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The Value of Relationships for Theological Development and Engagement: A Phenomenological Study of How College Students Experience Theology

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The Value of Relationships for Theological Development and Engagement:
A Phenomenological Study of How College Students Experience Theology

A thesis
Presented to
The School of Graduate Studies
Department of Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by
Kathleen J. Breitigan
May 2011
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<p>Higher Education and Student Development Taylor University Upland, Indiana</p>
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTERS THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Kathleen Breitigan

entitled

The Value of Relationships for Theological Development and Engagement:
A Phenomenological Study of How College Students Experience Theology

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the
Master of Arts degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to discover the essence of college students' engagement with theology. Theology is the foundation on which Christian beliefs are based, and many Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) institutions affiliate themselves with core theological doctrines that influence how their institutions function. This study seeks to explore the theological experiences of eight college seniors attending three CCCU institutions. The guiding questions for this study were how do college students define theology and how do college students perceive the influence of theology on their day-to-day experience? Through photo elicitation and semi-structured interviews, four main themes emerged: (a) Lack of theological clarity as first year students, (b) college as a positive influence on theology, (c) theology is challenged by differing perspectives, and (d) theology is developed through discussion. The essence of college student theology as revealed by the themes above suggests that college students engage theology through experience. Future implications for practice and future research are provided, as well as a discussion on the connection of theology to student development.

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CHAPTER 1

Christian institutions of higher education are poised between the demands of free academic inquiry and of committed theological loyalty. Without the first, it is hard to see the Christian colleges preserving intellectual viability, but without the second, they will not retain their Christian character.

(Ringenberg, 2006, p. 36)

INTRODUCTION

Acknowledging the traditional religious purposes of higher education, a need exists for Christian institutions to maintain their theological foundations, which stimulate the formation of institutional doctrine and mission statements. The mission statements of America's early institutions of higher education, such as Harvard and Yale, were influenced greatly by the religious institutions that founded these Ivy League universities. The goal of Harvard was a standard of higher learning in which students would "know God and Jesus Christ...and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning" (as cited in Ringenberg, 2006, p. 38). While secularization of the academy occurred over time (Holmes, 2001; Ringenberg, 2006), drawing many colleges away from their religious ties, Christian higher education has persisted and continues to be sustained by the institutional doctrines that shape how a Christian campus functions. Currently, there are Christian institutions that share an overarching goal of transforming the lives of students by "faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth" (cccu.org). An institution can strive to achieve the goal of connecting theological truths with learning; however, the effort put forth by the student will determine whether this goal is attained.

Based on the research of Dean (2010), conducted through the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), American teenagers are content with their current religious views – it is the church that needs to improve in educating the youth in relation to theology. In describing data collected from the NSYR, Dean (2010) summarizes the impression that “many American congregations – not to mention teenagers themselves – are ‘almost Christian’ – but perhaps not full, at least in terms of theology or practice” (p.4). This observation describes the religious background of many college-aged students (Dean, 2010; Smith & Snell, 2009). Christian higher education institutions should bear this in mind in order to be prepared to provide appropriate opportunities to challenge and support students as they develop in their faith, which should include theology (Kolb, 1984).

The topic of theology in the context of the Christian university has not been studied extensively, unlike the topic of spirituality, which has received much attention within higher education (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Fowler, 1981; Parks, 1986). Clark and Feinberg (2003) distinguish the importance of theology by stating, “even if spiritual life is more inclusive than theological doctrine, a particular person’s spiritual life must fit within theological parameters” (p. 226). As students transition through the college experience, they face theological, political, and epistemological diversity, which can be accompanied by intrinsic disagreement (Joeckel & Chesnes, 2010). Providing college students with the means to engage with their theological beliefs, whether through the power of narrative or through concrete representation, can be the gateway to developing a core aspect of their faith (Clark & Feinberg, 2003).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand how college students attending member institutions of the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) experience theology. This study explored the phenomenon of how college students experience theology and how they have integrated theological renderings throughout their college experience within three faith-based CCCU institutions. Therefore, this study pursued the following research questions:

1. How do college students define theology?
2. How do college students perceive the influence of theology on their day-to-day experiences?

These questions guided the research conducted in this study, as well as the review of the literature discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theology Defined

Essential to this study is how one understands the term *theology* and, further, how this term differentiates from *spirituality*. When looking at the etymology of the word, theology in Greek is *theos* (God) and *logos* (discourse), meaning “the discourse of God” (Enns, 2008; Thorsen, 2008). For the purposes of this study, theology will be defined more specifically as the study of the attributes of God and the articulation of the doctrines a person deems true about God (Enns, 2008; Thorsen, 2008). Within this definition, the term *doctrine* will be understood as “a belief or set of beliefs held and taught by a church” (Webster Dictionary).

For clarification, spirituality must be defined as there can be confusion about how an individual differentiates between the terms *theology* and *spirituality*. When research was conducted to assess college students’ perceptions of spiritual people and religious people, the participants, 19-23 year olds, “saw religion and spirituality as the same thing, with essentially no difference between the two concepts” (Borman, Cook, Moore, & Kunkel, 2000, p.129). *Spirituality* will be defined as the “human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the external world” (Mayhew, 2004, p. 666). Spirituality will not be the focus of this study as the intent is to better gauge how college students define and engage with their theological beliefs during their college experience.

Engagement Defined

Student engagement has been described as the amount of time a student invests in “educationally purposeful activities” (Kuh, 2001; Pascarella, 2001). Further supporting this definition, Wolf-Wendal, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) state that engagement consists of two main concepts: (a) the amount of time a student commits to academics and other activities that influence the successful experiences of the student and (b) how resourceful an institution is in facilitating learning experiences that encourage students to actively participate.

The role theology plays within the Christian community and, more specifically, within Christian institutions of higher education will be discussed further to provide context for this study on theological engagement. Illustrating the function of theological engagement within the Christian community, Peterson and Rourke (2002) explain that theology “is a tool for learning and an instrument of understanding, not a merit badge of the privileged and learned...because everyone is a theologian as he or she tries to find his or her place in the world and make sense of it” (p.1).

A Theory for Theological Engagement

A practical perspective in approaching theology is developed by Clark and Feinberg (2003), who explain that theology can be integrated into a person’s daily living through experiencing five different phases: engagement, discovery, testing, integration, and communication. Though the phases are not in sequential order, an individual needs to interact with each phase in order to engage fully with theology. In an effort to understand the theological engagement of college students, Clark and Feinberg’s theory provides a developed context for which the term *theological engagement* will be referenced. In

addition, understanding each of Clark and Feinberg's phases will help build cohesion between the college students' experience and their understanding of theology.

The engagement phase relates to a person's encounter with reality as it is presented through the lens of truth (Clark & Feinberg, 2003). The example is given of a man who, out of distress, begins to read the Gideon Bible in his hotel room and encounters reality through the truth of the Gospel of Matthew. This man will truly engage with theology if he assumes this perspective of reality and then learns how to share that reality with others (Clark & Feinberg). The point the authors make is that "people can come into contact with God through a wide variety of media. Some engage God more abstractly; others encounter God more concretely" (p.233). Regardless of the method used, however, the essential element is that one engages.

In the phase of discovery and testing, theology is a practice that should be engaged by the Church and bolstered by the personal testing of such discoveries (Clark & Feinberg, 2003; Erikson, 1994; Peterson & Rourke, 2002; Sayers, 1974). If an individual gets into the routine of accepting what first comes to mind or basing theological responses on the statement "what I've heard," then theological engagement will not be attained as the individual still needs to evaluate personal beliefs on the matter. Summarizing this idea, Clark and Feinberg describe the need for the Church to engage in discovery and testing because "theological dialogue helps us avoid this self-reinforcing pattern. It forces accountability and honesty" (p.237).

The integration phase relates to how people find theological meaning in their experiences and how they examine that meaning biblically (Clark & Feinberg, 2003). A person who is biblically literate yet is known as a cantankerous individual has avoided

the phase of integration by neglecting to conceptually test the biblical knowledge he holds. Clark and Feinberg provide a broader picture to understand the phase of integration. They explain:

Christians who unknowingly shield their personal lives from theological reflection can pretend they are ‘growing spiritually’ when perhaps they are merely accumulating biblical or theological information or using high-level spiritual gifts for public ministry. A seductive temptation for me – and for religious professionals in general – is to think that I am mature in Christ because I am knowledgeable about theology or skilled in ministry. (p.239)

Understanding the integration of knowledge and application is this phase of processing one’s thoughts and beliefs in accordance with the biblical doctrines intended to hold the Church accountable. In the same way, college students need to challenge how they are integrating their personal knowledge of theology through their lived experiences.

Lastly, theologians have created a technical language or terminology that implies theology is inaccessible to many Christians. For this reason, the communication phase was developed. This phase focuses on making the technical language of theology more concrete, whether through pictures, stories, or metaphors, all of which create a sense of openness and expression (Clark & Feinberg, 2003). Learning creative methods for engaging with theology can help an individual better understand and articulate beliefs. The implication of these phases is ultimately to guide college students in recognizing the opportunity to claim their faith as their own through gaining a deeper understanding of theology.

Theology and Christianity

In 1934, Karl Barth lectured on the topic of theology to a group of Free Protestant Theological Faculty (McGrath, 2001). During his lecture, Barth unfolded his perspective of theology by proclaiming, “In theology the Church seeks again and again to examine itself critically as it asks itself what it means and implies to be a Church among humanity” (as cited in McGrath, 2001, p.45). This lecture was given during a time when German churches were under pressure to conform to societal norms, provoked by the rule of Adolf Hitler. The relation of Barth’s statement to the historical setting of 1934 is relevant to the Church today as he emphasizes the importance of maintaining “the true identity of the Christian church” and prompts Christians to engage with theology, as it is not a subject meant for theologians alone (as cited in McGrath, p.45)

Theologians have highlighted the need for Christian communities to educate their members on the doctrines of their faith in addition to the practical disciplines of spirituality: a lack of theological education has created a dialogue of concern (Sayers, 1974; Wittmer, 2008). The prompting of this concern stems from the realization that many Americans struggle with theological literacy (Vlach, 2010). Theological literacy is defined as “learning to think theologically which implies a more self-conscious effort at theological reasoning” (Peterson & Rourke, 2002, p.2). Not thinking theologically in relation to one’s faith, or theological illiteracy, has led Christians to view theology as insignificant to their personal faith, straying from the historical and biblical foundations that identify the Church.

Developing a foundational understanding of doctrines needs to be initiated by the teaching of the Church (Clark & Feinberg, 2003; Erikson, 1994; Peterson & Rourke,

2002; Sayers, 1974), while recognizing how to apply those doctrines to faith rests on the individual. Acclaiming this trend, Erikson asserts that Christian preaching would shift from emphasizing doctrine to focus on “meeting human needs and comforting human hurts rather than glorifying God and declaring his expectations of and promises to us” (1994, p. 87), a theme that has become evident in the Christian community (Clark & Feinberg, 2003; Driscoll & Breshears, 2010; Peterson & Rourke, 2002). Supporting Erikson’s claim with their explanation of why the study of theology within Christianity is lacking, Driscoll and Breshears (2010) write:

Sadly, out of laziness or fear, some [Christians] give up far too quickly and subsequently have little interest in diligently studying to grow in their understanding of God. Further, they commonly defend themselves by saying that if they love God in their heart, they need not concern themselves with deep understanding in their mind. (p.28)

Driscoll and Breshears are referring to the Church; however, this claim can include the college-aged student. In order to integrate this context of theology within the larger Christian community with the context of theology among college students, there needs to be an explanation of theology within the framework of higher education to connect the two concepts.

Theology and the University

Within the historical context of universities, a foundational expectation existed to teach doctrine throughout a student’s college experience (Ringenberg, 2006; Rudolph, 1990). It was not unusual for campuses to experience religious revivals that would interrupt the routine of the college student, as was the case at Princeton in which “many a

chamber where formerly mischievous youths plotted...to set off firecrackers in the lecture rooms, there was earnest prayer or anxious discussions over religious matter” (Wertenbacker as cited in Ringenberg, 2006, p.62). This historical perspective reminds Christian institutions of their need to maintain their theological heritage. It also pertains to the unique environment a Christian institution creates in which religious discussions are welcome and the theological renderings of the students are challenged throughout their college experience as they are introduced to new theological frameworks through introductory religion courses.

Demonstrating the challenge of facilitating discussion about religious topics within current Christian institutions is the study conducted among ninety-five CCCU institutions by Joeckel and Chesnes (2010). In this study, 1,907 faculty members completed a survey covering a variety of topics, including faith, the Bible, perception of students, and campus climate. The faculty members were asked, “What is the most difficult part about being a professor at a Christian university?” and categories were created to group participant responses. One category was labeled “compromised intellectual rigor” of which 128 responses were placed. Representing a trend in the responses from this category, one faculty member writes:

It can be a challenge to escape the spiritual smugness that sometimes arises in the classroom or campus atmosphere: a spirit of ‘we have it all figured out and don’t need anything more.’ The homogeneity of the students and their life experiences which bring a great deal of confidence in the ‘rightness’ of their own lives and actions and an unwillingness to question, think deeper, or try to

imagine the goals and values and meanings of the lives of others.

(Joeckel & Chesnes, p. 190)

There was a sense of disappointment among the faculty member responses as they spoke of close-mindedness among students and a lack of desire to interact with difficult questions (Joeckel & Chesnes, 2010). The results of this study pose a question for further consideration among Christian institutions of higher education: How can the integration of theology be achieved within the diverse environment of the university, especially in regards to the theological engagement of the student experience in these environments?

In his popular work on the soul of the university, Marsden (1994) explains the historical and societal events that contributed to the secularization of the academy. During this time, universities started focusing more on preparing students for the job market, becoming vocationally oriented in the curricula rather than providing religious training. This shift contributed to the “decentralized ethos” of the university as Marsden refers to it as well as the separation of faith from learning (p.420).

The Christian university has reclaimed this objective of integrating faith and learning which “calls for interdisciplinary thinking in which theology is a leading voice in the dialogue between the disciplines; it calls for worldview thinking across the curriculum; and it calls for worshipful learning” (Holmes as cited in Dockery & Gushee, 1999, p.167). The integration of faith and learning is an integral part of Christian higher education as it creates opportunities for college students to contemplate their area of academic study as well as their personal beliefs (Dockery & Gushee, 1999).

Modeling an approach to the application of faith and learning within Christian higher education is the CCCU, an organization that accentuates theology within higher

education through its mission statement. The CCCU associates with the need to facilitate interconnectedness between scholarship and biblical truth (cccu.org). Acknowledging how college students perceive their personal integration of faith and learning, particularly in relation to theology, will provide insight on the effectiveness of such a mission. In order to understand the need for this comparison, an explanation of generational characteristics and developmental stages of the college student will be explored.

Theology and the College Student

When looking closely at the development of college student theological engagement, one should consider the broader generational characteristics that influence a students' interaction with their beliefs. Dean (2010) provides a caution in saying, "Whenever we participate in the transmission of faith, across culture or generation, we are putting the gospel into the hands of people new to it, which is a little like giving plutonium to a kindergartner" (p.128). Based on the previous section on the Church's role with theology, this concept could be a good indicator of how theology is being communicated to the young adult generation of Christians.

Reflecting on the future generation of the Church, Leroy Barber, president of the organization Mission Year, communicates, "Young adults are turning away from a modern church that they see as nothing more than hypocritical. Standards and rules without sacrifice and solidarity is hypocrisy. Christian rhetoric without tangible acts of love is hypocrisy" (Barber as cited in Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007, p.65). Incorporating an education on the doctrines of the Church into the youth ministries setting could better equip each new generation as they enter college, a period when many of their beliefs and viewpoints on Christianity are challenged (Fowler, 1981; Kinnaman & Lyons 2007;

Palmer, 1993). The challenge presented to students through their peer interactions has a major impact on their learning, as researched by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005). An example provided in their research relates to the idea of theology learned through peers, as students have “serious discussions about religious, philosophical, or political beliefs” (Pascarella & Terenzini, p. 121).

Supporting the need to engage students in their theology as they refine their beliefs is the evidence that a college student’s commitment to religious values is more likely to be refined and incorporated with other beliefs than it is to increase or decrease during the college experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). “Religious beliefs became more individual and less doctrinaire” based on the observation of college students’ attitudes toward religion provided by Pascarella and Terenzini (p. 284). This observation enhances the need to investigate further the change in theological beliefs experienced by the current generation of college students. Understanding the theological experience and renderings of college students will augment how higher education professionals understand the faith development of their students. In addition, Christian institutions of higher education can strengthen the religious commitments of students (Railsback, 1994). This concept relates to the need for Christian higher education institutions to address the theological frameworks associated with this process of reexamining one’s faith as college students search for meaning through the process of developing their faith (Parks, 1986).

In a study comparing the faith commitment of “Born-Again” students attending secular and evangelical colleges in 2001, students were asked to describe their religious beliefs in comparison to the beliefs they held their first year in college (Railsback, 2006). The results show that among the 44% of participants attending a Protestant college with a

mission statement associated with a church, less than half of the students indicated stronger religious beliefs (Railsback, 2006). The lack of growth reported through this study contributes to the literature by stating the need to draw attention to the theological experiences of the college students.

Dunham and Serven (2003) address the period of transition faced by many college-aged students by explaining:

In the midst of a barrage of new experiences and opportunities, your patterns of thinking develop and change....How you manage and evaluate this decade of time has a direct impact on the integration of your theology, person, and aspirations for years to come. (p.12)

Further supporting the idea that faith development is occurring during the college experience is Fowler's explanation on the stages of faith. While addressing the characteristics of the individual-reflective stage of faith development, Fowler (1981) explains that when transitioning into college, students may "come face to face with the relativity of their perspectives and those of others to their life experience. But they fail to interrupt their reliance on external sources of authority...in order to cope with this relativity" (1981, p.179). Part of the challenge and opportunity to begin the discussion of theology within the college student population is providing them with a means of communicating their theological renderings as they encounter the new perspectives provided by their college experience.

Summary

The Church is struggling to balance theological education and spiritual formation (Clark & Feinberg, 2003; Erikson, 1994; Peterson & Rourke, 2002; Sayers, 1974) as

Church leaders seek to guide its members. The mission statement of the CCCU professes a commitment of integrating scholarship with biblical truth, a statement often pursued by its member institutions. The familiar idea of holistic education among Christian institutions of higher education strives to provide an experience that encourages development in various areas, including theology and faith development (Fowler, 1981; Pacasrella & Terenzini, 2005). As students develop through college, they begin to interact with new theological perspectives and experiences (Railsback, 2006). As suggested by Pascarella and Terenzini, college students are likely to refine their religious attitudes. There is a need to understand better how the specific theological experiences of college students connect with the broader scope of their college experience. Further research on the theological engagement of college students will help higher education professionals in comprehending the theological understandings of their students (Railsback, 2006).

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Design

In order to explore the theological renderings and experiences of college students, this study followed a qualitative method with a phenomenological design to capture the essence of theological engagement among college students. Based on the definition provided by Creswell (2009), phenomenological research is a “qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study” (p.231). The intent of this study is to understand the theological experiences of college students; therefore, phenomenology is the most reliable method for capturing the “lived experiences” of college students (Patton, 2002). Further defining the “lived experience,” Van Manen clarifies that phenomenological reflection is an act of retrospection rather than introspection (as cited in Patton, 2002). According to Husserl, phenomenology intends to study how people describe their experiences through their senses. His assumption was “we can only know what we experience” (as cited in Patton, p.105).

This phenomenological study explored how college students attending CCCU institutions define theology and how they have experienced theology during college. Using a design similar to Mayhew (2004), this study involved photo elicitation and interviews. Mayhew (2004) created a study to explore the essence of spirituality among students with different worldviews using a phenomenological design. Mayhew (2004) used a sequential two-part data collection strategy to capture the “lived experiences” of

his participants. Photo elicitation requires participants to capture the phenomenon being studied in an attempt to make their experience more concrete. In this case, students explored how they understand their own theological development. Intended to make the language of theology more accessible, Clark and Feinberg(2003) identify the communication phase of theological engagement, which focuses on creating a sense of expression in relation to theology, which is the goal of the photo elicitation portion of this study.

Participants

The participants for this study were eight college seniors attending three faith-based liberal arts CCCU member institutions. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participating CCCU institutions to help with confidentiality. The first institution is Northern College, a Wesleyan institution of approximately 1,300 undergraduate students. The second institution is Central University, a non-denominational institution of approximately 1,900 students. The third institution is Mass College, a multid denominational institution of approximately 1,500 students. The participants were selected based on their availability to commit to taking photos and to participate in a 40-minute interview. They had to be registered as full-time students in their senior year of undergraduate study. Participants were asked to create a pseudonym for themselves for the purpose of confidentiality in reporting the findings in this study.

The purpose of studying senior students was to capture the lived experience, as this sample of students will have experienced four years within a CCCU institution. An invitation to participate in the study was e-mailed to the seniors at the studied institutions (see Appendix A) by an administrator at each respective institution.

Participant Characteristics

The participants in this study were six females and two males who were full-time students completing their senior year at three different CCCU institutions. Each institution abides by core Christian doctrines that are described on the institutional websites and in community living statements. The institutions in this study were given pseudonyms of Northern College, Mass College, and Central University. The participants who agreed to participate in the study chose pseudonyms for themselves. The following chart further describes the characteristics of the eight participants.

Chart 1

Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Institution	Major	Gender	Age
Britney	Central University	Political Science	Female	21
Diane	Central University	Art Education	Female	22
Elizabeth	Northern College	Christian Formation	Female	21
Lily	Northern College	Business	Female	22
Mark	Mass College	Biology	Male	22
Paul	Central University	Biblical Literature	Male	22
Sadie	Central University	Elementary Education	Female	22
Susie	Central University	Elementary Education	Female	22

Britney, a political science major, was involved in various leadership positions on her campus. She most recently served as a resident assistant in her residence hall. Diane was an art education major who was completing her student teaching requirement while participating in this study. She captured a majority of her photos for the study on her commute to and from her teaching location, an approach that she said helped her be more aware of her surroundings. Elizabeth was a Christian formation major who was involved in leading a daily worship service on her campus as well as being a children's ministry volunteer for the local community. As a business major, Lily indicated her appreciation

of the liberal arts focus at her institution. She served as an assistant hall director, which is a student leadership position on her campus. Also highly involved on his campus, Mark participated in weekly Bible studies and found his Biblical literature major as highly influential in his desire to study Scripture in great detail. Paul served as a good example of the integration of faith and learning as he incorporated his faith in his studies as a biology major, specifically in regards to the topic of creation care. Paul also served as a resident assistant on his campus. Sadie has served as a resident assistant and was living off-campus for her senior year. She had participated in several international trips that encouraged her to learn about different religious beliefs. Lastly Susie, an elementary education major, took advantage of service opportunities through Central University as well as international travel opportunities, both of which came up as experiences that have sharpened her beliefs and have taught her how to better articulate those beliefs.

Procedure

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at each studied institution, participants were contacted and invited to participate in this study through phone or e-mail communication. Once the participants were identified, they were asked to complete an informed consent form (Appendix B) prior to beginning the photo elicitation portion of the study. In addition, individual interviews were scheduled prior to the photo elicitation to ensure consistent amounts of time between capturing images and the interview process. Participants were given a one-week period to capture five photos that represented their understanding of theology. Following this portion of the study, participants were interviewed individually for approximately forty minutes following the interview protocol created for this study (Appendix C).

Participants were asked through an e-mail invitation (Appendix A) to capture five images which represented their personal understanding of theology. Once participants had captured five photos, they were asked to create a one-sentence subtitle for each photo. Creating the subtitle was intended to facilitate a challenge, as the participant must process the photo, making the definition of theology more concrete in order to create a concise statement representing both the definition and purpose of the photo. All photos were digitally submitted to the researcher prior to previously scheduled interview sessions. Interviews were conducted based on the protocol to discuss the participant's interpretation of the photos and to explore further the participant's lived experience through this process in relation to theology.

Analysis

After each interview was conducted and recorded, the data was analyzed. The researcher transcribed the recorded interviews. Once transcribed, the data, including photos, were kept in a file that was accessible only to the researcher. The researcher then reviewed each interview transcription to look for reoccurring and overarching themes related to the research questions of this study. The researcher coded the transcriptions based on the methodology suggested by Creswell (2007) which takes the approach of identifying major themes and categorizing them. Upon completion of the study, both interview recordings and photos were deleted from the researcher's file to ensure the participants' confidentiality.

Validity

For the purposes of increasing the validity of these methods, two strategies were completed. The method of triangulation through peer review was utilized first to check

the themes of the study, followed by a member checking process with each participant (Creswell, 2007). A peer review was completed in order to promote the validity of the researcher's themes. The peer reviewer provided themes discovered from reading all eight transcriptions from participant interviews. These themes aligned with the researcher's themes and, therefore, signified validity of the method used by the researcher. Member checking was used to validate the themes found in this study. Participants were provided with a copy of the themes pulled from their transcriptions to ensure the themes were accurately represented by the researcher. All participants confirmed that the themes represented their experience and responses reported in their interview.

|

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the day-to-day experience of theology among college students. The following two questions guided the research methods: How do college students define theology? How do college students perceive theology in their day-to-day experiences? Participants were asked to take five pictures of images that represented their view of theology. This chapter will discuss the themes of the photo elicitation portion of the study as well as the main themes that emerged through the interviews with each participant.

Participants' Definition of Theology

One of the research questions this study was seeking to answer was how college students define theology. For the purpose of this study, theology is defined as the study of the attributes of God and the articulation of the doctrines a person believes to be true about God (Enns, 2008; Thorsen, 2008). Each participant provided a definition of theology, and their responses could be categorized as the systematic study of God or relating theology to the experiential aspect of God. When asked what her definition of theology was, Diane responded by saying, "I guess I would define theology as the things an individual believes to be true based on their experience of God." Paul defined theology as "the ways in which humans understand their relationship to divine." Supporting the systematic definition of theology, Mark responded by stating, "In the Greek, *theos*, and *logos*, is the word, so, study or knowledge of God." Also supporting

the systematic definition, Lily explained theology as “a systematic study of Biblical principles and faith integration.” Each participant provided a definition that was brief yet encompassed either a systematic approach or an experiential focus. In summary, the definition theme that emerged was that theology is systematically and experientially understood by the participants in this study.

Photo Themes

Participants were asked to take and submit five photos of images that represented their understanding of theology. No further instructions were given in order to encourage creativity in capturing images. The photos were then themed based on the type of image captured. Three main themes emerged: Images of nature, images of community, and images of Scripture.

Images of nature.

The first theme that emerged from the photo elicitation portion of the study was the use of nature in the participants’ images. Six out of eight participants chose to represent their understanding of theology through nature images at least once. Images of trees, plants, lakes, snow, and oceans were used to convey a variety of theological representations. Elizabeth illustrated the Trinity through a tree with three branches. Susie focused on the idea of Eternity through capturing the horizon of the ocean and God’s guidance through a photo of mountains (Photo 1).

Photo 1

God's Guidance



Mark creatively represented the Atonement through a photo of dirty snow integrating with white snow (photo 2). He further explained that as a Christian, he acknowledges the need for Christ's atonement as sin exists in his life and he seeks to be "washed white as snow."

Photo 2

Atonement



Images of community.

The second photo theme was that of community. Six out of eight participants captured photos of a person or multiple people from their campuses that were intended to represent relationship and Christian community in regards to the participant's experiences and understanding of theology. Paul included a group photo of his living learning community. Mark photographed a group of racially diverse peers to present the idea "that every nation, tribe, and tongue will be worshipping God." Diane abstractly took a photo of a coffee cup and a newspaper to represent the need to connect with the world and consider how one interacts with people (Photo 3).

Photo 3

Connection



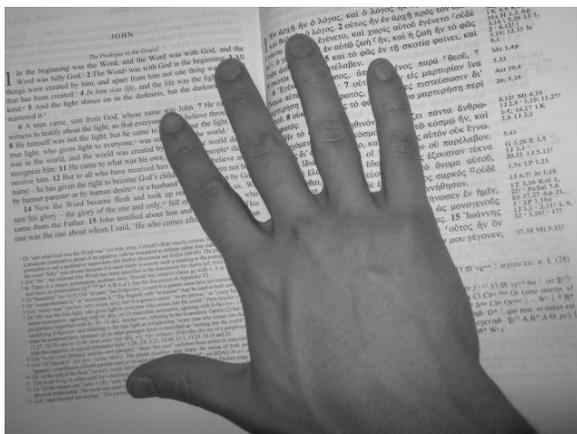
Images of Scripture.

Lastly, the use of the Bible in participant photos provided the third theme. While representing different aspects of theological understanding, five of the eight participants captured a photo of Scripture. Sadie demonstrated the value of having an informed theology through study of Scripture by photographing an open Bible, as did Britney and Lily. Diane focused on the study of Scripture through her image of a study Bible. Mark

was focused on the biblical concept of the Word becoming flesh in the photo below (Photo 4).

Photo 4

Word Becomes Flesh



The study of God was a concept that was represented by three participants within their set of photos. Lily took a photo of her campus library to represent the research and study needed to have a “deeper understanding of God.” Representing a similar concept, Britney and Paul took pictures of the books that have influenced their theological thinking. Sadie took a picture of the chapel on her campus to represent where she has learned a lot about theology through speakers and the ideas they present.

In summary, the three main photo themes were images of nature, community, and Scripture. These images represented a spectrum of theological beliefs, including the Atonement of Christ, the Word becoming flesh, and the Trinity. Through community, participants experienced meaningful conversations with peers and faculty, which begins to answer the second research question for this study: How do college students perceive

the influence of college on their theological beliefs? This research question will be further explained as the themes from the interview portion are discussed.

Interview Themes

After submitting their photos, participants were asked to complete individual interviews with the researcher to further explain their photographs as well as provide context to their experience. The four themes that emerged from these interviews consist of: a) Lack of theological clarity as first year students, b) college as a positive influence on theology, c) theology is challenged by differing perspectives, and d) theology is developed through discussion.

Lack of theological clarity as a first year student.

As first year college students, all participants indicated that they either did not know how to articulate clearly a theology or altogether lacked knowledge of theology. This was prominent in two forms of responses: those who had a low confidence level in speaking about what they believed and those who did not understand the complexities of their beliefs.

Mark, a biblical literature major, emphasized how his college experience at Central University had an impact on his faith as he referred to specific courses, conversations, and studies that led him deeper in his understanding of theology. Prior to having that experience, Mark resonates with this theme, by stating:

I think something I struggled with before College is...I believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation, but I didn't know why Jesus was the only way to salvation,

I understood that we sinned but I didn't know why it took Christ dying on the cross, why that was the only way, why God couldn't just take that sin away and say that's ok.

Paul, a biology major at Mass College, demonstrated his limited theological knowledge as a first year student:

I still have an understanding of the complexities of the world but as my perspectives have broadened to see just how complex of a world it is ... maybe because of that, my view of God is not in the same small box that it was in at the beginning of college, through understanding the beauties of community and of our call to be redemptive agents in the world...that provides a broader expanse of possibilities.

While Paul and Mark indicated that they recognized what their beliefs were, they did not necessarily understand why they believed those ideas as freshmen in college.

Britney, Elizabeth, and Lily communicated that as freshmen they lacked an understanding of theology and were, to some extent, intimidated by the term. Lily, a business major at Northern College, openly communicated her lack of theological understanding as a first year student. She genuinely explained:

As a first year college student, I probably could not define the word theology to you. It was a word that was somewhat foreign to me and it kind of scared me because it sounded like one of those big pastor words that I didn't know what it was.

This lack of theological understanding was indicated through the participant's referral to theology as a "pastor word" as well as the feelings of being overwhelmed when arriving

to their Christian campuses because their peers seemed to be more knowledgeable about the Bible and their beliefs.

College as a positive influence on theological understanding.

As demonstrated by statements of growth, participants indicated that their college experience positively affected their theological understanding through classes, chapel services, and community interactions. Within the descriptions of their college experience, Susie and Diane highlight the academic and social influences on their theological understanding.

Susie described what specifically influenced her deeper understanding of theology during her college experience. She identified these influences as:

Experiences through work, and through classes, and through professors, and through my floor...then looking at how I've grown I think just as a whole person, I feel like that's what Central's commitment is, not to just education in general, but to go out into the world prepared for God's service.

Diane, an art education major, explained how Central University has influenced her growth through her interactions with her campus counselor, conversations with a professor, and time spent with her peer group. Britney and Sadie also mentioned the influence of their peers, specifically with the women in their residence hall, in motivating them to study God more because they felt they were "so far behind" their friends in understanding theology. Further expanding upon the influence her college experience had on her theology, Britney commented:

I'm a lot more grounded in my faith and ...I have a better foundation for whenever I leave this Christian bubble that I'll be able to still have [theology] whenever I'm on my own and not surrounded by others who believe the same things as me.

Echoing this understanding that her college experience has prompted a deeper understanding of theology, Elizabeth expands upon how she formed her definition of theology by affirming, "I have come to know what more theology means from being at a Christian college and taking classes about theology."

Different perspectives challenge theology.

The third theme that emerged was the idea that theology is challenged by different perspectives and the practice of asking good questions. In their explanation of their photos or in response to protocol questions, participants demonstrated that the different perspectives they encountered on campus challenged and broaden their theological understandings and beliefs.

Sadie, who shared a lot about her appreciation of community on her campus, demonstrated how campus relationships shaped her theology as she responded:

I think opening my eyes to things that were outside of my very limited understanding of theology, or the way that I'd always been raised or taught...and so to see other points of views and perspectives I think has been really helpful in shaping my mindset on theology.

Elizabeth, a Christian Formation major, shared about her experience at Northern College in relation to the role conversations have had on her theological beliefs as she stated:

I've been exposed to a lot more questions and a lot of different perspectives and ways to look at different aspects of theology and...I think that has at least allowed me to see how other people see God and... my mind's been broadened in seeing other people's view points.

Providing a practical application in how she has experienced this theme of being challenged by different theological perspectives, Susie demonstrated how she approaches and processes new viewpoints. Referring to conversations she has had with her peers that have prompted her to say, "I don't really know what I think about that," Susie explains her desire to be rooted in Scripture in saying, "I want my root to be where, what the Lord says about this and I can also talk to people about it and see what they think but I really want it [her belief] to be rooted in Scripture."

Discussion as formative to theological understanding.

Lastly, the theme of discussion as an agent in gaining theological understanding for participants was identified, specifically the role discussion plays in meshing day-to-day experience with theological thinking. Participants reported that discussion within a campus community or within close relationships helped them to gain understanding and articulate their theological beliefs.

Adding to the theme of discussion, Mark shared about his experience talking about theology with his peers. He commented, "I'm challenged so much in conversations with people, people really defining where they are, where they stand with God, why they believe these things." Britney also spoke about the importance of the conversations she had with her peers in shaping her theology. She explained, "My friends have a big

influence about what I know about the Lord and we have roommate prayer together every week...I feel like I learn about God through that.”

Providing an example of how discussion influences our daily routine, Lily explained:

I would say the different forums and speakers that we have come to campus...allows for good discussion to follow ... I guess having chapel every three days out of the week, it becomes part of our routine, so in a sense it makes theological discussion normal to us because it is something we're exposed to quite frequently.

Lily communicated how she has been positively influenced by the liberal arts focus of her college curriculum as she has recognized the value of her Biblical Literature and Introduction to Christianity courses as foundational educational experiences.

Essence of How Students Experience Theology

One of the research questions guiding this study was: How do college students perceive the influence of college on their theological beliefs? Based on the themes that surfaced from the interviews, the college experience of the participants in this study was an influential facet in the participant's theological understanding and development. A lack of confidence in relation to understanding theology as a first year student was a predominant theme among all participant responses. As a result of being challenged by different perspectives presented by peers, professors, or within a chapel setting, participants indicated a deeper understanding of their theology. In addition, the role of discussion within the context of Christian community helped participants process their beliefs and questions about their personal theology.

Three main themes emerged from the photo portion of the study. All participants used at least one image of nature to represent a theological belief. A majority of participants included a person or a group of people to represent community in connection with their personal theology. Lastly, participants took pictures of Bibles to represent the importance of Scripture in their theology.

Incorporating these main themes and the research questions from this study, an essence emerged that captured the lived experience of the eight participants in this study. The essence of this study is that college students engage theology through experience. More specifically, the relationships formed through community and with peers that challenge them to question, discuss, and contemplate the theological perplexities of their faith. The essence of theological engagement for participants is present in the overall responses, as participants would often refer to specific narratives to aid in communicating a doctrine they believed or a theological concept that they were processing at one point during their college experience. Also, the participants' photos conveyed the idea of theology as experience by capturing buildings on campus or people that represented a formative experience for each participant.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The intent of this study is to discover the essence of theology among senior college students who have gained four years of campus experience which they can reflect on through their participation in this study. The four major themes that surfaced after analyzing the data were (a) lack of theological clarity as first year students, (b) college as a positive influence on theology, (c) theology is challenged by differing perspectives, and (d) theology is developed through discussion. These themes help to capture the lived experience of college students as they described how they have developed their personal understanding of theology during their four-year college experience.

From these themes, there is a need to set a framework of this study and discuss how the findings relate to current literature and practices within the area of college student development. The topic of college student spirituality is addressed briefly for the purpose of clarifying how participants referred to their theological versus spiritual experiences in college. The essence of theology within this study is that college students engage theology through their lived experience. This essence will be discussed further in connection to how participants experienced theology, the role of theology in student development, and the larger implications of college student theology within Christian higher education.

Theology as Experience

As Jenkins (2001) describes, “Theology involves and engages all we are and all we do, and demands our attentiveness to everything around us” (p.17). Approaching the concept of theology as experience derives from the reported experiences of the participants in this study that addressed how their social, academic, familial, and personal occurrences had influenced their current understanding of theology. The use of creative communication, reflective practices, and narrative are three mediums that students used to communicate their experience and should be discussed further to connect theology to student development and higher education.

The idea of choosing creative methods for communicating the technical language of theology was apparent, as participants were able to represent their doctrinal beliefs through images that captured their theological experience during college. For example, Mark captured the doctrine of Creation through a photo of a fellow student taking a bite of an apple. This was intended to represent the biblical narrative of Eve being tempted in the Garden of Eden. Elizabeth represented her understanding of the Trinity through a tree with three large branches that sprouted from the trunk of the tree. As these examples highlight, the use of imagery can communicate intricate ideas and represents the concept of simplicity in connection with a complex topic like theology. Lily encompasses this concept in explaining her experience of capturing theological images for this study:

I think it was very helpful and I enjoyed doing it because it made me kind of step back and really think about what do, how would I represent theology, how would I define it, especially within a college setting theology is a word that’s sort of, well not really thrown around, but it’s said a lot...but how often do we really

think about it? It was sort of a reflection piece for me, it made me step aside of any lecture, conversation, and really think about what do I think of theology.

Providing students with a means of communicating their theological renderings as they encounter new perspectives presented by their college experience can be helpful in articulating a theology. Arthur (2007) argues that the church needs to reclaim the role of imagination in passing on Christian tradition to the next generation of the church.

Theology is often associated with intellectual discussion and study more than a faith practice or reflection topic, as Lily suggests in her personal experience.

Arthur (2007) specifically speaks to the idea of metaphors, and Dean (2010) summarizes Arthur's idea in stating that "metaphors activate what creativity theorists call 'lateral thinking,' a co-activation of two parts of the brain that are not normally strongly connected" (p.127). Connecting the idea of lateral thinking with theology presents an opportunity for higher education institutions to be more mindful of the how theology is taught, understood, and experienced on Christian college campuses. As discussed in the supporting literature used for this study, the idea of Clark and Feinberg's (2003) phases of theological engagement, drawing specific attention to the phase of communicating of theology, relates to this idea of lateral thinking and creativity. This phase of communication highlights the importance of making the technical language of theology more concrete, whether through images, metaphors, or stories.

When participants were asked if capturing images to represent their theology helped or hindered their expression, seven of the eight participants communicated that the photo elicitation helped them express their theology. Lily's previous explanation serves

as an example of this finding. Paul was the only participant to report a difficulty in capturing images. He explains:

I think it is a bit of a hindrance because how do you wrap up these grand ideas and grand notions into a picture of an object or a person or a place, you know, God is so much bigger than all these things...so it's challenging to find a representational view of an idea.

Paul serves as an example of an individual who demonstrated a strong intellectual engagement with theology through his doctrinally based responses. When describing personal experiences, Paul creatively communicated his beliefs through metaphor and narrative. The idea of a narrative approach to theology is best explained by McLaren (2004), who writes, "From this narrative perspective, the practices of humility, compassion, spirituality, and love – which develop only in community – are more essential to a good and healthy theology, more primal and important than scholarship, logic, intellect" (p.330). McLaren's description captures the importance of narrative but also recounts the essence of experience in this study as participants have shared how they engage with theology.

Theology and Student Development

Understanding college student theology through the lens of experience sets a stage for the underlying developmental implications associated with the main themes of (a) lack of theological clarity as freshmen, (b) college as a positive influence on theological understanding, (c) theology is challenged by different perspectives, and (d) the role of discussion in shaping theology. The theory of peer interaction (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), the challenge and support model (Kolb, 1984), and the integration of

spiritual questing as reported by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) with the phase of theological discovery (Clark & Feinberg, 2003) will be further discussed in an effort to connect college student development and theology.

Peer interactions.

A theme in this study was how the peer interactions of participants positively influenced or shaped their systematic and experiential understandings of theology through conversation and being challenged by different perspectives. Peterson and Rourke (2002) explain that theology “is a tool for learning and an instrument of understanding, not a merit badge of the privileged and learned...because everyone is a theologian as he or she tries to find his or her place in the world and make sense of it” (p.1). This concept relates to the theme of peer interactions as participants learned from one another about theology, a complex topic. As described by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), the peer interactions that are most influential “appear to be those that reinforce the ethos of the formal academic program and extend it into non-classroom settings” (p.121), which includes religious conversations. Additionally, as reported from community college and four-year college samples, peer interactions “influence positively knowledge acquisition and academic skill development during college” (Pascarella & Terenzini, p. 121). The participants in this study on theology provided supporting data for these notions of peer influence as they described their individual experiences. Additionally, the photos of peers to represent community illustrate this very idea. The participants’ descriptions of each of their peers in the submitted photos also supported this concept.

Britney, who shared about having roommate prayer time, stated how this relationship helped her not only to process but also to understand theology on a deeper level as she and her roommate exchanged their beliefs and ideas. Britney also submitted a photo of a prayer journal she and her roommate used during their prayer time. Similarly, Paul, who participated in a living-learning community as a junior, used this experience to demonstrate the importance of conversation in helping him define his theology. To communicate this idea, Paul provided a photo of his living-learning community, to which he referred frequently in explaining how he formed his idea of community. Lily and Elizabeth also shared how their campus was intentional about holding forums that give students the opportunity to think and discuss with well-educated theologians, something that they identified as challenging their beliefs and their commitment to those beliefs.

Challenge and support.

The theme of different viewpoints prompting participants to examine their theology demonstrates the concept that college serves as a time when students' beliefs and perspectives are challenged (Fowler, 1981; Kinnamon & Lyons, 2007; Palmer, 1993). More applicable to current higher education practitioners is answering the question, "Are students being provided with opportunities to be challenged and supported (Kolb, 1984) as they develop their faith, including theology?" While participants indicated that they recognized growth in their theological understanding through the presence of differing perspectives, the value of questions was mentioned also as a means that prompted theological engagement among participants. As a Christian formation major, Elizabeth shared how her systematic theology course created a period of questioning during her overall college experience. She comments on this experience:

I've learned to form a lot of questions to God...I just have to give him [God] a lot of my questions and, I think that has grown me, I haven't always liked it, having more questions, but I think it is good for me in the end.

Elizabeth's experience with questioning God can be related to the findings of Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011), who report on the outcomes of self-reflection and spiritual questing, which will be discussed in collaboration with the theological questioning experienced by participants in this study. In their study on the inner lives of college students, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm report on the idea of spiritual questing (Klaassen & McDonald, 2002) which can be represented as "the seeking in us that can lead to a better understanding of who we are, why we are here, and how we can live a meaningful life" (p.28). The dominance of questioning among college students represents a common connection between the study of Astin, Astin and Lindholm and the theological focus of this study. This concept relates back to the idea presented by Clark and Feinberg (2003) that throughout the process of engaging theology there needs to be a phase of discovery and testing. This is when individuals need to separate themselves from basing their theology on 'what they've heard' to what they have studied, experienced, and know to be true about theology.

As students explore deep theological questions and pursue experiences that will provide answers to their questions, they need to be engaged by others to help them process their spiritual questing or, as mentioned by participants in this study, the reexamination of *why* they believe what they believe. A good example of how this can be applied is through the practice of contemplation or reflection as described by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011):

Time spent critically contemplating one's perceptions, experiences, and roles may help individuals gain greater awareness and self-understanding, and help resolve disconnections between one's values and experiences. Through these processes, students can better embrace their capacity to develop and articulate their own understanding of the world and their place within it. (p.42)

The influence of peer interactions, challenging students by presenting different perspectives, and journeying alongside students as they ask meaningful questions are three areas that can ultimately influence a student's engagement with and understanding of theology.

Theology and Implications for Christian Higher Education

Speaking to the theme of first year confidence, or lack thereof, Dean (2010) presents the idea of translation in connection to how Christian beliefs are passed from one generation of the church to another. She uniquely explains, "Whenever we participate in the transmission of faith, across cultures or generations, we are putting the gospel into the hands of people new to it, which is a little like giving plutonium to a kindergartner" (p. 128). As first year students, participants used language of fear and confusion as primary reactions when encountering the term theology, theological discussions in classes, or having to communicate their personal theological beliefs. These themes represent an opportunity for Christian higher education to encourage theological engagement within the campus setting.

Christian higher education institutions should seek to develop students who are rooted in the understanding, application, and articulation of their theological beliefs – essentially, engaging students about their theological "habits of heart and mind" (Garber,

2007) during their college experience. As indicated from the participants of this study, an opportunity exists to challenge and support first year students as they transition into and become familiar with the culture of Christian higher education institutions through encouraging theological discussion early on in the college experience. For example, pairing a discussion course requirement with foundational theology courses could help students process the complex ideas taught in the main lecture.

As demonstrated in this study, allowing students to be creative in how they conceptualize ideas has the potential to help increase their confidence as they find a means to communicate their beliefs. The photo themes demonstrated a strong visual connection to the theological beliefs of the participants. As Holmes (2001) indicates, the Christian college environment should “be a liberating experience that enlarges horizons, deepens insight, sharpens the mind, exposes new areas of inquiry, and sensitizes our ability to appreciate the good and the beautiful as well as the true” (p.19). As noted earlier, the importance of discussion in connection with theological understanding can also be tied to the value of asking good questions. Many opportunities existed for the participants in this study to answer tough questions posed to them by higher education practitioners, peers, or family members. As inspired by Garber (2007), a good question to consider and put into practice is, “How do we [higher education professionals] help students learn to connect what they believe about God with their daily experiences?” One possible outlet for this is college student engagement.

Engagement of college students has been categorized into two main concepts. The first is the amount of time a student commits to activities. The second relates to how resourceful an institution is in facilitating student learning through active learning

methods (Kuh, 2001). Based on this study, participants reported that their respective institutions greatly contributed to their theological understanding through the experiences of chapel, the classroom, forums, programming, and peer interactions. Augmenting how higher education views faith development, a more holistic approach could benefit students, including a focus on student theology in connection with their spiritual development and practices.

At the root of spirituality is theology, which provides the core doctrines and beliefs that should influence the spiritual practices of an individual. It is recommended that resident directors, campus pastors, and other student development professionals provide opportunities for students to contemplate and articulate their understanding of theology and their beliefs about God as a means for helping students develop spiritually. This concept implies various questions, ideas, and possibilities for future research on the topic of college student theology in order to contribute to a better understanding of theology within the higher education setting. The next section will discuss ideas for future research based on the findings from this study after first addressing the limitations of this study.

Limitations

While the methods of this study were intended to produce valid themes and results, there are still limitations that should be discussed. One limitation relates to the participant pool. The senior class at each institution was informed of the study and the opportunity to participate through a campus e-mail. Several students from each campus contacted the researcher stating their initial interest. Upon finding out about the photo elicitation, several students declined participation because they thought taking photos

would be too difficult or their schedule did not allow them time to do so. This is a limitation to the study because the participants that completed the study could be high achievers or more involved on campus. These characteristics could imply that the participants' responses would be different compared to students who are less involved on campus and struggle in the classroom.

A second limitation is the method of interviewing. Due to scheduling conflicts and distance, a majority of interviews were conducted through a phone conversation. This is a limitation because the researcher could not include nonverbal communication of participants. The nonverbal actions of participants could have given more context to the responses that were given and provide insight on the participant's reaction to various protocol questions.

Implications for Future Research

The study of spirituality has been a main research topic within higher education as indicated in the literature review of this study. However, the theology of college students has not specifically been researched. This study focused on the essence or lived experience of students, which provided rich and informative qualitative responses. In addition, the photo elicitation portion of this study contributed a unique and rich element to the overall study. Future studies could delve into the images students choose to represent their ideas and why particular images are used frequently to represent similar ideas. Also, a deeper investigation into the life experiences of college students, moving beyond the four-year college experience, would provide more context for understanding a student's pre-college engagement with theology and even a post-college engagement with theology. Revisiting the theme of first year students having a lack of confidence upon

coming to campus could serve as an important topic for future research. It would be interesting and meaningful to pursue research that studies the connection between youth ministry curriculum and first year student preparedness for introductory Bible courses on Christian college campuses.

Conclusion

The guiding questions for this study were, (a) “How do college students define theology?” and (b) “How do college students perceive the influence of theology on their day-to-day experience?” Four main themes emerged from this study: (a) Lack of theological clarity for first year students, (b) college as a positive influence on theology (c) theology is challenged by differing perspectives, and (d) theology is developed through discussion. The essence of college student theology emerging from the themes is that college students engage theology through experience (Astin, 1997). There is value in the relationships formed through community and with peers that challenge them to question, discuss, and contemplate the theological perplexities of their faith. This study highlights the need for Christian higher education professionals to explore the theological experiences of their students in order to foster theological conversations that challenge, support, and prompt intentional thinking and questioning from their students.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INVITATION:

Hello,

You have been contacted as a member of the Senior Class of 2011 to participate in a study on the Theological Experience of College Students. This study seeks to understand how college students engage with theology during their college experience.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to take digital photos of images that capture your understanding of theology as well as participating in a 40 minute follow-up interview. All materials and data collected from this study will be kept confidential and, upon completion of the study, will be properly disposed of.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please respond to this e-mail by contacting (researcher's e-mail) for further information.

Thank you for your time.

Kathleen Breitigan
Graduate Student,
Masters of Arts in Higher Education
Taylor University

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

The Value of Relationships for Theological Development and Engagement: A Phenomenological Study of How College Students Experience Theology

The purpose of this research project is to examine how college students define and engage with theology during their college experience. For this project, you will be asked to take pictures of images that help you define theology as well as answer a series of questions about your understanding of theology. You will have one week to complete the photo elicitation portion of the study. The interview will take approximately sixty minutes. The interviews will be digitally recorded.

The photo data gathered for this study will be used as part of the interview protocol. All data gathered from this study will be kept confidential and the researcher will properly dispose of all existing data after the interviews have been transcribed and coded.

There are no foreseeable risks or ill effects from participating in this study.

One benefit you may gain from your participation in this study may be a better understanding of the role of theology in your personal faith development.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing the Informed Consent Form and beginning the study, and at any time during the study.

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project entitled, "Theological Experience of College Students". I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

Participant's Signature

Date

Principal Investigator's Signature

Kathleen Breitigan, Graduate Student
Master of Arts in Higher Education
Upland, IN 46989

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Scott Gaier
Taylor University
Upland, IN 46989

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- I. Introduction
 - a. Greeting
 - b. Informed Consent
 - i. Explain the purpose of the study
 - ii. Review interview procedure
 - iii. Address confidentiality of participant
 - iv. Clarify that participant is free to withdraw at any point
 - v. Ask participant for clarification questions and to select a pseudonym
- II. Interview
 - a. Demographics
 - i. How old are you?
 - ii. What is your major?
 - b. Open-Ended Questions
 - i. What are your initial thoughts when you here the term theology?
 - ii. How would you define theology?
 - iii. How would you differentiate between *theology* and *spirituality*?
 - iv. How did you form these definitions?
 - a. (Follow up question): Was it something you heard, read, or formulated yourself?
 - v. Looking at your photos, can you explain how you associated theology with each of the images you captured?
 - vi. Did capturing the images help you or hinder you from expressing your understanding of theology?
 - vii. What would you identify as the attributes of God?
 - viii. What do you deem to be true about God?
 - ix. Do you recognize a difference in your current understanding of theology compared to your understanding as a first year college student?
 - x. Would you say theology shapes your day-to-day experiences?
 - a. If so, how?
 - b. If not, why not?
 - xi. Can you state whether theology has influenced your personal faith development?
 - c. Closing

- i. Any further comments? Questions?
- ii. Communicate gratitude for participation in study.