

Episode 16: Boys Need a Sense of Faith in Education

Brave Hearts Bold Minds

Episode Transcript

- Leigh Hatcher: Hello and welcome to the Brave Hearts Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. I'm Leigh Hatcher. Thanks for joining me as we seek to help the boys of today grow into the fine young men of tomorrow. Each week, we're exploring how best to shape a boy for a lifetime ahead. What's a boy need now that will see him grow into a man of courage, character and compassion? What does a parent need to know to be alongside him and involved practically in that inspiring journey. So let's ring the bell and meet our guest for this week's podcast.
- Leigh Hatcher: A very special guest is Professor David Smith. Professor Smith is Director of Graduate Studies in Education and Director of the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning at Calvin College in Michigan America and visiting scholar at The Scots College. Professor Smith also presented the distinguished 2017 Clark Lecture at the College and his topic is 'Boys Need a Sense of Faith in Education'. Professor, welcome.
- David Smith: Thank you. It's great to meet you.
- Leigh Hatcher: You too. This kind of discussion comes at a time in our society where many are saying that faith of whatever shade or leading is a purely private matter. But what drives your view that faith and Christian faith, in particular, does indeed have a place in the school curriculum, perhaps even in non-church schools.
- David Smith: Well let's start with the fact that if you're going to do school – if you are going to teach in any shape or form you can't do that without some kind of implicit idea of what it means for students to grow without some set of ideals towards which you are working. Do you think education is just preparation for the work force; do you think it's character preparation; which kind of character, which virtues are more important than other virtues? What kind of society are you building towards; how should the curriculum hang together? All of those kinds of questions imply some kind of value base whether it's sacred or secular. There isn't a place to stand that's completely outside those kinds of conversations.



So when Christians come to education they come with a basic set of convictions about the love God and love of neighbour being at the basis of the well-lived human life, the human flourishing and so that vision can be brought to public conversations about what schooling should look like.

David Smith: Now the private public distinction – I mean bringing Christianity into the public realm doesn't necessarily mean imposing a specific set of beliefs on people but Christians come from a set of convictions with things to contribute to public discussions and public practices.

Leigh Hatcher: But in a world that's increasingly secular, at least in the West and you say those values can come from either faith, Christianity in particular or the secular world.

Why the Christian faith still will we find those values?

David Smith: While in the end the only thing that's going to authenticate the Christian faith still having a part of the discussion is if it has things to say that prove to contribute to human flourishing even as a Christian I'm not sure there are inherent reasons why Christians should be listened to if what they're saying doesn't make any sense. But I do think that the Christian faith and the Christian tradition has an enormous amount to contribute to questions of human flourishing and education.

Leigh Hatcher: You deal with two assumptions about faith and teaching. There are helpful reflections I think on this question. Take us briefly through those two assumptions. First the nature of school knowledge. What do you mean?

David Smith: Yeah. I mean this came out of some research in England about how teachers were thinking about moral and spiritual formation in relation to their teaching and it found that many teachers had an idea of their teaching where for instance, if there's a mathematics teacher, their self-understanding would be – will I just teach mathematics? So asking me to think about values or character or moral formation or spiritual formation or faith or any of those things – that's not my job I'm the mathematics teacher.

Leigh Hatcher: It's hardly surprising.

David Smith: I just teach mathematics. So that's sort of quite a common view of school subjects. That's the first assumption. It breaks down as soon as you look at all historically about some of the different ways in which any given school subject has been taught. Because the way we teach the subject actually changes as society changes and as our value systems change.

David Smith: So I think a math textbook I looked at once where I went through all of the word problems like the examples where Johnny has a part time job and he works 37 hours a week and makes this much an hour and how much does he make and so on – and found that all of the examples in the book that refer to money, the characters in the examples were either earning the money doing their part time jobs etc. or they were spending on consumer goods. I couldn't find any examples of charitable giving for example. So yes students might be learning the mathematical operations but also the way the learning is framed tells us stories about what kind of people we're to become and what our place and



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society is going to be. So in that sense, even something like learning basic mathematics is not a neutral activity with regard to our value systems.

Leigh Hatcher: That's the first assumption, that of school knowledge. What about the second, the nature of faith.

David Smith: The nature of faith. Yeah, the second assumption that the researchers in the study we're talking about have found among teachers was that when they were asked to think about doing something Christian that their idea of Christian faith was mostly to do with somebody standing up saying religious things and lecturing from the front. So they then had the feeling that to do something Christian in education must mean kind of stopping the show and talking about God for three minutes. So the way to do something Christian in mathematics might be to stop teaching mathematics, draw the students together and do a little mini preach for four or five minutes and explain the faith to them or something and then go back to teaching mathematics. So the notion that somehow the Christian thing just lives in the God talk and not in the shape of perhaps is the shape of our actions the way that we shape our learning together.

Leigh Hatcher: So how is that going to be done without it becoming either too much or too uncomfortable if you take it out of that three-minute section and kind of embed it?

David Smith: Well let me go back to you know the simple mathematics example – suppose because of my faith stands I have a basic conviction that we're given material resources to share with others and not just for our own enrichment and benefit and that's going to shape the way I think about how we ought to learn the function of mathematics. What kind of examples I might want to give. What kind of examples I might want to share. It might be the people who are not Christian can share that value with me because that is not just Christians who actually think that caring for others with our resources is a good thing but it is something I bring as a Christian that can be part of a public conversation that can be part of an educational enterprise. And that doesn't always make it necessary for me to raise my arms in the middle of that and say oh here's a Bible verse to go with it. Again it's a question of what I'm bringing to the educational process.

Leigh Hatcher: I'd be interested to hear how you reflect on the increasing secularisation of the West that I mentioned before when so many of the West's societal foundations still emerge from the Christian framework.

David Smith: Yeah, one of the things that I talked about in the Clark Lecture ... if you go back to the to the 1600s there's a guy called Comenius who is probably one of the most important figures in the history of western educational thinking and he was a language teacher. I was a language teacher when I started my career so I kind of resonate with him and he wrote what was probably the most important language textbook in the history of Western education it was used for 200 years and was translated into 16 languages and was used all across Europe. This is the language textbook for schools and it starts with God, and then the different parts of creation and then the different human callings within creation. It's then got a section on ethics and virtues. It's got a section on comparative religion and it finishes with the day of judgement.



David Smith: Exactly so under the assumption he starts from is that you've got this –you're a part of this story in an ordered world in which humans have callings, ethical responsibilities, faith and that you're going to be held responsible for the way that you live your life within that and that colours the whole way that he shapes learning. If you fast forward to the present day language textbooks that I've used in school, there's one that I've used recently a German textbook the first chapter is called 'Who I am and What I do'. The second one is called 'Possessions and Pleasures'. So, again we start from this sense that I define my own life and I define it mostly through what I own and what I like doing. So we've got this very not only secularized but quite materialist, quite consumerist. What is going to give shape to my life, what's going to define my identity is what things I managed to own and what I like doing on the weekend.

Leigh Hatcher: So what's the matter with that? Let me put that to you.

David Smith: Well that's going to depend on your perspective to a degree right. For me, the matter with that is that it's an extremely shallow and hollowed out view of human significance. I think that the significance of a human life is not measured in what you can buy and how many experiences you can collect on the way it's measured in the truth of what you live for and the degree to which you are able to serve and contribute to the well-being of the community that you're part of. But already in answering that question you see that – that answering that starts to drive us down to basic value commitments at some basic level.

You've got to choose what you believe about where truth comes from – where the value comes from – what a good human life looks like. And that starts to condition what you think is a good or bad school textbook. Whether you think this is a good story to tell in a school textbook and so that circles us right back around to in a sense being unable to avoid at a certain level questions of faith when asking questions about school curriculum.

Leigh Hatcher: Now one particular study that sheds some light on this whole question has provoked some thinking of yours. That of Trevor Cooling's Christian faith in the English Church School. What did he find?

David Smith: Well this is the study I was referring to earlier where they were looking at teachers were being coached in finding connections with faith, with ethics and so on in their teaching, and found a lot of them struggling because they made these assumptions that mathematics is just mathematics and that faith is preaching. And if you put those two assumptions together then the only way you can think of doing something Christian in education is to teach normal mathematics and then stop and preach for three minutes and then going back to teaching normal mathematics. Whereas they found that if teachers were helped to get beyond that and to start to unpick the way their subject area is put together – what are the implicit stories that are being told in the examples that are chosen in the way things are sequenced in the way the classrooms organised, then teachers made some quite significant changes to their teaching that followed through into student behaviours.

So one example he talks about is a physical education teacher is teaching field hockey and teaching students to do the push past in field hockey. And he was challenged to think about what value systems underlay the way he was doing that and he was Christian and so he started thinking about how in



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society he was concerned that we increasingly think of sport in a way that the only real reason to take part is to win. And the other way to have a good experience is to be the person who scores the goal or to be the person who wins and it becomes win at any cost. So if you can cheat a little and get away with this and the referee doesn't notice then it's justified if you win.

And it's very much focused on the glorification of the – you know the individual person succeeding. And he wanted to push back against that he wanted to teach students to think about how when you take part in a sport you're responsible for the well-being of all the other people that are on the field with you. I mean you play hard. But if you cheat and get away with it the other team will go home miserable and that's your fault. You have an effect on other people and you're responsible for that effect.

So one of the things that teachers started doing was when he demonstrated the push pass to students in his physical education lesson he realised that what he'd been doing before was just show him how to do the push pass and then send them off with a ball and a stick to go practice. What he started doing instead was putting them together in pairs and saying one of you is going to be the coach, one's going to be the player – you're going to take turns and you're going to take turns trying to help each other improve between the push pass and you're going to think about how you can encourage the other player and help to build their skills. And when students in a focus group after this lesson were asked what they'd been learning to get today in physical education they said they've been learning how to encourage one another.

Leigh Hatcher: I bet.

David Smith: And so sometimes it's just these really small changes in the way you go about something that can have quite a far reaching effect on what students think they learned when they were in class that day.

Leigh Hatcher: Highly significant educational and life experience. Here's a question though. Can an atheist teacher with the greatest of respect to them take part in this kind of thing?

David Smith: Absolutely. I mean as soon as this teacher come to this conclusion he can share it with his colleagues. Anybody can start doing the same thing right as soon as faith turns into practice, practices can be shared and other people for their own reasons can get involved in the same kinds of practices. So we're not necessarily talking here about those moments when conversions at stake or when you're trying to pin somebody to the wall and say right you know.

Leigh Hatcher: Decision time.

David Smith: Are you going to sign up now? It's more a question of again what we can bring to our common life and what do Christians have to contribute to the question of how we learn to be human. What kind of people we learn to be through schooling.



Leigh Hatcher: For teachers with faith you'd recognise the danger of them bringing a whole host of their own personal faith or religious ideologies even hobbyhorses into the classroom. If faith is to be part of everyday education – like what faith or even if you take Christian faith – what form or denomination of Christian faith.

David Smith: Yeah I think there are inevitably going to be denominational differences and to some degree – I mean you know denominations set up schools offices their distinctive is going to in some way shape that setting just as in secular schools the specific cultural location and political system within which that schools located are also going to shape curriculum. It's not just Christian schools that have denominational differences. Secular schools have an equivalent to denominational differences that are rooted in culture, social class, politics, specific geographical location. So you're always going to get differences in education. It's never going to look the same in every classroom. Education involves human beings and there's an inherent risk with that because you've got a human teacher who's got their own interests and passions and concerns. Now there is an ethical limit to that – there is because students, in the end, don't belong to the teacher.

The goal of teaching is not to make students exactly like me. The goal of teaching is to help the student grow. It's tricky to give some kind of general rule as like when that line is crossed and it's something I think teachers have to learn a wisdom for. When am I starting to take up teaching time for something that's really just my private hobby and really doesn't need to be imposed on everybody else? And one of my advocating for things that do actually contribute to my student's growth are a valid sowing into their own grasp of truth and flourishing and service and those kinds of themes. So I'd hesitate to try to state it as like you know the one sentence principle that will save us all. I think it's more of a wisdom that teachers have to learn about where that line is when you're starting to try to dominate your students instead of contributing to them.

Leigh Hatcher: Have it on the radar.

David Smith: Yeah.

Leigh Hatcher: But also not be afraid of faith being an elephant in the room. We don't go there.

David Smith: Right, I mean the majority of the world's population of people of faith in one kind or another. And in fact, on many basic definitions of faith, secular people are people of faith as well. They have a faith that the world is a God less place and that one can construct value systems in that space so there are basic value questions about which we all have passionate stories to tell. And schooling is one of the places where some of those stories are worked out. That's unavoidable. The question becomes whether we can do that without tearing each other apart in the process, without impinging on the student's right to grow as their own person but to bring the wisdom we've gleaned with us when we come to teach.

Leigh Hatcher: This is a critical question though with our audience being parents of school-aged boys. What about those students or their parents in this age of tolerance who don't subscribe to that or a faith framework – where are they left in this?



David Smith: You can think about this in you know multiple directions. Suppose I'm a person who does subscribe to a faith framework and I go to a secular school.

Leigh Hatcher: Good point.

David Smith: Suppose I'm a person who does or doesn't subscribe to a faith framework and at school or in my job or down the street or at the polling booth I'm living alongside people who don't share my faith framework – whether my framework is Christian, secular, whatever it is. There are a few basic options there I can stop all building and decide I'm not going to talk to anybody who doesn't share my exact outlook on the world. That seems to be a temptation in some parts of modern culture to make everything safe again by finding ways of excluding all the people who aren't exactly my strike, or I can try to figure out ways of living well together with people who are at the end of the day I think are mistaken about things.

I think schooling is one of the places we learn to do that. And if we try to approach schooling by evacuating it of all the convictions that have actually given shape to our ethics, our society, our institutions and so on, then I think we've become less likely, not more likely to learn how to live well together with differences of belief. So I don't think the fact that people have different beliefs in a classroom means that you can't raise those beliefs that you can't interact around them that you can't see what it would mean to take them seriously.

Leigh Hatcher: What a liberating thing to say in this day and age actually. Can I ask you finally give us a sketch of how you'd like teaching to take place where questions of life and faith and meaning, as a set, are embedded? Can you give us a couple of practical examples that will still hold meaning and benefit for all?

David Smith: You asked about mathematics because people often raise that as a really difficult one. It's easy to think in English literature classroom you might discuss God things that might have been Macbeth or whatever. So it's kind of easy to imagine in some subject areas where faith questions might arise. But think about mathematics which seems to be kind of just numbers and symbols. I've seen an example of a curriculum that a team of teachers worked on in Michigan where they designed a unit for secondary mathematics that starts with a photograph of people on a beach running away from a tidal wave. And the title of the chapter is 'The Indian Ocean Tsunami 2004' which seems like a really unusual chapter for a chapter title for a chapter in a mathematics textbook. Right the math textbook is supposed to be called differential equations or whatever.

So it starts off by explaining what a tsunami is and then it starts to ask questions like can you use mathematics to describe the shape of a wave. And can you use mathematics to describe the acceleration of a wave? And if you can do that can you use mathematics to build early warning systems for tsunamis. If you can if you know the starting conditions can you predict how big the wave is going to get and how fast is going to go and when it's going to arrive on the coast of Thailand and turns out you can. Well if you can do that then why did so many people die in 2004? Well maybe partly because the resources around these things don't seem to be quite equally distributed around the world. And so was this just a natural disaster or was the human responsible.



Was it what we call an act of God, or was human responsibility involved? And then it starts thinking about the mathematics of emergency aids. So you've got crates of blankets and food that you need to drop to people scattered across a coastline. How do you plot the quickest path from the largest number of people? If you fly too low you're going to waste time and fuel, if you drop the stuff from too high you're going to destroy its contents. How would you figure out the optimum height to drop your crate from? And so what this unit does is get students exploring the way one of the things we use mathematics for in the world is to try to prevent death and suffering.

We use it to try to alleviate suffering. We try to respond to crises and we use mathematics and medicine and that is we don't just use mathematics for calculating our car loan and our mortgage and for buying things and for part time jobs and a lot of the things that populate some of the school math textbooks that I've seen. So that's an example of Christian teachers actually sitting down and trying to redesign something that came close to their vision of what's important about human life that includes ideas of service, care compassion, suffering and so on. And yet it's also not the kind of unit that somebody else couldn't take on board or learn from it and go wow that's potentially kind of interesting. So I see that as the kind of – you know an example of trying to try to bring something to the table that might actually be interesting to other folk too.

Leigh Hatcher: Enliven the education. That's what I kept on thinking as you were using that example and for that matter, faith as well.

David Smith: Exactly.

Leigh Hatcher: Professor David Smith, it's been a great conversation. Thanks so much indeed for joining us.

David Smith: Thank you.

Leigh Hatcher: If you'd like more information about growing your boy into a fine young man, you can subscribe to receive really useful articles and news from The Scots College. It's free and offered to every parent who wants the very best for their boy in their journey to manhood. In your Internet search engine, enter 'The Scots College enewsletter' to subscribe. I'm Leigh Hatcher. I hope you'll join me again next week on the Brave Hearts Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. Now, David, you're about to be hit with a rare honour here. You know the drill at the end of these podcasts, there is a bell button there. We now invite you to ring us out, please.

