

# **Resilient Readers: Spiritual Growth and the Bible**

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How can we equip Christians, both as individuals and communities, to have a robust, honest view of Scripture which will enable them to withstand times of challenge to their faith? Drawing on faith development theory and taking John 14.13-14 as a test case, this essay argues that a solely foundationalist hermeneutic is inadequate to this task. It suggests that pastors should be taught an integrated approach to biblical hermeneutics, which will enable them to foster more mature readings of Scripture in the pastoral setting.

## **Keywords**

John 14.13-14; faith development theory; theological education; pastoral ministry

## **Introduction**

Just over twenty years ago now, while I was in the midst of doctoral studies, my father died. He passed away peacefully at home, and I was very grateful that I was able to be with him. A few months after this, my brother (my only sibling) became unwell. Medical investigations revealed that he was terminally ill with a rare form of cancer and he died within two weeks of his diagnosis. More was to come in this dreadful year. An aunt and an uncle also died but, most painfully of all, shortly after my brother's death my sister-in-law told us that we were not to have contact with his children any more, and, true to her word, we never saw them again. Within a year, then, my mother and I lost eight members of our family – either through death, or family disintegration. All these years later, the psychological and spiritual repercussions are still with me.

A few weeks prior to my father's death I had heard a sermon preached on John 14.13-14 which reads, 'I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.' The message of the sermon was that we should take God at His word, pray believing that God would do whatever we asked, and that if we did so we would see marvellous things happen. So, when my brother became ill, I and many friends prayed for healing, believing that the prayer would be answered. When family strife took a hold, we prayed for peace and unity. When these prayers were not answered, the question of the

trustworthiness of the Bible was unavoidable. We had taken this verse at face value, and it had proved unreliable.

In addition to the severe family crisis, therefore, there was another potential loss to face – deeply held beliefs about God and the Bible. The Word of God had let us down. For my mother this was too much. “It’s not true, Marion”, she said, “it’s not true.” She subsequently stopped going to church and lost her faith. I persevered, but my understanding of faith and of Scripture underwent a gradual but profound change. The idea (which had been instilled in me since childhood) that the Bible’s primary function is to be a repository of reassurance and comfort for those who are faithful to the rules contained within it had proved inadequate, even cruelly misleading, and if it were to have any role in my Christian life at all, new ways of reading had to be found.

Looking back now, I consider that the pastor’s handling of Scripture, and my eager, unquestioning response, reflected an immature mindset which was to prove inadequate in the face of life experience and changing views of faith. I have come to believe that there is a pastoral responsibility to help people to read Scripture in such a way that it will be a source of strength and encouragement in times of crisis, rather than the stumbling block it proved to be for us. In this essay, I will draw on the insights of faith development theory and suggest ways in which theological education can help prepare prospective pastors to enable their congregations to do this.

## **Faith Development Theory**

Faith development theory is a modern way of describing what spiritual leaders have known since the time of the desert fathers — that believers can and should move away from a childish understanding of faith which primarily seeks reassurance and comfort, to a deeper spirituality which is God-centred rather than self-centred. The psychologist of religion Gordon Allport argued that immature religion is marked by a need to feel safe and certain, in other words it is a kind of emotional security blanket. Allport writes:

Immature religion, whether in adult or child, is largely concerned with magical thinking, self-justification, and creature comfort. Thus it betrays its sustaining motives still to be the drives and desires of the body. By contrast, mature religion is less of a servant, and more of a master, in the economy of the life. No longer goaded and steered exclusively by impulse, fear, wish, it tends rather to control and to direct these motives toward a goal that is no longer determined by mere self-interest.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon W. Allport, *The Individual and his Religion: A Psychological Interpretation* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1950), p. 72.

In other words, immature religion is marked by a focus on meeting personal needs, while more mature religion is characterised by a relational spirituality which is more concerned with the wellbeing of others.

Faith development theory accepts this premise and tries to chart the movement from immature to mature religion. The best-known theorist is James Fowler, whose book *Stages of Faith* (first published in 1981) continues to be highly influential in the fields of psychology of religion, pastoral theology, and Christian education. Drawing heavily on developmental theorists such as Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson, Fowler suggests that the nature of our faith changes as we develop from childhood to mature adulthood. Children learn the basic tenets of faith and the values of their community through the telling of stories in a secure and nurturing environment. Perception of what faith means at this stage is closely related to the experience of trustworthy and nurturing adults (Stages 0-2). In adolescence, faith is related to a sense of belonging and the influence of strong role models. There is a need to have a safe place in which to question what has been learned. The same applies to new converts and those who are still relatively 'young' in faith.<sup>2</sup> In the move from adolescence into adulthood, some will give up on faith altogether. For those who continue, the values and tenets they have learned over these years become the foundation for everyday life, which will be passed on to the next generation. Many will be content to accept what they have been taught without questioning, seeing it as foundational for their day-to-day lives. Some, however, will desire to explore further, either through reading or investigating traditions other than their own. Some may go into theological education, perhaps with a view to service in ministry or mission. People at this stage are learning to 'own' their opinions, learning to be able to defend them, and endeavouring to live by them with integrity (Stages 3-4).

Problems may come, however, when experiences of loss or disappointment challenge all that has been certain up till now. Some people react to crisis by clinging ever more tightly to their beliefs and principles, making it their business to defend them against any perceived attack. Others will be plunged into a period of disorientation from which they emerge with a loss of intellectual certainty and an openness to new ideas which they come to see as a gift rather than a threat. Characteristics of the latter stages are a willingness to let go the 'confines of tribe, class, religious community or nation', a greater altruism, and an ability to live with tension and paradox in their faith (Stages 5-6).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperOne, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, p. 198.

The influence of Fowler's work is reflected in the huge amount of critical response it has received. For example, his definition of faith, which he describes as 'an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions', is problematic.<sup>4</sup> Such an understanding of faith may be useful in anthropological and psychological studies, but it is less satisfactory for use in pastoral contexts. The primary difficulty is that it seems to ignore the idea of the transcendent, focusing instead on the idea of aspiration on the part of the individual. With Craig Dykstra, I prefer the idea of faith as a dynamic relationship – an 'appropriate and intentional participation in the redemptive activity of God'.<sup>5</sup> In this view faith development comes about as a result of the interplay between the believer and God.

Fowler's theory is also criticised for being so focused on cognitive processes that it fails to take into account social and cultural influences on an individual's experience of faith. The German faith development theorist Heinz Streib calls for a more holistic view, emphasising that there are other factors at work in our changing experience and needs as the narrative of our lives unfolds – our social and educational backgrounds, the tradition in which we have been nurtured and to which we now belong, the influences which come into our lives, our relationships with others, as well as our responses to crises and life experiences.<sup>6</sup> Streib and others also insist that Fowler's schema is too rigid, linear, and sequential, failing to allow for fluctuations in our experience of faith and responses to it. For this reason, Streib prefers to use the term 'religious styles' which 'can be visualized as overlapping waves, rising and descending again to lower levels, when succeeding styles come to the surface'.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, we may move backwards and forwards between stages at various times in our lives, and, in fact, several aspects of these styles may be operative at the same time.

These criticisms are important for a broadening out of Fowler's basic insights, and we have a much richer view of faith development as a result.

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<sup>4</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Dykstra, 'What is Faith?: An Experiment in the Hypothetical Mode', in *Faith Development and Fowler*, ed. by Craig Dykstra & Sharon Parks (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1986), pp. 45-64 (p. 55). See further Robert Davis Hughes III, *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life* (New York: Continuum, 2008), pp. 164-95.

<sup>6</sup> Heinz Streib, 'Faith Development Theory Revisited: The Religious Styles Perspective', *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 11 (2001), 143-158; Heinz Streib, 'Variety and Complexity of Religious Development: Perspectives for the 21st Century', in *One Hundred years of Psychology and Religion: Issues and trends in a Century Long Quest*, ed. by Peter H.M.P. Roelofsma, Jozef M.T. Corveleyn & Joke W. Van Saane (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2003), pp. 123-138.

<sup>7</sup> Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller, *Manual for the Assessment of Religious Styles in Faith Development Interviews* (Bielefeld: Universität Bielefeld, 2018), p. 8. See further Stephen Parker, 'Research in Fowler's Faith Development Theory: A Review Article', *Review of Religious Research*, 51 (2010), 233-52; Adrian Coyle, 'Critical Responses to Faith Development Theory: A Useful Agenda for Change?', *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 33 (2011), 281-298.

For pastoral practice, Streib's and others' development of Fowler's work helps us to recognise the fluid nature of personal faith and the need to take into account the influence and impact of the whole of a person's experience on their understanding of their relationship with God throughout all stages of life.

## **The Bible and Spiritual Development**

How does all this help us in our task of nurturing 'resilient readers'? The insights of faith development theory suggest that religious practices, for example how we pray or worship, are not static but are closely related to our stage or style of faith. The same must apply to how we read Scripture. How we read, and our response to what we read, should change as we develop psychologically, educationally, and spiritually and as we are influenced by life experience.

But why do we read Scripture in the first place? The 'orthodox' answer is to say that we read because we believe that Scripture is normative for our faith, and that God speaks to us through it.<sup>8</sup> We look to Scripture to feed our spiritual lives, to aid us in prayer, and to help point us to God's will for our lives, both as individuals and collectively as a community of faith. In practice, however, this may be something of an ideal. Our motives for reading change as we develop and our spiritual needs change. Children read Scripture because they are told to by adults. Motivation, therefore, is partly to please the adults, but also, we hope, to learn more. As we develop into adolescence and young adulthood, though, motives for reading the Bible tend to become even more mixed. For many, if not most, there will still be a desire to learn and to worship using Scripture, but there will also be a natural inclination to seek comfort in times of trouble and distress, and reassurance that we are on the right track, morally and doctrinally. This is a normal reaction to life events and it is entirely appropriate to do so. The trouble is, however, that if it is not balanced with a desire to go deeper and grapple with new ideas, it is possible for people to develop a view of the Bible as a kind of 'promise box', in which only familiar, comforting, reassuring texts are read. This applies just as much to those who enjoy the stimulus of Bible study and discussion, as to those of a less intellectual bent, for it is easy to fall into the trap of using biblical and theological argument to secure the psychological reassurance that we are in the right, and to gain power over others who must (of course) be wrong.

My point is that in each stage (or style) of faith there is a risk of regarding Scripture as existing for the fulfilment of our own psychological

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<sup>8</sup> John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

needs, rather than to lead us to God. Consequently, the Bible becomes something it is not – a self-help book, a security blanket, or an intellectual arsenal to support our theological position. Just how impoverished this use of Scripture is can become very evident when cherished ideas are challenged in severe crisis, such as the one I have described here. The question is, therefore, how can we equip Christians, both as individuals and communities, to have a robust, honest view of Scripture which will enable them to withstand times of crisis and retain a prophetic voice which is rooted in the biblical tradition?

### **Foundationalism, Immature Reading, and Theological Education**

In the sermon on prayer which I have mentioned above, the message was that John 14.13-14 contained a promise which could be taken at face value and applied in our lives. The approach to Scripture which was adopted by the pastor, and by myself as the listener, is one which is heavily influenced by what Nancey Murphy and Stan Grenz call ‘foundationalism’.<sup>9</sup> This view looks for a foundation for faith primarily in propositions which provide certainty and justification for beliefs held.

The goal of the foundationalist agenda is the discovery of an approach to knowledge that will provide rational human beings with absolute, incontestable certainty regarding the truthfulness of their beliefs. According to foundationalists, the acquisition of knowledge ought to proceed in a manner somewhat similar to the construction of a building. Knowledge must be built on a sure foundation. The Enlightenment epistemological foundation consists of a set of incontestable beliefs or unassailable first principles on the basis of which the pursuit of knowledge can proceed. These basic beliefs or first principles must be universal, objective and discernible to any rational person.<sup>10</sup>

Now, in many faith communities, this foundational approach to Scripture tends to be something of a default position. When Scripture is read, it is read in order to find out what we need to know and, by inference, what we should be doing. In the case I have described, the pastor adopted a foundationalist approach to the text, from which he expounded a universal and unassailable principle regarding prayer. The meaning of the text was clear and its message could be universalised without qualification. All that was needed was for us to believe it and put it into practice. From the perspective of faith development theory, the hallmarks of early stages of styles of faith on my

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<sup>9</sup> Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996); Stanley J. Grenz & John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Post Modern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Grenz & Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, p. 23.

part (and probably that of the pastor) are plain to see – the unquestioning appropriation of teaching, the desire for certainty and security, and the sense of belonging to a community which had found a formula for life. However, when a time of severe crisis came, it was to prove inadequate, to say the least. How then can we be helped to become resilient readers?

If it is part of the pastoral task to teach Scripture and help Christians to grow in their faith, it is the responsibility of seminary education to equip pastors with the tools to do so.<sup>11</sup> Traditionally, the core curriculum in Biblical Studies has consisted of biblical languages and the historical-critical method. We learn how to understand the text in its historical and literary context, to analyse the language used, and to try to ascertain its ‘original’ meaning. These are crucial skills for biblical interpretation, and it is to be hoped that they will educate pastors to avoid a shallow proof-texting mentality which treats Scripture as a monolithic whole, whose every verse can be applied universally. Nevertheless, to focus solely on these skills carries certain risks when it comes to teaching Scripture in the pastoral setting.

First, it can lead to a top-down understanding of the role of the pastor or teacher. Armed with specialist knowledge he or she becomes the expert whose task is to impart that knowledge to the congregation, rather than to be someone who is sharing the journey of faith with them. This gives less scope for members of the congregation to find their own voice and ability to appropriate Scripture for themselves; biblical knowledge becomes mere repetition of what is taught from the pulpit. Second, the atomising tendencies inherent in the historical-critical method are inclined to be replicated in sermons and Bible studies. Students are taught to take a small passage and exegete it, with often only cursory acknowledgement of the wider literary and historical context. This can and does contribute to a reduced view of Scripture, which fails to foster an appreciation of the sheer scale of the biblical meta-narrative of God’s intervention in history. It can also lead to a neglect of the many voices within Scripture which tell the story from different perspectives and explore what it means to be part of it.<sup>12</sup> Third, an over-emphasis on historical-criticism can make the distance between the text and the contemporary reader’s experience seem hard to bridge. Without hermeneutical strategies to enable us to apply the text in the present day, we can end up creating ‘a canon within a canon’ in which huge swathes of Scripture, deemed difficult, out of date or even distasteful, are ignored and

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<sup>11</sup> I have explored the relationship between faith development and teaching in the pastoral setting further in ‘Feed My Lambs: Some Pastoral Implications of a Biblical Metaphor’, *Baptistic Theologies*, 17:2 (2015), 10-24.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Anthony C. Thiselton, ‘The Future of Biblical Interpretation and Responsible Plurality’, in *Hermeneutics in the Future of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by Stanley E. Porter & Matthew R. Malcolm (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), pp. 11-27.

the voices within them silenced. We stick to those passages which offer comfort and instruction.

I am not for a moment suggesting that the historical-critical method should not be taught. In fact, I believe it to be an essential part of any theological education. I am saying, however, that to use it in isolation from other hermeneutical approaches could have the unintended consequence of promoting a view of Scripture in our churches and communities which inhibits development and growth. Alongside the teaching of the historical-critical method, therefore, we also need to teach basic hermeneutical theory as part of ministerial formation. It is crucial that students are taught to be self-aware in their reading – of their own interpretative presuppositions and the influence of their own backgrounds and traditions in their approach to scripture. They need also to know that there is a plurality of voices not only in the text itself but amongst its interpreters.<sup>13</sup> Introducing unfamiliar hermeneutical approaches to the text will help students to grasp the breadth of Christian tradition and the variety of cultures within it. In this way, theological education becomes a way of catalysing the development of more mature hermeneutics amongst those who will one day have responsibility for ministry.

Students can also be introduced to strategies for keeping the ‘big picture’ or meta-narrative in tension with the different voices which can be heard in Scripture. As far as doctrine and ethics are concerned, for example, a canonical approach, such that of Brevard Childs, which sees the whole of Scripture through a Christological lens, is fruitful.<sup>14</sup> Old Testament claims about the nature of God may be seen through the filter of divine revelation in Christ, while ethical or legal requirements regarding, for example, slavery or warfare are weighed up against Jesus’ teaching. In addition, character ethics, which takes narrative and community as its starting point, offers an alternative hermeneutic to foundationalism which helps to avoid the traps of individualism and legalism.<sup>15</sup>

The role of experience in our appropriation of scripture (as well as ‘objective’ knowledge) must be acknowledged and explored. Here, the idea of the hermeneutical spiral is invaluable in helping students incorporate Scripture into their lives at an experiential rather than merely informational

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<sup>13</sup> See Richard S. Briggs, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics and Scriptural Responsibility’, in *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. by Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), pp. 51–69.

<sup>14</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).



level.<sup>16</sup> Recent work by practical theologians on the use of the Bible in pastoral practice offers various tools for keeping Scripture central to the Christian ministry, while avoiding the pitfalls of fundamentalism.<sup>17</sup> Students should also be encouraged to write about their experience of using Scripture in various ministry settings as part of their reflective practice. Integrating Biblical Studies and Practical Theology skills in this manner will equip students to bring scriptural insights into their pastoral practice in less prescriptive, more imaginative, and reflective ways.<sup>18</sup>

## Theories and Practice

How can these skills be brought to bear in the pastoral setting? In large part it is a matter of creating an open ethos in which discussion and exploration are encouraged. Education for children and new believers will be based on biblical narrative and ethics for living in community, and as people develop (in terms of education or faith style), the sheer variety of biblical literature and the meta-narrative which holds it all together can be explored. Encouraging discussion groups and exploring different methods of Bible study will help people develop their understanding of Scripture without becoming too reliant on one particular hermeneutical standpoint or leader. For example, conducting contextual Bible studies encourages people from different backgrounds to find their own voice with regard to reading Scripture in their own situation.<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to leading studies of individual texts, the insights of historical-criticism remain crucial as part of the pastor's interpretative toolkit. There is, of course, a pastoral responsibility to use them wisely. For example, to introduce questions as to the authenticity of Jesus' words in John 14.13-14 would, in most settings, serve only to bring in unnecessary and even harmful confusion.<sup>20</sup> But in the sermon which I have been describing here, had the pastor set these verses in context, and noted that the statement

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<sup>16</sup> On the hermeneutical spiral, see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and exp. edn (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Zoë Bennett, *Using the Bible in Practical Theology: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013); Stephen Pattison, Margaret Cooling & Trevor Cooling, *Using the Bible in Christian Ministry: A Workbook* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007); Paul Ballard & Stephen R. Holmes, *The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> See Richard S. Briggs, 'Biblical Hermeneutics and Practical Theology: Method and Truth in Context', *Anglican Theological Review*, 97 (2015), 201-217.

<sup>19</sup> John Riches, *What is Contextual Bible Study? A Practical Guide with Group Studies for Advent and Lent* (London: SPCK, 2010); Gerald O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Continuum, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Ernst Haenchen (trans. Robert W. Funk), *A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7-21* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 126: 'it almost goes without saying that the earthly Jesus did not speak sayings like those recorded in verses 13f. The later Jesus tradition is coming to expression here...'

about prayer refers to the disciples' and therefore the church's mission of evangelism, I might have been less inclined to believe that God would do whatever I wanted in my personal life. As Schnackenburg, for example, notes, 'the evangelist does not have every possible intention in mind here. He is thinking rather of the tasks and the difficulties of proclaiming the gospel.'<sup>21</sup> I might also have learned to see the phrase 'in my name' as pointing to a close relationship with Christ through prayer, rather than as a quasi-magical formula (cf. Acts 19.13-20).<sup>22</sup>

Insights of this sort would have been invaluable in the task of gently moving me away from the kind of self-serving interpretation which is so symptomatic of less mature faith. However, serious problems remain. Not only is there many a missionary who will tell you that their petitions have gone unanswered; similar verses, for example, 'Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you' (Matthew 7.7-8; Luke 11.9-10) and 'Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith' (Mark 11. 23-24/Matthew 21.22 cf. John 15.7,16; 16.23) cannot be so easily 'explained away' by means of reference to literary and historical context.

What, then, are we to do with these texts about prayer which seem so straightforward, but which prove to be so perplexing in the face of personal experience? Certainly, we can invite people to balance these verses with other evidence from Scripture itself: Paul's thorn in the flesh (II Corinthians 12.6-7), for example, or Jesus' own desire that the cup of suffering be taken from him (Matthew 26.39 and parallels). We can explore together possible 'exemption clauses' – discussing what requests might be in line with God's will and what might not. And we can support one another as we come to the sometimes painful realisation that God's ways are not ours.

Ultimately, however, we may also have to admit that all our attempts to understand Scripture are flawed – simply because we are human – and that some aspects of it remain beyond our comprehension. In his essay 'Petitionary Prayer', C.S. Lewis ponders what these verses have to say about prayer and asks a direct and painful question.<sup>23</sup> Why are these assertions retained in Scripture when experience often tells against them? In his perplexity, he toys with the idea of faith as a gift rather than personal effort and wonders if those who do not receive what they ask for have not been given enough faith by God. He suggests that we might understand 'in His

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<sup>21</sup> Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John* Vol. 3 (London & Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1982), p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> Schnackenburg, p. 73. See also Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), pp. 432-34; Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), p. 312.

<sup>23</sup> C.S. Lewis, 'Petitionary Prayer: A Problem without an Answer', in *Christian Reflections*, ed. by Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967), pp. 142-151.

name' to refer not to a formula to render our prayers effective but to being 'in Christ'. In the end, however, these musings prove unsatisfactory and he has to confess that he does not understand why these statements are made at all, and that he is left wondering how he should pray. I am comforted to be in such good company and reminded once again of Paul's teaching that as we grow, we realise all the more just how incomplete our understanding is (I Corinthians 13.11-12). Such is the stuff of maturing faith.

## Conclusion

I have been arguing that there is a pastoral responsibility to enable people to have a robust view of Scripture which will help them to grow in faith and withstand spiritual crises. I have suggested that in order to equip pastors for this task, seminaries need to have a much more integrated approach to teaching Biblical Studies than is commonly employed, one which is grounded in hermeneutical theory as well as traditional historical-critical skills, and which cooperates with and benefits from the insights of pastoral and practical theology. I believe that this kind of integrative approach will better equip pastors and teachers to promote environments in which Scripture is taught and read with openness, integrity, and pastoral sensitivity. I hope that it will enable pastors to bring the fruits of their theological education to bear on how Scripture is read within their congregations, but without a top-down approach which discourages freedom and growth.

As we have seen, less mature reading is likely to be individualistic and self-serving, preoccupied with certainty and absolutes, while more mature reading is likely to revel in mystery and to see lack of understanding as an opportunity rather than a threat. Now, it is hard here to avoid the accusation of hierarchical thinking which is so often levelled at faith development theory — the suggestion that the later stages or styles might be superior to the earlier ones. In general terms, we are right to be suspicious of such an inference. The child or new convert is no less a child of God than the person who has learned openness and flexibility. Nevertheless, the traits of these less mature stages or styles can, if no growth is encouraged, lead to a brittle, inflexible fundamentalism which is at odds with the freedom which is at the heart of the gospel and is ill-equipped to withstand trauma and challenge.<sup>24</sup> We have a pastoral duty to guide and protect people with sensitivity and grace.

It should be evident that I am not suggesting that we no longer see Scripture as normative – but that we should reconsider *how* we read it in the

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<sup>24</sup> On the relationship between immature faith styles and fundamentalism, see Streib, 'Faith Development Theory Revisited'.

pastoral setting. Thankfully, we are now able to draw on many different hermeneutical approaches which can help people be resilient readers as their experience of faith changes and (we hope) matures. I have noted some of them here. While it remains important for children and new believers to be taught the fundamentals of faith, a non-foundationalist approach to the Bible might enable people to acknowledge the tensions which appear within the text with openness and honesty, and to seek help from the Spirit for discernment and guidance. An appreciation that our lives are part of the story of God's working in the world should, I hope, encourage a mindset which is better able to see beyond its own individual, family, or community needs, and so prepare the ground for maturing spirituality. An awareness of our fallibility as readers will help us to continue to hear Scripture's prophetic voice when everything around us seems to collapse.

As I look back over my experience all these years ago, I wonder if, had I been equipped with a less foundational, more holistic view of Scripture, I might have been spared some of the severe spiritual struggle which came to compound the suffering of multiple loss. I might still have been perplexed and troubled, but I may not have been so ready to conclude that all I had learned of a faithful God as attested by Scripture was untrue. Perhaps if my mother had not been fed a diet of memory verses and taught to see her religion primarily as a means of personal protection, she might have been more able to maintain her faith during that terrible time and thereafter. But times have changed, and we now have much greater understanding, not merely of spiritual development, but of pedagogy and hermeneutics, and I feel hopeful that future generations of Christians will be given a better grasp of the nature of Scripture, which will enable them to be faithful and resilient readers – no matter what their circumstances might be.

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