

# COLLEGE TRANSITION INITIATIVE

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## SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN EMERGING ADULthood: DAVID P. SETRAN INTERVIEW

By Derek Melleby

### Introduction

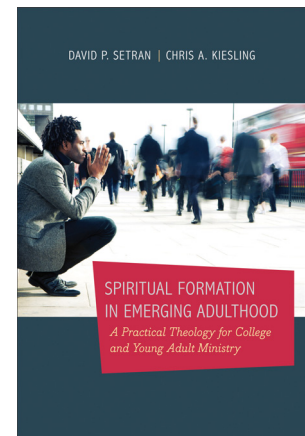
*Is it taking longer for young people to "grow up" in today's world?* I hear this question often. Two of the stated goals for the College Transition Initiative are to provide information on *emerging adulthood* and resources for *developing lasting faith*. In order to help young people develop a lasting faith, the church needs to have an understanding of the cultural conditions in which young people live. Examining the "cultural conditions" of young people ages 18-29 has produced a new body of research known as the study of "emerging adulthood."

A new book by two professors, David P. Setran (Wheaton College) and Chris A. Kiesling (Asbury Theological Seminary) entitled *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Baker Academic) explores the spiritual formation of today's young adults. From their extensive background in college and young adult ministry, the authors were motivated by two questions:

1. What does the gospel have to offer emerging adults as they are formed through the adult transition?
2. What do emerging adults shaped by the gospel have to offer to the church and the world?

Their stated desire for writing the book is "to provide a 'practical theology' for college and young adult ministry, one that combines important scholarship, a Christian theological vision, and attentiveness to concrete ministry applications." I highly recommend this book for church leaders, college ministers and parents who desire to see young people embrace and live-out faith during the formative, young adult years.

What follows is an interview with Dr. David P. Setran of Wheaton College:



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**- David P. Setran**



## Interview

**CTI:** What motivated you and your friend to write this book?

**Setran:** Ultimately, we have a passion to see 18-29 year-olds flourish in Christ, developing as adults who are increasingly able to serve as agents of hope, healing, and renewal in church and world. Chris and I have both worked in a variety of church, parachurch, and campus ministry settings with collegians and young adults. We are convinced, more than ever, that this is a pivotal stage of the life course, a gateway to spiritual formation, vocational commitment, and Christian identity. While a number of books have been written for those working with children and youth, we wanted to help equip those of strategic importance in emerging adults' lives: college and young adult ministers, professors, pastors, para-church workers, student development professionals, chaplains, parents, relatives, and friends. Hopefully the book will help to awaken interest in this critical life stage!

**CTI:** Define "emerging adulthood" and briefly describe the social factors that have led to this new phase of life.

**Setran:** "Emerging adulthood," a term coined by psychology Jeffrey Arnett, refers to the period in the lifespan between age 18 and the late 20s. In most industrialized nations, typical adult transitions—leaving home, completing education, financial independence,

marriage, and parenting—are happening much later. Many careers have expanded educational requirements, forcing those in this age group to pursue advanced degrees. Combined with student loan debt, this delays the financial independence and job stability often desired before pursuing marriage and parenting. In addition, parents seem a bit more willing to help finance these delays, funding educational ventures and providing a place to live for children who return home after college.

Many emerging adults also postpone marriage for personal reasons, wary of commitment in a divorce-ridden culture or happy to pursue sexual intimacy without the relational costs. While those beyond age 18 are quite different from "adolescents," they are also not quite "adults" in the traditional sense implied by these social markers. Thus, Arnett and others have described this period as "emerging adulthood," a phase characterized by identity exploration, relational, vocational, and geographical instability, self-focus, an "in-between feeling," and the exploration of seemingly endless possibilities. While

such a time can be exhilarating, it also tends to produce a great deal of anxiety. Few social scripts exist to help emerging adults navigate the major life decisions and personal identity formation that mark this period.

**CTI:** You describe emerging adulthood as a "formidable challenge" but also a "great opportunity" for the church. What are some of the challenges and opportunities for the church?

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**Setran:** The challenges are obviously great. According to the research, emerging adulthood marks the low point of the life span for key spiritual practices such as prayer, Bible reading, and evangelism. When compared with adolescents, emerging adults are less likely to adhere to key Christian doctrines like the divinity and resurrection of Christ. Moral convictions and boundaries seem to erode during these years as well, leading to increased risk behavior and heartbreaking life decisions. And perhaps the greatest challenge is that many of those in this age group are making decisions about belief, life, morality, and vocation apart from the local church.

Yet there are great opportunities as well! Many emerging adults have demonstrated a growing passion for social action and compassion for the poor. Many cultivate a sense of global awareness and responsibility and are willing to take great risks to bring the hope and healing of the Gospel to locations across the globe. Importantly, many recognize their need for mentors, guides who can help them make sense of life and call out gifts and passions for vocational use. While it is common for older adults to see those in this age group as a “challenge” (read “trial”) to the church, I think it is critical that we also see them as a “challenge” (read “inspiration, motivation, and stimulus”) to contemporary church life.

**CTI:** The book discusses the “centrality of the heart” in the spiritual formation of young adults. Why do you think “the heart” is so central to reaching emerging adults with the gospel?

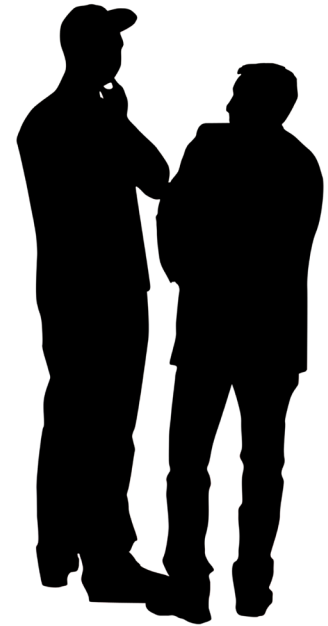
**Setran:** It seems that when many people consider the challenging spiritual climate of emerging adulthood, they are speaking primarily about visible, moral flaws related to substance abuse, sexuality, media consumption, etc. These are, of course, very important issues, but they often obscure the deeper heart realities that fuel these problems. We are prone to pursue what Dallas Willard has called “sin management,” a focus solely upon behavior modification related to the external manifestations of sin. However, we need to help emerging adults recognize the critical nature of the heart, the central desires and loves that exist at the core of their beings and fuel their worship. At its root, sin is always idolatry and adultery, the elevation of something in the heart to a level that God alone deserves. While attempts to reform behavior at the surface level may “work” for a time in stemming the tide of sinful practice, eventually the true nature of the heart will be revealed.



The centrality of the heart is actually one reason that emerging adulthood is such a potent time for spiritual formation. As many in this age group leave home for the first time, their true hearts are often revealed in dramatic ways. While environmental constraints (parents, youth leaders, school rules, etc.) might have held them in check while still living at home, the freedom afforded by the collegiate environment often allows the “true heart” to emerge without restraint. We obviously don’t ever desire rebellion or moral laxity, but this may serve as an excellent opportunity to “see” the heart with new clarity, dealing with issues that were previously obscured by convention. It is a great time to ask with them, “What do I really want?” “What do I really love?” It is a great time, in other words, to engage the issue of worship.

**CTI:** The book suggests that “we must help emerging adults vocationally account both for the ‘great commission’ and the ‘cultural mandate.’” What is the difference between the two and why is this so vital for young people to grasp?

**Setran:** The great commission refers primarily to Jesus’s call to “make disciples of all nations” by baptizing and teaching people to obey all that the Lord has commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). The cultural mandate refers back to God’s initial call to Adam and Eve to be fruitful, to multiply, and to “fill the earth and subdue it” while ruling over the other living creatures (Genesis 1:28). Addressing both of these becomes really important as we consider God’s broad and holistic redemptive purposes in the world. As Christian emerging adults consider their vocations, they are apt to embrace compartmentalized perspectives on life and career. They are likely, in other words, to think of the world as divided into sacred (souls and explicitly spiritual tasks such as prayer, Bible reading, and evangelism) and secular (anything seemingly unrelated to the soul, including elements of the physical world and human culture) domains. They may think that the only jobs with eternal value are those related to soul care—pastors and missionaries. If they have other “secular” vocations, they may think that the only spiritual task that can be completed here is evangelism among unsaved co-workers. While these jobs are obviously absolutely central to the Christian life and vocation, an exclusive focus on the great commission can obscure the importance of the cultural mandate within the work itself.



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We are all called upon to use our gifts and talents to fill, form, and care for the earth—including the physical world and various aspects of human culture—in such a way that we address human needs and bring glory to God. Thus, both aspects are important—spirit and matter, souls and stuff. We have not just a great commission and not just a cultural mandate but a larger “kingdom vocation” that weds the two in holistic fashion. If emerging adults can capture this vision from the beginning of their vocational explorations, they can embark on an exciting adventure of loving God and neighbor through their jobs and their lives.

**CTI:** You write, “Most parents do not talk with their children about matters of faith, particularly avoiding details of their own faith journeys.” And your book points out a recent study revealing that “only 9 percent of adolescents had a regular dialogue with parents about Scripture.” Why do you think parents have such a difficult time engaging in these types of conversations?

And, what advice would you give to parents who want to begin to have more meaningful conversations about faith and Scripture with their children?

**Setran:** If we are to believe some recent studies, parents tend to scale back on deep input beginning in adolescence out of respect for teens’ freedom. As adolescents begin to resist value-laden conversations, parents often accommodate these requests. However, parents must recognize that they are still the most important sources of input in their children’s lives! In terms of having these conversations, it is always best when dialogue occurs not only during pre-planned and scripted occasions (i.e., family devotions) but also more organically in the context of life (so-called “teachable moments”). This communicates the reality that God’s story infuses all of life—a message that will become very important as they leave home in later years. And the best advice may be just to begin as soon as possible, even if it is at first halting and awkward. If these conversations can start in childhood and continue in adolescence, it is much more likely that they can flourish in emerging adulthood even when parents and children are separated geographically.



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For more college transition resources visit CPYU’s College Transition Initiative at [CollegeTransitionInitiative.com](http://CollegeTransitionInitiative.com).

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**Derek Melleby** is the Director of CPYU’s College Transition Initiative and author of *Make College Count: A Faithful Guide to Life and Learning* (Baker Books) and coauthor of *Learning for the Love of God: A Student’s Guide to Academic Faithfulness* (Brazos Press).