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Graduation Portfolio

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ESSAY

There is a simple happiness that comes from knowing very little and knowing it with all the confidence in the world. I came to Briercrest feeling very confident and sure of what I knew. My plan in coming to Briercrest was to spend some time making great friends and gaining life experiences and to come out after four years being affirmed in the things that I already knew. My experience could not have been more different. My time at Briercrest College challenged me academically, spiritually, and holistically as a person. It has been incredibly difficult in many ways and I've had to rethink many positions that I used to hold with absolute certainty. At the end of my time here I leave as a more well-rounded student with a far greater depth of understanding of the scriptures and their interpretation across history and across a variety of denominations.

Before coming to Briercrest I thought that I had a pretty good grasp on the Scriptures. I was very content with the understanding that I had of how everything in the Bible fit together. However, for all my confidence in my knowledge, I had never really taken time to think seriously about the life of Jesus and about his message. My understanding of the Bible and especially the New Testament was influenced substantially by Paul's theology, or more accurately, by an interpretation of Paul's theology. I was a careful student of theology, but not as careful a student of the Scriptures. My theology informed the way I understood the Scriptures rather

than the Scriptures informing the way I understood theology. One of the most important changes that has occurred in my life in my time here at Briercrest is in the way I understand the Scriptures specifically the Gospels and how they shape an understanding of the entire New Testament. It was in my freshman Gospel's class that I was made aware of how much I had shaped my interpretation of Scripture on the basis of my theology and had not let the Scriptures speak for themselves. I remember hearing many things that I was uncomfortable with. It was alarming that many of the things that I was uncomfortable with were coming off Jesus' lips. That's when I realized how dangerous my method was. I was silencing Jesus' message by conclusions I had already drawn from different portions of scripture. As the week progressed, I slowly became less and less uncomfortable with what I was hearing and was eventually able to embrace this teaching of Jesus that I had never really heard. It was through this course that I learned about God's radical demands that go hand in hand with his radical mercy. I learned that judgment is based upon works and that what we do will always point to who we are. I learned about the importance of living a life that shows allegiance to Jesus and not to the world, and also the importance of enduring in that allegiance to the end. I learned the importance of Jesus and his disciples declaring that the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near. The door was opened for me to a world of biblical studies beyond the small box of theology that I had previously tried to cram the bible into. In my subsequent years at Briercrest I have enjoyed exploring the Scriptures again with fresh eyes. I had to let go of a lot of the theology I had previously held so tightly to and approach the scriptures as honestly as I could. My study of the Scripture has

greatly affected my life as a disciple of Jesus. It has helped me to understand what Jesus' mission was and what he calls his followers to do. I have gained much more confidence when speaking about God's kingdom. And although it was difficult to have so many of my theological positions challenged and many others of them changed, I have come out of Briercrest with a new-found confidence in interpreting the Scriptures. Although I now realize that things are more complicated than I originally thought, and that I don't have all the answers, I am comfortable holding tightly to the things I can know for sure, while at the same time being well informed and convinced about things that are more difficult to know with complete certainty. Briercrest has enabled me to become a better student of the word of God and this is something that I will carry with me the rest of my life.

One of the most challenging things about Spiritual learning is that it involves learning about God. When I learn something new, it doesn't only have implications for how I think about theological issues, but it also has huge implications because of the fact that God is not merely an object of knowledge but also a God with whom I have a relationship. As I learned new things about God, and as my theology changed and was challenged it was difficult to admit that my understanding of God may have been wrong all these years. It was difficult to accept that I may have been wrong in my thinking about God. It's hard to find out that the God that I've loved and worshipped my whole life might not actually be who I thought He was. He might not act in the ways I thought he did. I found out that there were people who loved God and were devoted to the Scriptures who understood God in different ways than I did. I came into Briercrest convinced that Calvinism was the only way to understand

salvation. It was only in meeting people smarter than me who loved the Lord who weren't Calvinists that I was able to consider that my views might not be as sure as I thought. It wasn't until I learned exactly how the Bible was compiled and how it has been passed on to us that I realized that my doctrine of Scripture might be a little bit naïve. I don't quite know where I land on the Calvinist issue. I do realize that it is far to simplistic to consider Calvinism biblical and reject the Armenians as left-wing liberals who don't care about Scripture. I've had to release my tightly held six points of Calvinism (yes not five) and accept that the bible teaches that God does desire all people to be saved and that it does matter that believers endure in following Jesus. I've had to look at texts again in a new way and rethink things I used to hold onto. Another issue I've had to think about stems from the fact that I was baptized as an infant. I've been forced to think very carefully about what baptism is and what counts as a *real* baptism. I have always wrestled with the question of to what degree infant baptism is Biblical. I grew up in a Church that taught about it, but I never was convinced by their arguments for it. I decided a long time ago that I would not baptize my children as infants. The question still remains however, if I should or would ever get re-baptized. I know that if I want to work in certain denominations like the Baptist one The Church would require me to. I think I would be ok with this. I know that baptism signals death and resurrection with the Messiah and being united to him in a very real way. I don't see anything wrong with being baptized again in a new way, especially if it's the model of baptism that I think is the most biblical and if it allows me to minister in a church that would use my gifts. My struggles through questions like these give a little bit of insight as to where I see

myself ending up in ministry. I have always had a desire to teach the Bible. I think God has called me to. My experiences at Briercrest and the voices of those around me have affirmed this in me. I look forward to teaching where I am able. I would like to serve as a teacher in the Church and maybe one day in the classroom.

One of the biggest payoffs of my education at Briercrest has been in developing my abilities to read and think critically. My English classes taught me the importance of every paragraph in a piece of literature, while my Greek classes taught me the importance of words with those paragraphs. I've enjoyed tracing arguments through biblical texts using various methods such as arching and outlines. I have also enjoyed engaging the writings of other authors as I write my papers. James Muir taught our philosophy class the importance of examining the strength of an argument someone is putting forward in and of itself. It doesn't matter who is making the argument, it matters what is being said. During my time at Briercrest I've learned to examine arguments and respond to them based on their merit and not on the authority of their author. I've had to take a second look at some of my favorite pastors and authors and examine their writings and sermons based on the strength of their arguments and not on how much I like the author. I've learned the importance of examining primary sources before looking at secondary sources. It has been really cool thinking critically about what authors like Plato and Cicero actually wrote before seeing what later authors had to say about them. In my papers I've learned to think about every word's function in a paragraph, and every paragraph's function in the paper. I've enjoyed interacting with other scholars and primary sources who are relevant to the topic I am exploring. It has been enjoyable to agree with and often disagree with scholars who have been studying for many

years. I've learned the importance of not only trying to find scholars who support my position, but also examining other arguments to see if they are compelling or whether or not they need to be shown fallacious. I look forward to using my abilities in future ministry opportunities in my own studies and in examining the arguments of others.

I have always enjoyed communicating verbally. I enjoy sharing ideas with others and feel comfortable communicating in a variety of public contexts especially the classroom. Briercrest has presented me with great opportunities to speak publicly and learn rhetorical skills. I've enjoyed taking a homiletics class and learning to develop and preach a sermon. It was helpful to receive valuable feedback from my instructor and use that feedback to improve my skills for subsequent sermons. I've also had many opportunities to do presentations in upper-level biblical studies classes. These presentations have provided me with opportunities to practice communicating effectively in a classroom setting. One of my most memorable experiences as a Briercrest student has been accompanying Dr. Olmstead to Camp Qwanoes to assist him in teaching the Kaleo program. Over the two years that I went I learned a great deal about teaching and communicating from the front of a classroom. Wes helped me to understand that one of the most important parts of teaching is learning to ask the right questions. I've gained a good amount of confidence in the two weeks I spent teaching at Kaleo and feel well prepared for various teaching capacities. Finally, my role in student government has allowed me many opportunities to speak publicly in front of the entire student body. I have been able to use principles from my homiletics class to prepare my sermons and speeches. I have learned to become comfortable speaking in front of hundreds of people and enjoy the opportunity to share things that the Lord has been teaching

me. As a rule, whenever I communicate I strive to be clear and concise. Dr. Stigall uses the phrase “lucid brevity” to describe effective communication. I want to say what I need to say as clearly as I can with as much effect on my hearers as possible. I look forward to continuing to develop this gift in my ministry experiences beyond Briercrest.

Briercrest has been an incredible place in allowing me to use my gifts to serve those around me in a plethora of ways. During my first year at Kaleo I was able to develop my gifts as a leader in the program and use them to lead my peers. I volunteered at a youth group and used the things I was learning to minister to the youth. That year I was also able to use my musical talents in leading worship. I led worship at youth group and also for chapels and spontaneous worship times within our Kaleo group. During my first year on campus I became a member of a hip-hop dance ministry called Refined Undignified. Being a part of the team was a great way to minister to youth. We were able to share the gospel message through dance and then follow up more specifically with individuals. The team offered a great community to share concerns and pray for one another. In my second year on campus I served in Lewis Apartments as an RA. I was able to use my leadership abilities and listening abilities to minister to the guys on the hall. I was stretched in many ways and came out with a better understanding of my skills and how I can work effectively as a part of a team. I was able to see a lot of the guys pursuing the Lord and took great delight in that. In my final year at Briercrest I had the great privilege of leading the student body as the student body President. This role has stretched me in many ways and continues to challenge me as the year goes on. I have had the pleasure of working closely with the two vice presidents and team of coordinators to provide the students with a fun and meaningful year. We put on events such as Spiritual Emphasis

Weekend, Day of Prayer, a study party in the cafeteria, etc. The opportunities to preach in chapel and sit in meetings have been helpful, as I look to future service in church pulpits and church boardrooms. On top of all these experiences, I have thoroughly enjoyed my experiences first at Cobble Hill Church and secondly at the Gathering. These church communities have encouraged me and renewed my faith in the Church actually being a place where people love one another and look out for each other's well being as they worship the Lord together.

Briercrest has been enormously helpful in my journey in the discipline of Biblical studies. When I came to Kaleo I thought I knew a lot about the Bible. I probably did, relatively speaking. I knew all the bible stories. I knew the theology of the Church that I was brought up in quite well, and I actually read my bible on a daily basis. However, for all my confidence in my knowledge I realized quite quickly and alarmingly that I did not know nearly as much as I thought I did. Through a freshman Gospels class I learned that I had never seriously thought about Jesus' mission and message in its context. I had always let Paul's letter dictate what I read in the Gospels. I had also taken most of my theology on the authority of the Church without carefully examining things for myself. I read the bible often, but I always read it to find things I was told would be there. Dr. Olmstead's class challenged me to think carefully about Jesus teaching in its own context. I learned that there was a whole world of biblical studies out there that I didn't know about. I decided to come to Briercrest to pursue this newfound passion of mine. With the high level of familiarity I had with the biblical texts coming into the biblical studies program I was able to do quite well in my classes. Two of the most beneficial things for me in my time at Briercrest have been my Greek and Hebrew classes. I took Greek with Dr. Olmstead in my first year on campus and it opened up a new world for me. It was incredible to

read the New Testament in the original language and examine the stories the authors were telling and the arguments they were making. Studying the book of Colossians in Greek Exegesis was one of the most rewarding experiences during my time at Briercrest. It was incredible to put to use all the things we had learned in our three semesters of Greek to interpret the book together. Our exegetical papers were challenging, but very rewarding. I learned to think seriously about the words in the text I was dealing with and to carefully interact with the scholastic literature on my passage. Resources like Don Carson's book *Exegetical Fallacies* proved to be a valuable tool as I entered this new world of exegesis. I learned to do word studies, talk about syntax, and deal with text critical issues. I began Hebrew with Dr. Miller in my second year on campus and continued with Dr. Ortlund in my third and final year on campus. Hebrew offered more challenges initially than Greek did based on the fact that the Old Testament Corpus is much larger than the New Testament, the alphabet has virtually no relation to the English alphabet, and Hebrew is read from right to left with vowel pointings written under and above the consonants. Although I found Hebrew more difficult in some ways, I also found it very valuable in my journey of biblical studies. It has been especially helpful going through some of the Prophets and seeing the color that the original Hebrew gives to the poetry. Apart from language classes I have enjoyed many other classes that have benefitted me in my field. In my I have taken a course in the gospel of John in which we carefully studied John's gospel and explored the story he was telling. I took an advanced course in the Prophets and learned how the prophets are often unified in their messages calling the people of Israel to covenant faithfulness. In an upper level class on the Gospel of Matthew I learned about different kinds of critical approaches to looking at biblical texts. Finally in my last year of school I have enjoyed serving as an intern to

Dr. Olmstead. Through this internship I have had opportunities to teach full lectures to students in the Kaleo program, I have the opportunity to read difficult portions of the New Testament in Greek with Dr. Olmstead, and I have the benefit of his supervision in a major research paper. Briercrest has equipped me to be a competent biblical scholar with developing proficiency in both Greek and Hebrew. Not only have I learned to study, but also I have had the opportunity to teach both in classrooms and pulpits in front of large and small groups articulating what I have learned. I consider my education at Briercrest a great start to a life-long journey in Biblical Studies. I appreciate most of all that all the long hours of study and tough questions haven't pushed me away from God, but rather have drawn me closer to Him. I love the God that I'm learning about in the pages of his Scriptures and look forward to growing deeper in my walk with Him.