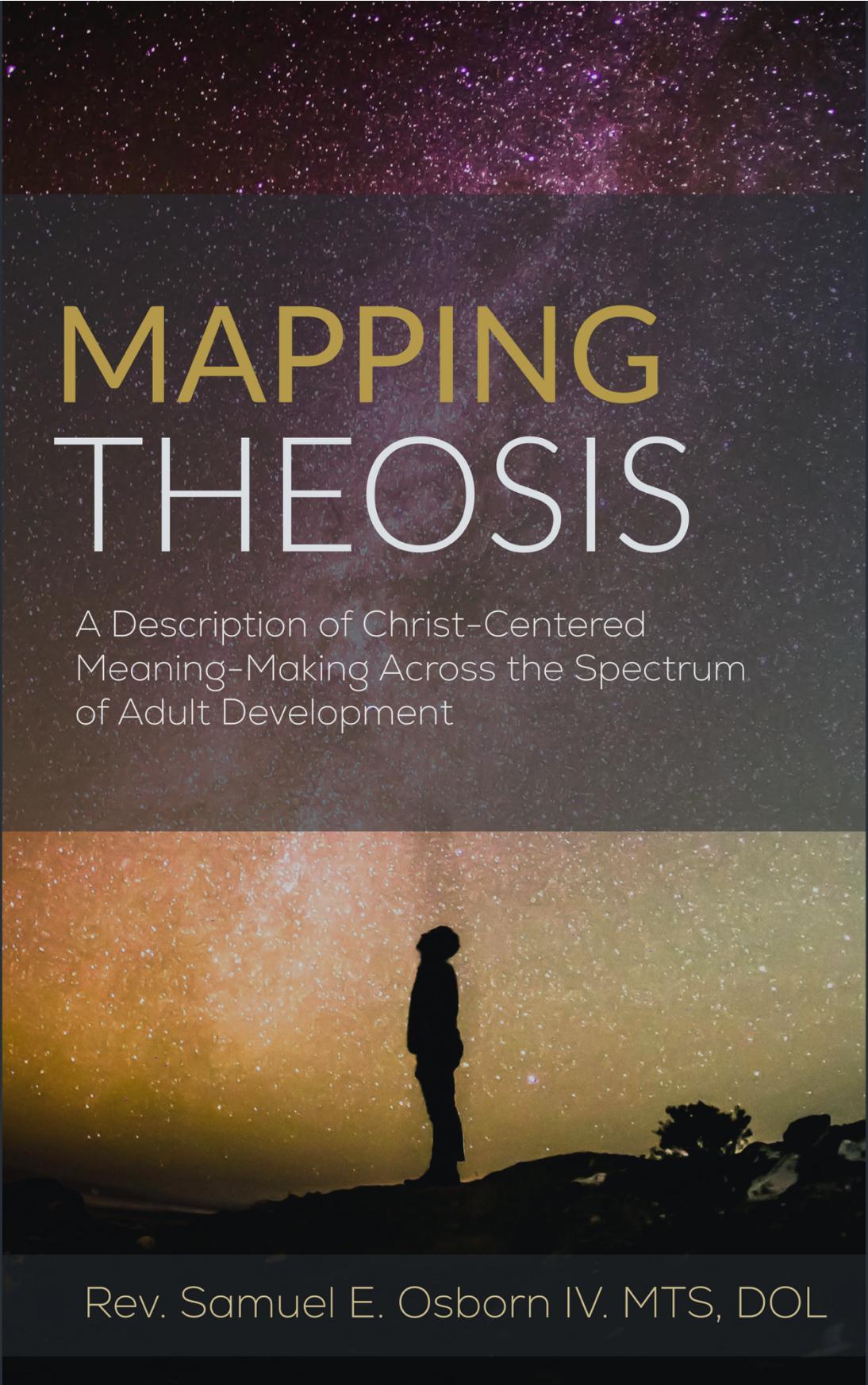




MAPPING THEOSIS

A Description of Christ-Centered
Meaning-Making Across the Spectrum
of Adult Development

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
STAGE 3 (SOCIALIZED)	5
STAGE 4 (SELF-AUTHORED)	8
STAGE 5 (SELF-TRANSFORMING)	11

Introduction

Have you ever wondered why believers can affirm the same creed, sit in the same pew, and read the same Bible, but express their faith in remarkably different ways? They seem to inhabit their faith through entirely different internal structures — one anchored in and in lock step with the community, another in a carefully reasoned personal conviction because they know what they believe, and another in a faith that has learned to hold conviction and mystery together. The answer lies in the reality that Christians do not all hold their faith the same way. Pastors and disciplers sense this difference constantly, even without a vocabulary for it. A rebuke that lands as clarifying correction for one believer lands as relational betrayal for another. A sermon on doubt that liberates one listener destabilizes the next. The difference is not primarily about maturity in the moral sense, or even about how long someone has been a Christian. It is about the shape of the meaning-making system a person is using to hold their faith at all. It comes down to how they make sense of the world and faith.

This is the territory developmental theory maps. Since the mid-twentieth century, researchers in human development have studied how people's capacity to construct meaning changes across the life span, and how that capacity, not just belief content, shapes the way a person relates to authority, community, doubt, and truth. Our central insight is that development is not the accumulation of more knowledge but a change in the very structure doing the knowing. What was once the subject or perspective in which a person was embedded and could not see (a relationship, a belief system, etc.) gradually becomes an object the person can reflect on, evaluate, and hold at a distance. Fowler applies this logic specifically to faith, describing recognizable stages in how people construct religious meaning over a lifetime. Applied carefully, this understanding helps give voice to something pastors already half-know from experience: that discipleship is not just teaching people what to believe, but meeting them in how they are currently able to hold belief at all.

This matters because developmental theory is not merely academic. It is a description of reality — of how actual believers actually change, or fail to change, over years of church life. A congregation is not a monolith of understanding; it is a room full of different meaning-making structures, and often we mistake the differences for different levels of commitment or different degrees of theological knowledge. A leader who does not see this will tend to treat every believer as though they were operating from the same stage the leader is, teaching self-authored conviction to someone who is still learning to trust, or offering relational reassurance to someone who has already outgrown it and needs to be challenged toward ownership. Discipleship that ignores developmental reality tends to produce either premature pressure toward independence or indefinite dependence on external authority, neither of which is the same thing as growth toward Christ.

The descriptions that follow detail three recognizable patterns of Christian faith, drawn primarily from Kegan's stages as summarized by Kelcourse, in conversation with Fowler's parallel faith stages and the integrative concerns raised by Estep and Kim: Stage 3, the socialized or interpersonal believer, whose faith is real, warm, and relationally held; Stage 4, the self-authored believer, whose faith has become personally examined and internally owned; and Stage 5, the self-transforming believer, whose faith has learned to hold conviction and mystery, boundary and openness, together. Each stage is described on its own terms — its characteristic voice, its strengths, its blind spots, its theological resonances and its theological pressures — because none of them is a caricature to be dismissed and none is a finish line to be idealized.

Two cautions govern everything that follows. First, developmental stage is not the same as spiritual maturity, and still less the same as Christlikeness. A believer at an earlier developmental stage can display profound holiness, trust, and love; a believer at a later stage can be developmentally complex and still be proud, unhealed, or unfaithful. Developmental theory describes the architecture of how faith is held, not the presence or absence of grace within it. Second, these categories exist for the sake of people, not the ranking of them. Their purpose is pastoral: to help us ask better questions, offer better challenge and support, and stop mistaking a difference in developmental structure for a difference in devotion. Used well, staged faith is not a way of sorting Christians. It is a way of seeing them and disciplining them more lovingly and effectively, in whatever stage of the journey God currently has them in.

Stage 3 (Socialized)

A Stage 3 Christian is a deeply relational believer whose sense of faith, self, and belonging is largely shaped by significant others and the communities that matter most to them. In the constructive-developmental scheme, Stage 3 is the *Interpersonal* or *Socialized* stage, marked by stronger inclusion than independence; the self is formed through relationships and social context rather than through an internally self-authored system. Kelcourse summarizes this stage as “Interpersonal” and notes that people become selves in human contexts and construct meaning through relationships with significant others.

In terms of faith, a Stage 3 Christian usually experiences Christianity as something lived with and through trusted people. Their faith is sincere, often warm, and often very committed. But it is usually not yet fully examined from an independent standpoint. They believe with the church, with their family, with their small group, with their pastor, or with the Christian subculture that has formed them. Fowler’s Stage 3 description helps here too: Stage 3 faith must provide coherence across multiple spheres of life, gives a basis for identity and outlook, and is strongly tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others; beliefs are deeply felt but usually tacitly held rather than critically examined.

So a Stage 3 Christian often sounds like:

- “I know what we believe.”
- “This church feels like home.”
- “My pastor really helps me know what is true.”
- “I want to stay faithful.”
- “I do not want to disappoint God or my people.”

That does not make them fake or shallow. Quite the opposite: Stage 3 Christians are often loyal, devoted, teachable, and eager to belong. They can be wonderful church members, volunteers, ministry leaders, and disciplers within established structures. Fowler even notes that religious institutions often “work best” when many committed people function from this Stage 3 pattern, because symbol, ritual, belonging, and shared meaning are tightly integrated.

Their identity is interpersonal and dependent rather than self-authored. They know themselves through the mirror of relationships. They feel most secure when they know where they stand with God, church leaders, family, and the people they value. Because of that, identity can be stable when relationships are stable, but shaken when approval, belonging, or shared norms are threatened. They often feel, “Who I am” and “where I belong” are closely tied together.

In church life, this may show up as:

- A strong attachment to their congregation, denomination, or ministry culture
- A desire for harmony and relational approval

- Deep respect for trusted authority figures
- Confidence in inherited beliefs, but not much distance from them
- A tendency to experience disagreement not just as an idea problem, but as a relationship problem

That last point is important. A Stage 3 Christian often has trouble separating ideas from people. Differences in theology or practice may feel personal: not merely “you see that differently,” but “we are not the same kind of people” or “this threatens our unity.” At Stage 3, differences of outlook can be experienced as differences in kind of person, and authority is often located in traditional authorities or the consensus of a valued group.

Their relationship to Scripture is usually reverent and communal. They tend to trust the Bible as the Word of God and receive it through preaching, Bible study, and the interpretive habits of their community. They may love Scripture deeply, memorize it, and obey it sincerely. But they often have not yet stepped outside their inherited framework to ask, “Why do I interpret this text this way? What assumptions am I bringing? How would another faithful Christian read this differently?” Their faith is inhabited more than analyzed.

Their relationship to others is often marked by loyalty, care, and responsiveness. They can be highly compassionate and sacrificial. They are often dependable friends and strong group members. But because belonging matters so much, they may struggle with boundaries, conflict, or differentiation. They may over-accommodate, fear disappointing others, or shape their convictions around the expectations of leaders or peers. In Christian settings this can look very mature on the surface because it often produces service, niceness, and commitment. Yet underneath there can still be a fragile dependence on external affirmation.

A Stage 3 Christian often does especially well in:

- group-centered discipleship
- clear church cultures
- mentoring relationships
- shared mission
- ritual and worship
- ministry teams with trusted leadership

They often struggle more when:

- their church disappoints them
- trusted leaders disagree
- they move into a different theological environment
- they encounter serious doubt
- they face conflicting loyalties
- they must stand apart from their group to follow conscience

If a beloved pastor fails morally or a church split occurs, a Stage 3 Christian may feel not only grief but disorientation. If faith has been held largely through a trusted relational network, the breakdown of that network can feel like the breakdown of faith itself. Or if they begin asking new questions and discover that their group discourages them, they may suppress the questions to preserve belonging.

Theologically, there are real strengths here. A Stage 3 Christian often embodies biblical themes of devotion, community, submission, and love. They often take church membership seriously, honor spiritual authority, and treasure the people of God. They know that Christianity is not an individualistic project.¹ That is a genuine strength. Scripture does form people in community, not in isolation.

At the same time, there are limitations. A Stage 3 Christian may confuse faithfulness with conformity. They may equate “our way” with “God’s way.” They may rely too heavily on admired leaders. They may lack the internal differentiation needed to test teaching, own convictions personally, or remain steady when communal consensus changes. A broader concern is helpful here: Christian maturity requires personally affirming and assuming responsibility for one’s spiritual and moral life, not merely participating in inherited forms.

A concise profile would be this:

A Stage 3 Christian is a relationally formed believer whose faith is sincere, communal, and loyalty-driven; whose identity is strongly shaped by belonging and the expectations of significant others; and whose relationships are marked by care, attachment, and responsiveness, but who has not yet fully developed an independently owned, self-authored faith.

Stage 3 should not be treated as an insult. Many faithful Christians live largely from this pattern, and churches depend on many of its strengths. The concern is not that Stage 3 faith is false, but that it can remain too dependent on external relationships and inherited systems if it never matures into personally owned conviction.

¹ This point should not be confused with the content of a person's beliefs. A person raised in a highly individualistic culture may express individualism strongly — prizing self-reliance, personal choice, or “finding your own truth” — without this indicating self-authored (Stage 4) faith. What matters developmentally is not whether a belief sounds independent, but whether the person can stand apart from it and examine it as an object, or whether it functions as an unexamined subject they are embedded in. A Stage 3 believer who has been formed by an individualistic culture will often hold individualism itself as a received value — “of course I make up my own mind, that’s what people like us do” — because their surrounding group, whether a family, a subculture, or a national culture, treats individualism as a virtue to be conformed to. The person is still knowing themselves through the mirror of a valued group; the group’s content simply happens to be “be independent.” Genuine self-authorship is not the presence of individualist language but the real capacity to examine even that inherited value and decide, from an internal vantage point, whether and how to hold it.

Stage 4 (Self-Authored)

A Stage 4 Christian is a believer whose faith has become personally owned, internally organized, and self-authored. They are no longer defined mainly by the expectations of their family, church, mentors, or Christian subculture. Instead, they have developed a coherent inner framework from which they evaluate beliefs, make decisions, and take responsibility for their convictions. Stage 4 is marked by stronger independence after the interpersonal embeddedness of Stage 3.

In faith terms, a Stage 4 Christian does not simply inherit Christianity. They have made it their own. They can usually explain what they believe, why they believe it, and how those beliefs shape their life. It is marked by critical reflection on one's identity, beliefs, values, and commitments, especially those previously tacitly accepted from authority and community.

So a Stage 4 Christian often sounds like this:

- “I know what I believe, and I have wrestled with it.”
- “I respect my tradition, but I cannot outsource my conscience to it.”
- “My faith must be coherent, accountable, and personally true.”
- “I want my life to align with conviction, not just belonging.”

Their view of faith is serious, thoughtful, and structured. They usually care deeply about theological clarity, integrity, consistency, and responsibility. They want a faith that can stand up to scrutiny. They often value careful exegesis, doctrinal precision, principled ethics, and a clear theology of vocation. They are less content with “because our church says so” and more likely to ask, “Is this biblical? Is this coherent? Is this faithful?” In many cases, this stage brings a more durable discipleship because belief is no longer carried mainly by external authority or group consensus.

Their identity is more differentiated than at Stage 3. They have a center of self that is not wholly dependent on approval, belonging, or relational harmony. They can maintain convictions even when others disagree. They can set boundaries. They can say no. They can leave an unhealthy church, question a leader, or revise a long-held view without feeling that they are disappearing as a person. They now have a system they can stand in, rather than being simply held by the systems around them.

In church life, this often makes them strong leaders, teachers, pastors, elders, reformers, and builders. A Stage 4 Christian can create order, clarify mission, articulate doctrine, and sustain disciplined commitment. They are often dependable under pressure because they are guided by principle rather than mood or crowd sentiment. They tend to take responsibility seriously.

Their relationship to Scripture is usually marked by intentional study and interpretation. They want to understand the text well and apply it faithfully. They often develop a more explicit hermeneutic and theological method. They may become more aware of genre, context, doctrine, and the difference between biblical teaching and

church custom. This can lead to real maturity. But it can also produce overconfidence in one's interpretive framework.

Their relationships to others are more differentiated, but also sometimes less fluid than at later stages. A Stage 4 Christian can genuinely love others while still relating from a clear internal structure of values and judgments. They are often capable of mature commitment in marriage, ministry, and friendship because they are not simply merging with others. Yet they may also become rigid, overly certain, or subtly controlling if their self-authored system hardens into the final measure of truth.

That is one of the key limitations of Stage 4. The great strength of this stage is ownership; the great temptation is absolutizing one's own system. A Stage 4 Christian may believe they have finally "figured it out." They may still be unable to see the limits of their own framework because they are identified with it. Stage 4 often brings demystification and critical reflection but can also produce an overconfidence in conscious processes and explicit systems.

In practice, a Stage 4 Christian often does well in:

- theological clarity
- principled leadership
- ethical consistency
- setting boundaries
- vocational responsibility
- owning beliefs personally
- resisting unhealthy group pressure

They often struggle more with:

- ambiguity
- paradox
- traditions outside their own
- people who do not fit their categories
- receiving correction that threatens their framework
- integrating mystery with certainty
- holding conviction without overidentification

For example, a Stage 4 pastor may preach excellent doctrinal sermons, lead with integrity, and resist manipulative church culture. But that same pastor may become impatient with people who are not as clear, decisive, or theologically ordered. A Stage 4 elder may confront abuse more courageously than a Stage 3 leader because they are less dependent on communal approval. But they may also struggle to appreciate how their own model of faith is historically and culturally located.

Theologically, Stage 4 has many strengths for Christian maturity. It supports responsible discipleship, conscience, discernment, and integrity. It resists mere conformity. It helps a believer obey God rather than simply mirror the crowd. In that

sense, it can resonate with biblical themes of maturity, testing all things, speaking truthfully, and becoming steadfast.

Still, Christian theology also places pressure on Stage 4. The gospel does not simply call us to become self-authored individuals; it calls us into communion, surrender, and conformity to Christ. A Stage 4 Christian may be strong in conviction but still weak in receptivity. They may know how to take a stand, but not yet how to be transformed by perspectives that expose the limits of their own system. That is part of why Stage 5 becomes important. Stage 5 does not discard conviction; it relativizes one's ownership of it before the larger mystery of God and the complexity of reality.

A concise profile would be this:

A Stage 4 Christian is a self-authored believer whose faith is personally examined, internally coherent, and responsibly owned; whose identity is grounded in convictions rather than mere belonging; and whose relationships are principled and differentiated, though sometimes limited by rigidity or overattachment to their own framework.

Stage 4 is not the same as spiritual superiority. A person can be highly self-authored and still be proud, harsh, or spiritually dry. At the same time, many of the church's healthiest reforms, courageous acts of conscience, and mature ministries depend on Stage 4 capacities. It is a major developmental gain, even if it is not the final word.

Stage 5 (Self-Transforming)

In terms of faith, a Stage 5 Christian usually sees Christianity as true and binding, but not as a possession to defend anxiously. Faith is no longer held as “my system over against yours,” nor merely as loyalty to one denomination, theological camp, or church culture. Instead, faith is lived as deep participation in God’s reality. This person can affirm doctrine while also recognizing that every doctrinal formulation is, in some sense, limited before the mystery of God. They are more at home with paradox: grace and obedience, transcendence and immanence, certainty and unknowing, conviction and humility. Faith becomes receptive to the “deeper self,” a greater awareness of one’s social unconscious, an openness to paradox, and an openness to the “otherness” of people whose views may threaten one’s own.

A Stage 5 Christian often views faith this way: “Christ is the center, but I do not confuse my present understanding of Christ with the fullness of Christ.” They can confess historic Christian faith without collapsing into rigidity. They can learn from Catholics, Pentecostals, Orthodox believers, Anabaptists, contemplatives, and even non-Christians, without feeling that learning equals compromise. They do not need difference to be threat. They often read Scripture with reverence and depth, seeing multiple layers—personal, communal, historical, symbolic, sacramental—rather than demanding only one flat level of meaning.

Their identity is also different from Stage 4. A Stage 4 Christian often has an owned, coherent, self-authored faith: “I know what I believe and why.” A Stage 5 Christian still has that, but now sees that even a well-constructed identity can become an idol. They no longer treat the self as a finished project. They experience identity as grounded more in God than in role, ideology, competence, or even consistency. They are less fused with labels like pastor, Reformed, progressive, conservative, evangelical, charismatic, scholar, activist, or mystic. They may still use such labels, but lightly. Their deeper sense of self is more surrendered, more porous, and less defensive.

In Christian language, this can look like a more mature form of dying to self—not self-erasure, but freedom from the need to secure the self through being right, admired, needed, or central. They can acknowledge mixed motives. They can admit, “Part of my theology is faithfulness, and part of it is biography.” They become aware of how family systems, culture, wounds, temperament, and church experience have shaped what once felt like “pure conviction.” That awareness often makes them gentler and more truthful.

Their relationships to others are marked by mutuality. They do not simply help, lead, correct, or influence others from a stable superior position. They are open to being changed by others. They can remain deeply committed while also being deeply teachable. This is a move beyond self-enclosed systems toward interdependence and mutual transformation.

Practically, a Stage 5 Christian tends to relate to others in these ways:

- They can love people without needing sameness.
- They can engage disagreement without contempt.
- They can recognize both the gifts and limits of their own tradition.
- They can hold boundaries without dehumanizing.
- They can repent without collapse.
- They can lead without overidentifying with leadership.
- They can suffer misunderstanding without frantic self-justification.

In church life, this often means they are unusually good at bridging polarized groups. They can understand why a certainty-driven believer values doctrinal clarity and why a wounded deconstructing believer resists simplistic answers. They do not flatten either person. They can pastor conservatives without scorn and progressives without fear. They can hear pain underneath dogmatism and hunger underneath doubt.

A Stage 5 Christian also tends to view the church itself differently. They love the church, but not romantically. They see it as both holy and deeply unfinished. They do not need the church to be pure in order to remain faithful, yet they also do not excuse abuse, hypocrisy, or domination. Because they are less dependent on institutional approval for identity, they can tell the truth more courageously. At the same time, because they are less ego-defended, they usually critique with grief rather than superiority.

Theologically, this profile resonates with several biblical themes. It fits Paul's vision of maturity as "speaking the truth in love" and "growing up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15). It fits the kenotic pattern of Philippians 2, where maturity is not self-assertion but self-giving participation in the mind of Christ. It also fits 1 Corinthians 13, where partial knowing does not produce cynicism but humility and love. A Stage 5 Christian often embodies a more cruciform identity: strong enough to be vulnerable, convicted enough to listen, rooted enough to remain open.

That said, a caution matters. No stage theory should be used to rank Christians spiritually, as if Stage 5 means "holier" in a simple sense. Developmental maturity and Christlikeness overlap, but they are not identical. A person can show advanced complexity and still be proud, unhealed, or morally compromised. Conversely, a simpler believer may display profound holiness, trust, and love. Christian formation must therefore judge every developmental profile under the larger realities of grace, sin, sanctification, and union with Christ. Development theories are tools to be integrated with Christian anthropology and sanctification, not substitutes for them.

A concise profile might sound like this:

A Stage 5 Christian is a person whose faith is deeply rooted in Christ yet no longer held defensively; whose identity is anchored more in God than in roles, systems, or labels; and whose relationships are marked by mutuality, humility, truthfulness, and

openness to transformation. They can live with paradox, honor mystery, love across difference, and remain faithful without needing closure or control.