

Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary

**Can A Christian College Student Please God?**  
**Spiritual Growth and Its Relationship to Small Group**  
**Involvement, Accountability and Academic Progress**

A Thesis Project Submitted to the Faculty of  
Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

By

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Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary

**Thesis Project Approval Sheet**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **CAN A CHRISTIAN COLLEGE STUDENT PLEASE GOD? SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO SMALL GROUP INVOLVEMENT, ACCOUNTABILITY AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS**

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Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015

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In order to please God, a Christian college student should be committed to spiritual growth, accountability, as well as doing one's best academically. This project will examine the association between these three areas. Academic success will be measured among College Learning Strategies students using their pre-class and post-class grade point averages. A pre- and post-class survey will be administered to students in order to measure spiritual growth. Spiritual growth will be compared to a student's involvement in some type of accountability. The finding of a correlation between spiritual growth and accountability and/or spiritual growth and academic achievement would lead to an increased emphasis on spiritual growth in academic classes. Such findings would also suggest the need for increased emphasis on providing small group or other mentoring opportunities for students. Leading students to small group involvement may lead to greater academic success but also to an increased retention rate.

Abstract length: 148 words.

## **DEDICATION**

I owe so much to my wife, Sara, and to my children who have encouraged me and endured the many hours of research and endless typing throughout the writing of this project. Without their willingness to sacrifice time with me, this project would not be a reality.

I also want to thank Dr. David Barton, Director of Institutional Analytics, from the office of Institutional Effectiveness Dept. at Liberty University. He provided incredible assistance by aiding in the organization and interpretation of the statistical data for this project.

Without the encouragement of Mrs. Barb Sherman, I would never have taken a serious look at teaching at Liberty University or at the prospect of completing my terminal degree. Thank you for seeing the possibility in me. I am also thankful to my colleagues in the Bruckner Learning Center who have been my cheering section.

Most important, however, is the praise due to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Who has been “my strength and song” (Exo 15:2).

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## ABBREVIATIONS

C. L. S. T.	<i>College Learning Strategies</i>
G. P. A.	<i>Grade Point Average</i>
P. L.	<i>Prayer Leader</i>
R. A.	<i>Residential Advisor</i>
R. D.	<i>Residential Director</i>
S. G. A.	<i>Spiritual Growth Assessment</i>
S. L. C.	<i>Spiritual Life Coach</i>

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

College students begin their college careers with varying degrees of readiness. Some have taken college preparatory classes in high school; others have been exposed to college level work through dual enrollment. But for many, the academic requirements of college level work can be a tremendous challenge. Books have been written and study skills courses have been developed and implemented, with the goal of helping students to be more successful in college.

### **Statement of the Problem and Limitations**

Many research studies have examined whether there is a relationship between a person's academic achievement and their religious involvement or spirituality with varying degrees of success. However, not much attention has been given to the comparison between changes that occur in one's achievement and one's spiritual growth. In other words, does a period of spiritual growth also result in academic progress?

Academic improvement, for the sake of this project, will refer to actual change in grade point average for students enrolled in study skills courses in a large private Christian university. Spiritual growth, through this work, will refer to changes (in the positive direction) between two separate administrations of the Spiritual Growth Assessment.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the comparison of spiritual growth to academic improvement, this project will also examine the role of other factors in the spiritual growth of college students. Scriptural support will be presented for meeting together in a small group setting for prayer, fellowship, encouragement, Bible study, etc. Using the same measure of spiritual growth, Hancock's Spiritual Growth Assessment, statistical measures will be used to examine whether there is an

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas E. Hancock, et al., "Attempting Valid Assessment of Spiritual Growth: A Survey of Christ-centered Living," *Christian Education Journal* 2, no. 2 (2005):129.

association between a measure of students' spiritual growth and the level of their involvement in a Christian small group.

The majority of dorm students in a large evangelical university are involved in small groups referred to as prayer groups. These students meet weekly during the semester to discuss a Bible lesson, share prayers needs, and pray for each other. Many of the commuter students in the same university are not automatically assigned to a regular small group and, therefore, miss out on the advantages of this type ministry. Results of the statistical measures from this study could alert university leaders to the need for more commuter students to be involved in Christian small groups. The mission of the present commuter group ministry in the same Christian university will be shared.

The researcher will also examine the role of mentoring/accountability in a student's spiritual growth. The idea of accountability will, once again, be presented from a biblical point of view. Examples will be given from scripture concerning the effectiveness of one-on-one mentoring.

Small group participation and involvement in a mentoring relationship are examined together within this project because they are closely linked together. The very nature of small group meetings tends to provide opportunities for someone who is mature in his faith to provide mentoring and accountability for others who are a part of the same small group. It will be part of the objective for this project to examine the role that both small group participation and individual mentoring have in the spiritual growth of college students.

### Theoretical Basis

In the early days of the study of psychology, near the end of the nineteenth century, G. Stanley Hall was interested in the child and adolescent psychology along with the study of

religion: “Hall argued that this new academic or experimental psychology could operate as a kind of ‘microscope of the soul’ illuminating the inner essence of the human person and helping science to understand the very soul of the individual.”<sup>2</sup> Hall considered that the brain represents the “mouthpiece of God,” therefore, investigations of the brain and nervous system lead to a greater understanding about the work of God.

Kevin Seybold reports that in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new interest in the study of religion and spirituality rose to the surface again in the field of psychology. In order for psychologists to be able to measure how religion affects behavior, there arose a need for proper measures of religion and spirituality. “These measures, totaling over a hundred, reflect the many aspects of spirituality/religiosity, and attempt to assess the cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, behavioral, and even the physiological aspects of the constructs.”<sup>3</sup> These measures of spirituality and/or religion have often taken the form of self-report measures. More than one hundred of such measures have been developed and are reported to “assess the cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, behavioral, and even the physiological aspects of the constructs.”<sup>4</sup>

This writer suggests the need for distinguishing between religion and spirituality. Seybold sees spirituality as a more personal construct: “Spirituality is conceptualized as a personal quest for meaning and greater understanding about life and relationships to the transcendent, which may or may not result in religious practices.”<sup>5</sup> Religion, in contrast, tends to

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin S. Seybold; *Explorations in Neuroscience, Psychology, and Religion* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Hancock, et al., “Attempting Valid Assessment of Spiritual Growth,” 127.

be more “community-focused, formal and organized, oriented toward behavior and practice, institutional and doctrinal.”<sup>6</sup>

A few researchers have examined how different measures of spirituality and religious involvement relate to academic achievement. Nicholas Bowman and Jenny Small voiced their concern that although religion is an important aspect of the lives of college students, not much research had been done about the relationship of religious affiliation to a student’s sense of well-being.<sup>7</sup> The longitudinal study that they conducted was aimed at students who were part of a religious minority enrolled in an institution. The study did conclude that religious affiliation appeared to be related to an increased sense of well-being.<sup>8</sup> Another interesting finding that relates directly to this study is that “engaging in religious activities and attending an institution with an inclusive religious climate are associated with greater gains in well-being.”<sup>9</sup>

The researcher who seeks to measure spiritual things with reliability and validity faces a challenge. The best of spiritual assessments are limited by being based on self-analysis. The best that one can hope for is that students will respond honestly and that the results will reflect, at the very least, an estimation of their level of spiritual growth. The research team who created the “Spiritual Growth Assessment” that will be used in this study, worked carefully and analyzed their work scientifically.<sup>10</sup> The results were an instrument with credible validity and reliability.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Hancock, 127.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas A. Bowman and Jenny L. Small. "Exploring a Hidden Form of Minority Status: College Students' Religious Affiliation and Well-Being," *Journal of College Student Development* 53, no. 4 (2012): 491.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Hancock, et. al, “Attempting Valid Assessment of Spiritual Growth,” 131.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 142.

An interest in how effectively a student accomplishes his college work reflects an understanding of Scripture. We are encouraged in Scripture to “do all to the glory of God.”<sup>12</sup> For college students, this includes their use of time, talents, and energy. Encouraging students to offer their best to God should include challenging them to be the best students they can possibly be.

The writers of the New Testament make it clear that spiritual growth occurs most effectively when there are opportunities for mentoring and accountability and where there are opportunities to experience the “one another’s” suggested for Christians.<sup>13</sup> We find several examples in the New Testament. One such example is found in Acts 2:46 where the new believers met in the temple to worship in unity but then shared joyful home meetings where they ate and fellowshiped together. In addition, the Apostle Paul had a mentoring type relationship with at least two less mature believers, Titus and Timothy. He referred to both of them as his “son in the faith.”<sup>14</sup> It is quite evident that both small group ministry and mentoring have clear scriptural foundation.

### Statement of Methodology

In order to obtain a measure of college student spiritual growth during the semester, Spiritual Growth Assessments will be administered near the beginning and end of the same semester. Academic Progress will be measured by comparing the grade point average of each

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor 10:31. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New King James Version Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, *The Pocket Guide to Leading a Small Group: Fifty -two Ways to Help You and Your Small Group Grow* (Houston: TOUCH Publication, 2007), 43-45.

<sup>14</sup> Titus 1:4, 1 Tim 1:2.

student before and after the semester. This research project will examine whether there is a relationship between academic improvement and spiritual growth.

Modifications will be made to Hancock's Spiritual Growth Assessment in order to determine if there is a relationship between a measure of spiritual growth and one's involvement in Christian small groups and/or in a mentoring/accountability relationship with another believer. For this measure, two questions will be added to the Spiritual Growth Assessment. Students will be asked to share whether or not they attend a Christian small group, and if so, how often. The second question will be to what level, if any, they are involved with a Christian mentor on an individual basis. The level of small group ministry participation and Christian mentoring will then be compared with their level of individual spiritual growth.

Following this introductory chapter, four additional chapters will follow that will complete this thesis project. Chapter Two will discuss the application of this study to ministry. This chapter will trace the work of the author, who is both a pastor and a professor of academic success, examining the need for spiritual growth as part of an overall improvement plan for college students. Student testimonials concerning the effect of spiritual growth on their academic progress will be included.

The material in Chapter Three will present the research design for this project. The validity of the measure of spiritual growth will be examined along with statistical measures that will be used in analyzing survey results.

The results chapter, Chapter Four, will present the actual research findings of this project. Statistical results will be presented and described.

Chapter Five will present the benefits of Christian college students being involved in small group ministry. An intervention plan will be included.

The final chapter, Chapter Six, will summarize the results in light of college student success. A statistical relationship between spiritual growth and academic improvement would suggest the need for greater emphasis on spiritual growth as part of the retention plan for a private Christian university.

### Review of Literature

Several different types of literature were accessed in preparation for this project. Academic research will be examined; biblical literature will be examined as well as research related to the effectiveness of small group ministry.

### Academic Research

With the purpose of this study being the desire to search for factors that relate to college student growth, including academic improvement, one would do well to examine the relationship between brain and spiritual, and in this case, Christian development. Kevin S. Seybold examines the research of neuroscientists and psychologist into the role of the brain in religion.<sup>15</sup> His writing addresses the roles of psychology and neuroscience, along with faith, in religious experience. Much of scientific writing in the past has painted a negative picture of spirituality, due in part to the work of Sigmund Freud. Seybold strongly disagrees: “The findings reported in this chapter suggest that religion and spirituality can have a salutary effect on mental as well as physical health.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, it seems plausible that a person’s spirituality might possibly be closely related to their success in other areas of their lives.

Nicholas Bowman and Jenny Small voiced their concern that although religion is an important aspect of the lives of college students, not much research had been done about the

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<sup>15</sup> Seybold, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 135.

relationship of religious affiliation to a student's sense of well-being.<sup>17</sup> The longitudinal study that they conducted was aimed at college students who were part of a religious minority enrolled in an institution for higher learning. The study did conclude that religious affiliation appeared to be related to an increased sense of well-being.<sup>18</sup> Another interesting finding that relates directly to this study is that "engaging in religious activities and attending an institution with an inclusive religious climate are associated with greater gains in well-being."<sup>19</sup> Such findings lead one to an interest in whether greater well-being might be related to greater academic success.

Others have attempted to measure an association between spirituality and academic achievement. G. Reyes found religiosity and spirituality measures to be correlated with academic achievement, though only marginally statistical.<sup>20</sup> For the sake of his study, spirituality was defined as having a transcendental view of the universe. This view of spiritual things is far removed from an interest in growth and maturity in Christ that drives this study. Religiosity, however, involved a more formal expression of one's faith in some established form.<sup>21</sup> Thus, religiosity is somewhat more related to the measure that will be a part of this study.

A statistical relationship between a measure of spirituality and academic success has been reported with a younger population. W. H. Jeynes, in his work among Christian and public school students, found that those with greater Bible literacy, as measure by three Bible

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<sup>17</sup> Bowman and Small, "Exploring a Hidden Form of Minority Status," 491.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>G. Reyes, "Spirituality and Religiosity: Their Relation to Academic Achievement of Undergraduate College Students," (PhD diss., Northern Arizona University, 2006), accessed on June 3, 2014, from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 10.

knowledge tests, also had a higher grade point average.<sup>22</sup> Those with the lowest Bible literacy scores had the lowest grade point averages.<sup>23</sup> Jeynes does not imply that an increase in Bible knowledge would cause an increase in grade point average, however an association was measured and recorded.

David A. Flannery reported such a relationship between spirituality and religiosity with academic performance among college students. He sought to determine if there is a relationship between spirituality and scholarship. “The main thrust of the study was to determine whether the student’s spirituality, or self-reported religiosity, has an effect on his or her academic performance as evidenced by his or her GPA. Part of the study sought to explore and describe whether a person’s spirituality or religiosity influences his or her perception of academic achievement.”<sup>24</sup> The results indicated a statistically significant positive correlation between spirituality and academic performance.<sup>25</sup> Dana Levin reported that a positive relationship was indicated between spirituality and students’ perception of academic achievement; however, it was not statistically significant.<sup>26</sup> In addition, there was a positive correlation recorded between time spent on devotions and a person’s grade point average; however, the significance was lost in

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<sup>22</sup>W. H. Jeynes, “The Relationship between Biblical Literacy, Academic Achievement and School Behavior among Christian- and Public-School Students,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 18, no.1 (2009): 36.

<sup>23</sup>David A. Flannery. "A Correlational Study of the Relationship of Spirituality on College Students' Academic Performance and Demographic Characteristics" (PhD diss., Capella University, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Dana S. Levin, “Let’s Talk about Sex . . . Education: Exploring Youth Perspectives, Implicit Messages, and Unexamined Implications of Sex Education in Schools” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010), 101–102.

regression analysis.<sup>27</sup> These findings, though not statistically significant, open the way for further research and measurement among college students.

Despite previous findings, Stephen Cubbellotti, and his colleagues were unsuccessful in reporting a significant relationship between spirituality, as measured by the Index of Core Spiritual Experience (INSPIRIT), and grade point average.<sup>28</sup> Findings did indicate that children whose parents are involved with their spiritual lives tend to also maintain involvement in their academic lives.<sup>29</sup> Thus, a portion of the relationship between spirituality and academic improvement may be attributed to parental involvement.

Metin Guven examined the possibility of a relationship between academic motivation and intrinsic religious motivation in high school and university students in Turkey, but was unable to report a significant relationship.<sup>30</sup> He did determine that there was a statistically significant effect of spirituality on a measure of personal success.<sup>31</sup> Additional study might reveal if the measure of person success had a positive effect on overall achievement.

Mickey Trockel, Michael Barnes, and Dennis Egget studied various health-related and social issues and compared those to grade point averages.<sup>32</sup> The study took place in a large private university setting. Many of the health variables and social issues that were compared with

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<sup>27</sup>Levin, 101-102.

<sup>28</sup>Stephen Cubbellotti, Jessica Schubmehl, and William Van Ornum, "The Effect of Spirituality and Campus Ministry on Academic Accomplishment in College Students," *Adolescence* 44, no.174 (2009): 499.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Metin Güven, "Relation of Motivation and Religiosity: An Empirical Research on the Relation of Academic Motivation and Intrinsic Religious Motivation," *Ekev Academic Review* 17, no. 55 (2013): 151-165.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Mickey T. Trockel, Michael D. Barnes, and Dennis L. Egget, "Health-Related Variables and Academic Performance among First-Year College Students: Implications for Sleep and Other Behaviors," *Journal of American College Health* 49, no. 3 (2000): 125.

academic achievement proved to be without statistical support.<sup>33</sup> The researchers reported some statistically significant relationships: “Variables associated with the first-year students’ higher grade point averages were strength training and study of spiritually oriented material.”<sup>34</sup> The significant finding of the study showed an association between academic growth and studying about matters of the spirit.

Michele K. Briggs and others present a case for the inclusion of spirituality in the counseling of adolescents. They advocate spirituality as an often overlooked component of a student’s resilience. They cite the longitudinal study from Elder and Conger. This study of secondary aged students in Iowa found that as “eighth graders’ religious activity increase over time, their confidence, relationships with others, and academic success improved.”<sup>35</sup> In this case, the use of a longitudinal approach led to a measurable association between spiritual things and academic success.

Many of the measures of spirituality apply to any worldview and do not necessarily apply to commitment to a particular religion; therefore, they seem inappropriate for the measure of spiritual growth that is required for this project. Hancock searched for a measure of spirituality that would be in agreement with the mission of the evangelical university where he is a faculty member. “No existing instrument completely fit our needs, so we coordinated in our community to create a survey of Christ-centered living rooted in evangelical beliefs. The assessment of 110 freshmen and 65 seminarians yielded high internal consistency, good test-retest reliability,

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 125.

<sup>35</sup>Michele K. Briggs, et al., “Assessing and Promoting Spiritual Wellness as a Protective Factor in Secondary Schools,” *Counseling and Values* 55, no. 2 (2011): 171.

significant group differences, and concurrent validity.”<sup>36</sup> This assessment seems appropriate for the measure of spiritual growth needed for this particular study.

## **Biblical Basis**

This study deals with spiritual development and its relationship to several different factors including academic development. Academic development involves proper mental development.

### **Involvement of the Mind and Spirit**

There are other references to both in Scripture and evidence of their importance and application in the life of a believer. When referring to the growth and development of Jesus, in fact, the reference was made not only to his physical growth, but also to his mental development and spiritual growth, as well. “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men”.<sup>37</sup> Jesus grew and developed, both inside and out: “During the so-called silent years, Jesus matured in four ways: (1) mentally, i. e., in wisdom; (2) physically, i. e., in stature; (3) spiritually, i. e., in favor with God: and (4) socially, i. e., in favor with man.”<sup>38</sup>

There are other references to mental development and spiritual growth in Scripture. The apostle Peter refers to the need for the development of both in the life of a believer: “...giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For, if these things are yours and abound, *you* will be neither barren nor unfruitful

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<sup>36</sup>Hancock, Thomas E, et al., “Attempting Valid Assessment of Spiritual Growth: A Survey of Christ-centered Living.” *Christian Education Journal* 2, no. 2 (2005): 129.

<sup>37</sup> Luke 2:52.

<sup>38</sup> *The King James Bible Commentary*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 1744.

in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>39</sup> Since faith has been given to them by the Holy Spirit, “what they are called upon to do here is to ‘provide’ certain items of support for faith.”<sup>40</sup> This list of support items is indicative of the need for growing or maturing in one’s relationship with Christ. Spiritual growth is referred to as the increase of faith and godliness in one’s life. Adding knowledge refers to acquiring knowledge, though it refers here primarily to the knowledge of the truth. Michael Green points to the urgency of spiritual growth: “Lack of spiritual growth is a sign of spiritual death.”<sup>41</sup> Without it, he suggests, one is headed for the fate of the wheat whose life was squeezed out by the cares of this life and who bore no fruit.<sup>42</sup>

Douglas Moo deals with the need for renewed thinking in the life of a believer: “As people who now belong to that realm [being in the Spirit], we need to mold our thinking in accordance with our identity. Moo suggests that since believers are no longer “in the flesh” but in the Spirit, they must cultivate a new way of thinking, what he refers to as the “mind set” of the Spirit.”<sup>43</sup>

Some have criticized the Christian faith is not a rational and intellectual pursuit. But such critics would have a hard time convincing the Apostle Paul. Paul advocated not only the use of one’s mind as part of one’s Christian growth and development, but he advocated the use of the mind in a way that honors God: “Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind *and* one

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<sup>39</sup> 2 Pet 1:5-8.

<sup>40</sup> *The King James Bible Commentary*, 1745.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Green, *The Second Epistle of Peter and the Epistle of Jude*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 71.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 176.

mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup> Paul indicates that the use of one’s mind was of interest to God.

While it is certainly true that the term “one mind” refers specifically to unity, Jesus, Himself, made it clear that the way one uses one’s mind can express one’s love to God. “And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. ‘This *is* the first commandment.’”<sup>45</sup> It does seem clear that God is as concerned with the openness of the mind as He is with the commitment of the heart.

Romans 12:2 commands that the believer must not allow the world system to dictate the way he thinks. Instead, believers need to experience a change in mind through a renewing by the Holy Spirit. Moo declares that the word body in this verse refers not just to the physical body, but to the whole person, and includes “our thoughts, our emotions, and our wills.”<sup>46</sup> Paul finishes the verse with describing this process as our “reasonable service.” Moo suggests that J. B. Phillip’s translation of the word “reasonable” as “intelligent” represents the better choice.<sup>47</sup> Paul is writing to a world that considered animal sacrifice to be the way to find favor with God. Moo suggests another way: “Animals might be slaughtered in sacrificial worship, but people - worship God by using their God-given intelligence to honor him.”

Paul declares clearly that when we come to Christ, we are transformed to a new experience of righteousness, but that our minds are not immediately re-made.<sup>48</sup> “Thus, we are called to engage in the lifelong process of changing the way we think, and by changing the way

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<sup>44</sup> Rom 15:5-6.

<sup>45</sup> Mark 12:30.

<sup>46</sup> Moo, 176.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 177-178.

we think, we change the way we live.”<sup>49</sup> Through the gradual transformation, believers are more able to understand and put into practice the will of God.<sup>50</sup>

Douglas Moo refers to Paul’s choice of words for the mind in the Romans passage. The words in the Greek are *to auto phronein* which refer to people “who think the same way.”<sup>51</sup> “The word suggests a mind-set, a way of looking at life and steering our course accordingly.”<sup>52</sup> Moo suggests that it does not mean that believers will all agree on everything. However, what results is a unity of spirit among the body of Christ, of people who are “like minded.”

God, through the writer to the Hebrews, stresses the fact that the mind plays an essential role in a person’s spiritual development: “‘For this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ says the LORD: ‘I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’”<sup>53</sup> Matthew Henry describes the role of the mind in this process of spiritual development: “he will give them understanding to know and to believe his law; he will give them memories to retain them; he will give them hearts to love them and consciences to recognize them; he will give them courage to profess them and power to put them in practice; the whole habit and frame of their souls shall be a table and transcript of the law of God.”<sup>54</sup> The mind is not excluded from one’s spiritual development. Instead, its involvement in the role of receiving, processing, remembering and then acting on the truth as revealed is crucial.

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<sup>49</sup> Moo, 178.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Heb 8:10.

<sup>54</sup> *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, (McLean, VA: Macdonald, n. d.), 231.

Thomas Hewitt sees within the passage the involvement of God in one's whole self: "It is possible that the mind covers the intellect, and the heart (sic.) the will and affections, for the new law of God was to be effective in the whole spiritual life of the Christian."<sup>55</sup> The words that follow remind one of the opportunity to "know God." Hewitt states that this is in stark contrast to the old covenant where only the High Priest could approach a holy God and only once a year. Since the veil was torn on the day of the crucifixion of Jesus, believers have personal access to the presence of God and are encouraged to experience Him and to know Him. Hewitt says that this knowledge is possible because the Holy Spirit is the One Who anoints and instructs the believer concerning the things of God.<sup>56</sup>

Henry describes this writing on the law on the hearts and minds of God's people as the "foundation of the covenant" and he suggests that when this relationship is accomplished, God's people will learn to obey with sincere hearts, to respond promptly to direction and to be ever ready to serve in obedience to the Father.<sup>57</sup>

The fact that the mind of the believer is affected by the working of the Holy Spirit has additional support. According to Matthew Henry, "He is the *Father of spirits*, and fashions the hearts of men alike (Ps. 33:15), opens the understanding, softens the heart, sweetens the affections, and gives the grace of love, and the Spirit as a Spirit of love, to those that ask him."<sup>58</sup> It is evident that the Holy Spirit, then, works on the mind to open it to greater understanding of truth.

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 137-38.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 231.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

### **As Related to Spiritual Gifts**

Paul writes at length about the need for the believer to move through different levels of maturity in their walk with Christ. In fact he makes it clear that the edifying of the body and their maturation are the reasons for the different gifts that are given to the church. He spells out those specific gifts in Eph 4:11-16. Paul teaches God gave certain gifts to believers that believers might be equipped to do ministry, and that the body of Christ would be strengthened and encouraged in the faith. These ministry gifts include some who are equipped to be apostles, “some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.” These equipping gifts will continue until there is unity within the body of Christ, until all come to know Christ, so that all can experience sanctification and come to measure themselves by the life of Christ Himself. Paul’s desire was to see the body of Christ experience real spiritual growth: “that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head, Christ.” Paul closes these verses expressing the desire that the body of Christ experience that unity that Jesus had prayed for in John 17. This would be accomplished through the Holy Spirit and would result in every part of the body doing its part. Spiritual growth would be the natural result and as the body strengthens itself in the love of Christ.

Moo suggests that certain members of the body are given the ministry or the gift of teaching. However, he also points out the fact that each of us teaches the other. He defines teaching, in this instance, as “communicating of Christian truth to the community.”<sup>59</sup>

Paul implies that spiritual growth is a necessity for all believers. He suggests that spiritual growth results in moving spiritual babies into more mature believers who are not easily

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<sup>59</sup> Moo, 179.

fooled by the tricks of the enemy. Spiritual growth results in causing the believer to become aware of whether their lives are pleasing to God.

### **For the Purpose of Glorifying God**

The apostle Paul teaches clearly that the believer is to honor God with both spirit and body: “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”<sup>60</sup> It is imperative that the Christian uses his body in such a way that proves to men that he belongs to God.<sup>61</sup>

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul reveals that even the mundane tasks in life can be an opportunity to bring glory to God. “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”<sup>62</sup> There is no indication that studying, doing research, taking tests and even taking notes are exempt. Paul indicates that the sum of daily activities should bring glory to the Creator. Growing in Christ certainly includes seeking daily to honor God in all things.

In addition, Paul writes to them concerning the grace of giving. But notice that he first commends them for abounding in many other things: “So we urged Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well. But as you abound in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—*see* that you abound in this grace also.”<sup>63</sup> Notice that he refers to their faith and to their knowledge. Once again, both the mind and spirit are addressed. Paul is pleased with their spiritual progress but encourages them to continue to grow.

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<sup>60</sup>1 Cor 6:19-20.

<sup>61</sup> *The King James Bible Commentary*, 1471.

<sup>62</sup>1 Cor 10:31.

<sup>63</sup>2 Cor 8:6-7.

### **Finding One's Place in the Body of Christ**

Spiritual growth certainly will find its completion when a believer identifies where he belongs within the body of Christ and begins to serve there. Paul, in Romans 12:4-8, compares the church of Jesus Christ to a living body with Christ as its head. Paul refers to the differences in ministry or function among members of the body. But he makes it clear that the differences do not take away from the oneness that Christ intends for us to have with one another. He further notes that large numbers of believers all belong to one body and therefore belong to one another.

Paul teaches clearly about the different gifts that are given to the body. Whether the gift is prophecy, service, teaching, or encouraging, one is to use the gift faithfully to minister to others. He further mentions the gift of giving and encourages generosity. Those whose gift is leadership are to govern diligently. Those who have been gifted with mercy are to show mercy with a cheerful spirit.

Moo suggests that if one view himself as a part of the whole and not as an isolated individual, as this passage suggests, then he is so much less likely to think too much of himself and to become conceited.<sup>64</sup> “We will think, rather, how best we can fit in with the other members of the body and carry out effectively whatever function we might have in that body.”<sup>65</sup>

Moo refers specifically to those who have the gift of encouragement. The word for encourager in the Greek is *parakaleo* and could also be translated, “exhorting.”<sup>66</sup> This ministry

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<sup>64</sup>Moo, 179.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

involves more than just making others feeling better but also calling believers to live a life according to the truth.

### **Sharing the Love of Christ**

In Romans 12:10, believers are commanded to show the love of Christ to one another. The two words that are used in this passage are from the Greek root word *phil-*. Noos describes these words as ones that were often used to describe affection within one's family.<sup>67</sup> "The church, Paul implies, is to be a kind of extended family, in which believers have natural affection for one another."<sup>68</sup> This kind of love results in thinking more highly of others than oneself, in showing hospitality to ones who are in need, and in ministering to those who are hurting.

Spiritual growth has strong scriptural support and clearly represents a need for all believers from spiritual infants to those who are mature in the faith. Such growth has been shown to be expressed by developing the mind of Christ, greater expression of spiritual gifts, increased acts of service, increased involvement in sharing of the love of Christ, and a greater desire to honor God in every aspect of life. Recommending these principles of spiritual growth for application in the lives of college students will be the major aim of this project.

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<sup>67</sup> Moo, 180.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

## **Chapter Two: Application to Ministry**

The author's interest in the relationship of spiritual growth to academic progress stems from years of youth ministry along with years of mentoring high school and college students. During past years of ministry, helping lead students to a deeper relationship with God has long been a priority. It has often been the case that students who experience growth and maturity in Christ have often seen greater success in the other areas of their lives. Therefore, assessing whether or not academic progress, small group participation and/or participation in a mentoring/accountability relationship are related is truly a worthwhile venture. If such a measurable association is found, the need may be warranted for greater emphasis on leading students, particularly those who are having academic difficulty in college, toward increased spiritual growth.

It is an accepted fact that spiritual growth is a necessary part of a Christian's life. Since spiritual growth results in a person being more like Christ, then determining how Christians, especially Christian college students, can see greater progress in this area leads to the basis for this study.

At the very core of spiritual growth is an insistence on the centrality of the Word of God. The Psalmist David understood the place of God's Word in separating oneself from sin: "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You."<sup>69</sup> The Psalmist presents this description of the effect of the Word on one's life: "Your word *is* a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."<sup>70</sup> The believer can count on God's Word to provide instruction and direction. It provides a road map for developing a Christ-like life.

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<sup>69</sup> Ps 119:11.

<sup>70</sup> Ps 119:105.

Perry Downs makes reference to a society that has turned its back on truth as an absolute. He urges that Christian education must keep at its center the Word of God if the results are to be the growth and development of believers who are spiritually mature.<sup>71</sup> At the very center must be the inerrancy and inspiration of the Word of God. He writes, “Since the goal of our education is righteousness, we must help students engage in the truth in ways that cause them to grow. Learning involves the whole personality—intellect, emotion, and volition. Learning that promotes spiritual maturity as not only cognitive...learning the Word means living the Word.”<sup>72</sup> Downs suggests that knowledge is not complete until it can be translated into change in action. It seems clear that simply increasing knowledge about God and His Word is not all that is required of the believer. One must add memorization, meditation and application to one’s knowledge about the truth in order for spiritual growth to be the result.

Prayer is also an essential element in personal spiritual growth. Paul issues the command of God for believers to pray: “And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.”<sup>73</sup> Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, Paul instructs one to pray consistently and to pray as directed by the Holy Spirit. Prayer is presented as not just a response to a heavenly mandate, but as having a multitude of benefits for the believer. He also declares the importance of praying for one’s own needs and praying intercessory prayers for the needs of other believers. These benefits are certainly descriptive of growth in the life of the believer”

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<sup>71</sup>Perry G. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 136.

<sup>72</sup>Downs, 137.

<sup>73</sup>Eph 6:17-18.

Oswald Chambers referred specifically to the role of prayer in spiritual growth: “Prayer is not meant to develop us, but to develop the life of God in us after new birth.”<sup>74</sup> Developing this “life of God” is what is often referred to as spiritual growth, and Chambers suggests that it is not an easy task: “There is nothing simpler under heaven than to become a Christian, but after that is not easy; we have to leave the ‘the word of the beginning of Christ,’ and ‘press on unto full growth’”.<sup>75</sup>

College students who have the desire to please God should turn to the directives given by Jesus, Himself. Jesus taught his disciples about having their priorities in order. In Matt 6:33, Jesus instructed them: “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” Jesus wanted first place in the lives of his followers. Obedience to His command came with benefits. This type of submission and surrender will place the believer in a position to be directed by God and to hear the voice of God more clearly.

Putting Christ first, an essential element in spiritual growth, allows God to supply the other needs in one’s life. Believers are called upon to become more Christ-like in faith, in actions and in attitude. That “Christ-likeness” should result in unity among the body and in a life that leads to bringing glory to God. Paul writes: “Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind *and* one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>76</sup> Again, it is made clear that the proper use of one’s mind can bring glory to God. It is not unreasonable

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<sup>74</sup>Oswald Chambers, *The Quotable Oswald Chambers* (Grand Rapids: Oswald Chambers Publications, 2008), 271.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>76</sup>Rom 15:5-6.

to believe that “all things,” which are added to use when priorities are in proper order, would include academic improvement, as well as improvement in other areas.

### Spiritual Growth and Academic Improvement

Scripture provides a precedent for considering the relationship between spiritual growth and academic improvement in the book of Daniel. The king of Persia chose Daniel and his friends, out of the slaves taken captive from Israel, to serve in the king’s palace. The king insisted that these young men be fed from his own table and given every preparation to serve the king well. Because the king’s meat had been sacrificed to idols, eating the meat would break the vow that these young men had made to God. Even in the face of pending death, Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego chose to honor and obey God rather than to submit to the king’s demands.

Daniel made a deal with the king. He convinced the king to allow them to eat only vegetables and water for thirty days. After that period of time passed, the king was to compare Daniel and his friends to the other slaves who had eaten the king’s food. According to Daniel’s record, the king’s servant did just as Daniel had requested. He removed the king’s wine that they were to drink and the food from the king’s table. They were given only vegetables to eat. God provided for these men a supernatural dose of understanding: “As for these four young men, God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. Now at the end of the days, when the king had said that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar.”<sup>77</sup> After the time of testing had passed, the king called these men before him and questioned them himself. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego proved to be the wiser than all the other of the king’s

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<sup>77</sup>Dan 1:17-18.

servants. They became the king's servants: "And in all matters of wisdom *and* understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians *and* astrologers who *were* in all his realm."<sup>78</sup>

Seeking to please God, even when it may have cost them their lives, led Daniel and his friends to resist the king's diet. God honored the commitment of these young men to Him and granted them favor in the king's eyes. Note that there was something unique about the reference to their development. Not only did they prosper physically, but they also increased in wisdom and knowledge, even in the study of literature, that is, they made academic progress. Their commitment to pleasing God led to God's blessing upon them, including an increase in their ability to learn. It seems reasonable to assume, then, that if a person makes a commitment to please God and to grow spiritually, they may also become more committed to being the best student that he can be. It is such an assumption that guides this research project.

### **Spirituality vs. Spiritual Growth**

To more properly interpret the results of past research studies that have compared spirituality to academic progress, there needs to be a clarification of terms. There have been numerous studies that have examined the relationship between academic progress and spirituality. P. G. Love researched how spiritual development is related to cognitive development.<sup>79</sup> Mickey Trockel and others also related these factors to health-related

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<sup>78</sup>Dan 1:20.

<sup>79</sup> P. G. Love, "Comparing Spiritual Development with Cognitive Development," *Journal of College Student Development* (2002), 357-373.

variables.<sup>80</sup> Steven Cubbellotti and others carried on similar research with college students and examined how academic accomplishments related to campus ministry and spirituality.<sup>81</sup>

In most literature related to spiritual things, however, there are vast differences in defining, and therefore measuring, spirituality. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm conducted a research project with 113,000 students across a wide variety of campuses.<sup>82</sup> Students expressed a significant amount of interest in spiritual things. Results of the study were an interesting mix. The researchers report that being rated as highly spiritual students did not prove to make them resistant to the issues of life that stress students psychologically. It is worth noting that those same students, who measure as highly spiritual, were not a likely to show signs of “positive psychological health.”<sup>83</sup>

“On the other hand, highly spiritual students are much more likely than less spiritual students to evidence equanimity, a trait defined by qualities such as ‘being able to find meaning in times of hardship’ and ‘feeling at peace/centered.’”<sup>84</sup> In other words, although spirituality and psychological distress are positively linked, so are spirituality and mechanisms for coping with hardship.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Mickey T. Trockel, Michael D. Barnes, and Dennis L. Egget, “Health-Related Variables and Academic Performance among First-Year College Students: Implications for Sleep and Other Behaviors.” *Journal of American College Health* (2000): 125-31.

<sup>81</sup> Stephen Cubbellotti, Jessica Schubmehl, and William Van Ornum, “The Effect of Spirituality and Campus Ministry on Academic Accomplishment in College Students,” *Adolescence* 44, no.174 (2009): 499-502, accessed June 4, 2014, *Academic OneFile*.

<sup>82</sup> Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, “The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose,” *Higher Education Research Institute*, (2005): 5.

<sup>83</sup> Astin, 4.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

In their research, which included a longitudinal study of college students, these authors used a very broad definition of spirituality. The authors sought to separate themselves from a religiousness that identified a person with a particular set of beliefs. They identified spirituality as “an animating, creative, energizing, and meaning-making force; a source of inner strength, an inner moral orientation; a way of knowing and being in the world, a source of connection that brings faith, hope, peace, and empowerment; and a dynamic expression of ourselves that gives shape to, and is shaped by, who we really are.”<sup>86</sup> This definition seems quite far removed from the meaning of spirituality from an evangelical Christian viewpoint. It is also quite distinct from the spiritual growth that will be examined in this research project.

Astin, Astin and Lindholm suggest that “there is also a deeper reason why academics are not likely to discuss spirituality: many faculty members associate spirituality with religion, and since most of our colleges and universities are secular, they assume that spirituality (religion) has no place in the academic environment.”<sup>87</sup> The writers make it clear that spiritual matters are given priority even on secular campuses. Whenever schools deal with freshmen orientation classes, academic advising, goal setting, as well as dreams, aspiration, and values, they are addressing spiritual matters.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, even secular institutions offer courses that address differing levels of “spirituality.” The kind of guidance offered in such institutions varies greatly and may merely address one’s sense of self and/or sense of belonging to the universe as the extent of their spiritual discovery. Again, viewing spirituality as all-inclusive entity, would not accomplish the purpose of this project. The author will use the term “spiritual growth” for the purpose of study.

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<sup>86</sup> Astin, 4.

<sup>87</sup> Astin, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

## Spiritual Growth Examined

For the purposes of this paper, an attempt will be made to discuss and measure spirituality from an evangelical Christian perspective. In line with the purpose of this study, Arthur W. Pink suggested that there are several verses of Scripture that serve as a biblical framework for spiritual growth: “You therefore, beloved, since you know *this* beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”<sup>89</sup> Such growth in grace certainly describes spiritual growth in the life of a believer. “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ...”<sup>90</sup> Paul writes in 2 Thess 1:3-4, “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure...”

Paul, in Ephesians describes the immature believer and urges spiritual growth among the young church there. In Ephesians 4:15-16, Paul suggests that immature believers often act like young children. He sees evidence that they are easily convinced by teachers of false doctrine, are easily led by those who would sway them from the truth, and often fall prey to those who would plot to deceive them who lead them away “in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting.” Paul’s desire for the believers is that they live a life based on the “truth in love.” Paul describes spiritual growth as growth in all areas of life with Christ as the head of the body. The unity of believers is described as a body made up many parts, with each person having a part in the

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<sup>89</sup>2 Pet 3:17-18.

<sup>90</sup>Phil 1:9-10).

working of the body. The result of everyone working together in unity is seen in Eph 4:16b: “the growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

The scriptural term “growth in grace” is a broad term that refers to an attainment that should be desired by all believers. Arthur Pink observes that few people have a complete understanding of the subject of spiritual growth. The result of this lack of understanding is that many Christians do not live a life that brings glory to God and Christians are often suffering unnecessary distress: “Because so many Christians walk more by sense than by faith, measuring themselves by their feelings and moods rather than by the Word, their peace of mind is greatly destroyed and their joy of heart much decreased...Scriptural knowledge is essential as we are to better understand ourselves and diagnose more accurately our spiritual case.”<sup>91</sup> Pink further suggests that it is extremely important that we have an accurate view of our spiritual growth or regression. This prevents the believer from thinking too highly or from depreciating themselves without cause.<sup>92</sup>

Pink suggests that spiritual growth, like physical growth, is not necessarily easy to perceive. It can more easily be gauged by a comparison to the scriptural directives concerning the requirements of spiritual growth. Spiritual growth involves becoming aware of the areas in one’s life that do not reflect the spirit of Christ. It involves applying the Word of God to those areas and dependence upon the Lord Himself to accomplish the spiritual work that is required.

Dave Earley further expounds on spiritual growth, saying that it is “...measured by walking in the Spirit and growing in maturity. Indicators like love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, and faithfulness reveal to others that the nature of Christ is being

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<sup>91</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1971), 7.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

transferred from the Spirit into our daily living. Other indicators of spiritual growth are evidenced by our willingness to serve others and help them come to know Christ...<sup>93</sup> It seems reasonable that growing in one's faith would result in greater evidence of the character of Christ being seen through him.

### **Ministry in the Learning Center**

For the past ten years, this author, whose training and experience were in pastoral care and youth ministries, has worked with college students as a mentor, pastor, counselor, and professor of study skills in the university's learning center. The majority of students who have come to the learning center for help have been students who struggle academically. Many of them have been placed on academic warning or probation. However, many of them have also expressed spiritual needs, as well. The professors in the center have had many opportunities to minister to spiritual needs, as well as academic struggles. Opportunities have arisen for professors to lead students to Christ, to pray with students, to offer spiritual counseling and, at times, spiritual mentoring.

Part of the curricula for the learning strategies classes includes the encouragement for students to cultivate their spiritual lives, as well as their academic pursuits. One particular course, involving individual curricular units for students to choose, offers students the chance to study prayer, God's will, forgiveness, and other spiritual issues. Other study strategies courses integrate biblical truth in lessons on time management, organization, and goal setting.

Experience as a professor in the learning center has indicated that students who become serious about their relationship with God will become more serious about pleasing Him. That includes being the best student that one can be.

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<sup>93</sup>Dave Earley, and Rod Dempsey, *The Pocket Guide to Leading a Small Group: Fifty-Two Ways to Help You and Your Small Group Grow* (Houston: TOUCH Publications, 2007), 217.

## Assessing Spiritual Growth

An individual's spiritual growth is indeed a personal matter. It involves a person's commitment to Christ, his involvement in the fellowship of believers, and his time spent in personal devotions and prayer. However, those who are called to care for and mentor believers, especially in a college environment, might do well to consider the need for an objective measure of spiritual growth.

Hancock, Bufford and Lau defended the need for some type of spiritual growth assessment: "In this context, we are reminded that "man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (See 1 Sam 16:7b). Two sides of this concern need to be firmly grasped. First, because we do not see as God sees we can always be wrong in our human judgments about the relationship of another with God—and probably even wrong to some degree about our own relationships with God (see Jer 17:9-10; 1 Cor 2:11-14)." <sup>94</sup> Secondly, according to Hancock, we are required to care for others with the "wisdom and discernment" that comes from God. Since the care of the flock falls upon the leadership of the church, and the fact that those in leadership will one day be called into account by God, it becomes increasingly evident that leaders need to provide close, careful watch for those under their care.<sup>95</sup>

Hancock provides evidence that administering some type measure of spiritual growth can have several benefits. First of all, the person taking the assessment may become aware of areas where spiritual growth is needed, areas of which the person has not been aware. Secondly, an objective measure may offer the opportunity for the mentor to become aware of needs in the life

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<sup>94</sup> Hancock, Bufford and Lau, *Attempting a Valid Measure*, 149.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

of the believer and to confront him/her concerning areas of weakness. Finally, results of the assessment may be used as a means to affirm areas of progress in the life of the believer.<sup>96</sup>

### **Role of Small Groups**

In addition to determining whether there is relationship between spiritual growth and academic progress, this study will examine whether there is a significant relationship between spiritual growth, as measured by the spiritual growth assessment, and participation in a small group. It seems probable that students who are participating in some form of Christian small group would exhibit an increased measure of spiritual growth. Such an indication would provide support for the importance of encouraging small group participation of students enrolled in a Christian university, including students who live off-campus. Small group participation can play an important role in the college student's spiritual development.

Small groups may be considered as incubators for this process of spiritual growth to occur. Spiritual growth and maturity happen most effectively when a believer has the opportunity for fellowship and mentoring from mature believers. Small groups foster such an environment and have clear support in New Testament Scripture: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers... So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness... praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."<sup>97</sup> The new believers had the opportunity to experience what true Christianity was through daily fellowship and mentoring.

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<sup>96</sup> Hancock, 149.

<sup>97</sup> Acts 2:42, 46-47.

It is through regular interaction and fellowship that one can see and experience the love that Jesus had in mind for His followers. John records these words of Jesus in John 13:34-35: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Experiencing this kind of love requires more than just a Sunday morning worship experience. Small groups provide the perfect place for people to get to know each other and to share the love of Christ.

Part of the Great Commission can be accomplished in the small group setting, as well. Christ intended for believers to take the message to unbelievers in order to see them become Christians, but that was not the full extent of His plan in Matt 28:18-20: “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.’ Amen.” Jesus intended for believers to reach the lost, then to disciple them, and lead them to reach and disciple others. This process can happen quite effectively in a small group setting. Steve Smith speaks convincingly about the call of the church to “go.”<sup>98</sup> The local church has long been involved with asking people to come to us rather than taking the message out to the people. Smith says that “instead of inviting people to come, I needed to go out and find them, to touch them and to talk to them.”<sup>99</sup> Having a small group meeting provides opportunities for people to be touched, ministered to and be given a chance to receive the gospel in a non-threatening environment. Thus, students involved in small

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<sup>98</sup>Stephen Robert Smith, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* (Monument, CT: WIGTake Resource, 2011), 48.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

groups would have opportunities to make friends with people, which will win for them an open door to share the gospel.

Small groups provide a place for believers to be disciplined. Smith teaches clearly that Christ did not simply call us to believe, but he called us to disciple: “A disciple must learn everything that his teacher teaches him. Then he needs to follow and to teach other people.”<sup>100</sup> Small groups provide the perfect place for believers to learn to be disciples.

In addition, small groups provide a great platform for showing love to one’s neighbor. Jesus made it clear that this was to be a priority for the believer. “Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second *is* like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets”<sup>101</sup> Small groups allow people to become acquainted enough with each other in order to share needs, to pray for one another and effectively minister to one another in times of need. Opportunities are often available to groups to minister to those in need who are outside of the group.

Small groups also tend to offer opportunity for accountability. A weaker believer can often find someone with the group, perhaps the group leader, who can provide regular support and accountability: “As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.”<sup>102</sup> This type of accountability may help the struggling believer to overcome areas of weakness and to live a more victorious and productive Christian life.

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<sup>100</sup> Smith, 48.

<sup>101</sup> Matt 22:37-40.

<sup>102</sup> Prov 27:17.

## Small Group Provides an Environment for Spiritual Growth

Downs is convinced that learning for the sake of spiritual growth is most effective in a small group setting. He adds, “The nature of learning necessary for spiritual growth is highly personal. Just as our Lord spoke with Nicodemus personally, so we must be available to help people think through issues on a personal level. This does not imply that we must tutor people personally; but it does mean that...more personal groups are to be preferred over larger ones.”<sup>103</sup>

Small group involvement can provide an atmosphere in which spiritual growth can readily occur. Christ who created a small group ministry with His disciples serves as an example. “One of the main things Jesus did was invite a handful of men to be gathered together with Him in an intensive ministry-focused small group. Jesus was a small group leader...Following Jesus today means following Him into deep relationships with other believers.”<sup>104</sup> Believers are commanded in Matt 28:19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age...*” Rod Dempsey and Dave Earley insist that small group ministry is essential for leading believers into becoming not just disciples, but disciple-makers.<sup>105</sup> Jesus intended for believers to follow Him in reaching others and leading them into a relationship with Him but had more than that in mind. He wants each believer to grow in his relationship with Him and to become involved in the lives of others in such a way that the disciple-making process can be taught by example. Small group ministry provides a great environment for this process to

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<sup>103</sup>Downs. *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 137.

<sup>104</sup>Earley and Dempsey. *The Pocket Guide to Leading a Small Group*, 13.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 14.

unfold. This type of personal involvement has scriptural support and practical application according to Bill Donahue and Charles Gowler:

Theologically, there is considerable biblical material exhorting Gods [sic] people to practice "one another" ministry (such as love one another, serve one another, and over 20 more in the New Testament alone.) In addition, one readily observes the essential nature of our Triune (communal) God and the formation of both the family and tribal communities in the Older Testament. Additionally, from a practical standpoint, our faith is weakened considerably without the regular support and encouragement of others (Heb 10: 24-25).<sup>106</sup>

### Small Group Ministry and the Great Commandment

One of most important benefits of small group involvement is personal spiritual growth.

R. Wuthnow describes that benefit as one of the main reasons for the rise of the small group movement in America: "People became increasingly aware of their need to take responsibility for their own spiritual growth, and groups offered support for this personal desire. Followers of Jesus desire a walk that is consistent with the truth of their faith, but need help for their journey."<sup>107</sup>

Earley and Dempsey make it clear that in 1 Tim 4:7, "Paul told Timothy, '*Train yourself to be godly,*' No one else could do it for him. As Christians, we understand that we are not the victims of our environment. We have learned that what we are is more the product of our decisions than our conditions."<sup>108</sup> The writers suggest that since each person will one day face God and give an account of his life, each one must take responsibility for his personal growth. "No one else can grow for us, learn for us, or improve for us. We have to grow, learn, and

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<sup>106</sup> Bill Donahue, and Charles Gowler, "Small Groups: The Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever?" *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 1, (2014): 118, Accessed on July 18, 2014, *Academic OneFile*.

<sup>107</sup> R. Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994): 349.

<sup>108</sup> Earley and Dempsey, 13.

develop for ourselves.”<sup>109</sup> This was further illustrated in the research of K. D. Dougherty. He observed “that this increased sense of belonging not only creates an atmosphere of participation, but also fosters an environment for growth.”<sup>110</sup>

Joseph Hack insists that making disciples is a vital part of the purpose of the local church: The church needs “to lead believers to spiritual maturity, and this is accomplished when the members are instructed, edified, and equipped. Spiritual maturity is difficult to achieve through mass means such as large assemblies, classrooms, or publications. It requires person-to-person contact and interaction, and the small group setting is one means by which to accomplish this.” Meeting in a small group setting lends itself to “active participation of its members.”<sup>111</sup> Hack suggests that this kind of involvement provides an avenue for Christian growth and the development of disciples.<sup>112</sup>

Faculty members in an evangelical Christian university who are concerned about seeing spiritual growth among their students would be well-served to be aware of the affect that small group involvement may have on students’ spiritual growth. Therefore, as part of the research for this project, the change in a person’s spiritual growth will be compared to their involvement in a Christian small group. Several questions will be addressed concerning small group involvement: Does a student who is regularly attending a small group exhibit a greater change in their Spiritual

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<sup>109</sup> Earley and Dempsey, 68.

<sup>110</sup> Dougherty, K. D., “Institutional Influences on Growth in Southern Baptist Congregations,” *Review of Religious Research* 46, no. 2 (2004): 127.

<sup>111</sup> Joseph L. Hack, II, “Equipping the Lay Small Group Leader to Teach Narrative Biblical Passages,” (DMin diss., Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, 2012), 37.

<sup>112</sup> Hack, 37.

Growth Assessment over a given period of time during the semester? Is a person who does not get involved in a small group experiencing less spiritual growth? If small group involvement proves to be related to spiritual growth, then how can a faculty member promote and encouragement small group participation among his students?

### Small Group as a Setting for Growth in Sanctification

Paul describes the Christian's growth process as a journey. After having made a commitment to Christ in salvation, a person begins a growth process characterized by the taking on of a new nature. Paul writes in Rom 6:4, "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." This growth process, walking in this new life, begins at salvation but is not completed until life on this earth has ended.

Paul also related the progress in a Christian's walk to hearing and obeying the teachings of Christ. He reminds them that his teaching of the Word should be resulting in life changes for them. His goal is continued growth and progress. In Thessalonians 4:1-2, Paul writes, "Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus." Paul further suggests in 1 Thess 4:1-3a that this growth, what he referred to as sanctification, "is the will of God," and results in living a life that rejects willful sin. Learning how to live the sanctified life is the responsibility of the believer and certainly can be encouraged by hearing and obeying the commands of Christ. Putting the truth into action can result in lives that are more and more pleasing to God. Paul further adds the need for living a life that pleases God as the real goal of sanctification. Paul understood the concept of sanctification as requiring a death to oneself so that one could be made

alive unto God. He makes it clear that growing in Christ through sanctification is part of God's plan for every believer.

Paul describes his own sanctification experience. It required a work in the heart that Christ made possible through His death on the cross: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."<sup>113</sup> The work that Christ accomplished made it possible for a believer, after surrendering completely to Christ, to live and walk the life of faith.

### **Personal Accountability/Mentoring**

To determine if mentoring is associated with spiritual life, Mark Cannister conducted a study of late adolescents in a Christian liberal arts college in New England. Students were randomly chosen for the study group. They were involved with a small group mentoring program as part of their Freshman Seminar. The control group did not go through the mentoring process. Mark Cannister describes the study: "Students in both groups were administered a self-assessment survey in September of their freshman year and again in May to determine if there was any change in their spiritual well-being and to explore their perceptions of mentor/student interactions."<sup>114</sup> The findings revealed significant differences between the two groups. In addition, the three aspects of mentoring were positively correlated with the two components of spiritual well-being."<sup>115</sup> The author suggests that such mentoring appeared to positively affect the

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<sup>113</sup> Gal 2:20.

<sup>114</sup> Mark W. Cannister, "Mentoring and the Spiritual Well-being of Late Adolescents," *Adolescence* 34, no. 136 (1999): 769, accessed July 20, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/195939316?accountid=12085>.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 770.

spiritual well-being of the students involved.<sup>116</sup> However, positive results went beyond spiritual things and resulted in more positive adjustments in other areas, as well.<sup>117</sup>

Small group involvement provides greater opportunities for students to become involved in a relationship with a mature believer who can provide necessary accountability which can be vital to a believer's spiritual growth. Earley suggests that one of the true benefits of small groups is an increased opportunity for mentoring which, he says, is truly following the example of Jesus: "A study of the gospels reveals that mentoring was Jesus' method. The goal of the Christian life is to be like Jesus. In no way is a Christian more like Jesus than when he or she is making disciples and raising up leaders. Before Jesus told his disciples to make disciples, He did it himself. Men were His method...Jesus spent his ministry mentoring future leaders."<sup>118</sup>

Earley and Dempsey suggest that mentoring future leaders involves modeling the ministry of Jesus and allowing the mentee to watch.<sup>119</sup> This first stage allows one to see ministry in action and to learn by watching someone else minister. In addition, mentoring would include giving ministry opportunities for a potential leader to gain hands on experience. The mentee is assigned opportunities for ministry under the direct supervision of the mentor.

Earley describes mentoring as an opportunity to show love to other people: "I have learned to concentrate my efforts to show love on the people I am mentoring. I have found that

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<sup>116</sup>Cannister, 779.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Earley, 67.

<sup>119</sup> Earley and Dempsey, 242.

mentoring apprentices is concentrating your 'love' on a few in order to reach the many. Love is doing what is best for others...Mentoring in its purest sense is empowering others to succeed."<sup>120</sup> The goal is for that person to experience spiritual growth and develop his own personal ministry gifts.

Questions are raised about the association between mentoring and spiritual growth. Are students who are involved in a Christian mentoring relationship on a regular basis more likely to exhibit spiritual growth? Does the measure of spiritual growth increase as increased involvement with a Christian mentor increases? These are questions that require further exploration. Therefore, a question was added to the spiritual growth assessment that was used for that was conducted as part of this project. The question asked about the level of involvement that each student had with some type of individual Christian accountability partner.

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<sup>120</sup> Dave Earley. *The 8 Habits*. 67.

### Chapter Three: Research Design

The material in Chapter Three will present the research design for this thesis project. The validity of the measure of spiritual growth will be examined along with statistical measures that will be used in analyzing survey results. Academic progress will be measured using changes in grade point average over one semester.

#### Search for Reliable Measure of Spiritual Growth

For the research portion of this project, spirituality will be viewed from an evangelical Christian viewpoint. B. W. Speck, in his research, seeks to define spirituality and its relationship to the educational process.<sup>121</sup> Researchers indicate a relationship between spirituality, or religiosity, with a wide range of other variables. Nicholas Bowman and Jenny Small, for example, examine the relationship between religious affiliation and overall well-being.<sup>122</sup> W. H. Jeynes seeks to determine whether there was a significant relationship between urban student attendance at religious revival services and their academic and social outcomes.<sup>123</sup> Studies reveal an association between religious involvement and academic achievement but the results have not always been strong. However, such studies approach spirituality from a much different perspective. The goal of this thesis project is to compare spiritual growth, from a biblical perspective, with academic progress, small group participation, and accountability. The goal of the thesis project will be to make such a comparison, and based on the results, to make

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<sup>121</sup> B. W. Speck, "What is Spirituality?" *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 103, no. 3 (2005):3-13.

<sup>122</sup>Nicholas A. Bowman and Jenny L. Small, "Exploring a Hidden Form of Minority Status: College Students' Religious Affiliation and Well-Being," *Journal of College Student Development* 53, no. 4 (2012): 491-509.

<sup>123</sup> W. H. Jeynes, "The Relationship Between Urban Students Attending Religious Revival Services and Academic and Social Outcomes," *Education & Urban Society* 39, no. 1 (2005): 3-20.

suggestions about an increase in small group involvement and accountability for Christian university students.

Speck addresses the issue of an acceptable definition of spirituality and refers to it as an almost impossible task. “The definitional dilemma merely adds confusion to an already chilling silence concerning the role of higher education in addressing the relationship between learning, teaching, religion, and spirituality.”<sup>124</sup> In addition, he notes that even though spirituality is such an integral part of a college student’s life, the majority of faculty is unprepared to address it in a productive manner.

Miller’s work suggests the need for a change in the integration model of faith and learning. He presents a plausible argument that there should be no great divide between scholarship and faith. He suggests that if scholarship is the pursuit of truth, then such a pursuit should not be seen as opposed to truth.<sup>125</sup>

Patrick G. Love relates the spiritual development of the college student to the student’s level of cognitive development. Students move from a dependence on parental authority to a period of searching. “College will also be a time where initial probing commitments are made and remade, where one’s emerging sense of inner-dependence is tested, and where one may have the opportunity to experience one or more mentoring communities.”<sup>126</sup>

Reeder and Pacino, when faced with the need to integrate faith with learning within the Christian college classroom, suggest the need for properly equipping new faculty for this

<sup>124</sup>B. W. Speck, “What is Spirituality?” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 103, 3 (2005): 6.

<sup>125</sup>Kevin D. Miller, “Reframing the Faith-Learning Relationship: Bonhoeffer and an Incarnational Alternative to the Integration Model,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 43, no. 3 (2014): 131-138.

<sup>126</sup>Patrick G. Love, “Comparing Spiritual Development with Cognitive Development,” *Journal of College Student Development* 43, no. 3 (2002): 357-373.

expectation.<sup>127</sup> Thus, if spiritual growth is found to play a role in academic improvement, then part of this integration would be providing students with challenges and resources toward growing spiritually.

Several scholars sought to develop their own definition of spirituality from an evangelical Christian viewpoint. They rejected the wider definition of spirituality that included forms of spiritualism. When testing the level of spiritual growth within their own Christian university, these researches wanted to approach the subject from a more conservative evangelical viewpoint. According to Thomas E. Hancock and his colleagues, the measure of “spirituality” has concerned itself with the more “subjective and internal or personal side of Christian faith.”<sup>128</sup> The word “religion” has come to refer to established and more public institutions.<sup>129</sup> “Recently spirituality has further generalized on the personal side to mean...the theoretical abstractions by which we find meaning in life...we came to use the term "spirituality" as the personal side of Christian faith, and in particular Christ... being known and formed in the life of the believer (both individually and in relation to other believers).”<sup>130</sup> The researchers concern themselves more with the development of a life that is focused on Christ and on becoming like Him than on outward institutions of religion or on simply seeking for the meaning of life. Thus, their focus seems closely tied to the interest of this thesis project.

Less research has been conducted on the relationship between spirituality and academic progress in an evangelical Christian setting. One would expect that improvement on a systematic

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<sup>127</sup> Gail Reeder and Maria A. Pacino, “Faith Integration in the Classroom,” *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 2, no. 2 (2013): 121-127.

<sup>128</sup> Hancock, et al., 132.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

measure of spiritual growth would correlate to changes in grade point average. Do students who commit themselves to spiritual growth and living lives that are more pleasing to God more likely to use their time wisely and to commit more time to studying? Is there a relationship between spiritual growth and participation in a Christian small group? Does involvement in Christian mentoring/accountability relate to an independent measure of one's spiritual growth. One might expect a positive relationship to become apparent in each of these areas. These are the very research questions that will serve to drive this current project.

### Subjects

Subjects for this project were students who for academic reasons have been placed in residential College Learning Strategies (CLST) classes at a large private evangelical university in the eastern United States. Use of CLST students provided a group of students who are somewhat homogeneous. All of them were currently enrolled as undergraduate students in residential courses in a Christian university. In addition, they were each enrolled in a twelve to fourteen week course that provides academic support and mentoring. Students from CLST 101, CLST 103 and CLST 105 residential courses in College Learning Strategies, during the Fall 2014 semester at Liberty University, were asked to voluntarily participate in the research project. The potential number of student participants was 290, however, not all of the students chose to participate in the project.

## Measures

Hancock's Spiritual Growth Assessment was chosen to serve as the measure of spiritual growth from a Christian evangelical viewpoint. Such an assessment seems appropriate for this project. It is important that an assessment be found that provides a measurement of spiritual growth that has been carefully studied and its use verified by research. Hancock published a study concerning the validity and reliability of the instrument just after the assessment was developed and published. In a research study with 38 participants, "internal consistency was .92."<sup>131</sup> This measure indicated that the items within the test were consistently related to each other.

Subjects were re-tested after one to two weeks resulting in a test-retest reliability measure of .92, as well.<sup>132</sup> This measure indicates that the test is consistently measuring the same construct over time. Hancock sought to determine if a difference would occur among professing believers: "Additional validation using the supplemental items, showed that those who professed a personal relationship with Christ obtained significantly higher scores,  $F(1,149)=14.73$ ,  $p<.001$ ."<sup>133</sup> Assessment scores in that study differentiated significant differences between freshmen and seminarians.<sup>134</sup> Hancock also found that "Self-reported importance of religion ( $r=.76$ ), frequency of personal devotions ( $r=.61$ ), frequency of church attendance ( $r=.44$ ), and number of years professing to be a Christian ( $r=.29$ ) all correlated positively and significantly..."<sup>135</sup> It was the number of aspects of spiritual life that were measured along with

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<sup>131</sup> Hancock, 150.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

the statistical testing that further suggested that this was a useable measure of spiritual growth for this thesis project.

The careful testing and development of the Hancock Spiritual Growth Assessment were paramount in its selection for this research project. Of importance also was Hancock's determination that this assessment would reflect spiritual growth from a Biblical perspective. The combination made this assessment appear to be the most logical choice for this project.

### Nature of the Spiritual Growth Assessment

Based on the research of Hancock and others, and using the Spiritual Growth Assessment from that study, College Learning Strategies class students were assessed two different times in the semester.<sup>136</sup> The survey was given at the beginning of the semester and then just before the class ends for the term. The questions asked the students to rate, on a seven-point scale, information concerning their beliefs about God and Jesus Christ. Prayer life was considered, as well as ministry to others.

Students answered questions concerning their belief about their own salvation, about their level of surrender to Christ, their experience of forgiveness, peace of mind, and freedom from guilt. They were asked about their quiet time, including questions about having a consistent prayer life and regular time spent in Bible reading. Students also answered questions about how they "live out" their salvation including service to others and sharing their faith.<sup>137</sup> The questions, developed by Christian leaders in an evangelical Christian college, definitely set apart

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<sup>136</sup> Thomas E. Hancock, Rodger K. Bufford, Brad Lau, and Neil Ninteman, "Attempting Valid Assessment of Spiritual Growth: A Survey of Christ-Centered Living," *Christian Education Journal* 2, no. 2 (2005): 129-153.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

spiritual growth as something quite different from the research made by secular institutions on spirituality.<sup>138</sup> The goal will be to obtain a measure of the change in this measure of spirituality over time.

### Statistical Measures

Measuring spiritual things using statistical measures is, at best, limited. However, using a measure of spiritual growth that has proven to be both reliable and valid will allow at least an estimation of a relationship between spirituality and other variables. In order to compare the results of the spiritual growth assessment to various other measures, therefore, certain statistical measures will be employed.

#### **Paired Samples T-Test**

T-tests are part of a group of statistics that were used to determine if there were significant differences among a number of groups. A paired samples T-Test, designed to compare mean scores “on some continuous variable, was used because those tested before and after the passing of time, or occurrence of some event, are the same people.”<sup>139</sup> A person’s score original score is compared to that person’s own score taken at a second measurement.

Two administrations of the same assessment were given to each student after a period of approximately thirteen weeks. Responses to each of the Spiritual Growth Assessments on the first and second administration were paired with together. A Paired Samples T-test was performed to determine if there was a significant difference between the results from two administrations of the Spiritual Growth assessment. The goal is to determine whether there was

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<sup>138</sup> Hancock, 130.

<sup>139</sup> Julie Pallant, *SPSS: Survival Manual* (New York: Open University Press, 2010), 105.

a statistically significant change in the measure of spiritual growth between the first administration and the second administration of the Spiritual Growth Assessment.

### **Pearson Product-Moment Correlation**

In order to determine whether a relationship exists between two variables, a Pearson product-moment correlation statistical test was utilized. Julie Pallant describes this statistical test: “Correlation coefficients (e. g. Pearson product-moment correlation) provide a numerical summary of the direction and the strength of the linear relationship between two variables.”<sup>140</sup> The direction of the relationship as directly proportional or inversely proportional is indicated by the positive or negative sign in front of the coefficient.<sup>141</sup> The strength of the relationship is seen in the absolute value of the number. It is important to note also that a correlation does not provide an avenue for determining causality, therefore the value of one variable does not, in any way, predict the value of the other.<sup>142</sup>

The question that first drew the author into this examination of spiritual growth was whether the difference between the pre-assessment Spiritual Growth measure and the post-assessment was related to the difference in pre- and post-semester measures of grade point average (GPA). This search for a significant relationship was also analyzed using the Pearson product-moment correlation statistic.

As previously mentioned, there was a question added to the assessment concerning small group participation. The response to this small group participation question will be compared to the overall score for the pre- and post-assessments of spiritual growth using the Pearson product-

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<sup>140</sup> Pallant, 123.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

moment correlation statistic. This comparison of scores will examine the possibility of a relationship between participation in a Christian small group and the measure of spiritual growth.

Likewise, the response to the question concerning accountability/mentoring will be compared to the overall score for the pre- and post-assessments. The response to each of these questions will be compared to each of the total scores on the pre- and post-assessments using the Pearson product-moment correlation statistic as well.

The question can be raised as to whether the small group participation question and the mentoring/accountability question are measuring similar constructs, measuring the same constructs, or whether the two measures are unrelated. Using a Pearson correlation, the relationship between the scores on the question concerning small group participation and the question about involvement in accountability will be examined to see if they measured similar constructs.

### Procedures

Permission to conduct research on university students was granted and the assessment and accompanying new questions received approval from the Internal Review Board.

Permission was also granted by the Internal Review Board and the researcher's department heads to access and use student grade point averages at the beginning and the end of the semester.

Hancock's Spiritual Growth Assessment, with the two questions added that were previously mentioned, was administered at the beginning of the Fall semester 2014, and again approximately fourteen weeks later, near the end of the College Learning Strategies course in which each student was enrolled. An electronic survey containing questions from the Spiritual Growth Assessment was made available via a link embedded in an email to each invited

participant. The survey was made available to students via Qualtrics Research Suite.<sup>143</sup> This computer application is required for all surveys administered to students at the university. The Qualtrics version of the survey allowed to participants to choose answers and click on the level of response that most closely describes them. The use of Qualtrics allowed for the efficient distribution of the survey. Once the survey was closed, the data were easily downloaded into an SPSS data file for analysis.

Near the beginning of the semester, students received the Spiritual Growth Assessment online embedded in an email. Teachers were given specific instructions for preparing students for participation in the survey. During this introduction, students were instructed to wait and complete the survey in class. On the designated day, students were given verbal instructions by their CLST course instructor. After being informed of the purpose of this study by their professor, students in CLST 101, CLST 103 and CLST 105 classes were asked to serve as volunteer subjects for this research project. Students were told that this study would examine spiritual growth and academic progress and that the Spiritual Growth Assessment would be administered a second time near the end of this semester. The participation form informed them that their participation was to be on a purely volunteer basis, that there would be no personal benefit or harm to them for this study, and that the only compensation for completing the Spiritual Growth Survey would be the acquisition of the participation points for that class period. Once students sign the informed consent form, they were instructed to access the Spiritual Growth Assessment from the email that was sent to them and to complete the survey online in one sitting. Interested students were able to complete the twenty-two-item survey during class.

Since measuring students' academic progress is also part of this study, participants were asked to give permission for their grade point average to be researched and recorded at the

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<sup>143</sup>Online information available at [www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)

beginning and end of the semester. Students were assured of the confidentiality of their spiritual growth assessment results and of their grade point averages. Students were then asked to sign the participation form if they were willing to complete both surveys and to have their grade point averages recorded. The Spiritual Growth Assessment was only administered to those students who signed the consent form.

Test results were only included in this study for students who completed both the pre-test and post-test versions of the Spiritual Growth Assessments. In addition, scores were only recorded for students who had a grade point average (GPA) at the end of the Spring semester of 2013 and at the end of the Fall semester 2014 that could be accessed on ASIST, the university record keeping system.

The major concern of this entire study is the spiritual growth of college students in an evangelical Christian university setting. Consequently, student spiritual growth, measured by the change in each student's Spiritual Growth Assessment scores, was compared to their academic progress during the semester in which the research was being conducted.

Academic progress, for the sake of this project, was measured by comparing the grade point averages (GPA) of these students at the beginning of the semester and after final grades had been posted for the same semester. Each participant's grade point average at the beginning and the end of the semester were obtained from the university registrar's office. Permission for the use of this data was approved by the dean of the department. A Pearson correlation test and Paired Samples test were performed to determine whether the change in the Spiritual Growth Assessment relates to the change in grade point average.

## Small Group Participation

Small group involvement can certainly have a positive effect on one's spiritual growth. Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey share details of their successful experience with small groups in a church plant in Ohio.<sup>144</sup> Rod Dempsey continues to be involved in small group ministry through the local Thomas Road Baptist Church.

The continued ministry of David Yonggi Cho also sees phenomenal growth in South Korea within the largest church in the world which boasts a membership of over 800,000.<sup>145</sup> Small group ministries, often under the leadership of women, have led to incredible multiplication of groups and of new believers in the city of Seoul.

In addition, Smith reveals the record of incredible growth among new churches in Asia.<sup>146</sup> Ying Kai was able to reach into 80 villages in a period of three and one-half years through the multiplication of small groups.<sup>147</sup> Based on the success of many Christian groups who have successfully used small groups, this project will also examine whether there is a statistical relationship between the spiritual growth, measured by a change in a person's Spiritual Growth Assessment, and their involvement in a Christian small group.

## Involvement in Mentoring and Accountability

Randy Reese and Robert Loane emphasize the importance of mentoring in the Christian faith: "No matter what stage of development, we need spiritual companions—mentors and

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<sup>144</sup> David Earley and Rod Dempsey, *The Pocket Guide to Leading a Small Group: Fifty-Two Ways to Help You and Your Small Group Grow* (Houston: TOUCH Publications, 2007), 51.

<sup>145</sup> Allan Myung Soo Park, "David Yonggi Cho and International Pentecostal/ Charismatic Movements," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 12, no. 1 (2003): 120, accessed February 13, 2015. *Religion and Philosophy Collection*, EBSCOhost.

<sup>146</sup> Stephen Robert Smith, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* (Monument, CT: WIGTake Resources), 24.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

guides, friends and peers along the journey—in order to flourish over a lifetime of godly service... guiding and helping them discover God’s gracious activity in their lives and communities.<sup>148</sup> Reese and Loane refer to the desire of Jesus to lead believers to an ever deepening spiritual relationship. Their view of mentoring has at its very core the same desire. The mentoring style of Jesus, according to Reese and Loane, included questions that led to more openness and parables that met people on familiar ground. Jesus, though very much God, was able to communicate with people on their level and to lead them toward experiencing the deeper things of God.

Jesus’ mentoring style, say these writers, tended to individualize people: “We long to be picked out of the crowd—noticed and invited, chosen and called, like Zacchaeus was by Jesus. We also long to befriend others in this way.”<sup>149</sup> Wherever Jesus went, he met people from all walks of life and was able to share with them in an open, caring, accepting way. Through his mentoring style, Jesus modeled the love of the Father. Jesus made time in his life to develop relationships that were “life-giving and life sustaining.”<sup>150</sup> Reese and Loane indicate the desire of Jesus to teach his followers, to lead them to spiritual growth so they might, in turn, “follow and imitate him.”<sup>151</sup> In short, he formed a learning community that would in time be released and sent out for kingdom purposes. “His nurturing way—respect, acceptance and friendship—was a critical element in his inviting, challenging and preparing his followers

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<sup>148</sup> Randy D. Reese and Robert Loane, *Deep Mentoring: Guiding Others on Their Leadership Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 179.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

to serve, lead and guide others down the road.”<sup>152</sup>

Small group participation affords incredible opportunities for mentoring and accountability that do not occur among church members who only cross paths for a few minutes on Sunday morning. Earley and Dempsey share evidence of the effectiveness of mentoring that can result in the training and development of new group leaders.<sup>153</sup> This process accounts for the high rate of multiplication among small groups when effectively utilized. The role of personal accountability in the life of a Christian college student, therefore, is also of interest.

Paul writes in 2 Tim 2:2 that he expects believers to hear the truth that he has shared with them (in a large group) concerning the gospel, and then to pass that truth on to men who can be trusted and who will be able to teach the truth to others. Earley considers mentoring to be following the example of Jesus and Paul. He says that mentoring was part of the method of Jesus. Earley describes mentoring as part of being like Jesus: “In no way is a Christian more like Jesus then [sic.]when he or she is making disciples and raising up leaders.”<sup>154</sup> Paul was involved in mentoring and poured his life into Timothy, Silas, Titus, and others.

Mentoring, says Earley, is a great way to show love to a few so that the message can be shared with many.<sup>155</sup> This show of love is exemplified by helping others succeed. Mentoring leads to multiplication of ministry. The call upon leaders is to mentor others so that they can do the work of the ministry, not just to learn about it.

There are more benefits provided in the mentoring relationship. One such benefit is the provision for godly accountability. Earley says that such accountability includes teaching

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<sup>152</sup> Reese and Loane, 185.

<sup>153</sup> Earley and Dempsey, 41.

<sup>154</sup> Earley, 67.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

someone to lead a group, encouraging someone in their quiet time with God and helping one to face his areas of weakness.

Mentoring involves the willingness of the leader to give up doing the ministry alone so that others can be trained to minister. “Effective mentors learn to enjoy the ministry success of others as much or more than their own ministry successes.”<sup>156</sup> Mentoring someone should include praying daily for them, encouraging them and leading them to greater spiritual growth.

Having seen such evidence of the efficacy of mentoring within small groups, a student’s level of involvement in personal Christian accountability was compared to the measure of spiritual growth. In order to determine how small group participation and mentoring relate to spiritual growth, two questions were added to Hancock’s Spiritual Growth Assessment that were administered to the students in this study. In one of the questions, students were asked to rate their level of involvement in a Christian small group. An additional question asks them to rate their level of involvement in a personal Christian accountability partnership. A Pearson correlation statistical test served as the measure for this analysis.

### **Reflection Paper Question**

Involvement with the spiritual needs of students in the learning center led to the author’s interest in researching how one’s spiritual life might affect one’s academic life. Three years ago, a question was added to the students’ end of the semester reflection paper in one of the college learning strategies classes. At the close of the semester, students were asked questions about changes that they had made during the semester and how those changes had affected their academic achievement. As part of that Reflection Paper, students were asked how they felt about the impact of their spiritual life on their academic progress. Of those students who had

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<sup>156</sup> Earley, 68.

made academic progress through the semester, most of them replied that they felt that their spiritual growth during the semester had led to improvement in academics. Student responses to those questions over the past few years added to the author's interest in further examining this issue.

Permission to retrieve the archived results to that question from Blackboard for the past three years was granted by both the supervisor and dean of the Bruckner Learning Center. Approval was, once again, received from the Internal Review Board to access and use responses to those questions. Actual results from that question on CLST 105 Reflection Papers were examined and will be presented as part of this project.

### Confidentiality

The strict maintenance concerning the confidentiality of academic records, along with their measures of spiritual growth, was assured to each of the volunteer participants in this research study. Information concerning confidentiality was covered in each classroom by the instructor who introduced the survey. The information was also part of the introductory information provided when the survey was accessed through Qualtrics. At the first administration of the Spiritual Growth Assessment, near the beginning of the semester, each student was assigned a code number. Copies of these code numbers will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the learning center.

In order to maintain confidentiality, an SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) form will be created to record the student's grade point average and Spiritual Growth Assessment score.<sup>157</sup> This information has only been made available to the person in charge of data management in CASAS (the Center for Academic Support and Advising Services), to the

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<sup>157</sup>Data collected using Qualtrics was transferred to an SPSS program that was used to make all of the statistical analyses.

author, and to the Director of Analytics (Institutional Effectiveness Dept.) for the university.<sup>158</sup>

Near the end of the semester, the scores from the second administration of the assessment were posted along with the grade point averages that were made available from the registrar's office at the end of semester. Each of the statistical measures that were computed for this study utilized the SPSS program with the same limited access

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<sup>158</sup>CASAS is the center for academic support and advising services located at Green Hall on the campus of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

Christian universities have a broad responsibility for providing an atmosphere in which students can achieve academic success. Having a large proportion of students who successfully maintain a decent grade point average, who complete their degrees, and who achieve gainful employment after graduation are certainly reasonable goals. But by its designation, a Christian university must be concerned with reaching other goals as well.

A Christian university needs to plan very carefully so that a nurturing spiritual environment is achieved as well as an academic one. To provide such an environment, the school must provide strong biblical teaching, and opportunities for effective and meaningful corporate worship. It should also make sure that significant planning is given to providing more intimate and personal times of spiritual interaction. The southern Christian university, where the author is involved, provides a great network of such small group experiences for students who reside in on-campus housing. Large numbers of students who live off campus, however, only have greater access to the corporate worship opportunities. Small group ministries have been shown to be effective in encouraging spiritual growth. Small group participation and other variables have been compared to a measure of spiritual growth.

In order to determine whether a statistically significant relationship could be demonstrated when a measure of spiritual growth is compared to academic progress, small group membership, and active Christian mentoring, certain statistical measures were performed. The results chapter, Chapter Four, will present the actual findings of the research portion of this project. Statistical results will be presented and described.

## Subjects

The research project associated with this paper began with 292 students who were enrolled in College Learning Strategies classes in the fall semester of 2014. Limitations included those that are often expected when working the human subjects. Of note is the small number of subjects who actually followed through with both assessments. There were several factors that affected the total number of participants. Of the 292 students who were encouraged to volunteer, 101 students actually followed through and completed at least a part of Hancock's Spiritual Growth Assessment that was sent to their email address. This was true even though students were provided numerous reminders by email and by their professor during their College Learning Strategies classes.

### **Factors Affecting Number of Participants**

The total number of students participating in the first assessment was affected in several ways. Some reported not receiving the email and were, therefore, unable to complete the assessment. Mass emails are often sent directly to junk mail folders, so some students failed to look for the email even after being encouraged to do so. Directions were given to the students in class to check their junk mail and deleted items if they had trouble finding the email in their inboxes, but some failed to do so. In addition, some students were absent from class and did not participate. As expected, some simply did not follow through and complete the assessment. A few opened the email, but did not complete the entire assessment. These subjects were eliminated from the results.

As expected with volunteer participants, the second administration of the assessment yielded an even smaller number of participants. The second Spiritual Growth Assessment was also administered online, embedded in an email message. Students were, again, given the

opportunity to access the survey in the classroom and allotted the time necessary to complete the post-assessment. A total of forty-four post-assessments were submitted. Two of these participants had not completed the pre-assessment, so these two students were considered ineligible for the thesis project. Of the 101 students who submitted the first Spiritual Growth Assessment, forty-two students submitted the post-assessment, which consisted of the same questions as the first assessment. Again, some students reported the inability to access the survey or lack of receipt of the assessment at all. Of these forty-two students, there were four students who did not answer all of the questions in the spiritual growth assessment, so their scores were not considered as part of the results.

There were thirteen students who were freshmen and/or transfer students, and because they lacked a pre-semester GPA, their assessment scores were removed from the thesis project. Upper classmen whose pre-semester cumulative grade point average was not available, were also excluded. Of the forty-two students who submitted both the pre- and post- Spiritual Growth Assessment, a total of twenty-nine participants completed both surveys and had accessible cumulative grade point averages at the beginning and end of the semester. These twenty-nine subjects became the basis for the statistical measures that were calculated for the sake of this thesis project.

### Statistical Measures

Statistical measures were utilized in an effort to determine the relationship between the different variables and the objective measure of spiritual growth. These variables included spiritual growth, small group involvement, and involvement in a mentoring relationship.

## **Spiritual Growth**

Students often come to a Christian college assuming that they are already Christians. It must be made clear that spiritual growth referred to in this project cannot truly begin in a person's life until they have come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

It seems reasonable to verify the test-retest reliability of the instrument that was chosen to measure spiritual growth. Therefore, student scores on the first administration of Hancock's Spiritual Growth Assessments were compared to the second administration of the same assessment. Total scores for the sake of comparison were achieved by adding up all of the values chosen for each of the assessment questions. When pre-assessment scores were compared to post-assessment, scores improved from 111.39 to 116.24. This indicates that the Spiritual Growth Assessment is reasonably stable over time. Even though a change of statistical significance was not measured using a Paired Samples T-Test, ( $r=.081$ , 2-tailed test), there was a notable increase between the mean scores on the two spiritual growth assessments measuring 4.8 points.

## **Academic Progress and Spiritual Growth**

In order to assess whether academic progress and spiritual growth over the semester were related, the change in each student's cumulative grade point average (GPA) for the semester was compared with the difference between the pre-administration and post-administration of Hancock's Spiritual Growth Assessment. The change in grade point average was compared to the change in the Spiritual Growth Assessment but no statistically significant association was found. ( $r=-.225$ , 2-tailed test).

There was a slight increase in the cumulative grade point average of the students who were a part of this thesis project. Statistical analysis using a Paired Samples Test did not indicate that increase was statistically significant, ( $r=.480$ , 2-tailed test).

### **Spiritual Growth and Small Group Participation**

It has been of major interest to this author to be able to identify a link between a Christian student's participation in a small group ministry and a measure of their spiritual growth. The measure of spiritual growth had been chosen so a question was created to measure whether they were involved in a small group, and if so, to what extent they were consistently attending.

Small groups, for the sake of this project, will refer to a group for less than twenty people who meet together on a regular basis for prayer and Bible study. Spiritual growth of its members is the most important goal of such groups.

In order to determine if small group participation was associated with participation in a Christian small group, the following question was added to the pre- and post- assessments: "I meet with a Christian small group for prayer, sharing, Bible study, etc." Student responses were based on the frequency, if any, of such meetings. Student responses to the additional question added to Hancock's Spiritual Growth concerning how actively they were involved in a Christian small group were compared to their overall score on the first administration of the spiritual growth assessment. Responses to the small group question did not show a measurable correlation with the overall score on Hancock's Spiritual Growth Assessment, first administration ( $r=0.283$ ).

Student responses to this question were compared to their overall spiritual growth assessment score on the post-assessment. A Pearson correlation was performed on the results and revealed a moderate correlation between the two, ( $r=.340$ ,  $p<.05$ , 2-tailed). This indicated a

measurable association between spiritual growth and small group involvement. This will be addressed further in the next chapter.

### **Spiritual Growth and Accountability**

To determine whether involvement in accountability/mentoring was associated with a measure of spiritual growth, the following question was added: “I meet with someone for Christian mentoring/accountability who provides feedback concerning my walk with Christ.” Student responses indicated the number of sessions they met with this accountability partner per week, if any. When individual score on Hancock’s Spiritual Growth Assessment, second administration, was compared to each student’s response to the question about level of involvement in Christian accountability/mentoring, the two measures did not indicate a significant relationship, ( $r=0.283$ ,  $p=0.085$ ), 2 tailed test). However, when the student’s response to the accountability question was compared to their overall score on the rest of the spiritual growth assessment, a moderate correlation was measured, ( $r=.376$ ,  $p<.05$ , 2-tailed test).

**Table 1 Correlations**

		POST_Q6 _1 -I meet with a Christian small group for prayer, sharing, Bible reading, etc.	POST_Q6_6 -I meet with someone for Christian mentoring/accounta bility who provides feedback concerning my walk with Christ.	PRE_Q6 _1 -I meet with a Christian small group for prayer, sharing, Bible reading, etc.	PRE_Q6_6 -I meet with someone for Christian mentoring/accounta bility who provides feedback concerning my walk with Christ.	POSTSGASc ore	PRESGASc ore
POST_Q6_1 -I meet with a Christian small group for prayer, sharing, Bible reading, etc.	Pearson Correlati on Sig. (2- tailed) N	1  38	.756**  38	.326*  38	.424**  38	.340*  38	.489**  38
POST_Q6_6 -I meet with someone for Christian mentoring/accounta bility who provides feedback concerning my walk with Christ.	Pearson Correlati on Sig. (2- tailed) N	.756**  38	1  38	.134  38	.469**  38	.283  38	.444**  38
PRE_Q6_1 -I meet with a Christian small group for prayer, sharing, Bible reading, etc.	Pearson Correlati on Sig. (2- tailed) N	.326*  38	.134  38	1  38	.405*  38	.007  38	.230  38
PRE_Q6_6 -I meet with someone for Christian mentoring/accounta bility who provides feedback concerning my walk with Christ.	Pearson Correlati on Sig. (2- tailed) N	.424**  38	.469**  38	.405*  38	1  38	.205  38	.376*  38

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table One: Correlations are given for the Pre and Post Spiritual Growth Assessment when compared to Small group Presentation, Academic Progress and Meeting for Accountability. Included are the actual correlations along with the statistical significance of each comparison.

### **Small Group Participation and Accountability**

Individual responses to the two questions concerning small group participation and involvement in mentoring that were added by the author to the Spiritual Growth Assessment were compared to each other. In the pre-assessment, the responses to the small group question and accountability/mentoring question were found to have a moderate correlation when compared to each other using a Pearson correlation, ( $r=.340$ ,  $p=0.370$ , 2-tailed test). Even more notable is that these two questions have a strong correlation with each other in the post-assessment ( $r=.756$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The measure seems to indicate item reliability. It appears evident that these two questions asking for level of small group participation and accountability/mentoring correlate with each other but that they are not measuring the same thing.

### **Grade Point Average**

The grade point average before and after the fall semester was compared to determine if there was a correlation between the two measures. A high correlation was found between the two scores, ( $r=.909$ ,  $p<.001$ , 2-tailed test).

Each student's pre-semester grade point average (GPA) was compared to the pre-assessment on spiritual growth. Statistical measures did not indicate a relationship between the two measures, ( $r=-.227$ ,  $p=.237$ , 2-tailed test). When their post-semester grade point average was compared to their post-assessment score on spiritual growth, again there was not a measurable association between the two scores, ( $r=.001$ ,  $p=.996$ , 2-tailed test).

### Results of In-Class Reflection Survey

Interest in this possible relationship between spiritual growth and academic progress led this author to include a question related to this issue in a class assignment. In addition to the research question at hand, additional information was gathered through the use of this question as part of an end of the course reflection survey.

Part of the goal of the college learning strategies courses has been to encourage students to make progress in their spiritual lives as well as academic progress. Scripture is used as part of each class lesson encouraging students to honor God with their time, through the completion of assignments and through living a life that is pleasing to God. The author has seen evidence over the past ten years of teaching in the learning center that many students who have expressed positive changes in their relationship with God also tended to see positive changes in other areas of their lives, including academic progress. Students have testified verbally to belief in such an association. In addition, a particular assignment given at the end of each semester in one of the college learning strategies courses lends evidence concerning this belief.

In order to determine the students' perspective on this hypothesis, students enrolled in the residential course, CLST 105: Strategies for the Application of College Learning Skills, during the Spring 2013 and Fall 2014 semesters were asked to discuss whether they felt that their spiritual life had an effect on their academic progress. Since the course was first developed, part of the requirements for the course included a closing written assignment entitled, "Reflection Summary." Students were asked about their strengths and weaknesses in the area of study skills. The question that has been used for the purpose of this research was part of the "Reflection Summary" assignment, and it stated, "How has your spiritual life affected your academic performance? Explain."

Answers to the questions were compiled from ten different sections of CLST 105 classes over a period of two semesters. A total of ninety-six students responded to the question. Of the ninety-six students, twenty-two students did not answer the question and were not included in the results. Of the seventy-four students who remained, 79.7% reported that they felt that their spiritual life had a direct correlation to their academic progress. It was their conclusion that because they had made pleasing God a greater priority in their lives, even in their academic pursuits, they had been better equipped to complete the requirements for their college courses.

Of the fifty-nine students who expressed their opinion that a direct relationship between spiritual growth and academic progress exists, fifty-five students, (92.3%), reported that growing closer to God had helped them to have a more successful semester academically. Thus, a strong majority of the students reported having experienced greater academic success and attribute that success, at least in part, to progress in their spiritual lives.<sup>159</sup>

Responses from these students had several things in common. Some of these reported that spending time in prayer helped them with overcoming anxiety about school. Several suggested that having a more consistent “quiet time,” that is, spending time in Scripture and prayer helped them to be able to focus on the things that matter, including school assignments. This finding helps support the premise held by the local Learning Center. Believing the students’ reports that spiritual progress has helped them to make academic progress, the College Learning Strategies classes have incorporated the encouragement toward spiritual growth as a vital part of the curriculum. Many students have credited the change in their relationship with God when describing what led to their academic improvement.

Many of these students felt that having experienced a change in priorities and committing more of themselves to God had resulted in greater success in the other areas of their lives. This

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<sup>159</sup> CLST 105 Residential Course, Blackboard, Liberty University, Spring 2013-Fall 2014.

suggestion relates quite clearly to the promise in scripture in Matt 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (NIV).

Some considered having a “quiet time,” spending time with God in prayer and Scripture reading, was a stress reliever. Making such time a part of each day helped them to be able to cope more effectively with the requirements of college life. Some suggested that realizing that God had a plan for their lives and seeking His direction had resulted in more focus and determination to finish the semester successfully.

There were those who indicated that a lapse in their spiritual lives tended to make them less successful in their academic work. Their responses indicate a direct correlation between spiritual growth and academic progress, but they had experienced it in a negative direction. There were four students, 5.4% of them, who said that because their relationship with God had suffered during the semester, their grades were not what they had hoped they would be. These students indicated that they had gotten away from prayer and church attendance. Things that had distracted some of them away from spiritual things had also distracted them from finishing assignments and being successful in academic pursuits. These distractions ranged from relationship issues to video games, from health issues to emotional hurts. These findings support a relationship between spiritual growth and academic performance.

## **Chapter Five: Intervention Plan**

Involvement with ministry to college-aged young people has led to the conclusion that small group ministry can be life changing for the Christian college student. Such ministry serves a multi-faceted ministry to those who are involved and committed to this ministry.

### **Purpose**

Small group ministry offers a practical solution to not only meeting the spiritual needs of Christian university students, but also, reaching the world with the Gospel in this present generation. This chapter will examine the purpose of small groups and will examine suggested agendas for creating effective groups.

### **Fellowship**

Steve Gladen, pastor of 3,500 Saddleback Church small groups, shares the purpose of small groups and it is five-fold.<sup>160</sup> Small groups come together for fellowship. The New Testament example is seen in the early church as they met regularly and fellowshiped from house to house. Group members eat together, they become connected, they share needs and pray for one another. The result of this connection is that as all become more connected to each other, they each can become more connected to God. Gladen stresses the importance of helping believers feel that they are a vital part of the family of God.

Earley and Dempsey suggest that part of fellowship is building community. Therefore, the small group environment should provide a place of acceptance without criticism, a place of forgiveness, submission to one another, humility, motivation and servanthood.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Steve Gladen, *Leading Small Groups with Purpose: Everything You Need to Lead a Healthy Group* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2012), 12, 41.

<sup>161</sup> Earley and Dempsey, 44-45.

## Discipleship

The believers in the early church attended worship in the temple courts once a week. But during the week they met together in homes to discuss what they had been taught in the temple. Bible study is only a portion of discipleship. “It’s not only *learning* about the Word of God but also bringing its truth into every aspect of our lives.”<sup>162</sup> It involves helping each other through the process of spiritual growth.

Steve Smith describes the discipleship revolution that took place in the book of Acts. Thousands of new believers accepted Christ on the Day of Pentecost on the birthday of the Church. It was the witness of these new believers that set ablaze the rapid growth of the early church: “The process of winning new believers and training them to witness to others who believed and witnessed to others cascaded out in ripples that touched the farthest reaches of the empire.”<sup>163</sup> The new believers were trained to reach others who would be trained to reach others. It is this multiplication in discipleship that will make possible the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

## Ministry

Part of being in a small group means getting involved in ministry. This ministry may take place within the group itself as members help one another through various crises. It may mean serving someone within or outside of the local church. Serving together will help to bring unity within the group.

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<sup>162</sup> Gladen, 41-42.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 33.

## Evangelism

Every small group needs to have a mission. In addition to service, the group should share a mission to touch the unsaved and to reach the world for Christ. This can begin with praying for one's neighbors. It can then progress to planning events that will help to reach out to one's neighbors or others who are not believers.

Steve Gladen suggests using the "CARE" acronym to remind group members about the importance of evangelism. "C" stands for finding common ground. Think about people who are seen on a regular basis: neighbors, coworkers, people at lunch, people who exercise at the gym. This may require getting out of one's comfort zone. No matter how insignificant it may be, find something that you and that person have in common. Use that common ground to build a bridge for Christ to use.<sup>164</sup>

The "A" stands for accept. Christians must realize that non-Christians are not going to act like Christians until they come to know Christ. Gladen says "And even then, it is a slow road for Christ to be Lord of all the areas on their life [sic]."<sup>165</sup> Jesus died for the sins of every man, not just for those who seem to deserve it. It is a good thing for a believer to ask to see people through the eyes of a loving and merciful Savior.

The "R" in "CARE" stands for a believer to be willing to take a risk and share his faith and his own spiritual walk with others. As a relationship begins, it will be appropriate to share one's own story with a non-believer. This could easily happen within a small group meeting. The major tenet must be Jesus has impacted the believer's life.

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<sup>164</sup> Gladen, 164.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

The “E” stands for expect. One should have faith that God will manifest His presence. The believer simply shares his story. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict hearts and change lives. The believer is simply the messenger and must believe that God will speak and change a life.

Steve Smith further suggests that outreach means taking the message “to everybody, not just some.”<sup>166</sup> Jesus gave the example of the man who was planting seed. Even though the farmer knows which is the good soil and which is the bad, he scatters the seed everywhere. It is the Lord Who brings the increase. It is the call of the believer to share the truth with everyone.

## **Worship**

Every small group should be involved in worship. We have scriptural foundation in the book of Acts. Worship is not just singing. “Worship is about surrendering your life to Christ so you can live more abundantly and become more like Christ in nature.”<sup>167</sup> Small group participation tends to help members become more transparent as they receive support and are provided an environment in which to grow spiritually.<sup>168</sup> Such transparency helps prepare one for worship within the group.

Earley and Dempsey agree that worship within a small group is vital: “Worship is a moral obligation and a natural response to the absolute worth of God.”<sup>169</sup> These writers urge small group leaders to never neglect the power of worshipping God. It is the goal of small

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<sup>166</sup>Smith, 48.

<sup>167</sup> Gladen, 43.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Earley and Dempsey, 47.

groups to have God to move among them and to change lives. The worship of God invites His presence into the group so that He can accomplish His work within the hearts of group members.

### Components of Small Group Meeting

Earley and Dempsey describe the main components of small groups that make them effective in leading group members to greater spiritual growth. Rod Dempsey uses the acronym: “L.I.F.E.”<sup>170</sup>

#### **Love**

The “L” stands for love. Sharing the love of Christ needs to be the number one priority of every small group. Mark 12:33 encourages Christians to love their neighbor as themselves. A small group will provide the opportunity to students to share the love of Christ within the group, with unbelievers who can be invited to the group and to those outside the group. John 13:34 encourages believers to “love one another.” It is by the demonstration of one’s love that the world becomes convinced of our faith and our relationship with God. It is through the “one another” passages in Scripture (of which there are more than thirty), that believers learn to practice the love of Christ.<sup>171</sup>

College students live stressful lives and are often disconnected from many of the support systems upon they relied when living at home. Small groups could provide a way to fill this void in many of the students’ lives.

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<sup>170</sup> Earley and Dempsey, 79.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

## Instruction

“I” stands for instruction.<sup>172</sup> The leader of the group opens the Bible and shares with the small group what God has been teaching him. “The goal is to draw out what God is doing in the group members lives and how God’s grace is effective in the life of the believer.”<sup>173</sup> Giving group members a chance to share what God is doing in their lives may open a door for real spiritual growth.

Dave Earley suggests that when preparing the Bible discussion a leader should spend time praying over the biblical passage and then studying it. He also suggests that time be given in each study for: “Observation: What does the passage say? Interpretation: What does it mean? [and] Application: How do we apply this to my life.”<sup>174</sup> Participation by group members should always exceed teaching from the leader who serves as more of a moderator than an instructor.

According to Steve Gladen, the goal is not getting through the week’s Bible lesson. The goal, instead, is “to get the Word of God and the truth of God into the lives of the people who sit in that room with you.”<sup>175</sup> Having a chance to glean truth from the understanding and experience of others can lead to greater spiritual growth.

## Fellowship

The “F” refers to fellowship but might also be characterized as “fun.”<sup>176</sup> Small groups need to provide opportunity for group members to interact have to enjoy the chance to be

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<sup>172</sup> Earley and Dempsey, 80

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Earley, 62.

<sup>175</sup> Gladen, 110.

<sup>176</sup> Earley and Dempsey, 80-81.

together. Planned group activities such as eating out together, watching a ball game, or sharing a meal are examples of ways to build a sense of oneness among the group.

Dave Earley points out numerous benefits for such social occasions.<sup>177</sup> These special events encourage members to get more involved, lead to increased interest and tend to make small group meetings more enjoyable. Earley suggests that a social gathering is a really good way to involve new people and encourage them to become part of the group. Even during times of fellowship, opportunities arise for ministry and discipleship.

### **Example**

Earley and Dempsey suggest that the last major component of group meetings is “example.”<sup>178</sup> Small groups for university students will provide an opportunity for leading by example. Potential new leaders can be identified and mentored. Chances for hands on ministry and service can be modeled by the leader and shared with group members. This type ministry by example represents the best opportunity to reach not just new believers but to train and develop new disciple-makers.

This idea of God wanting not just church members but disciples is emphasized by Steve Smith. “A disciple should be a trainer of others.”<sup>179</sup> Smith uses the word “trainer” more than the word “disciple” because the word “disciple” is often misunderstood. The word “disciple” is often perceived as one who is receiving rather than one who is giving: “So, in this book, we purposefully use the word “trainer” to convey the idea of someone who both grows in his loving obedience of Jesus and also passes on what he learns to others through his witness and

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<sup>177</sup> Earley, 81-82.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>179</sup> Smith, 49.

training.”<sup>180</sup> Training trainers is what Smith’s ministry is all about. This is his plan for accomplishing the Great Commission. It should be the foundational principle for all small groups.

### Agenda for Small Group Meeting

Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey stress the importance of preparation before a group meeting begins. This preparation includes prayer and fasting as well as planning an agenda for the meeting itself. Earley and Dempsey suggest a particular plan for each small group meeting.

#### **Welcome**

These writers suggest beginning the meeting with a “welcome.”<sup>181</sup> This may include a snack at the door, a time of greeting one another and one or more ice breakers. Icebreakers should with sharing very non-threatening information such as childhood memories or experiences. Then questions can be asked about spiritual experiences. This time should include times of affirmation. Group members can be encouraged to share things that they appreciate about one another. As time passes, group members may become willing to share their testimonies along with their biggest points of pain. The leader’s openness and honesty will lead to the development of the group as a spiritual “family.”

#### **Worship**

The “worship” segment of each group meeting may take place in a variety of ways but should always be kept fresh.<sup>182</sup> Worship can involve singing together and sharing prayers of

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<sup>180</sup> Smith, 43.

<sup>181</sup> Earley, 61-62.

<sup>182</sup> Earley, 61 .

thanks. Copies of song sheets can provide a way for singing with a worship CD or video. Sharing a time of reading aloud a Psalm or other Scripture passage can be an effective way to worship as a group. Encouraging members to share praises or thanksgiving can be effective during this portion of the meeting. This will be an effective place to use the talents of group members through avenues such as singing or playing guitar. This time should be guarded and should provide a time for members to experience group interaction through worship.

### **Word**

The “word” portion of the meeting is vitally important. During this portion of the meeting, group members should be led into a discussion of truth that promotes their interaction. Emphasis needs to be placed on how group members can apply the truth to their daily lives.<sup>183</sup>

### **Witness**

Earley’s final portion of the small group meeting is designated as “witness.”<sup>184</sup> Prayer for each other and for potential new group members takes place. Plans are developed during this time for contacting those who missed the group meeting. During this time, Steve Gladen encourages group leaders to help identify the gifts of the members of their group, what he calls each person’s S.H.A.P.E.<sup>185</sup> These letters represent certain characteristics in their lives. These characteristics include: spiritual gifts, passions, abilities, personality and experiences.<sup>186</sup> As gifts become apparent, service opportunities need to be planned for and arranged so that group members can serve together.

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<sup>183</sup> Earley, 62.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Gladen, 134.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

The goal Steve Smith's T4T program for small groups is to provide "a witness to the lost and [the chance] to train new believers to form reproducing discipleship communities generation by generation."<sup>187</sup> During this "witness" portion of the small group meeting members must be motivated and sent out to pursue the mission.

The goals for the development of small groups align quite well with the mission of Liberty University. Progress toward reaching a greater portion of the students and involving them in small groups should be seen as a means to see more students develop and grow into mature believers and to become involved in making disciples of other

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<sup>187</sup> Smith, 36.

## Chapter Six: Summary

This final chapter will summarize the results in the area of Christian college students' spiritual growth. Kevin Seybold has done extensive research in the area of neuroscience and its relationship to religion. Studies have looked specifically at how prayer affects medical healing, as well as the relationship between forgiveness and healing. Seybold encourages researchers to continue the exploration into how religion relates to mental and physical health.

Alexander Astin and other researchers suggest that ignoring the spiritual side of students and faculty encourages a "kind of fragmentation and a lack of authenticity, where students and faculty act either as if they are not spiritual beings, or as if their spiritual side is irrelevant to their vocation or work."<sup>188</sup> These colleagues suggest that in such an environment, "academic endeavors can become separated from students' most deeply felt values."<sup>189</sup> Students then may not feel comfortable sharing openly about meaning, purpose and wholeness among themselves and with faculty members. This is certainly far from the goal of education, especially in a Christian university.

The author accepts the premise that spiritual matters and academic pursuits are not mutually exclusive. The author also accepts that the pursuit of spiritual growth needs to be a priority for the overall education of Christian university students.

The goal of this particular study has been, from the beginning, to examine spiritual growth particularly as it relates to Christian university students. Of particular interest is the relationship between spiritual growth and academic progress. Statistical measures were performed and comparisons made to determine if a relationship exists between spiritual growth, academic progress, small group participation, and involvement in a Christian mentoring

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<sup>188</sup> Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, 7.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

relationship and whether such relationships would be measurable with statistically significant results.

The difference between two assessments of spiritual growth among college learning students was compared with their academic progress as measured by the difference in their pre-semester and post-semester grade point averages. Even though the research did not reveal a measurable correlation between spiritual growth and academic progress, it seems plausible that a relationship between the two may exist. There certainly are extraneous variables that may have prevented the measurement of a correlation between the two. In addition, student self-reports indicate that a relationship does exist.

#### Self-Reflection Question

In addition to the self-report of countless College Learning Strategies students over the past decade, a noticeable trend was revealed in the question that was asked at the end of one of the courses taught by the author. The self-reflection question that was completed by students in the CLST 105, College Learning Strategies classes, indicated that the majority of students felt that their spiritual growth had affected their academic progress. These reflections were consistent across semesters and between different sections and professors for the CLST 105 course. In addition, students in College Learning Strategies classes over the past few years have attested to seeing academic progress as they became more committed to Christ and more serious about their relationship with Him. Students also reported a lapse in their academic progress at times when their spiritual growth seemed stagnant.

When a college student accepts Christ as personal Savior, as well as when Christian students experience significant spiritual growth, it would seem reasonable that they would be more committed to being successful in other endeavors as well. As part of the mentoring that

goes along with the CLST 105 course, the author regularly reminds students that they are to complete their school work in a way that would bring glory to God. As Scripture calls one to do everything in a way that honors God, studying, preparing for tests, writing papers, and completing projects can also be a way of worshipping Him.

### Rationale for Assessing Spiritual Growth

Thomas E. Hancock and colleagues voiced concerns for the Christian community to consider when using measures to assess spiritual growth. Some may reject the idea of a formal measure of spiritual growth because it may be considered to be “judging” one another. The writers suggests that when addressing this issue one should note the following: “(a) it is primarily the respondents who are making judgments about themselves, and (b) Christian educators who are caring for the spiritual states of others are spontaneously and of necessity making judgments about them throughout their daily interactions.”<sup>190</sup> Therefore, seeking to measure the spiritual growth with a somewhat objective instrument should be considered as beneficial. Measures of spiritual growth can lead to intervention for students who are not experiencing spiritual growth, can lead to increased interaction with students who exhibit spiritual needs, and can be used in counseling and mentoring relationship. The goal of such interactions can be discipleship and spiritual growth.

The researchers reveal that through personal experience with “formal assessment data,” they have become more “intelligently compassionate,” and actually end up avoiding the tendency to judge others. Instead, rather than making “prideful comparisons,” the use of the data lends to more “deliberately shepherding or mentoring” to those for whom they care.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Hancock, 148.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid..

In reference to this point, the researchers quote from 1 Sam 16:7b, “[M]an looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord look at the heart” (NIV). The writers suggest two things that need to be established. Since we are imperfect and therefore sometimes mistaken in our judgments about one another, it is reasonable to assume that we may be wrong about the relationships of others with God and even with our own relationship with God. And secondly, in spite of our own imperfections, we are still called to “exercise wisdom and discernment in our care for others.”<sup>192</sup> The writers exhort those in leadership, those who have the responsibility to shepherd the children of God, so that they watch carefully over the souls of men because they will surely give an account to God. Therefore, it seems clear that those who shepherd the flock would need to have a clear understanding of the spiritual condition of those for whom they care.

The measurement of spiritual growth described in this project was not intended as a means for making judgment calls about the spiritual condition of the students being measured. As the researchers noted, such measurement of spiritual growth should result instead in an increased capacity for shepherding and leading the students who are under one’s care. It is the goal of the writer that the information will be used to make recommendations for additional ministry for students.

### Limitations in Results

The lack of a significant statistical result in the original research question may be explained, at least in part, by certain limitations, including the limitations of the instrument that was used. Limitations may exist in the actual survey used to measure spiritual growth. Researchers suggested limitations associated with the use of Hancock’s Spiritual Growth

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<sup>192</sup> Hancock, 148.

Assessment. Hancock suggests that in spite of the strong evidence that supports the usefulness of this assessment, there certainly are limitations that must be taken into consideration.<sup>193</sup> Areas for caution include “limited generalizability, absence of causal inferences, all the limitations of self-report data that include inadequate personal knowledge, social desirability, impression management, faking good or bad, emphasis on common features among individuals rather than individual uniqueness, and so forth.”<sup>194</sup> Even though there are always issues concerning “self-report biases,” when using survey instruments such as the one employed in this study, Hancock continues to defend the search for measures of spiritual growth that are inexpensive to use and simple to administer.<sup>195</sup>

Whenever a self-report measurement is used, these and other limitations must be taken into account. Student scores may not correctly reflect a person’s spiritual growth because of a person’s desire to make himself look better to the researcher. It is, perhaps, human nature for a person to make himself look as good as possible, whether or not the resulting measure reflects reality. Students may also have the tendency to answer questions in a positive manner in a desire to please the person who is conducting the research. Students filling out assessment questions may experience denial and answer the questions that reflect on the person they desire to be, rather than who they are in reality.

Variations in responses between the two administrations of the assessment may be affected by external circumstances on the day the survey was completed. Scores could be affected by one’s feelings, by what events had occurred on the morning of the survey, and even

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<sup>193</sup> Hancock, 148.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

by one's desire to complete the survey quickly. It is also possible that scores may not have been accurate for students who did not correctly interpret the assessment questions.

Other limitations may have affected the results from the pre- and post-assessments. It is also possible that is also that the experience of re-taking the Spiritual Growth Assessment may have resulted in the differences between the two scores. Completing the survey a second time may have led students to answer questions based on their responses to the previous survey, rather than their actual experience at the time of the survey.

### Other Variables

Changes in grade point average (GPA) may also be explained because of the presence of other variables that could not be controlled in this research project. The research design did not rule out the possible effect of the involvement of the students in College Learning Strategies classes that are designed to help students achieve improvement in academic progress. In addition, students' grade point averages may have been affected by additional variables. These may include such things as gender, age, intelligence, classification level, and even whether they were on-campus or commuter students. These are certainly variables that could possibly explain changes in grade point average over a semester. Additional variables that may have affected changed in grade point average are relationship issues, emotional problems, financial problems, health problems and/or family problems.

### Implications

The results of this study shed light on the need for additional research into the relationship between spiritual growth and other variables. Certain findings should be considered in determining the direction for further study.

## **Spiritual Growth**

The consistency between the two measures on Hancock's Spiritual Growth Assessment served to give more credence to its usefulness as a measure of spiritual growth. The fact that an increase did occur, and measured 4.8 points, is worth noting, even though the measure was not significant. An increase in spiritual growth did occur between the two administrations of the assessment. Thus, it is apparent that the population of university students enrolled in college learning strategies classes had at least a small increase in the measure of the spiritual growth. This increase is encouraging even though it was not statistically significant. Additional research should seek for a larger student population and include additional means for measuring student spiritual growth. This is certainly an area worth additional attention. Suggestions for intervention that may further foster spiritual growth among Christian university students will be included.

The increase in scores on the Spiritual Growth Assessment was accompanied by a slight increase in the grade point average for the students who were part of this study. The fact that there was not a significant correlation reported does not prove that there is not a significant relationship between spiritual growth and academic progress. It leaves open the possibility that further study would be in order. The removal of extraneous variables may result in clearer results. A larger student population may well lead to more observable results. A longitudinal study following a group of college students through their undergraduate years would certainly shed additional light on this question as well.

The lack of a statistically significant finding when comparing each person's GPA before and after the semester indicates that the increase that was reported was not considered significant. Future research studies concerning a student's academic progress should include

other factors besides GPA in its measuring. Additional factors that could be observed may include percentage completion of one's degree completion plan, number of assignments completed, and total number of courses completed successfully within the allotted time period. Adjustments to GPA should be made for the number of courses dropped within the time period as well.

### **Spiritual Growth and Small Group Participation**

By far, the most significant results of the Spiritual Growth Assessment pre- and post-tests were in its comparison to the question concerning small group participation. It is this statistical finding that is of greatest interest to the author. When the pre-assessment on spiritual growth was compared to a student's response to the question concerning level of small group involvement, a moderate statistical correlation was observed, ( $r=.405$ , significant at the .05 level, 2-tailed test). This lack of a strong statistical finding may be the result of the timing on the assessment. It could be possible that small group participation had only begun with students arriving on campus at the beginning of a new semester. When small group participation happened over a twelve week period, the results were more promising.

A noticeable difference was observed after approximately 12 weeks of the semester had passed. When the same question was compared to the overall score on the second Spiritual Growth Assessment, a strong correlation, ( $r=.756$ ,  $p<.01$ , 2-tailed test), was measured.

The strongest statistical relationship from this research study was observed between one's score on the post-assessment of spiritual growth and the level of involvement in a Christian small group. This has extremely interesting implications that would lead to further study. While causation cannot be established in correlation research, it does appear that meeting with a small

group for prayer, sharing, and Bible study is somehow related to at least one measure of spiritual growth.

It is evident that this relationship between spiritual growth and small group participation will warrant additional research. The population size would need to be enlarged. And, as mentioned before, a longitudinal study over several years would certainly provide more information concerning this relationship. Additional monitoring of attendance and participation level would provide greater understanding as well. Types of small groups involved would need to be investigated. Certain limitations would be necessary to insure consistency of ministry among groups.

### **Spiritual Growth and Accountability**

Results were not quite as convincing when investigating whether there is a measureable relationship between a student's involvement in accountability/mentoring and their score on the Spiritual Growth Assessment. The comparison of the first Spiritual Growth Assessment to the student's level of accountability revealed no statistical relationship. Once again, this may be explained, in part, to timing. Students again had only just arrived back on campus for a new semester, and accountability involvement may have only just begun, if it had begun at all.

When the score on the post-administration of the Spiritual Growth Assessment was compared to a student's involvement in accountability, a moderate correlation, ( $r=.376$ ,  $p<.05$ , 2-tailed test), was measured. Though not statistically significant, there appears to be a relationship between a measure of one's spiritual growth and his involvement in a Christian mentoring/accountability relationship.

These results certainly seem promising. Even though, once again, causality cannot be proven, there exists an indication of an association between the two measures. Additional testing

is definitely needed. Specific guidelines and parameters would need to be in place to measure the quality of mentoring that is taking place. Longitudinal studies over a student's four years of undergraduate studies could prove very beneficial in clarifying the relationship between spiritual growth and accountability. Hancock and his colleagues suggest that "researchers and program planners could "mine" such data, seeking fresh insights into the actual nature of the development of Christ-centered living in their own institution, and thereby have specific in-put for leading others to deeper spiritual growth."<sup>196</sup> With such an outcome in mind, spiritual growth assessment is warranted.

### Experience

Two experiences in the past serve as incentives for launching a new small group ministry. One was a ministry known as "Prayer and Share," and the other was a completion of an assignment for a Small Group Ministries course.

#### **"Prayer and Share" Ministry**

The author's interest in the spiritual growth of college students dates back as far as 1985. While working as a full-time minister of music, the author, along with his wife, were able to open their home for a small group ministry among East Carolina University students. At the time, the author was unfamiliar with other home groups but felt led of God at the time to launch such a ministry.

The group started with just a handful of the college students who attended the same local church. But as students began to invite friends, the group experienced growth beyond what the author's living room would comfortably hold. There was no great Bible teaching, and there was

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<sup>196</sup> Hancock, 148.

no major advertisement campaign. There was no preparation or training for growing a small group. Students met for praise songs, sharing a verse or two of Scripture and prayer for needs. This group was named “Prayer and Share” and met weekly (during the semesters) for over two years.

The results of those years of sharing were amazing. Those involved later testified to lives that were changed by times of real spiritual growth. From this ministry came an evangelist, a full-time worship pastor, a pastor’s wife, and several major leaders in that local church. It was that ministry that led the author to pursue a master’s degree in counseling. It was that ministry that prepared the author for a life of ministry to youth and college students.

### **Local Small Group Experience**

As part of the coursework for the doctorate in ministry, the author sat under the teaching of Dr. Rod Dempsey, Discipleship Pastor for Thomas Road Baptist Church. It was in his Small Group Ministry course that this burden for ministry through small home groups again began to take shape. Dr. Dempsey emphasized the urgency of including small group ministry as the plan to reach this generation for Christ. He teaches that small group multiplication can help make possible the goal of reaching all of the unreached people groups in the world during this generation. It is evident that reaching this goal will require much more than just seeing a few converts per year in a local church.

It has been the desire of the author to be involved in providing home-based small group meetings in his neighborhood. These small groups would allow for a chance to get to know students who live in the neighborhood, to be able to fellowship with them and minister to them, and to launch a ministry that could grow and develop into small groups meeting at different locations throughout the neighborhood. It is the author’s desire that potential new leaders can be

identified and mentored through this ministry so that multiplication of groups could effectively occur.

The author opened his home to a small group ministry for a short period of time after taking a course in seminary. A partial fulfillment of the Small Group Ministry course was the formation and maintenance of a small group over a period of six weeks. In order to fulfill this requirement, the author and his wife invited college students to be a part of the home group meeting.

The weekly home meetings were characterized by a time of welcome including a light snack and drinks. Each meeting started with “get acquainted” questions that allowed each person to get comfortable with sharing with each other. It was amazing how quickly the students began to open up and share with the group.

Part of each group meeting was a time of worship and praise. Lyrics and worship songs were broadcast on the television screen using YouTube videos. This time of worship, even from the beginning, helped to focus the attention of the group and provided an informal time for opening hearts to hear from the Lord and to share together. Music definitely helps to open the hearts of people. It created an atmosphere that was warm and helped prepare participants for the sharing of God’s Word.

The leader served more as a moderator than an instructor during the time that was focused on the Word of God. Group participants were encouraged to share what the Scripture passage meant to them. One goal was to help students realize how the Word of God has application for each individual life. Students seemed to become more willing to share with each week that passed.

Each session included specific time set aside for sharing needs and praying for one another. For this part of the meeting, the group was divided by gender. In this even smaller group setting, members were noticeably free to share individual weaknesses and needs. Other students were able to encourage and to pray for those who had needs. Students were encouraged to continue to pray for these needs throughout the week. Answered prayers were shared with the others in the group.

Part of each weekly session centered around one chair that was designated as the “empty chair.” This chair served as a reminder for each group member to continually be praying for those who needed to be involved in the small group. They may be believers or unbelievers, neighbors, roommates, or friends but these people share in common a need for community, and for many, a need for salvation. Members were urged to write down the person who comes to their mind, to pray for them daily, and then to invite them to visit the group. This outreach ministry in small groups was designed for evangelism, and ultimately, the growth and multiplication of the group.

After some sessions of the weekly small group, members played various games together and spent time getting to know one another. It was amazing to see how quickly the camaraderie among the group members developed. The fellowship was encouraging and helped to strengthen the unity that developed even in a short period of time.

It was encouraging that the students who took part in the small group were willing to meet together consistently, even during a busy part of the semester. No major drive for consistent attendance was required. Attendance averaged twelve, except for one week that most of the ladies were away. The time of sharing and worshipping together seemed to be enough of an incentive to keep students coming.

One area of weakness became apparent during the six weeks of group meetings. Even though offering ministry through service was brought up as a goal during each session, no specific plans for following through with service ever came to fruition. In Rom 12:13, Paul exhorts us to be involved in service ministries as part of Christ's plans for the believer. We are called to serve by "distributing to the needs of the saints," and by being "given to hospitality." Moo looks at service ministry as a natural response for a believer: "Our family affection for brothers and sisters in Christ should motivate us to share with those of them who are in need and to provide hospitality to those who require it."<sup>197</sup> Taking advantage of opportunities for service fulfills the call of Christ for his church. Such outreach also can provide a greater sense of unity within the body of Christ as believers serve together. In addition, Christians with differing gifts have the opportunity to put those gifts to work in the service of the Lord.

### Application

It seems evident that having small groups for college students will allow them to fulfill the commandments of Christ more effectively and provide greater opportunities for spiritual growth and development. The effectiveness and multi-faceted nature of this ministry have certainly been indicated.

### **Local University Commuter Groups**

The information gleaned from the comparison of spiritual growth and small group participation leads one to consider the need for increased student involvement in Christian small groups. One of the main unreached college students groups at Liberty University are the students who live relatively close to the university or have acquired off campus housing and who

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<sup>197</sup> Moo, 180.

commute to class. It is that population that warrants an examination of the commuter small group ministry that is available.

Brad Milks shared his vision for the inclusion of commuter students in Christian small groups on a regular basis. In Milk's experience, he had been involved with the typical American small groups who were centrally focused around a Bible study or a particular book. Milks reported that during his first year as head of the commuter groups at Liberty University, the number of groups went from thirty groups down to only two in one semester.<sup>198</sup> He realized that things had to change in order to more effectively minister to local students who live off campus. Milks has led the commuter small group ministry into significant growth. There are presently more than forty small group leaders, and the goal is continued multiplication of both groups and meeting locations.

### Training for Trainers

Under Milk's leadership, the commuter group ministry decided to change its focus. The work of Ying Kai and Steve Smith with IMB in Southeast Asia became the foundation for the change in ministry.<sup>199</sup> The scripture verse found in 2 Tim 2:2 provides the scriptural basis: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others," (NASB).

The ministry based on these concepts is called, "Training for Trainers" (T4T). Believers are to experience real growth in Christ through obedience to Him, and then, they are to pass on to others what they have learned.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Brad Milks, interview by author, Lynchburg, VA, January 8, 2015.

<sup>199</sup> Milks interview

<sup>200</sup> Smith, 43.

The invitation of the church has often been for people to “come.” But Steve Smith insists that the call of the Great Commission is not for people to come, but for believers to “go.”<sup>201</sup> The believer needs to go out to where the people are. By winning a neighbor or co-worker over to being a friend, a believer earns the right to share the gospel. A small group setting supplies just such an environment. Nonbelievers have the chance to come to a welcoming environment and to see the Gospel of Christ being exemplified.

Smith summarizes the teaching of the Great Commission in three steps: “1. Go, not come. 2. Share with everybody, not just some. 3. Make trainers, not just simply church members.”<sup>202</sup> He further insists that believers should see everyone as reachable with the Gospel. Maybe the timing is not right and the soil is not ready, but one must share the Gospel everywhere to as many as he can. Believers must let God choose the timing to bring the harvest. The third foundational truth is that God wants to multiply trainers, not just believers. The message of the Gospel cannot reach the ends of the earth by simple addition. The call is to lead people to Christ and then to lead them to disciple others.

Smith’s discipleship program uses Matt 10:24-25a as a key passage upon which their ministry of small groups is based: “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master” (NASB). Smith also advocates using the term “trainer” instead of disciple to describe the role that Jesus had in mind for every believer.<sup>203</sup> Jesus would have us to “follow Him,” that is, to seek to be like Him in every aspect possible. Smith further suggests that the way the word

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<sup>201</sup> Smith, 48.

<sup>202</sup> Smith, 95.

<sup>203</sup> Smith, 42.

“disciple” is understood currently has the idea of “receiving and not giving.” Matthew 10:8 requires just the opposite: because the Lord has freely given, then believers are to freely give.

The writer suggests that the T4T program allows for the implementation of key New Testament principles: believers can be raised up to fulfill the calling of God upon their lives; witnessing can be taught to believers as a way of life; believers can be led by example to experience an obedient and loving relationship with Christ; new small groups or new churches can be started and new leaders can be led to maturity quickly. The results can be the multiplication of believers, small groups and churches.<sup>204</sup>

Unlike traditional church norms, Milks’ focus for the local commuter groups is to lead the groups to experience salvation, then service, then maturity.<sup>205</sup> New believers are discipled while being involved in on-the-job training through ministry and service.

### Small Group Dynamics

Commuter small groups, under Milk’s leadership, have three distinct parts. The first third of each session is pastoral care. This is often accomplished by breaking the group into smaller groups and having individuals share weaknesses and victories so that ministry can take place through the others in the group. The second portion of each group meeting is the sharing of a new lesson. The local commuter group ministry leaves the lesson choice up to the leader. The final third of the session is a practice session. During this portion of the meeting, members of the group are allowed to put into practice or role-play how they might apply the lesson to their own lives. The goal of the session is that individuals will leave and act in obedience to the teaching that has been given.

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<sup>204</sup> Smith, 42.

<sup>205</sup> Brad Milks, interview.

## **Mentoring**

Student involvement in small groups will lead so naturally to an environment for mentoring to occur. Brian Wakeman describes the distinction in Christian mentoring. He suggests that mentoring can be described as “Christian” when it encourages mentors to be always “speaking the truth in love, (see Eph 4:15b),” or when they, like Jesus, are making disciples of others.”<sup>206</sup> Wakeman refers to the example of Paul when he mentored Timothy in the book of Acts or in his relationship with church at Thessalonica.<sup>207</sup> It was Paul’s desire that those under his mentorship be given the Spirit of wisdom. In fact, Paul said their increase in wisdom was something for which he kept on praying

## **Intervention**

A measurable correlation between spiritual growth and participation in small groups leads one to consider the need for more of an emphasis on this ministry. The present small group ministry opportunities will be addressed along with suggestions for future expansion for this ministry.

### **Present Ministry and Present Need**

Resident students at this large southern evangelical Christian university are provided with ample opportunity for small group participation. Dormitories are divided by halls into groups for hall meetings. Then hall groups are further broken down into volunteer prayer groups. Ministry takes place at several levels including RD’s (residential director), RA’s (resident advisor), SLC’s

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<sup>206</sup> Brian E. Wakeman, “A Christian Perspective on Mentoring,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Missions Studies* 29, no. 4 (2012): 279.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

(spiritual life coaches) and PL's (prayer leaders). Weekly meetings are held and discussions take place that are based on the message from the Wednesday night campus community service.

Although small groups, approximately twenty at the present time, are available for off-campus students, many of these students are not involved in small groups.<sup>208</sup> Having more small group opportunities, coupled with making these opportunities more widely known, could help to involve more of these students in a vital ministry.

### Training Leaders

The multiplication of small groups among commuter students would best be accomplished by having students participate in small groups. From those groups, leaders are mentored and trained and groups are multiplied. In order to increase the numbers of groups so that more students are involved, leaders must be recruited and trained. This goal could be accomplished by offering group leader training opportunities at Christian Service fairs and through campus announcements. Potential leaders can be identified and then assigned to group leaders who could provide training and guide in the multiplication of groups.

### Promotion

Promotion of a new ministry, like the communication of other news, among commuter students is a challenge. Students are currently introduced to the availability of commuter small groups during Commuter Orientation, a course that is required for all students who move off campus while attending school. Students who come to Liberty as commuter students represent a population that needs to be targeted.

Greater participation of commuters in small groups will require using whatever means available to get the message to potential group members. Taking advantage of social media can

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<sup>208</sup> Milks, Interview

certainly help to reach these university students. Booths in the most widely used buildings and near the food establishments on campus could be helpful in getting out the word to students. Many commuter students are dependent on the university bus system for transportation around campus. Advertisements on the busses could help get the word out concerning apartment complexes where small groups are available. In addition, special neighborhood events could be planned that would help bridge the gap between Liberty students in various apartment complexes. Block parties that are announced on the splash page and at bus stops could open doors for inviting new students to get involved in small groups.

**New Student Appeals.** The seminar for new students and transfer students would be great places to promote small group involvement. The location of present groups meeting across the city could be announced. Group leaders could be present to make an appeal for new people to come to their groups.

**Convocation Appeals.** An invitation for small group participation among commuters could be announced during Wednesday convocations near the beginning of each semester. Information about locations and times of meetings could be shared with potential group members.

**Appeals during Required Courses.** In Biblical Worldview and Evangelism classes, an appeal for commuter students to get “plugged in” to a geographical small group could be really helpful. Professors could establish the biblical purpose behind small group involvement, and challenges could be given to students to take advantage. These venues should also be able to share information about the availability of small groups. Other courses, including College Learning Strategies and Mentoring classes, could stress the need for fellowship and growth through small groups, especially among commuter students.

### Greater Support from Local Churches

Only Thomas Road Baptist Church is presently involved in the small group ministry to commuters and has basically offered support and help with determining mission and casting vision. Churches in the area with a strong biblical foundation could be instrumental in seeing the fulfillment of the desire to reach more commuters with small group ministry. Churches that are already involved in small group ministry may be instrumental in sharing in leadership training and perhaps even starting groups in various locations around the area. College students who attend various local churches could be key players in seeing such a ministry make further advances and in reaching more commuter students.

### Rationale for New Group Formation

The author has become thoroughly convinced of the biblical mandate for developing more opportunities for students at a Christian university to experience greater spiritual growth. The seed was planted two years ago during the completion of Dr. Dempsey's Small Group Ministry course. The need for more effective ways of reaching people and multiplying believers is apparent. The call of God to do more than just call people to faith in Christ has been quite proven from Scripture. Meeting together with believers once a week in a large group setting does not effectively allow for "one another" type ministries to happen regularly.

From the New Testament the commands were given to love one another, pray for, encourage, to correct, and to serve one another. Meeting together with a small group of believers allows for more of a sense of community to develop. This type setting lends easily to the outflow of such ministry among the members.

## Goals for New Student Commuter Home Group

Fellowship among believers promotes Christian growth. True fellowship requires spending time together and sharing openly with each other. In small groups, life's special occasions can be shared together and during the challenges of life, group members can provide support and even care when needed.

One of the most vital ministries of small groups is an emphasis on prayer. Sharing needs in a non-threatening environment allows for others in the group to minister in intercessory prayer. Needs may become apparent that allow for ministry through service.

Part of any successful small group needs to be some sort of tangible ministry. Care ministry involves such things as babysitting for young mothers, raking leaves for the elderly, or holding a service in a nursing home. It could involve such things as serving in a soup kitchen or unloading supplies for a local Christian ministries or other service agency. Providing tangible service ministers to other people, but it can also help to lead to greater unity within the group.

It is certainly God's design that the Gospel be spread and that those who have not heard the Gospel or those who have heard but not yet responded have a chance to do so. Many unbelievers are not comfortable visiting a local church. Taking the Gospel outside the walls of the church and into different homes may open the door to reaching more unbelievers to Christ. Group members are challenged to make friends with people, then to invite them to a small group function, perhaps when the group is having a special event. A small group setting may be much less overwhelming for someone who is not a believer.

The call of God is to reach, teach, and then train new believers to do the same. So, another goal for a new home commuter group would be the identification of potential apprentices. From the beginning of the group, the idea of the multiplication of the group will be

in the forefront. This goal will be accomplished as God directs in the selection of potential new leaders. The group leader will train the apprentice and allow them to assume responsibilities within the group as the apprentice is prepared for leading a group of his own.

The multiplication of small groups has proven to be an effective means for achieving this kind of growth. The need for additional groups in the subdivision where the author lives has become quite apparent. This neighborhood is made up of a large percentage of students from the local Christian university. This area would be a prime location for new groups to begin and multiply.

### Intervention Plan

The author has been sensing the need for getting involved in small group ministry with local university students. The plan is to begin with one new small group for college students in his home. The vision is developing for this group to grow and soon multiply into several groups. The goal will be to multiply groups as God supplies students and grants direction in the selection and training of apprentices to become group leaders themselves.

### **Goal: Launching New Commuter Small Groups**

The need has been resonating within the heart of the author for more than a year. The timing is falling into place with the launching of a small group ministry within the author's local church. Sensing that this is the direction of the Lord, it is the plan of this author to launch a new small group ministry within his neighborhood. The target population will be commuter students who live in the same neighborhood as the author.

The small group in this author's home, under the supervision of the local church, will use the message from the pastor's Sunday sermon as a basis for the Bible discussion. The goal will

be to have group members share what the Lord is speaking to them individually. Learning to hear the Word and to verbalize a response to it can encourage spiritual growth as well.

Launching a new group will require adequate prayer and planning, but the plan is more outreaching than just the formation of a single new group. This plan will also include encouraging the participation of other local ministries in reaching the commuter students in the area. Information concerning present commuter small groups can be shared with local pastors and then shared with their own college student population. Local ministries can be encouraged to provide potential leaders for small groups in various locations through the students involved in each local congregation. Churches with existing small groups could be encouraged to provide support, advertisement, and promotion for groups who minister to commuter students. Plans could be made for additional commuter students groups to be launched under the supervision of the local church. In addition, families within each church could consider “adopting” college students and providing additional support during their stay in the area.

The initial group ministry will fall under the supervision of the local church where the author serves as associate pastor. The group will also become aligned with the small group outreach ministry for commuter students at the university.

### Conclusion

This project has presented the biblical framework for reaching the lost through small group ministry. It has been made clear that small group ministry is an effective way to accomplish the commands of Christ: to reach, to teach, to disciple, and to train others to be disciple makers.

Paul suggests that loving one's neighbor "fulfills the law."<sup>209</sup> Small group ministry provides a perfect environment for this to occur. Douglas Moo sees the debt for loving one's neighbor as one that cannot be completely repaid: "God will always be bringing new people into our lives, those whom we are called to love and there are those people we have known for a long time whom we called to love in new ways as they go through the ups and downs of life."<sup>210</sup> This instruction seems so closely aligned to the kind of relationships that occur within a small group.

In Rom. 15:2, Paul instructs the Christians at Rome to be willing to sacrifice one's own freedom for the sake of one who is weaker. He exhorts believers to accept one another and to please one another. In Galatians 6:2, the language is similar when referring to one who is weak. Believers are called to "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." This law of Christ, says Moo, is not named specifically but must surely include the love commandment. Identification of weakness and the sharing of burdens can take place so easily as Christians share in closer fellowship with one another.

It makes sense that meeting together in small groups will allow more "one another" type ministry to happen on a regular basis. Believers have the chance to get to know one another and to be more proactive in meeting one another's needs.

### **College Student Spiritual Growth**

The goals of this project have been the identification of the need for spiritual growth among students at a Christian university, the search for an association between spiritual growth and a student's academic progress, and to determine if small group participation and involvement in mentoring are related to spiritual growth. Even though the statistical measures were small,

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<sup>209</sup> Moo, 188.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

when considered along with other included evidence, it remains reasonable to assume a relationship between a person getting more serious about his relationship with God and becoming more caring and consistent about his academic pursuits.

In addition, the relationship between mentoring/accountability and spiritual growth did not produce a strong result, but additional evidence from other sources reinforces the effectiveness of this type ministry, especially within a small group setting. This particular type of mentoring often leads to the development of new groups leaders so that multiplication of groups becomes a reality.

A moderate relationship was demonstrated between small group participation and a measure of spiritual growth. Additional evidence has been given from Scripture, commentaries, and small group ministry leaders who confirm this relationship.

The statistical measures in this study have only shown a significant relationship between small group ministry and spiritual growth. It is certainly evident, however, that as Christian university students experience growth in Christ and maturity as believers, they should, quite reasonably, see academic progress as well as consistency and growth in other areas of their lives as well.

## APPENDIX A

### Internal Review Board Approval

## LIBERTY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 7, 2014

Ralph W. Jernigan, Jr.  
IRB Exemption 1911.070714: Can a College Student Please God? The Role of Spiritual Growth, Accountability,  
and Academic Progress

Dear Ralph,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and that no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101 (b)(2, 4), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
  - (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.
- (4) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and that any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption, or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,



**Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.**  
Professor, IRB Chair  
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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## APPENDIX B

### Signature Page

#### II. INVESTIGATOR AGREEMENT & SIGNATURE PAGE

##### BY SIGNING THIS DOCUMENT, YOU AGREE:

1. That no participants will be recruited or entered into the study until you have received the final approval or exemption email from the Institutional Review Board.
2. That no participants will be recruited or entered into the study until they have been properly educated on the study.
3. That any modifications of the study or consent form will not be initiated without prior written approval, by email, from the IRB and your faculty mentor.
4. The Investigator (You) agrees to carry out the study as stated in the approved application; all participants will be recruited and consented as stated in the study approved or exempted by the IRB. If written consent is required, all participants will be consented by signing a copy of the approved consent form.
5. That any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others participating in the approved study, which must be in accordance with the Liberty Wayland and/or the Donor Code, and the Confidentiality Statement, will be promptly reported in writing to the IRB.
6. That the IRB office will be notified within 30 days of the completion of this study.
7. That the PI will inform the IRB and complete all necessary reports should he/she terminate University Association.
8. To maintain records and keep informed consent documents for **three years** after completion of the project, even if the Investigator terminates association with the University.
9. That he/she has access to copies of 45 CFR 46 and the Belmont Report.

Ralph W. Geringer  
Investigator (Printed)

Ralph W. Geringer  
Investigator (Signature)

6/23/14  
Date

##### FOR FACULTY MENTORS INVOLVED IN STUDENT PROPOSALS ONLY

##### BY SIGNING THIS DOCUMENT, THE FACULTY MENTOR AGREES:

1. To assume responsibility for the oversight of the student's current investigation, as outlined in the approved IRB application.
2. To work with the Investigator and the Institutional Review Board, as needed, in maintaining compliance with this agreement.
3. That the investigator is qualified to perform this study.
4. **That by signing this document you verify you have carefully read this application and approve of the procedures described herein, and also verify that the application complies with all instructions listed above. If you have any questions, please contact our office ([irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)).**

D. Marie Dowdson  
Faculty Mentor (Printed)

D. Marie Dowdson  
Faculty Mentor (Signature)

6/25/14  
Date

\*The Institutional Review Board reserves the right to terminate this study at any time if, in its opinion, (1) the risks of further experimentation are prohibitive, or (2) the above agreement is breached.

**Appendix C**

PowerPoint Presentation

CAN A COLLEGE STUDENT  
PLEASE GOD?

Spiritual Growth and Its Relationship to Small Group  
Involvement, Accountability and Academic Progress

# OVERVIEW

- ◎ Spiritual Growth among Christian College Students
  - Relationship to Academic Improvement
  - Relationship to Small Group Participation
  - Relationship to Mentoring/Accountability

## RATIONALE

- ⊙ Scientific writing often sheds negative light on spirituality.
- ⊙ One researcher has studied the “roles of psychology and neuroscience, along with faith, in religious experience.”
- ⊙ Kevin S. Seybold, *Explorations in Neuroscience, Psychology and Religion* (Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2007), 2.

## RELATED STUDIES

Relationship between biblical literacy and academic achievement among younger students produced significant results.

W. H. Jeynes, "The Relationship between Biblical Literacy, Academic Achievement and School Behavior among Christian- and Public-School Students," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 18, no.1 (2009): 36.

## LONGITUDINAL STUDY

A longitudinal study from Elder and Conger: as “eighth graders’ **religious activity** increases over time, their confidence, relationships with others, and **academic success** improved.”

Michele K. Briggs, et al., “Assessing and Promoting Spiritual Wellness as a Protective Factor in Secondary Schools,” *Counseling and Values* 55, no. 2 (2011): 171.

# STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

- ◎ Studies have produced results when comparing academic achievement and religious involvement or spirituality
- ◎ Problem: Not much attention to change in one's achievement when compared to a measure of their spiritual growth.

## SPIRITUAL GROWTH DEFINED

Spiritual growth, through this work, will refer to changes between two separate administrations of the Spiritual Growth Assessment.

Thomas E. Hancock, et al., "Attempting Valid Assessment of Spiritual Growth: A Survey of Christ-centered Living," *Christian Education Journal* 2, no. 2 (2005): 129

## MEASURE OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- ◉ Measure designed to assess “Christ-centered living rooted in evangelical beliefs.”
- ◉ Hancock reported: “high internal consistency, good test-retest reliability, significant group differences, and concurrent validity.”
- ◉ Chosen measure: Hancock’s “Spiritual Growth Assessment”

Hancock, Thomas E, et al., “Attempting Valid Assessment of Spiritual Growth: A Survey of Christ-centered Living.” *Christian Education Journal* 2, no. 2 (2005): 129.

# ACADEMIC IMPROVEMENT

Measure of Academic  
Improvement: Difference between  
grade point average before and  
after the semester

# BIBLICAL FOUNDATION: ACADEMIC PURSUITS CONSIDERED WORSHIP

- ◉ In Romans 12:1 Paul refers to our “reasonable service.
- ◉ Douglas Moo suggests that J. B. Phillip’s translation of the word as “intelligent” is a good choice.
- ◉ Moo: “people worship God by using their God-given intelligence to honor Him.

Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 176.

## ANOTHER RELATED PASSAGE

- ◎ “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).
- ◎ This certainly can include the way a student studies, writes papers completes assignments.

## OTHER VARIABLES

- ◎ Spiritual Growth compared to Small Group Participation
- ◎ Spiritual Growth compared to Involvement in Mentoring/Accountability

## PROCEDURE

- ◎ Hancock's Spiritual Growth Assessment was entered as a Qualtrics survey and embedded in an email.
- ◎ Students CLST 103, 101 and 105 in the Fall of 2014 were invited to participate.
- ◎ Approximately 300 students were offered the chance to participate.

## SMALL GROUP AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

To the Spiritual Growth Assessment a question was added. Students were to choose their level of involvement.

I meet with a Christian small group for:

- ⦿ prayer,
- ⦿ sharing,
- ⦿ Bible reading

# MENTORING AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A question was also added to measure their involvement in a Christian mentoring relationship:

I meet with someone for Christian mentoring/accountability who provides feedback concerning my walk with Christ.

## REFLECTION QUESTION

The relationship of academic progress and spiritual growth has been this author's interest for several years.

Reflection Question was added to an end of the course assignment.

Results were collected over two semesters of this course.

## RESULTS: SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Change in spiritual growth assessment scores:

Paired Samples T-Test, ( $r=.081$ , 2-tailed test):  
notable increase of 4.8 points.

Change in spiritual growth assessment  
compared to academic progress (difference in  
GPA): no statistically significant result

## RESULTS: MENTORING AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- ⊙ Spiritual Growth Assessment, (post) was compared to the level of involvement in Christian accountability/mentoring, the two measures did not indicate a significant relationship,
- ⊙ Accountability question was compared to the Spiritual Growth Assessment, (pre-test) a moderate correlation was measured, ( $r=.376$ ,  $p<.05$ , 2-tailed test).
- ⊙ Small group and mentoring questions have a strong correlation with each other in the post-assessment ( $r=.756$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

## RESULTS: SMALL GROUP INVOLVEMENT AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- ◎ First administration of Spiritual Growth Assessment compared with level of small group participation: not statistically significant ( $r=0.283$ )
- ◎ Small group question compared to spiritual growth assessment score :
- ◎ Moderate Correlation was measured ( $r=.340$ ,  $p<.05$ )

## PARTICIPATION

- ⊙ Population in the three CLST classes was 300.
- ⊙ 101 completed the first survey.
- ⊙ A total of forty-four post-assessments were submitted.
- ⊙ Some students reported the inability to access the survey or lack of receipt of the assessment at all.
- ⊙ Some simply chose not to reply.
- ⊙ Total sample successfully completed both assessments (who had pre- and post- GPAs recorded) was 38.

## PARTICIPATION IN CLST 105 REFLECTION QUESTION

- ◉ Question: “How you do feel that spiritual life has affected your academic progress?”
- ◉ Total of 96 students took the survey
- ◉ Twenty two students did not answer the question

## RESULTS OF SURVEY QUESTION

- ◎ Of the 74 students who answered the question, 79.7% (54 students) reported feeling that their spiritual life had a direct correlation to their academic progress.
- ◎ It seems that making God a greater priority made them better equipped to complete the requirements for their college courses.
- ◎ Of the 59 students, 92% reported that by growing closer to God they were able to be more successful academically.

## BIBLICAL FOUNDATION: SMALL GROUPS

- ◎ “Continuing daily with one accord in the temple, ...breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness...And the Lord added to the church daily” (Acts 2:42, 46-47).
- ◎ “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; ... By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

## MORE SUPPORT

- ◎ Go therefore and **make disciples** of all the nations” (Matt 28:18-20).
- ◎ Small groups provide a great platform for showing love to one’s neighbor.
- ◎ “Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matt 22:37-40).

## AGENDA FOR SMALL GROUP

Time should be set aside for certain essential elements during each group meeting:

- ⦿ W – Welcome (greeting, snack, affirmation)
- ⦿ W - Worship (songs, scripture reading)
- ⦿ W – Word (discussion of truth with application)
- ⦿ W – Witness (prayer, plan for ministry, plans for contacts)

Earley and Dempsey, 61-62.

# LIFE GROUPS

◎ Main components of small group meetings according to Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey:

- L – Love
- I - Instruction
- F – Fellowship
- E – Example

David Earley and Rod Dempsey, *The Pocket Guide to Leading a Small Group: Fifty-Two Ways to Help You and Your Small Group Grow* (Houston: TOUCH Publications, 2007), 51.

## CARE

- ◎ Steve Gladen suggests for ways groups can be involved in evangelism:
- ◎ C - Find Common Ground
- ◎ A – Accept others even if they are different
- ◎ R - Establish a Relationship
- ◎ E – Expect the Holy Spirit to do His work to convict and change lives.

Steve Gladen, *Leading Small Groups with Purpose: Everything You Need to Lead a Healthy Group* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2012), 12, 41.

## PRESENT SMALL GROUP MINISTRY TO L. U. STUDENTS

- ◎ Small groups within dormitories provide support
- ◎ Commuter Small Groups are meeting
  - New Direction: T4T
- ◎ Approximately 41 group leaders

## PROMOTION OF COMMUTER SMALL GROUPS

- ◎ Presently offered to students who move off campus as part of their required Commuter Orientation
- ◎ Need: to reach commuters who already live off campus.
- ◎ Need: promotion in convocation, in ministry fairs, within local neighborhoods and bus stops

## INTERVENTION: COMMUTER SMALL GROUPS

- ⊙ Goal: Begin a small group for commuters in Cornerstone
- ⊙ Work under supervision of local church
- ⊙ Work in cooperation with the Commuter Group Ministry of L. U.
- ⊙ Work with local ministries to identify and train new leaders to begin additional groups within the community.
- ⊙ Pray for the group to multiply in to several locations within in neighborhood and beyond and put forth effort to see it happen.

## CONCLUSION

- ◎ Small Group participation showed a measurable association with spiritual growth.
- ◎ Though not measured statistically, Student Reflection Questions pointed to student agreement that spiritual growth affects is related to one's academic progress.
- ◎ Commuter Small Groups need additional support and promotion.

- ◎ One of best ways to see significant improvement in the spiritual growth among Christian university students in through consistent small group participation.
- ◎ I sense that my role is to make disciple- makers through forming a local small group and through encouraging the involvement of other Bible-believing churches to consider becoming involved by doing the same.

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