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Taylor T. Smythe
Impact 360 Institute

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Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry

Setran, D. P., & Kiesling, C. A. (2013).
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics.

Reviewed by Taylor T. Smythe

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Emerging adulthood is a relatively recent addition to lifespan development vernacular, making its first debut into research literature nearly a decade ago. In the light of its short existence, very little literature provides a depth of insight into the challenges of this cluster of twenty-somethings and their unique developmental needs. Setran and Kiesling offer their latest book—*Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry*—as a comprehensive introduction to research and practice related to this ever-expanding demographic. Though it has its weak spots, Setran and Kiesling’s book equips the reader with an understanding of the challenges facing young adults in the present age. The real strength of this work, however, is that the authors move beyond context and into the pragmatic.

Written explicitly for an audience of Christians, Setran and Kiesling set out to provide a theological understanding of holistic spiritual formation of young adults with a focus on practice. Their practical elements pay specific attention to church ministry, para-church ministry, and higher education settings, though parents of students in this age bracket will find the research equally meaningful and apropos. After presenting the many challenges facing students of this age, the authors argue mentoring is the most effective solution.

To begin, Setran and Kiesling establish the current landscape of faith in emerging adulthood. They present a well-researched summary of existing literature on emerging adult faith, noting the challenges of increased individualism,

jadedness with the institutional church, an overall loss of corporate spiritual formation, and the prevalence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as a worldview. The authors argue effective mentoring can address these issues at the level of the heart and generate space for transformation of character. Effective mentoring, Setran and Kiesling offer, consists of the facilitation of three postures: remembering, attending, and envisioning.

Setran and Kiesling attempt to move the reader through these three postures, allowing us to *remember* past research (or, for many, read it for the first time), *attend* to God's present work in students' lives and world, and *envision* ways to develop students in these critical and formative years. Each chapter follows a similar format to the book as a whole, presenting a literature review of the given chapter's topic that creates a foundation for discussion of practical implications. The authors organize the chapters in such a way that each one builds upon one another intuitively, moving from research to practice and from internal motivations to external interactions. The book, like each chapter, concludes with a framework for application and future considerations.

One of the great strengths of this volume is its conception of ministry as a holistic, all-encompassing process. The authors integrate topics of identity, vocation, morality, and others with an understanding of faith and spiritual formation that defies the compartmentalization so common to young adults. While some chapters emphasize certain facets of a subject more than others, the breadth of topics explored makes Setran and Kiesling's work invaluable to persons who frequently engage with emerging adults.

Not only does *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood* offer a thorough rationale for the importance of spiritual formation, it also acts as a primer on identity development and formation that filters prominent developmental research through the lens of faith and spirituality. Familiar names in developmental research such as Erik Erikson, James Marcia, and Sharon Daloz Parks intermingle with experts on emerging adulthood and spirituality such as Jeffery Arnett and Christian Smith, making the book a natural exploration of that overlap. Along with these authorities in the world of academia, Setran and Kiesling interweave a variety of sources spanning from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Walt Disney—all in ways that feel appropriate to their given contexts.

The authors effectively communicate the gravity of the shifting cultural climate in relation to emerging adults while simultaneously providing hope for individual transformation. While this book does not outline a list of nine easy steps to transform a young adult into a mature Christian, it offers a helpful stepping-stone in the process of leading students to a place of holistic flourishing. Each chapter is peppered with practical wisdom that may vary in relevance based on the prior knowledge and experiences of the reader, though all are likely to find themselves refreshed in some capacity.

While every reader will find value in this work as a whole, an area where the book falls short is its chapter on relationships. As one might imagine, that chapter focuses on the different types of human relationships in the lives of emerging adults. Whereas the scope of every other chapter is fairly broad, this chapter hones in on romantic relationships,

spending a considerable amount of its pages describing the progression from physical attraction to physical intimacy in vivid detail. While I applaud the densely descriptive paragraph in defense of the value of singleness, it appears to be an afterthought and is eclipsed by the discussion of romantic and sexual relationships. Other noticeably absent topics include platonic friendships and discussion of the relationships of students with same-sex attractions. While these topics could warrant entire books themselves, Setran and Kiesling's failure to deliver any practical thoughts on these issues leaves a considerable void.

As a whole, though, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood* is meaningful and informative. The authors utilize a sizable review of literature to make the case that mentoring is one of the most potent venues for spiritual formation. In a culture increasingly more individualistic, Setran and Kiesling argue such intimate and intentional communities of truth provide effective spaces for change—even if mentoring is inherently counter-cultural. With the research and experience to back up these claims, the argument is both welcome and timely.

“On the cusp of adulthood, twentysomethings need leaders who can teach and exemplify a vision of human flourishing that beckons them forth into a life of meaning and purpose” (p. 232). With this end goal in mind, Setran and Kiesling present a treasure trove of insight that proves invaluable for those working in institutions of higher education. No matter one's field of expertise or credentials, they are likely to find the authors' case compelling and knowledge applicable. Setran and Kiesling bring academic credence to the ongoing work of professionals in student affairs, calling us to envision a future of flourishing for our students, ourselves, and our world.

Taylor T. Smythe holds a M.A. in Higher Education and Student Development from Taylor University and is the Learning Community Coordinator for Men at Impact 360 Institute in Pine Mountain, Georgia.