



*Reading Scripture with
Head, Heart, and Hands:*

FAITH DEVELOPMENT AND THE WAY
WE READ THE BIBLE

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Reading Scripture with Head, Heart, and Hands: Faith Development and the Way We Read the Bible

By Alyssa Kleinhans

1. Introduction

A few weeks ago, I was teaching a Grade 3-5 SCA lesson on God’s faithfulness. I asked, “Where have you seen God’s faithfulness in your life?” Several girls shared examples, when one suddenly piped up, “I have an answer and a question...” Her question was bold: “*What was God doing before he created everything?*”

From there, my neat lesson plan vanished as we tumbled into a stream of their deepest questions, hurled with the earnestness only children can muster. I did my best to respond, but left with many questions of my own. It was delightful. Later, when I told a fellow parent about it, she said, “My kids ask things like that too; I just tell them that sometimes they need to have a bit of faith!” I agreed—faith sometimes leaves us with more questions than answers—but I thought how rich the conversation had been because we leaned into their questions rather than pushing them aside.

This made me wonder: what is faith? Is it blind acceptance, or something deeper? After all, Jesus says in Matthew 18 that unless we “become like children,” we cannot enter the kingdom.¹ And, as Rachel Held Evans noted, “Those who say that having childlike faith means not asking questions haven’t met too many children!”² Childlike faith, evidently, is marked not by passivity, but by curiosity and delight. Additionally, if we consider Jesus’ words: “let the little children come to me”³ it seems that faith starts with relationship.

Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:16–19 echoes this and captures how this relational center transforms us: “that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, rooting us in love,” so we might know the immeasurable love of Christ and be “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God,” meaning, as Yusufu Turaki observes, “understanding leads to maturity in Christ.”⁴ Christian formation, therefore, is not merely *knowing about* Jesus, but *knowing* him, loving him, and becoming like him—head, heart, and hands. James Fowler, who studied the process of faith development, echoes this, describing faith as “an orientation of the whole person.”⁵

2. Faith Develops

When we talk about faith, it’s easy to imagine it as fixed: certainty or doubt, agree or disagree. But real faith is dynamic. It grows, stretches, and reshapes itself through the seasons

¹ Matthew 18:3

² Rachel Held Evans, *Faith Unraveled: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions* (Zondervan, 2010).

³ Matthew 19:14

⁴ Yusufu Turaki, “Ephesians,” in *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars*, revised ed., ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 1451-64.

⁵ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (HarperOne, 1995), 18.

of life. Like a tree, it begins small, but expands as it adds rings, sinks deeper roots, and even weathers storms.

My own story reflects this. Faith began in the structured rhythms of Sunday school and youth group. As a teenager, I encountered charismatic and traditional communities, learning that Christians with different convictions could share a common love for God and neighbor. Moving to South Africa in adulthood further widened my perspective, revealing both the beauty of the global church, but also ways theology can be misused. This led me to begin a process of disentangling what was taught from what is truly Christlike. Upon entering fulltime ministry, I discovered the childlike wonder and joy of faith—no longer inherited or enforced, but freely embraced out of genuine love for God and Scripture.

Thinkers from Tolkien and Kierkegaard to Kohlberg, Gilligan, and McLaren have observed a similar pattern across the diverse human family: that faith begins in trust, collides with complexity, and, if nurtured, can mature into something expansive, resilient, and life-giving. James Fowler, who combined pastoral insights with developmental psychology, offers a particularly helpful framework for understanding this unfolding.

Part A: Faith as a Journey

3. Stages of Faith

In his framework, Fowler identified six stages of faith that reflect the way people move from simplicity toward maturity. This growth can't be rushed; it is "the slow work of God,"⁶ and each stage is not a skin that we shed, but rather, a ring of a tree: each new layer building upon the last, expanding and carrying it forward.

Pre-stage (ages 0-2) and Stage 1: Intuitive–Projective faith (ages 3-7)

In infancy, faith is trust, built on secure attachment to caregivers, which sets a base for exploring the world and God safely.⁷ By ages 3–7, children absorb the faith of parents and teachers through stories and rhythms, projecting both wonder and fear onto God and the world.

Stage 2: Mythic–Literal faith (ages 7-12)

As logic develops, children make sense of faith in concrete and often binary categories, such as right and wrong, reward and punishment, good and bad. They take stories and symbols literally, often equating faithfulness with appeasing God. Some adults remain here, holding a "works righteousness" mindset.⁸

Stage 3: Synthetic–Conventional faith

Adolescents and adults in this stage find identity in group belonging. Faith is formed from family, peers, and church, often without critical reflection. Questions are seen as threats,

⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Patient Trust" in *Genèse d'une pensée: Lettres 1914-1919*, 57.

⁷ John Bowlby, *A Secure Base* (Basic Books, 1988), 11.

⁸ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled, Timeless Edition: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (Touchstone, 2003), 121

authority lies outside the self, and boundaries of “us” and “them” are sharply drawn. Many adults remain here for life.⁹

Stage 4: Individuative–Reflective faith

This stage begins when someone claims faith for themselves, apart from the group. Doubt and critique enter. Authority is questioned. For some, this is experienced as “deconstruction,” often triggered by exposure to new ways of reading Scripture or confronting hypocrisy in the church. In the South African context, Allan Boesak¹⁰ emphasized this stage’s importance for filtering distorted practices and reclaiming Christlike faith.

Stage 5: Conjunctive faith

We can think of this as “faith after doubt.” Here believers learn to live with paradox. Instead of seeking reductionistic answers, they hold space for complexity with reverence for mystery. They are able to honor perspectives different from their own and see tension as a space for growth. Faith here integrates critique with compassion, justice with humility.

Stage 6: Universalizing faith

Rare and radical, this stage moves beyond boundaries to embody selfless love and justice. We can think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Such people give themselves fully to “Your kingdom come, your will be done,”¹¹ often at great personal cost.

It is important to note that the aim is not to reach a particular stage as though maturity were a badge of honor. As Thiessen observes, true maturity is to grow at the pace that preserves both the integrity of the world we encounter and the integrity of our own soul.¹² The goal is not “arrival” but steady transformation.

This matters deeply for discipleship. Discerning where people are in their journey helps us accompany them toward maturity in Christ, and one of the most decisive factors is how they are taught to approach Scripture. From the Shema (“Impress these words on your children”)¹³ to Paul’s reminder of Timothy’s grandmother and mother passing down their faith,¹⁴ Scripture assumes faith is handed on, but how it is handed on matters. Expectations of attaining certainty sets people up for crises later. Too often we hear of university students who, having been told the Bible must mean “six literal days of creation or nothing,” abandon it altogether when faced with science. The problem is not the Bible itself, but the narrow framework they were given for reading it.

This brings us to a central conviction: we need an approach to Scripture that doesn’t have to be outgrown, but one that can nurture wonder in children, withstand doubt in early adulthood, and deepen into embodied knowing in adults.

⁹ Tonya Stanfield, “Contemplative and Embodied Worship as a Mediating Agent in Faith Stage Transition in YWAM Communities in Africa and Asia,” *Glocal Conversations* 5, no. 1 (2017), 53.

¹⁰ Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2-3.

¹¹ Matthew 6:10

¹² Walter Thiessen, “Communities and Spiritual Maturity: Rooted with Wings,” *Pilgrimage*, no. 1 (November 2024), 73.

¹³ Deuteronomy 6:7

¹⁴ 2 Timothy 1:5

Part B: Scripture as our Compass

4. Setting Our Expectations of the Bible Straight

Before guiding others in Scripture, we must first clarify our own expectations of it, which comes from understanding what its purpose and function are. John Walton sets us straight: “The Bible is written for us, but not to us.”¹⁵ Scripture is God’s gift for our formation, yet it was not written in our culture, language, or with our modern questions in mind.

This is why slogans like “B.I.B.L.E. = Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth” miss the mark. Such reduction shrinks Scripture into a rulebook, too small for the depth of human experience. As Enns notes, it is less about *what to do* than *who we are*, and how our entire existence flows from that identity.¹⁶

At the center stands Jesus: the *true* Word of God,¹⁷ to which the Bible witnesses. Brad Jersak adds: “Everything said in the Bible about God submits to his revelation of the Father.”¹⁸ Scripture, then, is not the destination but, in Jersak’s phrase, “an inspired compass,” always pointing us to Christ. Through it, he confronts and comforts, reshaping us into God’s likeness in every aspect.¹⁹

5. The Emmaus Way of Reading

Jersak in his *A More Christlike Word* posits a threefold way of reading: the Emmaus Way, named after the transformative encounter of Jesus with two traveling disciples after his resurrection.²⁰ He summarizes this approach simply: the Bible is a diverse, multi-author story that culminates in Christ—what God has to say about Godself—and speaks to us in three senses: the literal (in its words, intent, and genre), the moral (how the text draws us to Christlike action), and the spiritual (encountering and embracing the Spirit’s ongoing work). This is a recovery of the ancient church’s fourfold method of interpretation,²¹ and resists the twin problem children of liberalism and fundamentalism, both stemming from modernist assumptions.

While the Emmaus Way captures Scripture in its full potential, we unfortunately often default to partial readings, which distort the message of Scripture: a literal-moral approach overemphasizes rules while neglecting God’s presence; literal-spiritual approaches pursue divine encounter while neglecting ethics; moral-spiritual approaches inspire love but risk losing historical grounding. By contrast, the Emmaus Way holds all three facets together.

¹⁵ John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah – Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context*: 6 (IVP Academic, 2019), 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

¹⁷ John 1:1-14

¹⁸ Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike Word: Reading Scripture the Emmaus Way* (Whitaker House, 2021), Kindle loc. 427.

¹⁹ Hebrews 4:12

²⁰ Luke 24:13-35

²¹ Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike Word: Reading Scripture the Emmaus Way* (Whitaker House, 2021), Kindle loc. 130.

Consider the “Emmaus reading” of the Good Samaritan: literally, a man is beaten and helped by an outsider; morally, we are called to radical neighbor-love; spiritually, Christ meets us in the stranger, inviting transformation into mercy and justice. When held together, all three components lead to faith development in heart, heart, and hands.

6. The Emmaus Way through the Life of Faith

The Emmaus Way is not limited to any one age or stage; rather, it meets believers where they are, adapting in depth and focus as faith develops. A quip from Walter Brueggemann offers a helpful guideline: “Teaching children the Bible is like teaching children about sex, you don’t want to tell them more than they’re ready for, but you never want to tell them anything you’ll have to untell them later.”²²

In practice, children in the earliest stages of faith (1-2) need gentle guidance to notice the moral and spiritual layers of Scripture without collapsing them into mere rules or sentiment, but you may be surprised at how spiritually attuned they are already. At this age, adults are often seen as unquestionable authorities, so care and humility are essential. The task is to help them see that Jesus is also an authority that can be trusted.

As believers enter the stage of certainty and reliance on authority (3), the task is to nurture belonging within the worshipping community and to model how Scripture can be read faithfully in more than one way. A shift into later stages calls for spaces where questioning, critique, and wrestling with meaning are safe and welcomed (4). During these times, the literal-moral-spiritual approach may feel fragile or even suspicious, so companionship in doubt becomes a vital pastoral practice.

As faith matures, the strands of interpretation begin to weave together. Scripture is no longer approached primarily as information or moral instruction; it is prayed, meditated upon, and experienced sacramentally. At the highest stages (5 and 6), reading Scripture can resemble embodied prayer, with each text opening into encounter with the living God and the transforming power of divine love.

Engaging Scripture as a compass pointing to Jesus in literal, moral, and spiritual ways benefits readers across the lifespan. It honors developmental stages, nurtures discernment, and sets deep knowing of Christ as the goal, rather than “religious maintenance.” Importantly, this approach never discards Scripture; it invites repeated return, allowing it be “living and active,”²³ and Christ to be born within us anew every time. But encounters with Scripture are never purely individual or abstract—they are shaped by relationships, communities, and practices.

²² Peter Enns and Jared Byas, *Episode 174: Brian McLaren - The Four Stages of Faith*, episode 174, The Bible for Normal People, July 26, 2021, <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.com/episode-174-brian-mclaren-the-four-stages-of-faith/>.

²³ Hebrews 4:12

7. How We Read: Practices and Contexts That Shape Us

In Community

The maturity of a community—and its posture toward messy, real growth—can profoundly shape whether individuals thrive or stagnate. Some churches provide fertile soil for exploration; others, rocky and boundary-policing, leave little room for honest faith development.²⁴ Research cautions us against this kind of approach: Jamieson found that nearly a third of committed believers who left their churches did so not from offense, but because they had outgrown the developmental space the community offered.²⁵

A healthier community embraces diversity of perspective while cultivating unity in Christ. Thiessen likens this to a rubber band: believers must be free to stretch while remaining anchored to an orienting center.²⁶ Our example is Christ, who himself was rooted in God's love but challenged community boundaries.²⁷ This echoes the secure-attachment ideal: just as a loving caregiver provides a safe base from which a child can explore and to which they can return,²⁸ so too should the church be a steady home for people as they venture through the stages of faith. If a community clings too tightly, individuals may face the choice of staying stunted or leaving altogether.

Research also underscores that enduring faith begins with trust in God, not mere moral lessons.²⁹ Family warmth, consistent with Bowlby's attachment theory, is especially critical: children who feel securely connected are far more likely to carry their community's faith forward.³⁰ Together, such practices create fertile soil where faith can grow, mature, and be sustained across a lifetime.

With Spiritual Practices

Spiritual growth is shaped not by Bible reading alone, but by active participation in spiritual practices. Contemplative reading, lectio divina, imaginative Gospel reading, and centering prayer foster slow, prayerful encounters with Scripture. Communal worship allows Scripture to be proclaimed aloud; confession, intercession, and the Eucharist make it embodied. Silence and stillness create space for the Spirit to speak, while sharing doubts, questions, and reflections with others nurtures communal discernment. Creativity, through art, song, or movement, can become an expression of faith, as can acts of service and justice that put faith into practice. These rhythms can be integrated at any age, and when Scripture is woven into

²⁴ Thiessen (2024), 75.

²⁵ Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys beyond the Churches* (SPCK Publishing, 2002), .

²⁶ Thiessen (2024), 77.

²⁷ Matthew 5:17-20, Mark 2:15-17, John 4:7-10

²⁸ For more information, see circleofsecurityinternational.com

²⁹ Meredith Miller, *Woven: Nurturing a Faith Your Kid Doesn't Have to Heal From* (Worthy Books, 2023) Kindle loc. 247.

³⁰ Vern L. Bengtson et al., *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 98.

these embodied, communal practices, it can sustain faith even through seasons of disillusionment.³¹

8. Conclusion

As ministers and companions on the journey of faith, we need not fear questions, doubts, or even crises, whether they are our own or of those we serve. The Emmaus Way of reading with head, heart, and hands is a compass for such moments, pointing us to Christ alive in Scripture, drawing us into wisdom, love, and justice. "Oscar Romero goes further: 'A gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin... what gospel is that?'" May we, then, be people who welcome the unsettling Word, trusting it to break us open so the Spirit may flow freely in and through us.

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³¹ Tanya Stanfield shows the value of these practices in promoting spiritual maturity in her article "Contemplative Embodied Worship to Mediate Faith Stage Transition in YWAM Communities in Africa and Asia," *Glocal Conversations* 5, no. 1 (2017).

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Stages of Faith Development

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith
Transforming process

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith
Awareness of perspective

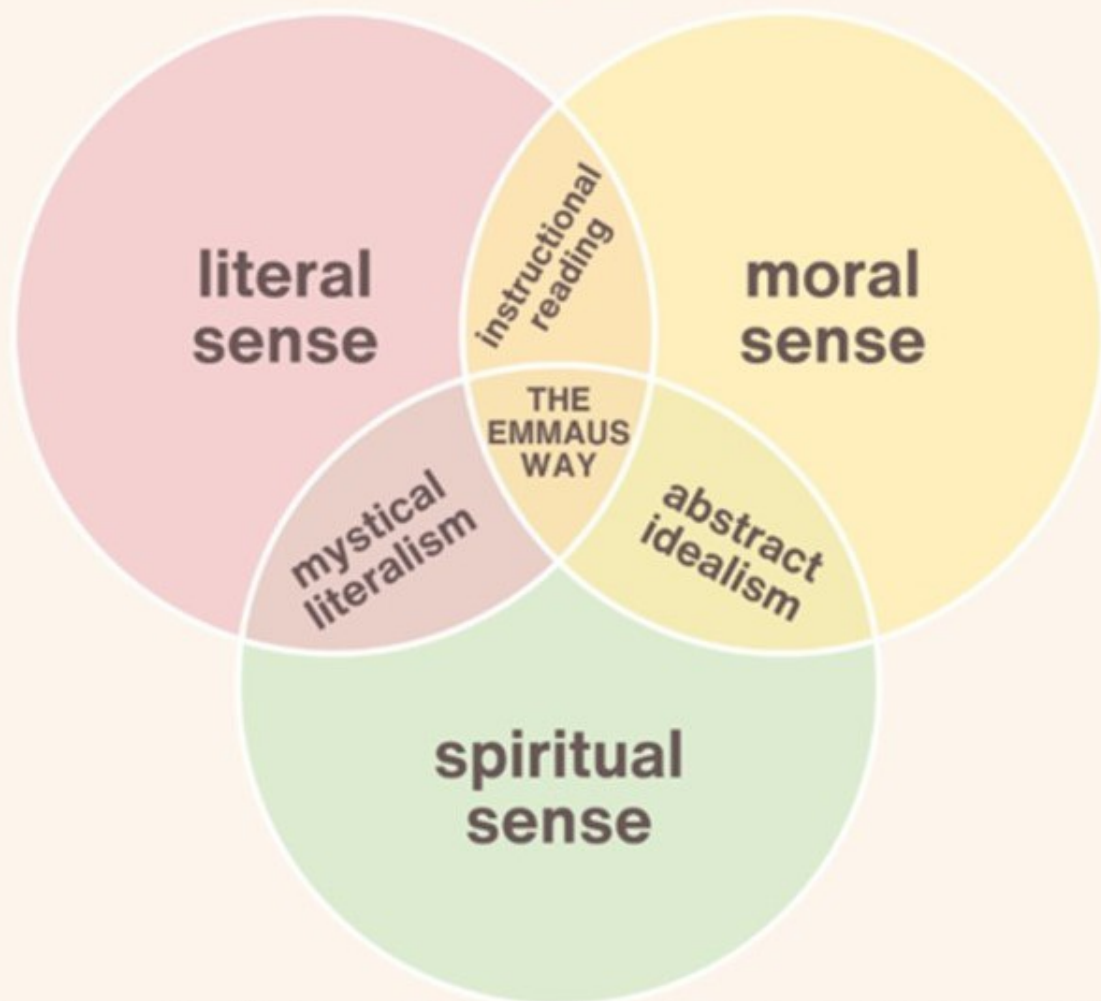
Stage 4: Individual/Reflective Faith
Focus upon personal faith

Stage 3: Synthetic/Conventional Faith
Commitment to church & leaders

Stage 2: Mythic/Literal Faith: Childhood
Limited to concrete thinking

Stage 1: Intuitive/Projective Faith: Early Childhood
Images & Stories

READING THE EMMAUS WAY



READING THE EMMAUS WAY

	LITERAL + MORAL ONLY: "INSTRUCTIONAL READING"	LITERAL + SPIRITUAL ONLY: "MYSTICAL LITERALISM"	SPIRITUAL + MORAL ONLY: "ABSTRACT IDEALISM"	LITERAL, SPIRITUAL, AND MORAL: "THE EMMAUS WAY"
FOCUS	Obedience, rules, right belief, behavioral application	Symbolic or supernatural meaning in concrete stories	Emphasizes spiritual or ethical insight, but may downplay historical grounding or literary features.	Integration of the historical, ethical, and transformative dimensions of Scripture
DESCRIPTION	Sees Scripture as a rulebook or moral manual. Emphasizes right conduct but lacks inner transformation or divine mystery.	Sees divine significance in events and symbols, but without connecting it to lived ethics or justice.	Values the spirit and ethics of Scripture but disconnects from the text's rootedness in history or tradition.	Fully integrated reading that takes the text seriously, wrestles with its moral implications, and seeks the deeper spiritual encounter.
STRENGTHS	Clarity, commitment to holiness, faithfulness to Scripture	Openness to mystery, experiential encounter with God	Emphasis on love, inclusion, spiritual depth, and moral courage	Integrates intellect, ethics, and spirituality; fosters deep, resilient, lifelong faith.
RISKS	Can become rigid, legalistic, or moralistic; mystery and nuance may be underdeveloped.	Can lead to escapism, fantasy spirituality, or avoidance of responsibility.	Can drift into vague or decontextualized spirituality.	Can feel slow or unclear; requires formation and community to sustain.
TRADITIONS THAT MAY LEAN THIS WAY	Fundamentalist Evangelicalism	Charismatic/Pentecostal Churches	Mainline Protestantism, Progressive Christianity	The best of Anglicanism, Wesleyanism, and Catholicism

ENGAGING SCRIPTURE THE EMMAUS WAY

STAGES 1-2

- Use stories, images, and simple symbols: read parables, miracles, and creation stories with imagination.
- Emphasize God's trustworthiness rather than rules ("Jesus is with you," "God keeps promises").
- Invite wonder and curiosity: encourage questions, don't shut them down.
- Model prayerful engagement: wonder aloud, "I wonder what God wants us to notice in this story?"
- Connect moral lessons to relationship with Jesus, not just behavior.
- Adults must show humility and gentleness: children see them as authorities, so tone and example matter.

STAGE 3

- Create belonging in groups (e.g. Bible studies): let them see multiple voices engaging one text.
- Model how Scripture can have more than one faithful interpretation.
- Encourage memory and practice: learn Psalms, prayers, or memory verses.
- Tie the text to communal worship and service, reinforcing identity in Christ rather than group conformity.

STAGE 4

- Provide safe spaces to ask hard questions, encourage critique and exploration without fear.
- Engage historical and cultural context to challenge simplistic readings.
- Show that faithful people have wrestled too: draw on Psalms of lament, Job, Ecclesiastes.
- Model "faithful doubt": demonstrate how questioning can be an act of love for God and Scripture.
- Offer companionship, not quick answers

STAGE 5

- Help people hold paradox and tension (justice and mercy, suffering and hope) without needing quick resolution.
- Invite engagement with Scripture across traditions and cultures, broadening perspective.
- Encourage them to let the text read them: where is God exposing, healing, or calling today?
- Scripture becomes less about answers, more about formation into Christlike love.

STAGE 6

- Scripture engagement becomes embodied prayer and action: texts are read with the whole life.
- Encourage deep integration of Scripture and lived justice: e.g., praying with the Beatitudes while working alongside the poor.
- Scripture opens into encounter with the living God; less analysis, more contemplative abiding.
- Their reading inspires and challenges the community: invite them to share testimonies or guide practices that flow from Scripture.