How do we invite youth to baptism? And when?

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In college our education class studied Jean Piaget's theories of cognitive development. We visited the lab kindergarten to observe a reenactment of a classic Piaget experiment which demonstrates that for children at this "pre-operational" stage, reality is what it appears to be in the moment. One by one, the five-year-olds watched as the experimenter poured what was obviously the same amount of colored water into each of two transparent containers, one tall and narrow, the other short and squat. When asked which beaker contained more water, each confidently declared that the tall, thin beaker held more: at this stage they all lacked the cognitive ability to abstract from what was before their eyes to the previous image of quantities of water that looked—and were—the same.

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A few years later, as a seminary student, I studied James Fowler's theories of faith development, and John Westerhoff's work,[1] which builds on Fowler's stages. I learned that given the right conditions, children's faith develops in predictable ways, moving along with their emotional and intellectual growth through several stages. Since then I have become a parent and a pastor. Like the lab kindergarten, my congregation and my home have given me ample opportunity to observe the truth of these developmental theories.

Understanding stages of faith development is foundational for the way I approach catechism and baptism. To call a twelve year old to the costly path of discipleship makes no more sense to me than to expect a five year old to perceive that the containers hold the same amount of water. *What* we teach should be closely related to *when* we teach it. The confession of faith we expect should vary with baptismal candidates' age and stage of faith.

Christian faith in four dimensions

In catechism classes I teach that being a Christian involves four dimensions—believing, behaving, belonging, and experiencing.[2]

Believing includes the confession that Jesus is Lord and the declaration that God has come to us uniquely in Jesus Christ. This dimension is reflected in Jesus' announcement that "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14–15). In this dimension is Paul and Silas's response to the Philippian jailer who asked what he must do to be saved: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 16:31). Along the way to believing one might well engage in an examination of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, or struggle with theories of the atonement and understandings of Christ's divine and human natures. As we consider believing, we do well to sing "My hope is built on nothing less" (*Hymnal: A Worship Book [HWB]* 343).

The second dimension is ***behaving,*** faith in action. The writer of 1 John is emphatic about the need for right behavior: "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (3:18). Work with this dimension includes dealing with what our tradition has called nonconformity to the world. I talk with the youth in catechism class about telling the truth, giving up gossip, and rejecting the party scene. We explore nonregistration,[3] simplicity, a life of service. I commend a clear sexual ethic and intentional patterns of stewarding money. As we consider behaving, we do well to sing "I bind my heart this tide" (*HWB* 411).

Belonging is the third aspect of faith that we consider. To be a Christian is to belong to an alternative community, the body of Christ, and to stand against our culture's rampant individualism: a solitary Christian is a contradiction in terms. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul's body metaphor describes the organic way Christians belong together and need each other. And 1 Peter 2:9–10 eloquently testifies to the centrality of the corporate dimension of Christian life: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people." As we consider belonging, we do well to sing "Heart with loving heart united" (*HWB* 420).

A fourth aspect of Christian faith is ***experiencing***. Experiencing is the profound sense that we are known and loved by one who

reminds us, "I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (Isa. 49:16). Experiencing may be the Spirit's nudge to raise a hand, or head down the aisle. We may speak in tongues, follow the guiding light within, hear the voice of Jesus in our inner ear. As we gaze up into a starry night and ponder the wonder of the cosmos, we may feel drawn to our creator. The swell of congregational song catches some of us up into a powerful anticipation of the heavenly choir. I teach that regularly practicing spiritual disciplines, individually and corporately, opens us to the experience of faith. The Psalms give voice to some of our most profound experiences; Psalm 139 in particular names the intimacy of being completely known. As we consider experiencing, we do well to sing "Lord, I am fondly, earnestly longing" (*HWB* 514) or "My life flows on" (*HWB* 580).

A developmental approach to catechism recognizes that at the different stages, more or less weight falls on each of these four dimensions of faith. A lively faith will stretch and expand throughout one's lifetime. Also, as we move to more mature stages of faith, the earlier stages remain in us, and we may revisit them along the way.

Four stages of faith development

The first of John Westerhoff's stages of faith development is ***received faith.*** The Anabaptists held that infants do not need baptism for forgiveness of sin; they are innocent, sheltered under the wings of God. To say that young children do not need baptism is not to say that they do not have faith. Believing and behaving are beyond them, but they are capable of belonging and experiencing. Through the mysterious grace of the Holy Spirit and the love of their parents and others, they receive the gift of faith. Our task is to surround them with unconditional love and to create boundaries for their safety and growth. They then begin to experience God's love for them and to trust that God's people—at home and at church—cherish and nurture them. We observe parent-child dedication rituals as a sign of the faith we trust will continue to grow in them.

If the needs of children in the stage of received faith have been met, they begin to develop ***affiliative faith***. They begin to take hold of what is being given to them. At best they exhibit a

wonderful sense of belonging. Hearing the stories of Jesus, children at this stage may declare their love for Jesus, for their friends at church, for a cherished Sunday school teacher. Witnessing baptism, they may say, "I love Jesus. Why can't I be baptized?" We should affirm their positive identification. Many congregations have discovered the importance of a strong junior youth group in this stage of faith development, to deepen a sense of belonging. Some congregations provide rituals that recognize the growing faith of these children.

Primary and preadolescent children may begin to use the language of believing, but at this stage they are identifying with what others believe. One of my colleagues overheard someone asking his grade-school child what he wanted most in the world. The pastor's child responded, "I want a Sony PlayStation and world peace." His second wish contrasts with the first in reflecting the child's identification with what matters to his parents.

Grade-school children can develop a strong sense about right and wrong behaving, displayed in a capacity to assert loudly, "That's not fair!" Children at this age can and should be taught rules for fair fighting and creative conflict management, but they are hardly ready to declare their commitment to the nonviolent way of the cross Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. They can and should be taught about telling the truth, but they are rarely able to grasp the implications of the Schleitheim confession's teaching on refusing to take oaths. There is nothing *wrong* with children at this stage, but they lack the tools to grasp and reflect on the deeper meanings of believing, behaving, belonging, and experiencing.

I prefer not to baptize children at this stage, but I have done so a time or two, and I believe one can make a case for it. Baptism is one way to honor a growing and genuine faith, and many Mennonite congregations, with good intentions, do baptize children in this stage (approximately ages ten to fourteen). "Thank goodness," the parents and grandparents sigh. "At least he's baptized. Perhaps that will insulate him from all the stormy times in adolescence." But we do our children and our Lord a grave disservice if we indicate to a thirteen year old that she has now done the main thing required to be a Christian, that she just needs to keep coming to church and reading her Bible. Baptism is

about heading in a direction; it is not about arriving at a destination. We need to tell our preadolescents who are receiving baptism, "We expect that you are on the verge of some major questions. We are grateful for the affirmations you are making and your sense that you belong with Jesus and with his church. We pray that your growing faith will serve as an anchor for you, but we want to give you a lot of rope during the next years. We trust the Spirit to keep you connected, and we are committed to doing our part also, to receive your questions, struggles, and doubts as an honest and important part of your faith journey."

Too many of our youth who were baptized in the affiliative stage were then burdened with guilt when they hit the next stage. As they developed a capacity for abstract thinking, their earlier beliefs seemed inadequate or naïve. Unable to find space in the church for their questions, they wrote off their baptisms as irrelevant and misguided, as meaningless rituals. How sad!

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If the needs of affiliative faith have been met, sometime in adolescence children move into the stage of ***searching faith***. Westerhoff writes that this stage has three characteristics. The first is the action of *doubt* or *critical judgment*. "In order to move from an understanding of faith that belongs to the community to an understanding of faith that is our own, we need to doubt and question that faith" (96). No longer content to let belonging carry them along, children at this stage undertake the hard work of figuring out what they believe and how they will behave.

When my first-born was baptized late in her senior year of high school, my youngest, then a sixth grader, thought it was so neat. "I just love our church and the way we do things here. How long do you have to wait to get baptized?" Two years later, she came to me with great angst. "We were talking about creation and evolution in science. Do you really believe the universe came into existence the way it says God did it in the Bible? I'm not even sure *what* I believe about God." Internally I trembled slightly as I witnessed her shift from affiliative to searching faith, but my wiser

self could respond, "What great questions you are asking!" We talked about scientific truth and spiritual Truth, about how the meaning and purpose of Bible stories differs from that of theories in a science textbook. My daughter brightened up, "This is good. I'll talk to Maria. She's having a lot of questions, too." As Westerhoff writes, "The despairs and doubts of the searching soul need to be affirmed," and children at this stage "need to join others in the intellectual quest for understanding" (96–7).

A searching faith is also characterized by *experimentation*. At this stage people explore alternatives to earlier understandings and test their own tradition by learning about others. Through this process they are able to reach convictions that are their own. One bright young man in our congregation declared himself an atheist early in his high school years. He was not defiant or angry; he just wanted to be honest: the notion of God didn't seem to work for him any more. He began reading about Eastern religions. We felt some anxiety for him, but I wasn't completely surprised when he responded to the invitation to join the exploring baptism class a couple years later.

Searching faith also "embodies the need to *commit* our lives to persons and causes." People in this stage "sometimes appear fickle, giving their lives to one ideology after another, sometimes in rapid succession and on occasion in contradiction." Westerhoff says we learn commitment by committing to things: "How can we know what it means to give our life away until we have learned how to do it?" (97).

When our youth and young adults are in this stage of their faith development, do we make space for them? Do we tell them, "Ask questions here"? Or do we communicate that we all have it together, that we all believe the same things and behave alike, that we all belong, that we all experience our faith in the same ways? Westerhoff observes that because many adults in the church have not experienced an environment that encouraged searching faith, they may be frightened or disturbed by adolescents who are enlarging their affiliative faith to include searching faith. If we do not welcome their questions, these youth may leave the church during this stage, and some will never return.

Exploring baptism with youth in the searching stage takes careful listening, honest feedback, and thoughtful discernment. At

the end of our classes, participants write a faith statement. It may be an honest statement about what they are able to claim now; it may become part of what they say to the congregation when they are baptized. Our young "atheist" presented his carefully prepared statement. After making several orthodox affirmations, he concluded, "I am in the Buddha and the Buddha is in me." I suggested that he might want to read the Christian mystics, that he didn't need to leave his faith tradition in order to claim a deep spirituality. Months later he requested baptism. He'd undergone some remarkable growth, and we proceeded to baptize him. His affirmation of faith, one of the most profound I have witnessed among our youth, is standing him in good stead.

Questions and commitment are not mutually exclusive. If you sense that the Spirit is drawing you and you are responding with an answering faith in the midst of your questions, baptism can be an authentic expression of your searching faith.

If, as I have noted, a lively faith stretches and expands throughout our lives, we can make the case for baptizing youth in the searching, exploring stage of faith. I remind our youth that they need not wait to be baptized until *all* their questions are answered; I still have questions. Questions and commitment are not mutually exclusive. I tell young people, if you are churning around in your questions and not seriously looking for direction, then baptism is not the next step for you. If your search is happening within the body of Christ, if you trust that God's Word is a guide and authority for your life, if you sense that the Spirit is drawing you and you are responding with an answering faith in the midst of your questions, baptism can be an authentic expression of your searching faith.

In their late teens, our congregation's youth in the searching stage often have more assurance about the behaving aspect of faith and less about believing or experiencing. Sometimes, for example, they are deeply committed to the nonviolent way of Jesus, but lack clarity about who Jesus is. Is that OK? Perhaps we can proceed with a faith statement as simple as: "God exists. God loves us. God showed his love for us in Jesus. Faith is living as if the above is true without knowing it for sure."

When the needs of searching faith have been met, we may expand into ***owned faith*** (98). If what preceded this stage was

serious struggle, owned faith may appear as a great illumination or enlightenment. Or it may emerge slowly, quietly, as the self now centered in Christ Jesus becomes more solid. People with an owned faith are willing to stand up for the faith they have come to claim *and* be claimed by. A hymn that expresses this stage of faith development is "I sought the Lord" (*HWB* 506). An owned faith lives in all four dimensions, and one's believing, behaving, belonging, and experiencing are all understood as responses to the gracious call of God in Christ Jesus. An owned faith is lived in the dynamic tension that acknowledges, "I choose this faith, yet I know also that I was chosen."

I take great joy in baptizing folks at this stage. Many have done their inner work and are also finding direction about their work in the world. They are clear about a faith that is their own, which at the same time joins them to others.

We will need creativity and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to adapt what we teach and when we teach it to the needs of the children and youth who come to us. "Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph. 4:15–16).

Notes

[1] John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury Pr., 1976).

[2] To the best of my knowledge, this framework has evolved from the work of Charles Glock and has been modified in conversation with J. R. Burkholder. Alan Kreider works with a similar framework; see "The Journey of Conversion," chap. 3 in *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Pr. International, 1999), 21–2.

[3] In the U.S., all eighteen-year-old males are required by law to register with the Selective Service System. The law makes no provision for registering as a conscientious objector.

About the author

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