Faith Maturity and Social Concern in College-age Youth: Does Christian Education Make a Difference?

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The massive *Valuegenesis* study examined faith maturity among a large sample of Adventist youth. Results were compared with similar studies of other denominations. One persistent criticism of Search Institute's *Valuegenesis* study was the inappropriateness of the scale used to determine faith maturity. In the following article, the author uses two revised faith-maturity scale, developed by Dr. Jerome Thayer, to examine a new sample of older Adventist young people. Dudley's analysis corroborated Thayer's findings to a remarkable extent. Moreover, Dudley identified *why* the original faith maturity scale did not fit—because it placed a much greater emphasis upon social concern as an ingredient of faith.

The *Valuegenesis* study has been widely featured in current publications. In this massive effort, 10,641 Seventh-day Adventist students enrolled in Adventist parochial schools in grades 6 through 12 and 457 Adventist students enrolled in the same grades in public schools were surveyed on a variety of attitudes and behaviors relating to faith, values, and commitment (Benson & Donahue, 1990; Dudley, 1992; Rice & Gillespie, 1992). A feature of the lengthy (over 500 responses) *Valuegenesis* questionnaire that has drawn particular attention is a 38-item Mature Faith Scale. This scale was created by Search Institute of Minneapolis for a study of six major denominations. Including it in the *Valuegenesis* questionnaire has made it possible to compare Adventist young people with their peers in leading Protestant denominations.

The purpose of this article is six-fold:

1. To describe the results of administering the Mature Faith Scale to a new sample obtained from 887 older youth (ages 19-21)

2. To compare results on the Mature Faith Scale and on individual items between the original *Valuegenesis* sample and the older youth

3. To respond to criticisms of the Mature Faith Scale by analyzing the present data with a revised scale that has been demonstrated to be more valid and reliable when employed with *Valuegenesis* data

4. To compare results for the older youth on the revised scale with those on the original scale

5. To construct a "social" scale from horizontal items and examine to what extent this scale may be related to a measure of mature faith

6. To compare the faith maturity and social concern of those in Christian schools with those in other educational institutions using the revised scale

THE YOUTH SURVEY 5

In 1987, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States and Canada began a ten-year study of youth retention and dropout. The aim of the project was to select a group of 15- and 16-year-olds who were already members of the denomination and to survey them each year for 10 years in order to determine what factors were related to staying or leaving.

The first step was to pick 695 churches by a stratified random method so that they were geographically representative of all Adventist churches in the North American Division. The clerks of these churches were then requested to send the names and addresses of all members who were 15 or 16 years of age. Clerks of 659 churches responded (95%) and a 6-page base questionnaire was mailed to each teenager. Usable instruments were received from 1,523 (64% response rate). Each year follow-up surveys have been mailed.

Rather detailed findings for the first three years have been reported elsewhere (Dudley & Kangas, 1990; Dudley & Ng, 1992). Of course, some attrition from the original sample has occurred although every effort is being made to find correct addresses and to encourage subjects to continue, including four or five mailings each year. Some respondents skip a year or two and then start again. Surveys were completed by 1,083 young people in the third year, 894 in the fourth year, and 887 in the fifth.

After some rather large early losses, the sample appears to have stabilized. The 38 items of the Mature Faith Scale were included on the fifth-year questionnaire of this study, which is designated as "Youth Survey 5" to distinguish it from the original *Valuegenesis* data set. Analyses is based on these 887 responses from the sample subjects, who are distributed throughout the United States and Canada.

THE MATURE FAITH SCALE

This scale was developed from 1988 to 1990 by Search Institute for a national study of adults and young people in six major Protestant denominations. In this conceptual scheme, faith maturity is not simply a set of right beliefs. Rather, it is conceived more as a way of life, as a set of priorities, dispositions, and behaviors that evidence that faith is deep, vibrant, and life-changing. A person of mature faith integrates into his/her life eight core dimensions of faith:

1. Trusts in God's saving grace and believes firmly in the humanity and divinity of Jesus

2. Experiences a sense of personal well-being, security, and peace

3. Integrates faith and life, seeing work, family, social relationships, and political choices as part of one's religious life

4. Seeks spiritual growth through study, reflection, prayer, and discussion with others

5. Seeks to be part of a community of believers in which people give witness to their faith and support and nourish one another

6. Holds life-affirming values, including commitment to racial and gender equality

7. Advocates social and global change to bring about greater social justice

8. Serves humanity, consistently and passionately, through acts of love and justice

It is evident that these eight dimensions embrace two overall themes. A person of mature faith experiences both a life-transforming relationship with a loving God (the *vertical* theme) and a consistent devotion to serving others (the *horizontal* theme).

Within each of the eight core dimensions, representative statements of mature faith were constructed. A total of 38 were used in the Mature Faith Scale and comprise the first 38 questions on the *Valuegenesis*

questionnaire. Seven responses were possible to each statement: never true, rarely true, true once in a while, sometimes true, often true, almost always true, and always true. For the Youth Survey 5, these responses were reduced to five by eliminating "rarely true" and "almost always true."

In the comparison of each item listed in Table 1, the *Valuegenesis* figure is the combined responses of those who chose either "often true," "almost always true," or "always true" for each item. The comparable figure for Youth Survey 5 is the combined responses of "often true" and "always true."

Those items labeled "reversed scoring" are stated negatively as far as the concept of faith maturity goes. Thus, when they were calculated into the Mature Faith Scale, the numbers were reversed so that choice number one (never true) received the highest rating, and vice versa.

On a number of items the percentages are quite close. However, the young adults are at least five points *lower* (after reversing negative items) than the *Valuegenesis* subjects on the following items: faith shaping every day actions, faith helping to distinguish right from wrong, seeing evidence of God's activity in the world, seeking opportunities for spiritual growth, time for prayer, efforts to promote world peace, responsibility for reducing pain and suffering, a changing understanding of God, God's presence in relationships with others, meaning and purpose in life, churches becoming involved in political issues, and creating international harmony. They are at least 10 points lower on caring for physical health, speaking for equality for women and minorities, obedience to God's commandments, and a sense of God's guidance. Furthermore, they are at least 20 points lower on efforts to promote social justice and commitment to Jesus Christ.

By contrast, the young adults are at least 5 points *higher* than the *Valuegenesis* subjects only on protecting the environment, self-acceptance, and handling their responsibilities and obligations, and 11 points higher on reconciling a loving God with the presence of pain and suffering.

Table 1
Mature Faith Statements

	YG	YS5
1. I am concerned that our country is not doing enough to help the poor.	54%	56%
2. I know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died on the cross and rose again.	98%	98%
3. My faith shapes how I think and act each and every day.	60%	54%
4. I help others with their religious questions and struggles.	30%	32%
5. I tend to be critical of other people. (reversed scoring)	30%	26%
6. In my free time, I help people who have problems or needs.	30%	31%
7. My faith helps me know right from wrong.	81%	72%
8. I do things to help protect the environment.	43%	50%
9. I devote time to reading and studying the Bible.	25%	22%
10. I have a hard time accepting myself. (reversed scoring)	28%	23%
11. Every day I see evidence that God is active in the world.	77%	71%
12. I take excellent care of my physical health.	71%	57%
13. I am active in efforts to promote social justice.	43%	21%
14. I seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually.	41%	33%
15. I take time for periods of prayer or meditation.	41%	35%
16. I am active in efforts to promote world peace.	21%	12%
17. I accept people whose religious beliefs are different from mine.	92%	94%
18. I feel a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world.	45%	38%
19. As I grow older my understanding of God changes.	79%	72%

20. I feel overwhelmed by all the responsibilities and obligations I have. (reversed scoring)	48%	43%
21. I give significant portions of time and money to help other people.	18%	16%
22. I speak out for equality for women and minorities.	43%	33%
23. I feel God's presence in my relationships with other people.	47%	42%
24. My life is filled with meaning and purpose.	66%	59%
25. I do not understand how a loving God can allow so much pain and suffering in the world. (reversed scoring)	29%	18%
26. I believe that I must obey God's rules and commandments in order to be saved. (reversed scoring)	78%	63%
27. I am confident that I can overcome any problem or crisis no matter how serious.	61%	63%
28. I care a great deal about reducing poverty in my country and throughout the world.	50%	46%
29. I try to apply my faith to political and social issues.	31%	29%
30. My life is committed to Jesus Christ.	75%	55%
31. I talk with other people about my faith.	42%	44%
32. My life is filled with stress and anxiety. (reversed scoring)	44%	46%
33. I go out of my way to show love to people I meet.	45%	42%
34. I have a real sense that God is guiding me.	60%	47%
35. I do not want the churches of this nation getting involved in political issues. (reversed scoring)	54%	59%
36. I like to worship and pray with others.	49%	45%
37. I think Christians must be about the business of creating international understanding and harmony.	54%	45%
38. I am spiritually moved by the beauty of God's creation.	75%	77%

Thus the young adults in this sample are lower than the younger students on many components of this measure of faith maturity. The percentages seem especially low on items like time for Bible study (22%), efforts to promote social justice (21%), efforts to promote world peace (12%), and time and money to help others (16%). Moreover, these respondents are the 58% of the original random sample who have chosen to remain in the study; they probably are more dedicated than those who have discontinued it.

The next question concerns the overall Mature Faith score. On any item a respondent could receive a score of 1 to 5. Responses to the 38 items were added and the total divided by 38, yielding for each person an average Mature Faith score that could range from 1 to 5. The actual range was 1.87 to 4.68. While a slight problem exists in comparing the 5-point Youth Survey 5 Scale with the 7-point *Valuegenesis* Scale, the wording of the responses makes it reasonable to designate scores of 2.00 and below as *low*, scores of 4.00 and above as *high*, and scores in between as *moderate*. This designation is followed for each scale discussed in this paper.

On this basis, about 0.9% of the sample fell into the low faith-maturity category, about 93.7% were categorized as having moderate faith maturity, and about 5.4% evidenced high faith maturity. In the *Valuegenesis* study, 22% of the students fell into the high faith-maturity class—a statistic that was widely decried as being too low. Therefore, the overall score confirms what the individual items had suggested—these young adults are definitely lower on faith maturity than the *Valuegenesis* sample as measured by the 38-item scale. However, two complicating factors exist. The first has to do with the Mature Faith Scale itself.

CRITICISMS OF THE MATURE FAITH SCALE

The Mature Faith Scale has been disputed by a number of scholars (Furst, 1990; Naden, 1991; Thayer, 1992). Some of the criticism revolved around philosophical and theological understandings of the meaning of faith. Should horizontal items, especially those concerning social justice and world peace, be considered components of faith or are horizontal relationships the *result* of faith? Other items were challenged because they seemed inappropriate for Adventists, inappropriate for youth, employed an inappropriate response format, called for a global rather than a personal response, or failed to discriminate among respondents.

Using empirical or criterion-based approaches, or both, scholars like Benson, Donahue, and Erickson (1993), Hughes (1993), and Thayer (1993) have constructed shorter scales by selecting from the original 38 items. The 15-item Thayer Long-form Scale is to be applied to the present data set since Thayer used a particularly rigorous process in order to obtain optimum validity and reliability for his scale. In addition to a number of factor analyses and reliability analyses with item-to-scale correlations, Thayer surveyed over 500 professors of religion, other educators, and pastors on the appropriateness of each of the 38 items on the Mature Faith Scale as a measure of faith maturity for Seventh-day Adventists.

One purpose of this paper is to apply Thayer's procedures to the Youth Survey 5 data set and compare the results with his findings on *Valuegenesis*. To save space, the items are not repeated but are referenced by their numbers in the above listing.

APPLYING THE THAYER MATURE FAITH SCALE

Thayer (1993) first conducted a principal components factor analysis on all 38 items employing a one-factor solution. Nineteen items loaded at .50 or above on that factor. These 19 items were submitted to a two-factor solution analysis, and those items that loaded on the first factor at .50 or above were identified. Next, a reliability analysis was conducted with the 19 items to select a scale with the best psychometric properties. Here the criterion was item-to-scale correlations of .50 or above. In addition, at least 75% approval of each item was required by the survey sample of Adventist educators and pastors, indicating the item is appropriate for an Adventist scale. These procedures resulted in the final selection of items 3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 14, 15, 23, 24, 30, 31, 33, 34, 36, and 38 for the 15-item Thayer Long-form Faith-Maturity Scale (hereafter labeled the Thayer Scale).

The Thayer Scale includes 11 items originally intended as a measure of vertical faith and three items (4, 23, 30) not clearly either vertical or horizontal. Only one horizontal item was included (#33: I go out of my way to show love to people I meet), and it did not concern social justice or world peace and was personal rather than global in response.

Several of Thayer's analyses were performed on the Youth Survey 5 data set using SPSS/PC+ programs. All 38 items were submitted to a principal components factor analysis with a one-factor solution requested.

Of the 19 items that loaded .50 and above for Thayer, 17 of them loaded on the first factor, ranging from .50 to .79. Only items 6 and 21 failed to load that high (both at .41), and neither of them made Thayer's final cut. None of the items other than Thayer's 19 loaded as high as .50.

The 19 items were then factor analyzed with a two-factor solution. Of the 14 items loading for Thayer on the first factor at .50 or above, 13 of the items performed similarly with these data. Only item 24 missed slightly (.49). On the *Valuegenesis* data items 6, 18, 21, and 33 loaded below .30, and item 29 loaded at .31. In the present analysis, items 6, 18, 21, and 33 also loaded below .30, while item 29 did a bit better than Thayer with a loading of .44. Thayer retained the 14 items with high loadings and dropped all others except item 33. Although it loaded only .22 on the first factor (.24 on Youth Survey 5), it had performed well on other criteria and received a high approval rating (79%) on the survey.

A reliability analysis was conducted on the full, 38-item Mature Faith Scale. Fourteen items had item-to-scale correlations of .50 or above, and item 7 was correlated at .49. These 15 items were identical to the Thayer Scale with one change. They included item 29 at .52 and excluded item 33 at .45. Thayer found a very similar correlation for item 29 with the *Valuegenesis* data (.53) but deleted the item on other considerations.

Finally, a reliability analysis was conducted on the Thayer Scale with the Youth Survey 5 data. All items had item-to-scale correlations of over .50 (range = .54 to .75) except item 24 at .49 (Thayer, .51) and item 33 at .40 (Thayer, .48). The reliability alpha for the Thayer Scale was a strong .92 (.90 on the *Valuegenesis* data).

Thus, following Thayer's procedures with the Youth Survey 5 data, I obtained almost identical results to what he obtained with the *Valuegenesis* data. This replication corroborates Thayer's conclusions and establishes the Thayer Scale as a valid and reliable measure of faith maturity for the present study.

THE FAITH MATURITY OF OLDER YOUTH

The questions now are: How did the respondents of Youth Survey 5 score on the Thayer Mature Faith Scale? And how does that compare with their scores on the original Faith Maturity Scale as reported above?

Scores on the Thayer Scale covered the full range from 1 to 5. If the same cut-off points used with the original scale are employed, 5.9% of

the sample fall into the low-faith-maturity category, 67.9% into the moderate, and 26.2% into the high. The mean score on the 38-item Mature Faith Scale was 3.26, whereas the mean score on the Thayer Scale was 3.36. Obviously, use of the revised scale has raised the reported level of faith maturity; but the magnitude of the difference is masked by the distribution of scores, as Table 2 reveals:

Table 2
Comparison of Faith Maturity Between Scales

	Low Maturity	Mod. Maturity	High Maturity
Mature Faith Scale	.9%	93.7%	5.4%
Thayer Scale	5.9%	67.9%	26.2%

The revised scale dramatically increases the percentage of the older youth who are classified as having high faith-maturity. But it also greatly increases those categorized as low. This polarization among respondents on Youth Survey 5 minimizes the mean difference in the increase. Thayer (1993) also found that using his revised scale with the *Valuegenesis* data resulted in an increase of those classified as having high faith-maturity. With the original scale, 22% were so identified; with the revised scale this percentage rose to 41%. Thus, the Thayer Scale reveals a more encouraging picture with both data sets, but the older youth rate is lower than the *Valuegenesis* sample on both measures. A partial explanation is offered later.

A MEASURE OF SOCIAL CONCERN

On the survey that Thayer (1993) conducted with Adventist educators and pastors, only one of the 12 horizontal-faith items received at least a 75% approval for inclusion in a mature-faith scale. That item, number 33 (79%), was included on the Thayer Scale. In addition, the horizontal items did not perform well in the factor and reliability analyses. Therefore, the revised Thayer Scale presents mature faith as a concept defined largely in vertical terms (relationship to God).

Still, that leaves the question of how relationships with fellow human beings relate to mature faith. If they are not a component of that faith,

are they the fruits or the results of it? To explore that question the 11 unused horizontal items (1, 6, 8, 13, 16, 18, 21, 22, 28, 29, and 37) were combined into a scale. A reliability analysis of this scale revealed that three items (8, 21, 37) had item-to-scale correlations of less than .40. These three items were deleted, and a new scale, labeled the Social Scale, was formed with the remaining eight items. On this scale two items had scale correlations of .39, two were in the .40s, three were in the .50s, and one was correlated at .62. The reliability alpha for the scale was .78—adequate, but considerably weaker than that for the Thayer Scale. Apparently, horizontal items do not form as unified a concept as faith maturity.

As measured by the Social Scale, 11.8% had low social concern, 79.2% had moderate social concern, and 9% had high social concern. Thus social concern lags behind faith maturity in this sample. This partially explains why dropping the horizontal items in the revised scale raised the proportion of those with high faith-maturity. Adventism seems to do a better job of nurturing relationships with God than it does with relationships with humanity.

The Social Scale was found to be correlated at .41 with the Thayer Scale, significant beyond the .001 level. This moderate correlation reveals that faith maturity and social concern are not the same thing but that they are related to each other. People who are high on faith maturity tend also to be high in areas of social concern. Loving one's neighbor is the fruit of a relationship with God.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND FAITH MATURITY

Does attendance at Christian schools make a difference in the level of faith maturity? It should. Christian education exists to nurture a loving relationship with God and to promote the development of the spiritual life. One might also expect a difference in social concern. Christian educators may have honest differences of opinion concerning the place of concepts like "social justice" and "equality for minorities" in the life of faith, but all of them would affirm that Christianity must have both a "horizontal" and a "vertical" dimension (Matthew 22:37-40).

It is very difficult, however, to compare Christian with secular education in the *Valuegenesis* study. As reported above, of the 11,098 usable youth surveys, 10,461 (96%) of them came from students in

Christian schools. Furthermore, the 457 (4%) students in public education were almost surely self-selected and thus biased toward being more committed to the church and its teachings than the typical Adventist student in public education.

Fortunately, the Youth Survey 5 data set does not suffer from this difficulty. While 158 of the subjects were no longer in school, the remaining 729 were divided fairly evenly between Christian and public education. The results show that 404 (55%) of them were students in Christian (Seventh-day Adventist) high schools or colleges, and 325 (45%) were attending public high schools or colleges. This provides a ideal situation for apt comparisons.

On the Thayer Mature Faith Scale, those in Christian schools had a mean of 3.53 while for those in public education the mean was 3.21. A test for the difference of means reveals a t-value of 4.59, significant beyond the .001 level. Those students attending Christian schools were significantly higher on faith maturity than those in public education. This difference can be seen more clearly by comparing the percentages that fall into each category, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Comparison of Maturity Between Schools

	Low Maturity	Mod. Maturity	High Maturity
Christian schools	3.5%	62.8%	33.7%
Public schools	7.7%	72.6%	19.7%

Earlier it was mentioned that two complicating factors partially confounded the finding that the youth in the *Valuegenesis* study rated higher on the Mature Faith Scale than the subjects in Youth Survey 5. The first factor has to do with problems in the Mature Faith Scale itself and led to the revised Thayer Scale, which slightly narrowed the margin between the two groups.

The second factor concerns the type of school the subjects are attending and provides considerably more explanation. The data shown above make clear that the presence of a large percentage of public-education students is lowering the overall mature-faith scores. The percentage of students in Christian schools in the high category is nearly

34%—only about 11% behind the *Valuegenesis* figure of 41% that included nearly all Christian-school students. On the other hand, the public-education students are about 21% behind the *Valuegenesis* group.

Comparisons also were made between the two groups on the Social Scale. Those in Christian schools had a mean of 2.88, while for those in public education the mean was 3.02. A test for the difference of means reveals a t-value of -2.56, significant beyond the .01 level. Those attending Christian schools were significantly lower on social concern than those in public education, although the spread is not as great as for faith maturity. This difference can be seen more clearly by comparing the percentages that fall into each category, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Comparison of Social Concern Between Schools

	Low Social	Mod. Social	High Social
Christian schools	11.9%	80.2%	7.9%
Public schools	9.9%	78.0%	12.1%

Here is a reversal. The students in Adventist Christian schools measure higher on faith maturity than do students in public education when the measure is largely limited to vertical items (Thayer Scale); but they measure lower than their public-school counterparts when a measure of horizontal relationships is used. This may suggest that Adventist schools have been somewhat weaker than the public-education system in instilling concerns for social justice and world peace. Such lower social concern may be typical of conservative religions in general (Dudley & Hernandez, 1992, chap. 1).

CONCLUSIONS

Maturity of faith is a complex concept to define, and sincere and competent Christian scholars will undoubtedly continue to differ as to how to measure it adequately. However, all would agree that such faith must somehow involve both one's relationship to God and one's relationships with fellow human beings. The original Mature Faith Scale is a broad-based attempt to include a variety of ways in which these relationships

function. Evidence (Thayer, 1993) indicates, however, that some of the concepts are unacceptable as definitions of mature faith by Adventist educators and pastors and that the scale suffers from psychometric inadequacies.

The Thayer Mature Faith Scale corrects these problems by removing nearly all horizontal references. It has been shown to be both valid and reliable on the *Valuegenesis* data (Thayer, 1993). This present paper demonstrates that the Thayer Scale performs nearly identically with the older youth of the Youth Survey 5 study. With both groups, use of the Thayer Scale locates greater percentages of the youth in the high-faith-maturity category. However, mature faith becomes almost exclusively defined as relationship with God.

To explore the place of relationships with other humans in the life of faith, a Social Scale was developed consisting of eight horizontal items from the original Mature Faith Scale. Significant correlation with the Thayer Scale reveals that while social concern may not be part of the definition of mature faith, it tends to be related to it. Concern for humanity is a fruit of faith. Writing in the context of providing food and clothing for the needy, the apostle challenged: "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. . . . Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do" (James 2:17-18).

Of particular note is the fact that when students in Adventist Christian education and in public education are chosen randomly and compared in roughly equal numbers, the students in Christian education demonstrate a marked advancement in faith maturity as measured by the Thayer Scale. This result should encourage Christian educators, but it also should challenge because only about one-third of the students in the Christian system had attained high faith maturity.

The situation is even more challenging with regard to social concern. Only about 8% of the students in Christian schools were high on this measure, and the percentage was even lower than that of students in public education. Both *Valuegenesis* and Youth Survey 5 call for Christian educators on all levels to find ways of deepening the relationship of their students with a loving God and of reflecting that relationship in ways that bless their fellow human beings.

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