Modeling Spiritual Formation in Distance Education

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Summary

In religious education, the spiritual formation of students is one of the most foundational actions in the educative process. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), providing theological accreditation for more than 260 schools nationwide, states (Standard 10.3.3.3) that distance education programs "shall seek to enhance personal and spiritual formation appropriate to the school’s mission and ecclesiastical tradition and identity." Defining what qualifies these formations is ambiguous. Maddix and Estep (2010) recognized this challenge and asked, "Is Christian nurture and spiritual formation possible in an online course or program?" To answer this question, the session will reference the Apostle Paul's letter to the Roman Christians to find out if "spiritual formation at a distance is possible."

When Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, he was physically located in Galatia. He had a personal relationship with some of the Romans, but most of them he did not know personally. Thus, the relationship between Paul and the Romans is similar to the relationship between many online professors and their online students—some were known and some were unknown. Examining Paul's (distance) formation with the Romans reveals eight practices that he used to articulate his spiritually formative message. Professors of distance education can apply these practices in their own classrooms; thus, increasing the spiritually-formative education they offer to their students. These practices reveal that Paul emphasized the Gospel as the basis for his message; grounded his authority to teach based on scripture; was transparent in his message; anticipated the questions of his audience; enlisted the community to help in the spiritual formation process; encouraged the recipients; prayed for needs; and provided an archetype of the ideal Christian life.

References


Presenter Bio

Benjamin K. Forrest, EdS, has been an Instructional Designer for Liberty University for the past year facilitating the design of online courses in the fields of Theology, Education, Public Policy, Business, and Psychology. Recently, he accepted a position as the Online Chair of Practical Studies for Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary. He is currently finishing the dissertation for his EdD, focusing on the relationally formative experiences of non-student seminary spouses in an online and residential graduate program.

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