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Story-Based Spiritual Formation for College Students

Anna Sikes

Ouachita Baptist University

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled
“Story-Based Spiritual Formation for College Students”

Written by

Anna Sikes

**and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for completion of the
Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.**

(Dr. Duvall) thesis director

(Dr. Pemberton) second reader

(Dr. Fayard) third reader

honors program director

The typical way that spiritual formation of college students is approached tends to be therapeutic instead of centered around God's big story. I believe the current approaches to spiritual growth do not adequately meet the needs of today's emerging adults because they are self-centered and simplistic. College is a time when those who want to grow can if they are placed in an intentional, story-based process that allows them to realize their part in God's grand story. This becomes a way for those who are on a search for deep, authentic faith to find out how to grow. As a college senior, I want to add my voice to those who argue that more can be done in the lives of college students concerning their spiritual growth.

Problem: Self-Centered Spiritual Formation

The term "emerging adults" has become the new definition of "young adults" ranging from ages 19-35 years old. Many scholars use this term in order to describe those who have the desire to "grow up" but find the culture makes that challenging. Today, becoming an adult has become a slower process due to the job market, extended education, continued financial reliance on parents, and the age of marriage becoming older. Researchers Richard R. Dunn and Jana L. Sundune discuss some common questions that emerging adults ask such as, "What is my purpose? Why am I here? What does it mean to be a member of society? How can I make a purposeful contribution in the midst of the demands of life?" (Dunn, 27). Answers to these questions determine the framework for a young adult's life. Initially, as a college age Christian, this period of transition and questioning in a student's life can be a fruitful time of becoming more like Christ; without intentional story-based approaches, students are often left with shallow spiritual formation.

According to research by Setran in the book *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, typically the core beliefs of college students include, “believing in God, believing we should be nice to others, and believing we should be happy” (Setran, 23). College students may not feel a drive to develop their knowledge of the Bible more because they feel as if they know the basics of the Christian faith so they focus more on “felt” needs. This creates what Setran coins as a “therapeutic” approach to spiritual growth which leads to “a path in which happiness becomes far more important than an unwavering and sacrificial submission to God and his kingdom” (Setran, 23-24). A therapeutic approach places the emphasis on self instead of God. Students find themselves drawn to pop-psychology or self-help instead of seeking an understanding of biblical truth. Gary Newton in his book *Heart-deep Teaching: Engaging Students for Transformed Lives* addresses six problems the church teaches young adults which fall into a therapeutic category because they cater to their felt needs instead of giving them a big picture story of the Christian faith. The false assumptions include:

- All fun activity equals good learning.
- All interaction equals good learning.
- Keeping students busy is more important than accurately teaching biblical facts and principles.
- Simple points are more important than biblical depth.
- Since most people learn through experience, experiences must be the basis of truth.
- Accomplishing measurable behavioral objectives is more important than changing student’s character (Newton, 8).

These assumptions placed on college students teach an urgent, self-centered focus that ends up leaving students confused and discouraged about their faith. Whenever students are given over-simplified messages and popular books directly relating to their current needs, it can create a self-centered faith and end up not satisfying the deep needs of a student's heart. Although Christian events can be helpful, whenever they are the starting point for a college student's spiritual formation, then students are often not adequately equipped for the Christian life. Students receive an improper perspective through the latest fads among Christian faith, college students face difficulty whenever they have grown up in youth groups that have not taught them how to study God's word on their own. Students are spoon-fed trendy subject matter that aligns with biblical truth but also tends to felt needs. This practice ends up damaging a student instead of developing their spiritual formation. According to Newton:

As they enter college or the adult world, they are ill equipped to wrestle with the temptations, worldviews, lifestyle questions, and dilemmas they will surely confront. . . In light of the growing biblical illiteracy in our culture, the tendency to dumb down the biblical content must be avoided at all costs (Newton, 163).

Students are spiritually stunted whenever they are given a therapeutic approach to spiritual growth because they start believing that their faith is all about them. Whenever hardships occur, they think that God is being unfair or that they need to do more for him instead of understanding a bigger story. Michael Horton in his book *Ordinary* shows the problem with Christians who look for the next big thing in their faith. He writes about the danger of this mentality:

We're called to enter the kingdom like children (Matt. 18:3, Lk. 18:16), but not to remain locked in the perpetual restlessness of childhood and adolescence.

Eventually we learn to make commitments, develop roots, and invest our lives in long-term relationships instead of constantly searching for the newest, greatest, and latest . . . Driven to and fro with every wind of doctrine and often no doctrine at all, those reared in evangelicalism become accustomed to hype and cataclysmic events of intense spiritual experience that nevertheless wears off. When they do wear off, there is often little to keep them from trying a different form of spiritual therapy or dropping out of the religion rat race altogether. (Horton, 48, 79).

Instead of being people who cannot get past selfish, immediate problems, The Apostle Paul urges the Ephesians to grow up into maturity because it is God's best plan for his children. He states:

Building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we will no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, craftiness in deceitful schemes (Eph. 4:12-14).

For the college student, seeking spiritual growth also involves seeking maturity in order to ultimately build up the church like Paul commands. This seeking of something bigger than self brings about unity within the body of Christ, not only in thinking but also in action.

Often, therapeutic approaches over-emphasize particular parts of the Bible in an attempt to be relevant to the audience but end up limiting a student's faith. For example,

it has become popular to make ministries “gospel-centered” which does not give an appropriate context for the entire biblical narrative. If every topic that believers study is directly related back to the gospel, it makes the Bible too narrow. By reducing the Bible to one topic, it robs people of the purpose of the complete story.

Solution: Story-Based Spiritual formation

I suggest that when a student desires to grow spiritually, they need a story-based approach to learning. Learning God’s story from beginning to end gives the proper framework for students’ spiritual growth because the starting point of growth no longer begins with themselves. The most important aspect of spiritual growth comes directly from God’s Word, but often Christians approach the Bible backwards. Students want to use it as a means to understand ethical habits instead of allowing God’s complete story to shape their whole identity. Instead trying to fit God’s story into our lives, we need to see, instead, our role in the plan.

In the beginning, God created people to dwell with him, not because he needed them but because of his desire to have a people who could be with him and know him personally. God’s plan was disrupted by human’s disobedience. Humans thought they had a better plan for their lives. God could no longer dwell with his people because of their disobedience, so they were kicked out of his presence. Nevertheless, God quickly set his plan of redemption in motion to restore the relationship with him. He started with a covenant with Abraham and created the people of Israel who would be his chosen people. The Israelites were given the Law that allowed them to remain in his presence as long as they were obedient. The Israelites did not keep the commandments of the law and the temple was destroyed. But God did not give up on his people; he sent Christ, his Son,

to come to the world in order that he might provide a new way for people to be in relationship with God. This relationship with humanity was available through his payment for sin on the cross. The Spirit came after Christ ascended from the earth in order to provide his presence for his people. The Spirit dwells with believers both individually and corporately. Only one stage remains in the future: he will return and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. His people will be established to live with him. Revelation 21:3 states, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." God's story is not complete without bringing people back into relationship with him.

Students need to realize how they fit into this big story. Spiritual formation is not just a piece of life's puzzle; but it is a process that directs one's entire life. Students are unable to compartmentalize their spiritual growth whenever the whole story is the framework for how they think and act. What is needed is a spiritual formation model that teaches students how they are part of the story and how they fit into God's kingdom work. This approach allows students to realize God's desire to be in relationship with him. With a story-based approach to spiritual formation, a student does not frantically search for trendy spiritual growth fixes, but instead seeks contexts that provide in-depth biblical teaching and equipping for the Christian life.

Discipleship

It is not enough to simply know the story, but students must learn how they are to live as part of the kingdom story of God in order to become equipped as a believer. As students realize they are part of a big story, they need to walk through their time in

college in close relationship with a mentor to see in more mature believers how the story can be lived. In order to make disciples of other believers, a student must become a disciple of Christ. Discipleship is modeled and “caught” so a student must have someone walking them through their faith to point them towards Christ. This modeling takes the form of discipleship through intentional life on life living where the students see their mentors living out their personal faith. Through mentorship, students are able to sort out lofty questions about life and are held accountable for their lifestyle. Setran states the importance of mentorship in a college student’s life, “Twentysomethings need leaders who can teach and exemplify a vision of human flourishing that beckons them forth into a life of meaning and purpose” (Setran, 232). This mentor needs to be more than a good, hard-working person, but one who can intentionally point college students to God’s grand story and guide them in their spiritual growth. Countless resources are available to mentors to use as tools to help their students synthesize their faith experience instead of offering piecemeal information. One discipleship model that has proved effective in my time in college is *Master Life* by Avery Willis. This tool equips students to grow and serve others by instilling the basic disciplines and habits in their lives.

Habits

As students develop an understanding of the story and have others guide them in their spiritual growth, they need to practice personal spiritual habits to develop a deeper walk with God. These habits are consistent with God-centered appropriate worship and align with the complete story of Scripture. G. K. Chesterton in his book *Orthodoxy* describes how God delights in our practices that express our love and desire to know him better. These ordinary habits of faith reflect the character of God:

Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, 'Do it again'; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we (Chesterton, 61).

Some examples of habits that help students conform to the image of God and fit into God's big story include:

- Solitude – This habit facilitates an abiding relationship with God. In order to hear the God's voice, students must find times to be alone in order to spend time with him.
- Worship – The habit of worship expresses God-given purpose giving students an opportunity to praise God.
- Simplicity – This habit helps students understand the importance of living as a member of God's kingdom student, instead of the clutter of life that can distract from a true identity in the Lord.
- Rest – This habit acknowledges human limitation in order to experience refreshing for both the soul and body.

- Reflection- This habit allows students to purposefully take time to process how God has previously worked in their past in order that they may remain faithful to him in the future.
- Submission – This habit seeks to fight against the desires of flesh in order for students to yield their lives to God and his plan for them.
- Service – This habit allows students to be part of God’s restorative work, taking the focus off of self in order to develop Christ-like compassion towards others.
- Perseverance –This habit gives an eternal perspective to students in the midst of hardship, there is a future hope that Christ has defeated evil and will one day make all things new.
- Celebration –This habit proclaims gratefulness for God’s good gifts and allows a student to be content with their season of life.

Conclusion

By understanding God’s grand story, our part in his story changes everything. Without a proper understanding of the complete story of God’s word, students are left with only bits of the story that end up becoming distorted. Often whenever students do not know the whole story, they are left to tend to their spiritual needs through trendy, self-centered approaches that do not last. Whenever students seek a God-centered, holistic spiritual formation they are able to develop into mature believers who realize a bigger purpose of God’s kingdom. This framework leads to the necessity of mentors who guide students in their spiritual growth and model a God-centered lifestyle. Students who have a proper framework and mentors to walk alongside them will learn the importance of spiritual habits in order to deepen their maturity with their relationship with God.

College students seeking spiritual growth can rest in Jesus' promise from his Sermon on the Mount, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Mt 6:33)." There is hope for students who want grow spiritually throughout their time in college whenever God is the center of their pursuit.

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