

# KOHLBERG'S STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT: Implications for Theology

Jackson Snyder

[Snyder Bible Home](#)

[Essays](#)

Hi Jackson,

[While the inclusion of the article] would be okay, it would be nice if you put **Rachel Cory, CRNA, MA** as the author and if you have room or the inclination maybe put our web site [www.aggelia.com](http://www.aggelia.com) Thanks!

Klaus Kuehl [webmaster@aggelia.com](mailto:webmaster@aggelia.com)

Lawrence Kohlberg is a moral philosopher and student of child development. He is director of Harvard's Center for Moral Education. His special area of interest is the moral development of children - how they develop a sense of right, wrong, and justice. Kohlberg observed that growing children advance through definite stages of moral development in a manner similar to their progression through Piaget's well-known stages of cognitive development. His observations and testing of children and adults, led him to theorize that human beings progress consecutively from one stage to the next in an invariant sequence, not skipping any stage or going back to any previous stage. These are stages of thought processing, implying qualitatively different modes of thinking and of problem solving at each stage.

These conclusions have been verified in cross-cultural studies done in Turkey, Taiwan, Yucatan, Honduras, India, United States, Canada, Britain, and Israel.

An outline of these developmental stages follows:

Kohlberg's concept of consecutive stages of moral development is rich with theological implications. **An application of his theory to the story of God's dealing with ancient Israel, offers a rational explanation of actions on God's part which may seem harsh or unduly severe from our perspective.**

An application of Kohlberg's stage theory is especially relevant to current discussions of the gospel, the atonement, the Law, and the true character of God.

## KOHLBERG'S STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

**A. PREMORAL OR PRECONVENTIONAL STAGES:** Behavior motivated by anticipation of pleasure or pain.

### STAGE 1: PUNISHMENT AND OBEDIENCE:

Avoidance of physical punishment and deference to power. Punishment is an automatic response of physical retaliation. The immediate physical consequences of an action determine its goodness or badness. The atrocities carried out by soldiers during the holocaust who were simply "carrying out orders" under threat of punishment, illustrate that adults as well as children may function at stage one level.

### STAGE 2: INSTRUMENTAL EXCHANGE:

Marketplace exchange of favors or blows. "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." Justice is: "Do unto others as they do unto you." Individual does what is necessary, makes concessions only as necessary to satisfy his own needs. Right action consists of what instrumentally satisfies one's own needs. Vengeance is considered a moral duty. People are valued in terms of their utility.

**B. CONVENTIONAL MORALITY:** Acceptance of the rules and standards of one's group.

### **STAGE 3: INTERPERSONAL CONFORMITY:**

Right is conformity to the behavioral expectations of one's society or peers. Individual acts to gain approval of others. Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others within the group. "Everybody is doing it." One earns approval by being conventionally "respectable" and "nice." Sin is a breach of the expectations of the social order. Retribution, however, at this stage is collective. Individual vengeance is not allowed. Forgiveness is preferable to revenge. Punishment is mainly for deterrence. Failure to punish is "unfair." "If he can get away with it, why can't I?"

### **STAGE 4: LAW AND ORDER:**

Respect for rules, laws and properly constituted authority. Defense of the given social and institutional order for its own sake. Responsibility toward the welfare of others in the society. "Justice" normally refers to criminal or forensic justice. Justice demands that the wrongdoer be punished, that he "pay his debt to society," and that law abiders be rewarded. "A good day's pay for a good day's work." Injustice is failing to reward work or punish demerit. Right behavior consists of maintaining the social order for its own sake. Authority figures are seldom questioned. "He must be right. He's the Pope (or the President, or the Judge, or God)." Consistency and precedent must be maintained.

### **STAGE 4 ½:**

Between the conventional stages and the post-conventional Levels 5 and 6, there is a transitional stage. College-age students that have come to see conventional morality as relative and arbitrary, but have not yet discovered universal ethical principles, may drop into a hedonistic ethic of "do your own thing." This was well noted in the hippie culture of the 1960's. Disrespect for conventional morality was especially infuriating to the Stage 4 mentality, and indeed was calculated to be so.

**C. POSTCONVENTIONAL OR PRINCIPLED MORALITY: Ethical principles**

### **STAGE 5: PRIOR RIGHTS AND SOCIAL CONTRACT:**

Moral action in a specific situation is not defined by reference to a checklist of rules, but from logical application of universal, abstract, moral principles. Individuals have natural or inalienable rights and liberties that are prior to society and must be protected by society. Retributive justice repudiated. Justice distributed proportionate to circumstances and need. "Situation ethics." The statement, "Justice demands punishment," which is a self-evident truism to the Stage 4 mind, is just as self-evidently nonsense at Stage 5. Retributive punishment is neither rational nor just, because it does not promote the rights and welfare of the individual. Only legal sanctions that fulfill that purpose are imposed-- protection of future victims, deterrence, and rehabilitation. Individual acts out of mutual obligation and a sense of public good. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights, and in terms of standards that have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole

society--e.g. the Constitution. The freedom of the individual should be limited by society only when it infringes upon someone else's freedom.

## **STAGE 6: UNIVERSAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLES:**

An individual who reaches this stage acts out of universal principles based upon the equality and worth of all human beings. Persons are never means to an end, but are ends in themselves. Having rights means more than individual liberties. It means that every individual is due consideration of his interests in every situation, those interests being of equal importance with ones own. This is the "Golden Rule" model. A list of rules inscribed in stone is no longer necessary.

At this level, God is understood to say what is right because it is right; His sayings are not right, just because it is God who said them. Persons at this level have accepted God's invitation to "come and let us reason together".

### **THE FOLLOWING ARE OBSERVATIONS THAT WERE MADE BY KOHLBERG**

#### **FURTHER EXPLAINING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN STAGES.**

##### **1. STAGE DEVELOPMENT IS INVARIANT.**

One must progress through the stages in order, and one cannot get to a higher stage without passing through the stage immediately preceding it. A belief that such a leap into moral maturity is possible is in sharp contrast to the facts of developmental research. Moral development is growth, and like all growth, takes place according to a pre-determined sequence. To expect someone to grow into high moral maturity overnight would be like expecting someone to walk before he crawls.

##### **2. IN STAGE DEVELOPMENT, SUBJECTS CANNOT COMPREHEND MORAL REASONING AT A STAGE MORE THAN ONE STAGE BEYOND THEIR OWN.**

If Johnny is oriented to see good almost exclusively as that which brings him satisfaction, how will he understand a concept of good in which the "good" may bring him no tangible pleasure at all. The moral maxim "It is better to give than to receive" reflects a high level of development. The child who honestly asks you why it is better to give than to receive, does so because he does not and cannot understand such thinking. To him, "better" means better for him. And how can it be better for him to give, than to get.

##### **3. IN STAGE DEVELOPMENT INDIVIDUALS ARE COGNITIVELY ATTRACTED TO REASONING ONE LEVEL ABOVE THEIR OWN PRESENT PREDOMINANT LEVEL.**

The person has questions and problems the solutions for which are less satisfying at his present level. Since reasoning at one stage higher is intelligible and since it makes more sense and resolves more difficulties, it is more attractive.

For example, two brothers both want the last piece of pie. The bigger, stronger brother will probably get it. The little brother suggests they share it. He is thinking at level two, rather than at level one. The solution for him is more attractive: getting some rather than none. An adult who functions at level one consistently will end up in prison or dead.

##### **4. IN STAGE DEVELOPMENT, MOVEMENT THROUGH THE STAGES IS EFFECTED WHEN COGNITIVE DISEQUILIBRIUM IS CREATED, THAT IS, WHEN A PERSON'S**

## **COGNITIVE OUTLOOK IS NOT ADEQUATE TO COPE WITH A GIVEN MORAL DILEMMA.**

The person who is growing, will look for more and more adequate ways of solving problems. If he has no problems, no dilemmas, he is not likely to look for solutions. He will not grow morally. In the apple pie example. The big brother, who can just take the pie and get away with it, is less likely to look for a better solution than the younger brother who will get none and probably a beating in the struggle.

## **5. IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE FOR A HUMAN BEING TO BE PHYSICALLY MATURE BUT NOT MORALLY MATURE.**

If a child is spoiled, never having to accommodate for others needs, if he is raised in an environment where level two thinking by others gets the job done, he may never generate enough questions to propel him to a higher level of moral reasoning.

## **6. KOHLBERG BELIEVED THAT ONLY ABOUT 25% OF PERSONS EVER GROW TO LEVEL SIX, THE MAJORITY REMAINING AT LEVEL FOUR.**

The Bible enjoins principles of modesty, humility, and wise stewardship of the money. Application of these principles might preclude the purchase of expensive jewelry, furs, flashy cars, or other items primarily for show. A person functioning at level six would have no problem applying these principles. Persons functioning at a level four on the other hand, might make rules about "jewelry" (in a church for instance) or red dresses, or cosmetics. But they might not even notice a flashy car or the lady who wears a new dress every single week. Those things aren't on the list. If Kohlberg's observation is true, then level 6 thinkers would be in the minority. They might even be misunderstood and persecuted by a level 4 majority (Christ being the primary example).

## **THEOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS**

How was God to deal with human beings functioning just barely at level two. One million slaves, not yet freed from the lash. To them "good" was more to eat and not being punished. How is He to convince them to follow Him out into a desert wilderness, to face the most hostile tribes of people then on earth, to believe that He will lead them to a "land flowing with milk and honey." More importantly, how is God to teach moral principles to such a group of people.

**It is apparent to some students of scripture, that God stooped to reach those people where they were. He began by using reasoning they could accept: level one reasoning.**

These slaves, functioning at level one, could be stimulated to think at level three if it presented a better solution to their problem, (and there were many "problems" in the Sinai desert.)

At stage one a ruler establishes his right to rule by displays of power and vengeance upon his enemies. He rules by threat of punishment and hope of reward. Mercy, or failure to punish, is seen as evidence of weakness, not morality by stage one standards.

God first established His credentials to rule Israel by acts of vengeance upon the Egyptians, and by mighty, spectacular miracles. "I did this so that you might know that I am the Lord your God." (*Deut. 29:6* NIV) Each of the plagues of Egypt was directed at an object to

worship to the Egyptians - the River Nile, the frog (a fertility symbol), the cattle, the sun, the "first born" (They were considered dedicated to the gods.).

In many instances this situation of God vs the other "gods" (Dagon for example, the god of the Philistines), was involved when God acted in seemingly destructive ways. When we realize that these civilizations were for the most part functioning at level two, or at best level three, the picture becomes clear. If God had done nothing when directly challenged to prove Himself, He would have lost hope of any further influence over those peoples. To initiate a connection with Himself, a point of contact, from which to begin a reeducation He had to use forceful means. It is evident that sometimes these means involved the death of many people (the 185,000 Assyrians for example). If God had done nothing. Or worse If God had tried to use level 5-6 reasoning, the people would have judged Him weak and unworthy of worship. His word would fall upon no receptive ear. The story of Israel is the story of a Father guiding, not one child, but a whole nation of moral children (a whole world of moral children) from childhood to maturity.

Instances of this type of direct confrontation between God and the pagan gods, or between God and individuals who wished to challenge His right to be their God and to rule them, include:

The plagues of Egypt (*Exodus 4-13*)

The death penalty laws given by God to young Israel (*Leviticus 20*)

The rebellion of Nadab and Abihu (*Leviticus 10*)

The Tribe of Levi blessed by God for killing idolaters at Sinai. (*Exodus 32-34*)

The rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (*Numbers 16*)

The 50,000 slain who looked into the Ark after it was returned by the Philistines. (*I Sam. 6:19*) The plague upon the Philistines who took the Ark (*I Sam. 3-7*)

Sampson verses the Philistines in the temple of Dagon. (*Judges 16*)

The Soldiers of the King of Samaria vs Elijah the prophet (*II Kings 1:1-17*)

The mocking juveniles versus the prophet Elisha (*II Kings 2:24*)

The Valley of Jehoshaphat when the enemy was confused into fighting against each other. (*II Chron. 20*)

The command to kill in war with assurance of victory. (*Joshua 6:17*)

Fifty days after Israel was rescued from Egypt God appeared to them on Mt. Sinai. The people were terrified of the thunder and the glory. Moses, who apparently was functioning at a higher level, tried to explain that there was no need to be afraid. The people preferred a mediator. They said, "Moses, you go talk with God, and come tell us what He said." (*Exodus 20:18*).

God gave them His law in the form of ten simple, concrete rules, punctuated with threats of punishment. He deliberately portrayed Himself as a angry, jealous ruler, threatening not only to punish the disobedient, but the children for the parents' sins, (a concept which leaves us aghast but would seem perfectly normal to the pre-conventional mind). (*Exodus 20:5*). Today we almost automatically reinterpret these words to refer to the working to cause and

effect, but this does violence to the context in which it was given and would have been a meaningless concept to a pre-scientific culture.

Belief that God punishes children for their parent's sins was chronic in Israel, persisting to the time of Christ. When the disciples saw a blind man they asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" When Christ pronounced a blessing upon the poor, the persecuted, the meek, this seemed incredible, because these were the very ones whom the Israelites thought God was punishing. If you were prosperous, it was a sure sign that you were right with God, because He was blessing you. (The three friends of Job held this belief.) Perhaps the wording of the 2nd commandment - "visiting the iniquity of the doctrine. So also, Noah's curse upon Canaan for the sin of Ham (*Exodus 20:5*)," strengthened belief in this statement of the Lord, "The fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall the children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin" (*Deut 24:16*). Ezekiel spends a whole chapter arguing vigorously against the people, who protest that it is unjust for God not to punish children for their parents's sins Ezekiel chapter 18, see also Jeremiah 31:29-30). Apparently God had decided it was time to deal with Israel at a higher level.

Today, we understand the words of the second commandment to mean that the wicked habits and unbelief of the Fathers were passed down by teaching and example, to their children who then suffered the consequences. In the time of Moses, the "law" of cause and effect might not have been so understood by a nation of slaves.

After the conquest of Canaan the spectacular displays of power ceased, perhaps because God no longer wished to deal with men at this level. He was seeking to draw them into a higher level of functioning. They however, returned to their idols, in true stage one fashion, as soon as their fear abated. God demonstrated in this way, for all who care to observe, the futility of punishment as a learning tool. Punishment only buys time, until other positive reinforcement techniques can effect permanent changes in behavior.

What was God to do with such a people, when they adopted the pagan gods, even sacrificing their own children on the red hot arms of Dagon. He did the only thing that could be done under the circumstances: He punished them severely, "in furious anger and great wrath," as they perceived it. (*Deut. 19:28*) At stage 1 they expected Him to do this, or He would have appeared weak in their eyes, hardly worthy of notice, let alone obedience and worship. To be taken seriously at all, God had to punish. By this time in Canaan however, God did not punish them directly, He simply withdrew His protection, and allowed them to be beaten by their many enemies (*II Chron. 29:8-9*). When they returned to God and burned their idols, God rescued them again and again. Israel was a tiny nation, which could not have survived without God's special protection.

Ezekiel states the stage 1 and 2 reasons: "So I will spend my wrath upon them, and they will know that I am the Lord, when their people lie slain..." (*Ezekiel 6:12,13*)

God clearly runs the risk of appearing to gain some sort of satisfaction or catharsis from avenging Himself on His enemies, as would a heathen deity. Look at *Micah 5:15* : "In anger and in wrath I will execute vengeance." Or *Ezekiel 5:13*: "Then my anger will cease and my wrath against them will subside, and I will be avenged." In the Old Testament, we see God saying, in effect: "Because you aren't sufficiently afraid of sin, I will have to make you afraid of Me, lest you destroy yourselves and the hope of all future generations."

God had problems over and over with men interpreting His mercy as weakness and a license to do as they pleased without consequences. "I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way." (*Deut. 29:19*) At stage 2, and in a more sophisticated way at stages 3 and 4, God's mercy is challenged as unjust. "Where is the God of justice?" "It is vain to

serve God...evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test, they escape" (*Malachi 2:17, 3:14,15*) Even the prophet Jeremiah remonstrated with God. "I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" (*Jer. 12:1*). God's tantalizing answer in verse 5 says, in effect, "Jeremiah, this is too advanced for you to understand." (*Jer. 12:5*). "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord." (*Isa. 55:8*)

The problem of God's mercy to the wicked is not resolvable at lower stage thinking. It doesn't even arise as a question at stages 5 or 6. Isaiah even says that God shows mercy "because He is just" (*Isa. 30:18*), a totally incomprehensible statement to early stage moral reasoning.

Stage one is partly characterized by an inability to generalize from principles to their application. Rules are understood very concretely, so they have to be spelled out in complete detail. An example of such detailed instruction is found in the 2nd, 4th, and especially the 10th Commandments. After God has told the Israelites not to covet their neighbor's house, lest they assume that they are left free to covet his other possessions, the Lord adds, "your neighbor's wife or his manservant." But if God had stopped there, Israel would have concluded that it would be permissible to covet the "maidservant", so God spells that out too, and "his ox, nor his ass." Redundantly He adds "nor anything that belongs to your neighbor."

This detailed instruction is what makes the first four books of the Bible so lengthy. At stage 6, the Law may be summed up in two statements: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (*Luke 10:27*) and (*Deut 6:5, Lev 19:18*). These are not New Testament concepts. They are as old as the Law. It's just that they could not be understood when they were first spoken. The people were morally immature.

After the golden calf debacle at Sinai, God begins to relate to Israel more at the stage 2 level of marketplace bargaining and mutual exchange. He makes an agreement or "covenant" with them: If they obeyed God, He would cause them to prosper, and if they disobeyed then they would not prosper, and might be cut down by their enemies. (*Deut. 7:6-26*)

Many of the civil and criminal laws were based on the preconventional concept of justice. "Show no pity: life for life, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (*Deut. 19:21*) God made provision to soften the brutality of stage 1 "blood vengeance" by providing "cities of refuge" where a man could flee who had unintentionally killed someone. (*Deut. 19:6*) Intention counts at stage 2, so the "avenger of blood" (a classic preconventional phrase!) would have to be functioning at

stage 1, where intention did not count. Of course the premeditated murderer was not safe even in the city of refuge. He would be safe only until a proper trial was held. Then he would be executed. What a far cry from "Love your enemies. Do good to them that hate you", spoken by Christ. But that was level 6.

The cities of refuge gradually fell out of use, as such, as the people matured. By the time of Christ, we see the people comfortable in their conventional morality, but cheating the poor and abusing the powerless because everybody does it. (Stage 3) We see them carrying out a multitude of ceremonial observances, some not even given by God, just to make sure that they are being obedient to the Law. (Stage 4) God says through the prophet Amos: "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies...but let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (*Amos 5:21,24*) God is trying to lead them to the heart of the Law, and not just the letter. He would rather have them "act justly

and love mercy" than to bring Him "thousands of rams with ten thousand rivers of oil."  
(*Micah 6:6-8*)

Justice at the conventional levels (3-4) is understood in the sense of what we commonly mean when we talk about "criminal justice." Justice demands that a lawbreaker be punished, that the penalty must be paid. In Ezekiel's time the people protested that God was unjust if He did not punish a wicked man who had repented (*Ezekiel 18:25*). God's answer was, "But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed...he will surely live, he will not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?" (*Ezekiel 18:27-29*)

Listed in *Lev. 20*, is the penalty for adultery - death by stoning. But Christ Himself forgave the woman caught in the act of adultery, and she began a process of rehabilitation. Here again is contrasted stage two level thinking with stage 6. In fact all of Christ's teaching was level 6 or level 7.

At stage 4, the saying "a good day's work for a good day's pay" is a truism. In the parable of the workers (*Matt. 20:1-16*), those who worked only one hour were paid the same as those who had worked all day (unjust?). Christ confronted the Pharisees with the contrast between conventional justice and God's justice. Those who come to Christ at the last hour will receive the same reward, the same eternal life, as those who have walked with Christ all of their lives.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, the conventional respectability of the Jewish ruling class came under fire. The publican had a true heart repentance and love of God, and so was acceptable and savable. The Pharisee had only outward form and ceremony (level 4 morality). He felt no need of God, and so could not grow morally. He was self-satisfied. No question or problem called for a higher level solution. In the time of Christ the fear of a punishing God had generated a compulsion for rule making, and a backbreaking mass of regulations covering every detail of living. Much of the teaching of Christ seems to have been directed at weaning the people away from mechanical rule keeping. The Pharisees were threatened because they felt He didn't have enough respect for the rules (or for themselves). What they did not perceive was the higher stage thinking (level 5-6) that He was trying to lead them towards.

The Sermon on the Mount, (*Matt. 5*) is an excellent example of level 5-6 morality. It is heavy with principle not prescription, yet some would use this, in true stage 4 fashion, as a more rigorous rule book, providing more detailed regulations on such things as divorce and remarriage. To do this is to miss the overall intent of the sermon.

Christ's teaching and example of Sabbath keeping provides another example of the superiority of principles over rule keeping. The statement "the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath" revealed a level 5-6 understanding of the nature of rules. Rules are valid only insofar as they promote the freedom and value of persons. God knew that human beings needed time with Him, time to consider who they are, time to turn attention to their relationship with their Heavenly Father. Level 6 people have no problem enjoying the Sabbath Day. It is at level 1-4 that the Sabbath seems a duty to be performed.

At stage 5-6, commands become promises. "Thou shalt not kill", becomes "I can stop hurting myself or others through the power of God in my life." What wonderful good news! This is righteousness by faith.

At level 6 God's commands just make good sense. For instance God commanded Israel not to eat fat or blood under any circumstances. (*Lev. 7:22-27*) Just think what health benefits would have come from adherence to this prescription. Level 6 individuals see God as the



one who tells you to do, what you would want to do anyway, if you knew what was really good for you. And He doesn't just tell you to do it, He helps you do it.

Jesus' healing of the paralytic illustrates wonderfully the concept of forgiveness at level 6. The young man was paralyzed, a consequence of his own foolish choices. His friends let his bed down through the roof, right at the feet of Jesus in the middle of a great crowd. Jesus said to him simply "Your sins are forgiven." The Pharisees questioned this statement, because to them forgiveness is a legal maneuver and unjustly releases the guilty party from punishment. So Jesus then said "Which is easier to say, 'your sins are forgiven', or 'get up and walk.'" You see, healing the damage done by sin is what forgiveness is all about. It is not just juggling the heavenly books so Uncle Harry can get in. Forgiveness means giving Uncle Harry a "new heart (or mind)," healed now from the damage done by sin.

Kohlberg suggests that there may be (I believe there is) a level 7. Whether it stands totally outside of the other moral stages, I do not know. Stage 6 implies a perfect equivalence of duties and rights. "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The stage 6 person believes he may expect of others the same things that he is willing to give to them. **But the love of the saints goes beyond expecting anything of others.** Agape acts are of grace, without regard for merit or return. They go a giant step beyond. This is a self-sacrificing love. Agape love creates value in its object. This is why the command to "Love one another as I have loved you," was a "new commandment." This is why Christ said, "You must be born again."

Stage development exhibits a phenomenon called lateral decollage. That is, it may take a person just reaching Stage 5, for example, a long time for the implications of his new way of thinking to filter out into all areas of his thinking. Since religious thought is often tightly compartmentalized, with its own jargon and thought forms, insulated from the rest of our thinking, theological concepts may take on a life of their own and be relatively impervious to advancements in the rest of our thinking. In other words, a person's theology may lag at least one stage behind the rest of his thinking processes. This may explain why highly educated persons may have very primitive theological notions, or why successful business men or even educators may not be able to relate to their own children at home.

A great many of the problems within the church may be explained by these differences in stage thinking. Level 4 people are anxious that the rules be kept, while level 6 persons who want to discuss general principles, are called "liberal." Level 6 persons may become very bored with legalistic sermons aimed at level 4, or with level 2 -the fiery hell and damnation threats, while level 4 members feel threatened by questions which seem to undermine the authority of God and His Law or His church.

Those Christians who are functioning at higher levels of maturity must realize that stage development is normal and necessary. They must not be prejudiced towards those who are functioning at lower levels, who cannot understand many of those things which the more mature take for granted. They must be patient, seeking to draw others towards a higher level of understanding without belittling them or diminishing their current experience in faith. To do this is to work with God.

The story of Israel, miraculously written down and preserved for 3,500 years, is the story of God and man, in miniature. God's efforts to save men from themselves, to lead them to greater understanding, to pull them into a relationship with Himself, are a revelation of His character. Reading this story, we may consider the evidence, and decide for ourselves if God truly loves us.

## **STAGE THEORY AND THE ATONEMENT**

The sacrifice of Christ, His substitutionary death, "the Atonement," takes on greater and deeper meaning at each level of moral development. God chose the perfect way to win mankind back to Himself. He chose an act which could be understood and accepted at each level of development, an act which while comprehensible to the person at level 2, takes on greater and greater significance at each level.

Level 1: Man sinned and offended God. God responded with angry vengeance taking the life of Jesus.

Level 2: God somehow struck a bargain with the Devil, a market place exchange of Christ's life, paid as a ransom to the Devil, in trade for the devil's releasing his hostages. In the popular version, Satan found out too late that God had conned him, when Christ rose from the dead.

Level 3-4 : The Law must be kept. Man broke the Law. Someone had to pay the penalty. "The wages of sin is death." Jesus

paid that penalty. The integrity of the Law was maintained.

(Let me here say that I believe that there is a true level four understanding of why the Son of God had to become a human being, live a life of perfect loyalty to God his father, and then be murdered - the victim of Satan and evil men. Satan's claim to dominion of the earth is based in large part upon a level four argument. He is the great legalist. He claimed that Adam and his posterity had rebelled against God every bit as Lucifer himself did. Because of this, Satan claimed dominion over the human race. He claimed this earth as his kingdom. When Jesus Christ was born a human being, and then lived in perfect obedience to His father's will, "even unto death," the Father could then give to Christ the dominion of the earth. Satan could not point to any rebellion in Christ as a reason why God the Father should not thus give to Christ the dominion.)

Level 5-6: He demonstrated that separation from God is death. ("Why have you forsaken me?") Since we separate ourselves from Him, not He from us, He is not our executioner. He allowed Satan to play out his hand, exposing his selfish character for all both man and angels to see, and thus erasing all sympathy for the accusations of the fallen foe. God's character was vindicated.

Level 7: Atonement becomes at-one-ment. God did what it took to win our love and trust. His love for us is greater than any man can comprehend, that the eternal God of the universe should so value a human being, that He would die to win his love. Neither God, nor His law, defined as the eternal principles upon which He bases His government, change, but our understanding of His law changes, and God speaks to us at each level of our understanding. It is a mistake to cling to expressions appropriate to an earlier age of understanding, regardless of how valid and useful they were in their own context, when more appropriate expressions exist. But we must be patient with our brethren who perhaps are just beginning their maturing process, and allow the pastor to preach for them sometimes. For even as God was laying down detailed concrete rules for the Israelites, He was already looking forward to the day when He would "write His laws on our hearts."

[Top](#)  
[Next](#)  
[Back](#)

[Home](#)