an adolescent (or even an adult) with normal capability for abstract thought may insist on thinking and speaking of God in anthropomorphic terms. Or, an adolescent (or adult) may refuse to

think through and establish a personally-tested faith, preferring instead to trust what authority figures tell them to believe. Such persons may never develop a proper understanding of the Christian faith and never fully learn the value of their Christian heritage. These persons have an arrested, limited view of theology and faith. Because of their lack of grounding in the faith, they are in perilous condition and can be easily deceived by cults. They tend to be problematic in the church setting because they are not mature Christians. They are subject to periods of doubts, especially in times of crises, because their faith and theology are not properly developed. Such arrested persons are in need of special care and training, not unlike that required by adolescents, so that they might have opportunity to progress once more in their level of spiritual formation. Nevertheless, some persons will refuse to "risk" change for one reason or another. They will remain arrested Christians for the remainder of their lives.

REGRESSED SPIRITUAL FORMATION
A second group of persons in this negative category is experiencing *regressed spiritual formation.* Interestingly (and unfortunately), some Christians choose to return to an earlier level of spiritual formation. There may be a variety of reasons this regression occurs, but the most likely cause might be a crisis of some kind. The crisis may be spiritual (for example, an adult who, because of sin, begins to doubt an earlier salvation experience) or emotional (for example, the death of a loved one which causes a person to question God's love and to consider no longer loving and serving God). The crisis may be psychological (for example, stress from loss of job which causes one to lose a sense of self-worth and personal identity), or physical (for example, the discovery that one has terminal cancer, which causes one to doubt the presence, or existence, of a God who cares). Persons in times of crises may regress to a previous level of commitment; however, that regression may be only temporary. With proper love and care from those Christians who share life with them, most will become progressing Christians again.

God's people must understand that the pains of life can be disarming and cause this regression. Proper training and preparation for the storms of life can enable most Christians to continue to be characterized by progressing spiritual formation, regardless of the severity of the crisis. Nevertheless, some Christians will regress, no

matter how well they appear to be prepared. Different persons will respond differently in different circumstances. Unfortunately, some Christians, especially those with arrested development, may regress and never recover. They may become the classical example of a dropout, lost to the church, to God's Kingdom, to God's work. Indeed, they are lost to themselves. Their lives rarely experience happiness or meaningfulness ever again. What a tragedy!

UNADDRESSED SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The third group in this negative category consists of persons who are experiencing *unaddressed spiritual formation*. There are two identifiable sub-groups within this group. First, there are persons who, for one reason or another, have chosen not to respond positively to God's call to commitment of faith. They have heard the claims of Jesus Christ upon their lives, but they choose to ignore those claims. Some may think those claims are little more than man's projections of his own psychological needs. Some may think they want to live a life free of religious restraint. Some may simply want to live their own way for a little while longer. Whatever the reason, they have heard the Bible message and have rejected it--at least for the present time. This sub-group needs to experience love and care from God's people, not condemnation or rejection. They need to see the love of God flowing out of God's people so that they begin to see the reality of God living in His people. They need to experience caring concern for them from God's people, even though they are not yet (and may never be) a part of God's family. The second sub-group consists of persons who have never heard the message of Jesus Christ. They are unaware that they are sinners, that Jesus died for their sins, that Jesus wants them to repent of their sins and trust in Him for salvation from their sins, that Jesus wants to live His life through them. These persons exist in every society, in every culture, in every part of the world. They may be children, adolescents, or adults. They have not yet heard and do not have a positive view of Christianity and Jesus Christ. They may actually have negative feelings because of some Christians they have known or because of the way Christianity and Christians are frequently portrayed in the media. Christians must seek out such persons and present the claims of Jesus Christ to them. More than that, God's people must seek to love them and nurture relationships with them in order to be able to have a positive influence in their lives. This is called friendship

evangelism, and it is essential in reaching most people for Jesus Christ. Without evangelism and missions, the church will allow many thousands, even millions, of people to remain uncommitted to Jesus Christ. The result of such unaddressed spiritual formation is death and hell. Clearly, that is unthinkable and unacceptable. God's people must be involved in addressing the unaddressed.

COMPRESSED SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The last group in this negative category is comprised of persons who are experiencing a *compressed spiritual formation.* This group also has two sub-groups. The first sub-group experiences compressed spiritual formation because they are persons who have made a commitment of faith as an adolescent or an adult. Since they did not make this commitment at an earlier age, they now experience the various commitments appropriate to earlier age-levels in a compressed time period. For instance, adults hear the gospel message and suddenly realize that they love Jesus. They commit their lives to Jesus. Oh, how they want to tell everyone about what Jesus has done for them! There is nothing quite so exciting as an adult who becomes a new Christian. Not only do they suddenly love Jesus, but also they suddenly develop a craving for Bible study--an unquenchable thirst for more and more knowledge about Jesus. They become more and more excited as they read about the Christians in the Bible. They have a great interest in understanding, accepting, and claiming the Christian heritage as their own. They ask questions about everything--some very embarrassing ones about why their church is not like the churches in the Bible, why long-time Christians are not more excited about Jesus, why no one ever told them about Jesus before, and on and on. The childhood and adolescent experiences are compressed into a brief time in adulthood as they catch up to where they should be in terms of appropriate age-level commitment. More mature Christians can help guide these persons through this compressed spiritual formation and encourage them to use their energy and enthusiasm for the extension of God's Kingdom. These persons make excellent witnesses to their friends and others who do not know Christ. They can heat up cooled-off Christians with the fervor of their testimonies that can and should be given during worship services and other special programs. Their spiritual fire must not be allowed to burn out, as is so often the case. But the fire needs to be a controlled blaze. The reality is that new

converts are the best prospects for cults. They must be trained in Christian truth and disciplined in the Christian life. Otherwise, they may burn out as quickly as they flamed on.

The second sub-group experiences a compressed spiritual formation in a different way. They are persons who have discovered that they have a terminal illness. They may be old or young. Their compression works from their present age-level commitment forward to the end-of-life commitments, whereas the previous sub-group compressed from the beginning to their present age-level. These persons may go through several levels in a compressed time frame. For instance, an adolescent learns of having a terminal illness. Over the next few weeks or months, however much time there may be, the adolescent begins to accelerate through the various commitments of adolescence yet remaining and on through the various commitments of adulthood--e.g., the desire to practice faithfully one's Christian heritage, the desire to increase one's understanding of the faith (the deep things of God) and to improve one's relationship with Christ, and the desire to prepare oneself for departure from this life and entry into the next. These are all adult-level commitments, and they are compressed into a short period of time as the persons in this sub-group prepare for death. These persons need much love and care from those Christians who share life with them. They need encouragement. They need compassion. They need Christian friends to remain faithfully by them during their difficult days. Christians can render invaluable assistance to one another in such times. This Christian caring is mutually beneficial to all involved.

CONCLUSION

These various descriptions of persons experiencing different levels of spiritual formation reveal a tragic truth. Many Christians fall by the wayside on the way to heaven; only a few continue to progress toward heaven throughout life. Many of God's people have stumbled along until they finally gave up. Many have stopped growing; others have actually gone backward. Furthermore, most people in the world today have simply not addressed, either because of choice or out of ignorance, the matter of commitment to Jesus Christ. Others have had to work through their commitments in an abbreviated period of time. The tragedies of life are many and varied. The same can be said about

the spiritual life. God's people must be diligent in their efforts to continue progressing in their spiritual formation. But that is not all. They must take the responsibility to guide and to encourage less mature Christians along the road to heaven. How much more that is true of our little ones! We must love and care for our little ones, even as Jesus taught us to do. Not one must be lost because of a lack of love! Not one must be lost through carelessness! Not one must be lost because of inconsistent living! Not one must be lost! NOT ONE!