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Can Memoirs Be Used For Spiritual Development in a Book Group?

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ABSTRACT

Biographies have historically been used by Christians for instruction and encouragement. The current trend in biographical writing is the memoir. Can spiritual memoirs be used as an effective tool for learning more about Scripture, doctrine or the Christian life? Approximately twenty spiritual memoirs were read and evaluated to determine if there was a central theme or series of themes that provided a story-based context for exploring greater biblical truths. This article reviews the genre of spiritual memoirs, discusses their strengths and weaknesses, and suggests a method for preparing them for a book group format.

Introduction

Memoir has become a popular form of writing in recent years – far outstripping the more traditional biographies and autobiographies (Buss, 2007; Larson, 2007). Neff (2002) observed a similar increase in the number of spiritual memoirs being published. The popularity of *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) brought the subgenre to the general acceptance of reading groups when it made the Top 10 Discussion Books in a national survey amid the usual fair of women's fiction ("ReadingGroupGuides.com," 2010). The spiritual memoir is distinct from the standard memoir. According to Mark Kerr, spiritual "memoir makes the *divine real and personal* [emphasis added] in a way that other genres can't, by getting to the heart of how faith is actually lived" (Neff, 2002, para. 5).

Spiritual Memoirs As A Genre

Since the first conversion narrative, Augustine's *Confessions*, the genre of spiritual narrative (or memoir) has historically been read by Christians for instruction and encouragement. Hindmarsh, tracing the development of the conversion narrative, noted that each era of narrative mirrors the Christian society of its time – whether it be conversion from paganism to Christianity, to monasticism, or to the devout life. The Reformation's persecutions fostered exhortations to stand firm in the faith; while 17th century Protestant conversion narratives were personal testimonies to gain church membership (Hindmarsh, 2008). Larson observes that the memoir "has ascended for this generation because the form is so useful in getting at the truth" (Larson, 2007, p. 9). But whose truth?

Memoirs are a narrower slice of the biography genre. Larson defines it as a book about "the now." This is not the summary of a life that has undergone years of thoughtful contemplation. A memoirist's concern is the "immediate past, even the still corruptible present, not waiting

for time to ripen or change what they know" (Larson, 2007, p. 16). It is this immediacy that gives the memoir its emotional power while its lack of reflection may yield dangerously subjective results. Larson explains how individual each person's experience is when he describes a hypothetical family of children who each write about every year of their lives – how these chronicles would have only minimal agreement of fact as each child's experience in that family was different. He calls it a version of the truth (Larson, 2007).

As A Spiritual Discipline?

In 2009, a *Christianity Today* article encouraged readers to rediscover the spiritual discipline of reading biographies (Armstrong, 2009). Can the same recommendation be given for reading spiritual memoirs? According to Barna, only 9% of Christians have a biblical worldview (Barna Group, 2009), which means that 91% of Christians do not have a biblical worldview. This has a profound influence on their thinking, behavior, and writing of memoirs. "All of our theology must eventually become biography." (Hansel, 1998, p. 41). The challenge for all Christians is to take what he or she believes—their doctrine or worldview – and enact it in his or her own life. The modern spiritual memoir with its emphasis on immediacy naturally presents what some would call a raw authenticity, in contrast to the typical Christian biography which presents a somewhat sanitized life. Because of this, the memoirist may reveal a limited understanding of the Bible and doctrine, or provide a poor example of how to live the Christian life.

Despite these concerns, spiritual memoirs can give the Holy Spirit occasion to capture the reader's thoughts and emotions, turning them towards God and promoting spiritual development (Armstrong, 2009). Christians by identifying with other Christians through their life stories can produce spiritual growth

in their own lives. It also can help Christians reconnect when they feel lost (Peterson, 2006). “Story is the best verbal way of getting us back in touch again. And that is why God’s word is given for the most part in the form of story” (Peterson, 2006, p. 42). Spiritual memoirs are an ideal way of relating to the many stories of God’s children; as Richard Baxter observed, “God breaketh not all men’s hearts alike” (Baxter, 1974, p. 11).

Power of Story

Stories, especially individual stories, are important to the postmodern reader. Curtis and Eldredge explain that “life is ... a series of dramatic scenes. Story is the language of the heart. Our souls speak not in the naked facts ... [but] in the images and emotions of story” (Curtis & Eldredge, 1997, p. 39). According to Hesselgrave, a missiologist, stories are the means by which worldviews are formed and sustained. It is the stories told and the inferences pulled from them that establish a person’s or a group’s values (1994). Here is where spiritual memoirs have a purpose: “The Christian life is conducted in story conditions” (Peterson, 2006, p. 40). Spiritual memoirs provide readers with the opportunity to respond to a particular life experience written by a child in the family of God.

These testaments of Christian lives can provide opportunities not only for individual readers, but for groups, to discuss the connection or disconnect between the Bible, doctrine, and spirituality found in these stories. Many spiritual memoirs have a central theme or a series of themes providing a story-based context for exploring greater Biblical truths. Susan E. Isaacs’ spiritual memoir, *Angry Conversations with God*, provides the opportunity to discuss Isaacs’ wrong view of God – the major premise of the book – and, by using Scripture and other reference sources – a right view of God can be explored. Anne Lamott in *Traveling Mercies* calls herself a “bad Christian.” Would she still call herself that if she had been discipled after conversion? Like the Bereans of Acts 17:11 who “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (NIV), readers

of spiritual memoirs should take the “truth” an author writes about and compare it to the truth of Scripture.

Methodology

Since this manner of reading spiritual memoirs focuses more on an examination of the biblical and doctrinal themes than the events in the work, most book group questions available are not suitable. The following methodology was developed to prepare a work for this type of group study: (1) Skim the memoir noting down spiritual themes that seem to be developing; (2) Conduct a second close reading of the memoir, mark passages (post-it® or type in Evernote) that match the themes identified; (3) Review each marked passage, summarize the content, list the theme and page number; (4) Organize passages by theme; note content that can be discussed using Scripture or outside sources; (5) Locate relevant Scripture, books, periodical articles, or dictionary/encyclopedia entries (such as the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed.), that relate to and will illuminate the passages. This will provide more grounding for the discussion, raising it above each reader’s personal opinion; and finally, (6) Write a question for each theme that will stimulate discussion in the group. To see details about the spiritual memoirs already reviewed, go to: <http://tinyurl.com/93z8yjf>

Suggested Memoirs

The following are the top ten memoirs (of the twenty read by the authors), for the purposes of a spiritual development book group, in alphabetical order:

Angry conversations with God: A snarky but authentic spiritual memoir. Susan E. Isaacs. Faith Words, 2009. **Themes:** Views of God/ Jesus; Will of God/Purpose in Life; Sex, Men & Dating (Singleness)

Called out of darkness: A spiritual confession. Anne Rice. Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. **Themes:** Hearing vs. Reading the Word/Religion; Catholic to the Core

Immediacy... gives the memoir its emotional power while its lack of reflection may yield dangerously subjective results.

Spiritual memoirs provide readers with the opportunity to respond to a particular life experience written by a child in the family of God.

Churched: One kid's journey toward God despite a holy mess. Matthew Paul Turner. WaterBrook Press, 2008. **Themes:** Legalism; Fear

Evolving in monkey town: How a girl who knew all the answers learned to ask the questions. Rachel Held Evans. Zondervan, 2010. **Themes:** Evolving Beliefs; The "Cosmic Lottery" & Hell; Doubt & Reactions to Doubt

Girl meets God: A memoir. Lauren Winner. Random House, 2003. **Themes:** Liturgy & Prayer; The Church Year; Spiritual Disciplines

Grace abounding to the chief of sinners. John Bunyan. Various publishers, 1666. **Themes:** Satan & Temptations; Spiritual Warfare; Sin, the Unpardonable Sin & Salvation; Grace

Me, myself, & Bob: A true story about God, dreams, and talking vegetables. Phil Vischer. Nelson Books, 2006. **Themes:** Losing A Dream/Idolatry; Busy Doing Good vs. Doing God's Will

O me of little faith: True confessions of a spiritual weakling. Jason Boyett. Zondervan, 2010. **Theme:** Doubt

Picking dandelions: A search for Eden among life's weeds. Sarah Cunningham. Zondervan, 2010. **Themes:** Recognizing & Changing One's Faults; Growth in the Christian Life; Childhood Religion

Traveling mercies: Some thoughts on faith. Anne Lamott. Pantheon Books, 1999. **Themes:** Forgiveness; Singing & the Soul; Church Family/Community †

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