

Absent in Body

Is Spiritual Formation Possible in Online Christian Education?

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With opportunities for online learning growing by leaps and bounds, many people are now able to take advantage of Christian higher education without having to leave their ministry, family, or work. While course quality may be on par with traditional on-campus learning, questions exist regarding the ability for significant spiritual formation away from a campus community.

Mary E. Lowe and Stephen D. Lowe of Erskine Theological Seminary, as members of the National Consultation on Spiritual Formation in Theological Distance Education, conducted a three-year study funded by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. The following article reports on the findings of the study and looks at the question, “Is spiritual formation possible in online Christian education?”

Trends in Seminary Distance Education

Most institutions of Christian higher education are experiencing an explosion in enrollment for distance and online education. The Sloan Consortium reports that enrollment in the future will probably increase for those institutions that are the most engaged in online learning. Many seminaries and four-year private and Christian colleges are following in the same footsteps. While the economy continues to take a toll on traditional enrollment, according to *USA Today* (March 17, 2009) more Bible colleges and seminaries are turning to online study as one way to address declining enrollments.

Financial concerns are not the only driving force toward increasing online study at Christian schools. Many of the students at Erskine Theological Seminary are mid-career changers and/or bi-vocational ministers. Most simply cannot afford to move away from their ministry, family, or work. They are determined to find schools offering online study that enable them to remain where they are while they study.

The Association of Theological Schools has over 200 member institutions, more than a third of which report various forms of distance education. This figure is likely

higher since many schools offer a hybrid program combining both online and on-campus courses. According to *Baker's Guide for Christian Distance Education*, there are over 500 online programs including schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries that offer Christian education. ACCESS, the Association for Christian Distance Education has a membership of more than 100 institutions and/or organizations that distribute Christian distance education, either nationally or internationally.

The Problem of Spiritual Formation in Online Theological Education

Despite the increase in online course offerings and degree programs, for many seminaries and other institutions of Christian higher education the question of spiritual formation remains elusive and problematic. While many in theological education applaud the technology that enables online learning, they question whether online learning communities foster the kind of student spiritual formation associated with traditional on-campus experiences.

Everyone who has considered spiritual formation has his/her own definition of the term. Each denominational and theological tradition has its own unique take on what the term involves and implies for the Christian life. The Erskine Seminary National Consultation on Spiritual Formation in Theological Distance Education defined spiritual formation as “whole person transformation into the fullness of Christ.” One of the major problems identified in the deliberations was the plethora of confusing terms used (spiritual development, spiritual growth, faith formation, spiritual formation, Christian life, faith development, Christian development, etc.) and the delimiting nature of most of the terminology.

The National Consultation began using the term “Christian development” or “Christian formation” preferring to point the language in the direction of a whole person perspective. But even this language does not capture the entire biblical concept since it concentrates on student formation and neglects, for the most part, any discussion of a corporate perspective, a concept so dominant in the New Testament. While fully acknowledging that, in practice, the individual cannot be separated out from the corporate context of the Body of Christ, for purposes of theological analysis it was done in order to be more precise and clear.

Any comprehensive treatment of spiritual formation must offer some way to account for both the individual and corporate aspects of development. The National Consultation's idea was to find a point of conceptual agreement between the social sciences and theology, which was based on the model of ecology of human development propounded by Urie Bronfenbrenner and a theological model of ecology of Christian development suggested in the writings of Howard Snyder, in particular his *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church and Kingdom* and *Decoding the Church: Mapping the DNA of the Body of Christ*. These models provided insight into the dynamic processes of Christian formation and helped interpret and explain the many references in the New Testament epistles to the interactive nature of Christian formation.

Brief Insights from the Two Models

Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development model proposes that we cannot explain human development solely from the emergence of innate patterns mapped out in our human DNA. He demonstrates that human development involves the interaction between the person possessing these innate patterns and other developing persons in a social ecology.

The key component in Bronfenbrenner's model is social reciprocity and the interaction between developing persons within a large social ecosystem. The result of this reciprocal interaction is reciprocal development. Human beings who interact with one another across a variety of social contexts influence each other for good or for ill developmentally.

This same reciprocal dynamic is present in Snyder's understanding of the church as a spiritual ecology. He writes, "Ecological thinking reminds us that everything is related to everything else" (*Liberating*, p. 69.). He goes on to elaborate that "God has saved us and made us responsible for each other . . . Believers must be ready to take some agreed responsibility for their own lives and for the lives of their sisters and brothers in the faith" (*Liberating*, p. 87).

The National Consultation looked for a similar emphasis in the New Testament on the critical importance of reciprocity for the faith formation of believers. Gordon Fee (1996) tells us that in the communities Paul founded "everything is done *allēlōn*." What

Fee means is that Paul established ecologies of faith formation (local churches) and set up the very basic principle of reciprocity as the key ingredient to promote mutual edification or what Bronfenbrenner calls “reciprocal development.”

When Christians reciprocally interact with one another they “build up one another” (1Thess 5:11) corporately and individually, leading to whole person transformation into the fullness of Christ and whole church transformation into the Bride of Christ “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph. 5:27). The ecology of the Body of Christ as set out by Paul in 1Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 depicts reciprocity and interactivity among members of the Body. The net result of this reciprocal interaction is reciprocal Christian development.

Application to Christian Distance Education

Social ecologies are not limited to physical face-to-face encounters. Online communities offer another kind of social interaction that can be as influential in promoting human development as physical communities.

We were recently in Haiti when the earthquake struck that caused such massive loss of life and demolished the fragile Haitian infrastructure. Our only reliable contact to the outside world for 10 days was via the Internet using email, Facebook, and instant messaging. We were able to create an online community of concerned family members, church members, and friends who supported, encouraged, and prayed for us. We felt their anxiety, concern, fear, love, sympathy, and support. We bonded in a unique social connection not possible through any other means. We were able to influence one another reciprocally for good and to the glory of God because of this electronically mediated connection.

When studying the reciprocal relationship between the Apostle Paul and the churches he founded, there is a similar dynamic at work. While Paul ministered to churches in person, a great deal of his ministry was carried out while physically separated from his congregations. He reduced this physical distance through a mediated form of communication: the epistle.

Through his epistles, Paul was able to carry out ministry and to influence the spiritual development of individuals in his churches. He was able to pray for his churches

and admonish and encourage them to “excel still more” in their walk of faith (1Thess 4:1). He was even able to say that through the written form of his epistles they would be able to “comfort one another with these words” (1Thess 4:18). The reason for this spiritual impact with mediated communication was the empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit working through the written words in Paul’s epistles. Although Paul longed to see the church in person (1Thess 3:10) and desired that God would direct his way to see them (3:11) until that happened he could still have an effective ministry among them at a distance through his written epistles.

Mark Nichols, E-Learning Specialist at Laidlaw College, New Zealand and a student in the Ph.D. program at the University of Otago, remarks “The Apostle Paul is admired as the first great distance educator; the power of that example is that Paul remains a distance educator to this day.”

A similar dynamic is at work in online Christian education. An ecological perspective allows us to appreciate the fact that humans can influence one another across space and time in much the same way as they can when physically present. In much the same way that the Apostle Paul mediated his spiritual influence through written epistles delivered over the Roman Road system of the 1st century, we exert similar spiritual influence bi-directionally through online learning communities in the 21st century. Just like the Apostle Paul, although we may be “absent in body” we can be “present in spirit” (1Cor 5:4). Through this mediated online presence Christians reciprocally interact and influence one another toward greater maturity.

Examples of Reciprocal Interaction in Christian Distance Education

Dr. Damon Osborne, Associate Professor of Education at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, notes that one of the critical components in the facilitation of spiritual formation in online courses is required participation by both faculty and students. This intentionality increases collaboration and participation for all involved. The various tools he investigated include content-oriented discussion boards, optional prayer threaded discussions, optional chat rooms, instant messaging, and podcasted chapel services. He found that a community of faith developed in spite of what he calls “intentional, yet optional, faith tools.” He added, “This is not to say that the prayer

threads or synchronous tools such as chat are not effective in establishing a community of faith among some students and faculty, however, students have indicated that the discussions that take place in the content-oriented discussion boards provide the connections upon which a community of faith is truly established.”

Dr. Mark Maddix, Professor of Christian Education and Dean of the School of Theology and Christian Ministries at Northwest Nazarene University, identifies practices he finds helpful in ensuring spiritual formation in online courses. Professors select students in each online course for placement in ministry cohorts of 15-20 students. He reports, “The cohort format provides a context that fosters a strong learning community. Students build significant relationships and share life together in these learning communities.”

The school also pairs online students with a spiritual director or mentor that assists in the development of spiritual and personal accountability. Students are also required to keep a reflective journal of spiritual development as they chronicle their journey. Maddix observed, “I have been teaching online courses for over ten years and I am always delightfully surprised by the high quality of community that takes place in online classes.”

Maddix believes that the big question facing online education is whether spiritual formation can truly take place online. The research on social presence and learning communities indicates that it can. A student’s ability to conceptualize learning in their own setting may be more transformative than traditional forms of education. Maddix concludes “students have more interaction with a professor in an online course than in most traditional face-to-face courses. Through this social interaction with faculty and students community is developed and formation takes place.”

In the online graduate programs at Northwest Nazarene University, students indicate that the strength of the program is the online learning community. Students develop significant relationships that support them in ministry and in life. Maddix reports “Most of them would argue that they experience more authentic community in their online classes than in traditional courses.”

Results of Research on Spiritual Formation in Online Seminary Courses

The assumption that seminary students can grow spiritually in an online seminary course was consistent with the research findings by Dr. Mary Lowe, Director of Online Instruction at Erskine Theological Seminary. A study among Erskine Seminary online students reported enhanced spiritual development because of new information learned in the course and from interaction with peers in online courses. Additionally, online students reported a positive relationship between spiritual development and interaction between faculty members and fellow students.

Students in the online Erskine Seminary courses reported a positive influence on their personal relationship with God. The way in which students teased out this vertical relationship was evident through the terms they used, such as *knowledge*, *growth*, *spiritual practices*, and *progression*. There was increased knowledge and information about God, an awareness of stages of spiritual growth, and a deeper connection in terms of one's relationship to God forged through understanding and application. One student reported, "I was challenged to think more deeply about the issue of spiritual formation as a result of being confronted with the delivery system [online] and interaction with peers and faculty."

The issue of one's relationship to God from a comparative view can be seen from terms such as *deeper*, *stronger*, *broader*, and *more in love with God*, which students used to describe the way in which their relationship with God was different as a result of their online courses. Another participant noted, "My relationship to God was deepened to a much stronger degree which includes more introspection and my own spiritual growth was greatly impacted." Students repeatedly remarked that they learned more about God, themselves, and others in the online seminary course they completed.

The importance of peer relationships in an online community cannot be underestimated. With respect to spiritual formation, the role of the community has tremendous influence—it's how students nurture one another toward greater faith maturity.

Another issue addressed in this study is the notion that faculty must be engaged in a face-to-face dialogue to produce formational opportunities. Results showed that faculty members' geographical proximity to students is not as relevant as whether they

intentionally encourage spiritual formation in course development, the quality of their interactions with students, and their own alignment with faith and learning. Because of intentional faculty interaction, participants claim to have grown closer to God, developed deeper relationships to other students, and expanded their horizons with respect to worship, spiritual disciplines, and course content.

A number of components within the online learning community, such as family, faculty, and fellow learners, also relate to the issue of spiritual formation. Online students in the Erskine Seminary study had connections to a family, interacted with faculty in the online courses, and interfaced with other students enrolled in their course or other online courses. Interaction with peers enhanced the spiritual component of the course through increased awareness of online community, greater diversity of theological views, the development of new relationships with fellow believers, and supportive encouragement during difficult times. A significant number of online students responded positively to the way in which peer interaction nurtured spiritual formation. Several addressed the issue of encouragement, using terms such as *uplifting*, *prayer*, *support*, and *reinforcement*.

This study suggests that the previously held notion of geographical location as a *primary* influence on spirituality may not be as significant as once thought. If validity is given to the perceptions and perspectives of online course participants, then intentionality, regardless of the medium, becomes a critical component to spiritual growth and development.

These findings suggest that theological distance education is providing ways in which students can, at the very least, encounter opportunities for spiritual formation. The research also suggests a cultural shift is taking place in seminaries, demonstrating the influence of the electronic age. The electronic revolution is influencing the spiritual formation of seminary students, especially among younger cohorts. It seems crucial that seminaries and educators address the way in which theological education is delivered beyond the traditional campus classroom and what intentional opportunities they provide to help students grow in their Christian development.

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