

Classical Christian Education Factors Contributing to a Resilient Faith

A Dissertation and Surrounding Research
*Developing faith that goes from **surviving to thriving** during
the adolescent into adulthood transition*

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Agenda

- Goals
- Situating the Research
- Research Process
- Research Findings
- Research Implications

Goals

This workshop has been designed to provide participants with:

- a deeper understanding of what classical Christian alumni describe as helping them to develop a faith that goes from **surviving to thriving** during the adolescent years
- an increased awareness of current data and research around adolescent faith
- ability to connect your anecdotal stories to larger movement

Situating the Research

- Various data exists regarding faith retention as adolescents enter into adulthood but the trends are negative
- The years of education are impactful because of the relationships formed, the age of students, and the time spent on campus
- There is data around the impact of school, but the data is incomplete and paints only a broad picture
 - Yet the data that does exist suggests that classical Christian education may be more impactful than any other form of education
- A study was recently conducted by ACCS called the Good Soil Report

Research Process

- 7 classical Christian schools, all with some sort of SCL connection, shared a survey with their alumni
- The survey had two main parts – one part to assess continued faith practices and one part to assess continued faith beliefs
- Those who completed the survey (50 alumni) were scaled to identify interview participants, resulting in 10 participants (7 one-on-one participants and one focus group with 3 participants)
- Findings likely not surprising but they help take our anecdotal stories and verifies them as more broad than anecdotes at each school

Interview Participants

Pseudonym (M/F)	Year graduated	State of school	Grades attended	Years at the school	Score
Abigail (F)	2011	VA	9 th -12 th	4	90
Bekah (F)	2001	VA	10 th -12 th	3	82
Caleb (M)	2004	VA	8 th -12 th	5	89
Daniel (M)	2002	NC	6 th -12 th	7	84
Elias* (M)	2008	NC	K-2 nd ; 6 th -12 th	10	92
Elizabeth* (F)	2013	NC	2 nd -12 th	11	92
Esther* (F)	2005	NC	9 th -12 th	4	92
Hannah (F)	2007	NC	6 th -12 th	7	93
Isabel (F)	2014	TX	K-7 th ; 9 th -12 th	12	80
Judith (F)	2005	NC	9 th -12 th	4	86

***identifies participants who participated in a focus group together**

Findings

Theme	Subthemes	Interconnected
(1) Faith is not always easy	(1-A) Wrestling with faith during high school (1-B) Challenges to faith in college and beyond (1-C) Faith over time	2 - C 3 - A & B 5 - B & C
(2) It requires more than school	(2-A) Family (2-B) Church (2-C) The years after high school (2-D) The exception during high school	1 - A & C 3 - A & B 5 - B
(3) Relationships at school matter	(3-A) Adult relationships (3-B) Peer relationships	1 - A, B, & C 5 - B
(4) Voluntary conversations about faith	None	3 - A & B 5 - B & C
(5) Classical Christian education is impactful	(5-A) Faith integration (5-B) Focused on preparation and training (5-C) Academic rigor	1 - C 2 - D 3 - A & B 4

Findings – Theme 1

Theme 1: Faith is not always easy. Subthemes: wrestling during HS, challenges to faith post-graduation; faith over time

Bekah: “I think that it’s very difficult, especially in our modern era, if you’re just a teenager you’re going to get influences from all aspects, whether that’s school, social media, friends, family, and if you don’t have a firm belief system when you go off to college, then you’re definitely not going to have a firm one when you’re there.”

Hannah: “It helped me a lot that we had wrestled through issues and nobody ever said ‘this is what you should believe as a Christian’ at my high school.”

Isabel: Experienced pushback during college in response to her ideology, particularly her adherence to the belief “that absolute truth existed” and was something that ought to be strived for.

Various: Transitions were seen as faith in high school was often about growth (Caleb), learning (Daniel), and sitting in it (Elizabeth), compared to words used for faith today of journey (Caleb), complex (Daniel), and grown (Elizabeth). More details on next slide.

Findings – Theme 1

Theme 1: Faith is not always easy. Subthemes: wrestling during HS, challenges to faith post-graduation; faith over time

Participant	Faith in High School	Faith in College/Today
Caleb	Personal; didn't really know how to convey meaning, purpose...to others; a time of growth	Journey; continual process; different people come alongside you at different opportunities at different times in your journey; sharing your own experience
Elizabeth	Taking information in; sitting in it; didn't have to be super active; neat and tidy	Grown; not at fullest potential of faith but still growing; compared to high school...has a lot more weight, more meat to it; blossomed; living it out; experiencing it
Isabel	Academic, head-based, learning truths and recognizing they were truth; solitary; making my faith my own	Restarting; new chapter; endless sorts of possibilities; in awe of what God was capable of doing and yet expectant of what He would do...but not sure of what that looks like



42



13



23



05

Findings – Theme 2

Theme 2: It requires more than school. Subthemes: family, church, the years after HS, the exception.

Abigail: Saw her parents as “the biggest supporters of my faith” and was “so thankful that I was born into the **family** that I have.”

Esther: Spoke about her **church** and youth group, particularly with the “different events that we did...trips that we would take each year together which were really formative.”

Bailey: “I really made that priority to stay committed to that [faith] in **college** and was involved in both the local church and then also led a student ministry on campus. It was a way of serving and then also being matured to a point of leadership in college as well.”

Hannah: “I was involved in church but I honestly, the **high school** I went to was pretty demanding. I played three sports, so I had sports all year long, took a lot of tough classes, was prefect and did all sorts of volunteer work and things like that so I didn’t get as plugged in honestly with the church as far as youth groups and things like that.”

Findings – Theme 3

Theme 3: Relationships at school matter. Subthemes: Adult relationships, peer relationships

Esther: “I really believe the foundation knowing what we believe and why we believe it was really engrained in us and to be able to make our faith our own...Yes it was our job to do our part but our teachers were ready to make that happen as well, and were there for the highs and lows, for all of it.”

Isabel: “One of them was the relationship with my teachers, so while they were definitely clear authority figures, my classmates as well would say this to this day, but we nine out of 10 times always felt that our teachers cared more about our hearts and our spiritual well-being than anything else... So having that relationship with somebody that could be a spiritual mentor, an academic mentor, and have that be an open and safe place to have a hard conversation...I could go to my teacher and that was a place where I knew I would get Biblical counsel.”

Daniel: “I was put in a community of students who were very bright and very interested, and so we had a lot of space to talk through things.”

Hannah: Saw her peers as “a lot of iron sharpening iron” leading to a “healthy kind of dialogue.”

Findings – Theme 4

Theme 4: Voluntary conversations about faith. Subthemes: none (explored by participant)

Abigail: Husband (when dating) and current conversations with friends

Bekah: A big part of her faith is “talking to people about it, talking to people who aren’t Christian about it, talking to people who are Christian about it.”

Caleb: “I tried to explain my side, my views, as much as I listened to him. Perhaps I tried to listen to him more than I told my side of things...I used it as an opportunity to reflect...so that was kind of the start of that. Since then I have had more non-Christians, non-believer friends and I think because of starting with that initial time.”

Daniel: “The tools I got at school allow me to have conversations without really getting shook.”

Focus group: “High school prepared me [Elias] to have a conversation, how to deal with somebody confronting me about something”

Hannah: Conversation at a party about underage drinking and Romans 13

Isabel: Shared a “unique experience” during study abroad with “self-proclaimed agnostic” roommate

Judith: Using Pascal’s wager in conversation; part of college volunteer and now job

Findings – Theme 5

Theme 5: Classical Christian education is impactful. Subthemes: faith integration, preparation & training, academic rigor.

Bekah: “A very strong role...I would not have traded the education that I got here for anything...it was an edifying experience...I did not appreciate it at the time for what it was...[but] it was a much more complete experience than I had really given it credit for at the time and I really couldn’t see that until I was an adult.”

Caleb: “I think it had an immense impact actually...I think it is one of many factors but I think in the role it plays it is a positive one.”

Hannah: “Yes. It definitely...helped prepare me especially for college when you were met with a lot of different worldviews and folks who didn’t believe the same things as you; It helped me a lot.”

Isabel: “Absolutely...The appreciation I have now for the quality of the education and the faith, Christ based education, has only grown every year I’ve been out of high school.”

Findings – Theme 5

Theme 5: Classical Christian education is impactful. Subthemes: faith integration, preparation & training, academic rigor.

Isabel: “Every class was taught from a Biblical worldview but not from a point of just rote memorization or to produce sort of a cookie-cutter Christian kid, but was to pursue excellence in all things, because that’s honoring to God...”

Hannah: Her school would say “we don’t teach you what to think but how to think’ which I think I experienced. They taught you how to think as a Christian, not what to think as a Christian.”

Elizabeth: “How classes were taught...a forum kind of discussion.” The combination of specific courses with how the courses were taught all helped provide “a really solid foundation.”

Esther: “We were taught to be developed as a reader, as a thinker, as a writer, and as a believer. “

Results and Interpretations

Result one: Classical Christian education prepares and equips many alumni to remain committed to faith after graduation.

- 50% of survey respondents were within 13 points (80-93) on a scale where all participants ranged from -90 to 93 (a 183 point range).
- The findings present alumni that are not what other research labelled as “under-socialized in their religious faith” as they are able to not only recognize, but also are equipped to respond to challenges to their faith.¹
- Other research found that “those teenagers for whom religious faith and practice are important tend to have religious lives constructed relationally and institutionally to intersect and overlap with other important aspects of their lives”; these findings depict participants who had high school lives intersecting and overlapping in multiple ways with institutions and people of faith.²

*Given research showing that faith is not isolated from institutions and relationships, and the need for a deep imprinting of that faith, **these findings suggest that a classical Christian school provides this intersection and overlapping in a meaningful way for graduates, while also imprinting it deeply.***

Results and Interpretations

Result two: A multitude of interconnected factors contribute to faith formation and continued adherence, and many, but not all, of these factors are found in classical Christian schools.

- Prior research highlighted the potential impact of spiritual modelling on faith formation, where teenagers see others living their faith authentically and the impact it has on them₁; demonstrated an increase in the influence of teachers when they play multiple roles at a school, such as a coach₂; & highlighted the importance for those exploring their faith to have connections to others who are devout; all factors highlighted by participants₃.
- The experience of participants also connected to many of the nine factors identified by Smith and Denton (2005) outlined on the next slide.
- In addition to the nine factors identified by Smith and Denton (2005), there is significant overlap with the six pathways presented by Smith and Snell (2009) which is presented after the nine factors.

Nine Factors	Connected themes from current research
Moral directives <i>(historical traditions and narratives)</i>	Faith is not always easy; Relationships matter; Voluntary conversations about faith; CCE is impactful
Spiritual experiences <i>(context and substance for moral commitments)</i>	Faith is not always easy; Requires more than school; CCE is impactful
Role models <i>(adult and peer)</i>	Faith is not always easy; Requires more than school; Relationships matter; CCE is impactful
Community and leadership skills <i>(observe, learn, and practice skills)</i>	Requires more than school; Relationships matter; CCE is impactful
Coping skills <i>(for stress and emotions; conflict)</i>	Faith is not always easy; Relationships matter; Voluntary conversations about faith; CCE is impactful
Cultural capital <i>(education/skills that transfer outside religion)</i>	Faith is not always easy; Voluntary conversations about faith; CCE is impactful
Social capital <i>(cross-generational ties)</i>	Faith is not always easy; Relationships matter; Voluntary conversations about faith; CCE is impactful
Network closure <i>(deep ties that influence choices)</i>	Faith is not always easy; Requires more than school; Relationships matter; CCE is impactful
Extracommunity links <i>(beyond local community)</i>	Requires more than school

Theme	Subthemes	Related Smith and Denton (2005) Nine Factors
Faith is not always easy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wrestling with faith during high school Challenges to faith during college and beyond Faith over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moral directives; Spiritual experiences; Role models; Coping skills; Cultural capital; Social capital; Network closure
It requires more than school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family Church The years after high school The exception during high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spiritual experiences; Role models; Community and leadership skills; Network closure; Extracommunity links
Relationships at school matter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult relationships Peer relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moral directives; Role models; Community and leadership skills; Coping skills; Social capital; Network closure
Voluntary conversations about faith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Voluntary conversations about faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moral directives; Coping skills; Cultural capital; Social capital
Classical Christian education is impactful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faith integration Focused on preparation and training Academic rigor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moral directives; Spiritual experiences; Role models; Community and leadership skills; Coping skills; Cultural capital; Social capital; Network closure

Results and Interpretations

Smith and Snell (2009)

- a) High parental religious service and importance of faith
- b) High teen importance of religious faith
- c) Teen has many personal religious experiences
- d) Teen frequently prays and reads scripture
- e) Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs
- f) Teen has many adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support
- g) Low parental religious service attendance and importance of faith

Path way	Factors (see bulleted list above)	Percentage becoming highly religious
1	A + B + C + D	68%
2	A + B + E + D	70%
3	A + B + E + C	68%
4	A + F + E + C	67%
5	G + F + E + D	64%
6	B + C + E + D	77%

Number of times each factor appears:

5 times: E

4 times: A, B, C, D

2 times: F

1 time: G

Results and Interpretations

Result two: A multitude of interconnected factors contribute to faith formation and continued adherence, and many, but not all, of these factors are found in classical Christian schools.

- Prior research highlighted the potential impact of spiritual modelling on faith formation, where teenagers see others living their faith authentically and the impact it has on them₁; demonstrated an increase in the influence of teachers when they play multiple roles at a school, such as a coach₂; & highlighted the importance for those exploring their faith to have connections to others who are devout; all factors highlighted by participants₃.
- The experience of participants also connected to many of the nine factors identified by Smith and Denton (2005) and there is significant overlap with the pathways presented by Smith and Snell (2009) which is presented after the 9 factors.

*Classical Christian education is alone not the pathway to committed and continued faith adherence; however, **it seems to be a method for surrounding a student with a multitude of factors that contribute to faith formation.** These include the nine factors identified by Smith and Denton (2005) as well as the six pathways introduced by Smith and Snell (2009).*

Results and Interpretations

Result three: Knowledge of faith is important but is itself not enough.

- In a longitudinal study of faith, research found that many teenagers ascribed their beliefs to their parents and did not demonstrate ownership of their own beliefs; this helps contribute to their later drift away from faith often for reasons they are unable to articulate. This is the opposite of the experience described by participants in this study.
- Addition research found that youth feel meaningful church ministry pairs education with relationships; the nine factors by Smith and Denton (2005) identified role models, network closure, and social capital to be among the factors that teens found important; and the six pathways of Smith and Snell (2009) does not have knowledge of faith in any of the six pathways but does have relationships. This aligns to the experience of participants as they described meaningful relationships as a key element of their experience.

*While knowledge is important, based upon the experiences of participants, knowledge alone is not enough. Participant experience implies that the knowledge component is helpful for reducing the faith attrition seen elsewhere, but that there is the need to pair that with relationships between others and to touch the emotional, or personal, side of high school students. **These factors, the knowledge of faith and the personal connection, were instrumental in working together for the continued faith formation of participants.***

Results and Interpretations (Summary)

Result one: Classical Christian education prepares and equips many alumni to remain committed to faith after graduation.

- A classical Christian education provides an intersection and overlapping of faith in a meaningful way for graduates, while also imprinting it deeply.

Result two: A multitude of interconnected factors contribute to faith formation and continued adherence, and many, but not all, of these factors are found in classical Christian schools.

- Classical Christian education seems to be a method for surrounding a student with a multitude of research-based factors that contribute to faith formation.

Result three: Knowledge of faith is important but is itself not enough.

- The knowledge of faith and the personal connection experienced within a classical Christian education are instrumental in working together for the continued faith formation of students after graduation.

Implications & Recommendations

- Classical Christian schools should continue to **prioritize opportunities for students to grapple with their faith**, including deciding whether to accept the Christian faith as their own belief in addition to opportunities to think through current topics applied to their faith, being pushed to really consider the implications of their beliefs. These opportunities of wrestling or challenges should be conducted in a manner that feels safe for students. If any of this experience leads to serious questions and doubting of their faith and potential faith adherence, the closed social network and the overall supportive environment of the school setting can help guide a student through this time, particularly if the feeling of care has been demonstrated by teachers/staff. These opportunities need to include open discussion with disagreement and chances for questioning beliefs, along with controversial but relevant topics of faith in practice.
- Maintaining **faith integration throughout all content areas** must be authentic and seen as essential for classical Christian schools. Faith should be connected to all areas and not reserved to specific religious studies courses or religious experiences. This will also help equip believers to integrate their faith into their lives, as the participants of this study demonstrated, including their college experience and career even if they pursue secular colleges or jobs.

Implications & Recommendations

- Creating **opportunities for healthy and meaningful adult to student relationships** is important for adolescents and should be a focus/goal for classical Christian education. This can be through coaching, teacher-led Bible studies, or other activities but should be something encouraged by institutional leadership. Within classical Christian education the structure of the classroom, both in content and pedagogical delivery, can help form relationships between students and teachers.
- Content knowledge must remain a priority but must not be so consuming that it is seen as prioritized above **adolescents feeling known and cared for by the adults**. Academic rigor is important, and content knowledge of faith is included in that rigor; however, it must not be the ultimate goal at the expense of students feeling known, cared for, and loved.
- Those concerned about faith for adolescents and young adults should **consider ways to support classical Christian education**. This could be sending their own students to this type of school or supporting the school through giving of time, talent, or treasure. When considering the body of research, there is no one magical solution to reverse the trend of faith disengagement during early adulthood; however, classical Christian education pulls together many of the components that have been identified as impactful, allowing for a focused opportunity to reverse the current prevailing faith trends. Classical Christian education is not the only way but it appears to be a successful option.

Questions

Happy for additional follow-up
and/or more detailed conversations:

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