

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY  
RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF LEADER-OBSERVED AND STUDENT  
EXPERIENCED BEHAVIORAL TRANSFORMATIONS ASSOCIATED  
WITH CHRISTIAN RELEASED TIME PROGRAMS

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Steven Louis Rathers, Jr.

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2021

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of instructional leaders and high school graduates associated with a released time education (RTE) learning center in northern Georgia. The study sought to understand the perceived contribution of released time on behavioral transformation and the construct of a biblical worldview. The phenomenological method was chosen as the qualitative design for this research since it involves how the participants made sense of their experience. Data collection in this phenomenological study consisted of interviews with nine instructional leaders, and a focus group of eight alumni, all of whom were purposively selected. Four research questions were designed to reveal the participant's perceptions and experiences of the connection between RT, behavioral transformation, and the development of a biblical worldview. Data analysis followed Moustakas' process of bracketing, open coding, and thematic analysis, revealing four emerging themes. The findings revealed compelling evidence that RTE constructively influences behaviors and is an impetus for the development of a biblical worldview in adolescents. RTE programs may hold the answer to the revitalization of Bible-based morality in adolescents.

*Keywords:* release time, phenomenology, behaviors, constitutional, Mormon

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### **List of Abbreviations**

The Church of Latter-Day Saints (LDS)

Released Time (RT)

Released Time Education (RTE)

CLC (Christ's Learning Center)

## **CHAPTER ONE – RESEARCH CONCERN**

### **Introduction**

Biblical morality has been diminished by the hypocrisy of the Christian community, as well as the decline in biblical literacy. The second President of the United States, John Adams declared, “It is religion and morality alone, which can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand. The only foundation of a free constitution is pure virtue” (as cited Walpin, 2016). The connection between religion and morality was relevant in the past but has become obsolete in the present. Consequently, a “new morality” is widely accepted among individuals who identify with Gen Z and millennials. According to Barna (2018), one adolescent research participant stated, “Society changes, and what’s good or bad changes as well. It is all relative to what’s happening in the world.” Released time is a religious educational institution capable of changing the above stated worldview, with a Bible-based morality because the principles in the Bible are immutable.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of instructional leaders and high school graduates in relation to behavioral transformation and the development of a biblical worldview within a released time (RT) learning center. Released time education provides students at public schools with a bible-based education, giving them the opportunity to develop a biblical worldview. Since religiosity has been shown to provide a level of protection against risk behaviors (Cole & Ovwigho, 2009), released time needs to be considered as a viable option to transform behavior through the development of a biblical worldview. Released time is foreign to many Christians and Christian leaders; therefore, its justification for widespread use as a transformative behavioral instrument needs to be researched.

### **Background of the Problem**

According to the Christian Legal Society (1996), released time education is the most effective open door available for students to receive Bible-based instruction during the school day. Unfortunately, the open door is ignored by most Christian leaders. Many Christian leaders are unfamiliar with the legality and feasibility of RTE. Arizona is a state which “requires each school district to adopt a policy governing the excuse of pupils for religious purposes.” (Ciavolino, n.d.). However, a Christian-based RTE organization or learning center does not exist in Arizona. Conversely in Pennsylvania law states, “released time programs should be operating in every school in the state to ensure that students are able to take advantage of their right under state law to participate in religious instruction” (Ciavolino, n.d.). Currently, in one county in Pennsylvania, 28 out of 72 elementary schools have released time programs (Clymer, Musser, Sarno, 2017). Every state does not have specific laws governing released time; however, some Christian leaders who reside in states which provide supportive governance for released time are ignoring an opportunity to provide students with religious instruction that develops bible-based morality.

The Christian community needs to become more involved with the revitalization of morality among adolescents. Extant literature corroborates a congruence between religiosity and behaviors. Research finds that less than one-third of adults rely on the Bible for decision-making, and the other two-thirds rely on others, personal beliefs, experiences, and feelings (Munsil, 2020). Comparatively, the findings are more disturbing among the youngest generation where only 15% are likely to use the Bible for moral guidance (Munsil, 2020). The lack of a Bible-based education appears to correlate to immoral behaviors. An example of this problem is reported by Barna (2018), where Christian adolescents engaged in religious activities are more

than twice as likely to believe lying is wrong (77%), compared to those who are churched (38%), and nearly four times more likely than those claim no faith at all (20%). The common denominator is absence of a connection to a biblical worldview.

Released time is a program that allows public-school students, who have written consent from their parents, to participate in religious instruction during regular school hours (Ryman & Alcorn, 2020). RT educational platforms are mandated to meet legal requirement to be identified as religious-based RT programs. The legal parameters for RT require the classes to occur off-campus, public funds are not utilized, and the public-school administration cannot promote program attendance, or coercion occurs by any method. Released time is a program conducted in conjunction with the daily public-school schedule where students attend a religious class off-campus either before or after school and, in most cases, receive school credit.

### **The Law and Religion**

*Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) was the prelude to the decommissioning of sharing the Great Commission in the public-school system. The legal ramifications of *Everson v. the Board of Education* centered on the New Jersey law that granted permission to local school districts to arrange public transportation for children who attended parochial school while reimbursing parents for transportation costs (Theissen, 2001). The outcome from *Everson v. Board of Education* had a resounding impact on the relationship between religion and public schools.

The declaration of separation between Church and State led to the incorporation of the *Establishment Clause* (Smith, 2009). The Establishment Clause is the first clause in the First Amendment which states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” (Fish, 2015). Some believe the Establishment Clause and its application in *Engel v. Vitale* (1962)

and Abington School District, initiated the removal of God from the public school system (Prothero & Kerby, 2015). Whether individuals support or deny the plausibility of such a statement, the obvious implication of the Establishment Clause is the elimination of a biblical resource for cultivating character development. The Establishment Clause eradicated numerous religious practices; however, the institution of released time, though wounded, did not die.

Religious bias by the Supreme Court was also a contributing factor to the outcome of *Everson v. Board of Education*. For example, Justice Hugo Black, who presided over the *Everson v. Board of Education* case was a former member of the Ku Klux Klan. Judge Black was thought to have asserted his partial and strict separationist view of the Establishment Clause, which affirmed his anti-religious and anti-Catholic sentiments (Witte, 2006). The former Klansman wrote into law a "legislative wall," impeding Catholicism in public-schools. The *Everson v. Board of Education* case was the first case involving and rejecting governmental aid to parochial schools (Fessenden, 2005). The partiality exposed in *McCollum v. the Board of Education* created a wall between religion and public schools. According to Witte (2006):

The Court purged religion from the public school and removed religious schools from many traditional forms of state support. In more than two dozen cases after *Everson*, the Court held that public schools could not offer prayers or moments of silence, could not read Scripture or religious text, could not house Bibles or prayer books, could not teach theology or creationism, could not display the Decalogue, could not use the services or facilities of religious bodies. (p. 41)

The legal fallout from this and other cases would set the tone for the relinquishment of religious instruction in schools as well as the abandonment of released time religious education.

### **The Law and Release Time**

The proposition for released time religious education was considered at a teacher's conference in New York in 1905 and implemented under the direction Dr. William Wirt in Gary

Indiana in 1914 (Ciavolino, n.d.). The success of released time was undeniable and connected students to religious and moral instruction. The following observations were noted:

In 1922, for example, Released Time programs were active in 23 states. Forty thousand students from 200 school districts were participating. By 1932, thirty states had active Released Time programs in 400 communities with an enrollment of 250,000 students. Ten years later, in 1942, participation reached 1.5 million students in 46 States. Released time peaked in 1947, with 2 million students enrolled in 2,200 communities. During this time, favorable Released Time legislation was adopted by 12 States (Ciavolino, n.d.).

Before the legal hurdles in the 1940s, released time "reached nearly 2000 communities in 49 states enrolling over two million students" (Bindewald, 2015, p. 84). Currently, the data for operational released time programs across the United States is at 1000, with approximately 250,000 participants from grades one through twelve (Brevik, 2019).

Justice William O. Douglas of the United States Supreme Court declared the following supportive proclamation for the utilization of RT programs (Ericsson et al., 1996):

When the state encourages religious instruction or cooperates with religious authorities by adjusting the schedule of public events to sectarian needs, it follows the best of our traditions. For it then respects the religious nature of our people and accommodates the public service to their spiritual needs. To hold that it may not would be to find in the Constitution a requirement that the government shows a callous indifference to religious groups. That would be preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe. (p. 26)

Legally, RT has been authenticated as a worthwhile instrument for providing biblical instruction to students in public schools. However, *McCorm v. Board of Education* (1948) contested the constitutionality of RT. McCorm argued the enablement of religious instruction in public schools constituted the illegal use of state sustenance, which violated the First Amendment Establishment Clause (Zucker, 2007).

The McCorm's case would be heard and defeated first at the Sixth Illinois Court in September 1945 and then again in the Illinois Supreme Court in December of 1947 (McCorm, 1982). The United States would hear the case and overrule the two previous Illinois court

decisions on December 8, 1947. Unfortunately, the *McCullum v. the Board of Education*'s verdict produced a negative impact on the evolution and progression of Bible-based religious education in public schools. The utilization of the released time paradigm experienced further decline under legislative scrutiny, which included the removal of school-sponsored praying and Bible reading in public schools (Bindwalde, 2015).

### **LDS and Release Time**

Released time education is not a novel phenomenon; however, the expanded use of the LDS community's seminary has created a remarkable rationale to return to the released time vehicle to further the Gospel message and cultivate the whole person of the adolescent Christian community. In communities heavily saturated in the Mormon faith, LDS seminary or released time institutions are adjacent to nearly every secondary school (Griffiths, 2011). The first Mormon-based released time seminary was opened in 1911 near a high school in Utah where students held classes in LDS-owned buildings, receiving one elective credit towards graduation (Griffith, 2011).

The LDS community has produced an organized and easily accessible released time program by strategically building Mormon stakes near public-schools. The purpose of the released time program or LDS seminary is to cultivate Mormon culture and theological doctrine to ensure that the future generation has a sound Mormon foundation (Griffiths, 2011). Mormon churches facilitate the development of the seminary to bridge the gap between Church and public-school education.

### **Theology and Religious Education**

Training provides an individual with a continual opportunity to excel in a desired discipline. Sports specialization during early to middle childhood has been deemed essential to



produce elite level athletes (Jayanthi et al., 2013). Children are taught or disciplined physically to maximize their athletic potential. Similarly, the Bible proclaims the necessity for children to be trained, not athletically, but spiritually to live a righteous life. In Deuteronomy 6:1-9, the people of Israel were commanded to follow the Lord's decrees as well as impart His laws to future generations. The impartation of God's laws and decrees to the next generation correlates to bible-based training for children. Although the context of the Scripture applies to the relationship between child and parent, the biblical manifesto implies the need for children to be instructed according to the Word of God. Deuteronomy 31:11-13, Joshua 8:35 and Psalm 78:1-7 each points out when the reading of the Scripture was shared in a gathering, the children were included with adults.

### **Education and the Old Testament**

Moses implored the people to recognize the importance of living according to God's laws and educating the younger generation in following the laws. Without proper training, future generations were destined to fail. Deuteronomy 6:20-21 states, "In the future, when your son asks you, 'What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees, and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?' tell him: We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand." (*New International Version*, 1973/1984). Moses presented the importance conveying biblical knowledge to the forthcoming generations. Moses also emphasized the importance of parental involvement in educating their children (Pazmino, 2008). Although the teaching context is the home, the primary theme is the necessity to provide children with an understanding of God's commands.

Bible-based education is mandated in the Word of God. However, the education of a child is also the responsibility of the community. According to Pazmino (2008), "Wherever

faithful persons interact, there is an occasion for Christian education-provided this interaction is deliberate, systematic and sustained” (p. 24). Released time is a deliberate and systematic approach to discipleship that provides sustained, faith-based learning for adolescents within a community.

Psalm 78:1-8 provides another reference for imparting God's desires to children. Whenever information is communicated, an educational opportunity occurs. The writer of Psalm 78 reveals the importance of communicating the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. The people of Israel were exhorted to communicate this revelation so the children would develop a trusting relationship with God. The Psalmist writes, “Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget His deeds but would keep his commands” (*New International Version, 1973/1984, Psalm 78:7*). Although the family was considered the primary source for education, in the exilic and postexilic period, synagogues and schools were educational settings (Pazmino, 2008).

Nehemiah 8:1-2 states, “all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate.” They told Ezra, the teacher of the Law, to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel” (*New International Version, 1973/1984, Nehemiah 8:1-2*). Ezra was commissioned to teach the Laws of God (Ezra 7:25). The educational setting included men, women, and others. As an educator, Ezra had the responsibility of proclamation, exposition, and exhortation (Pazmino, 2008). The students' burden included knowing Gods' word through attentive listening, understanding God's word by responding to the exposition, and obeying God's name under the influence of the exhortation (Pazmino, 2008). Although women were usually excluded from meetings, the significance of the teaching warranted both women and children (Barker & Kohlenberger, 1994).

### ***Education and the New Testament***

The importance of a Bible-based education is also substantiated in the New Testament by the Master Teacher Jesus Christ, His disciples, and the Apostle Paul. The essence of teaching is active engagement, conveyance of information, and application for the purpose of an ongoing transformation. Jesus was not a formal teacher by discipline; however, Jesus committed to the task of enlightening and empowering people with the goal of transforming lives. The authority by which Jesus taught differentiated Him from other rabbis (Anthony & Benson, 2003).

The New Testament is a collection of "textbooks" used to develop spiritually well-rounded and faithful students (disciples) in preparation for the "ultimate graduation". Each teacher in the New Testament revealed significant instruction to produce a living faith in the lives of the hearers. The Gospels, Epistles, and the other "textbooks" establish a biblical curriculum for students to comprehend and apply to live a life that glorifies God (1 Corinthians, 10:31). Ultimately, the New Testament vision is to provide a curriculum taught by teachers whose pupils eventually become teachers themselves (Matthew 28:19-20).

The New Testament teachings reinforce the importance of a religious education rooted in the Word of God; however, the purpose of the educational efforts moves from conformity to the Law to developing disciples (Pazmino, 2008). Matthew establishes a protocol for the disciples of Jesus Christ to develop more disciples. Disciples of Jesus Christ are both leaders and teachers. Leaders are people of influence, and their teachings are the catalysts of change. The Gospel of Matthew identifies a pattern for teaching. Pazmino (2008) states the following about Matthew's Gospel:

The five major teaching sections of instruction include the following: 5:1-7:27; 10:1-42; 13:1-52; 18:1-35; 23:1-25:46. These sections address major areas of the Christian life. They can be categorized in terms of three elements that a Christian community shares with its members, name a vision, a mission, and a memory (p. 36).

The value of teaching is exemplified in Matthew's Gospel as well in other chapters of the New Testament. The Bible establishes a pattern and a prerequisite for the advancement of spiritual formation.

Spiritual formation, by definition, is "the ongoing process of the triune God transforming the believer's life and character toward the life and character of Jesus Christ – accomplished by the ministry of the Spirit in the context of biblical community" (Petit, 2008, p. 24). Spiritual formation is necessary for adults and children alike. Therefore, a Bible-based educational platform that undergirds spiritual formation exemplifies the vision of the New Testament.

Adolescents need a foundation to sustain them beyond physical provisions. The foundation must include moral, social, spiritual and psychological truths. Providing students with biblical instruction may initiate a spiritual and moral transformation. In Paul's writing to Timothy, training in godliness is necessary for life (*New International Version, 1973/1984*, 1 Timothy 4:7-8). The adolescents of the Christian community need spiritual fitness training to bring forth holiness that pleases the Lord. Therefore, children need to be nurtured to live according to the Scripture, "As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live, to please God, as, in fact, you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more "(*New International Version, 1973/1984*, 1Thessalonians 4:1-2). A living faith pleases God.

Living faith is a product of effective discipleship and a manifestation of growing in the image of Christ. Discipleship is how individuals are taught and encouraged to manifest a living belief and a transformed life. According to Foss (2014), such faith is founded in the Word of God, nurtured in the church, and expressed imperfectly in our daily lives. Spiritual disciplines

are lifted and practiced not as ends in themselves but because they grow us toward that outcome. An active faith undergirds a disciple's transformation in the image of Jesus Christ.

According to Kilner (2015), the image of God is not a present existence but a future outcome through Jesus Christ. The human result is instigated by a heart that desires to be transformed by a renewed mind to possess the character of Jesus Christ. The correlation between man and the image of God is not man's appearance or attributes, but in man's advancement in emulating Christ, who is the image of God. Christian leaders are partially responsible for the spiritual development of adults and adolescents alike. Discipleship is a mandate from Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19-20). Discipleship must extend outside the walls of the church, which includes entering the walls of the schools.

## **Theory and Religious Education**

### ***Servant Leadership Theory***

According to Robert K. Greenleaf, the forerunner for servant leadership, "The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not be further deprived"? (Spears, 2007, p. 11). The servant-leader recognizes the importance of a man's maturation while maintaining the foresight to accomplish an objective. Servant leadership theory emphasizes building a better tomorrow by developing today's people (Parris & Peachey, 2013). The leadership characteristics of servant leadership have been identified as humility, relational, service-oriented, selfless, wise, and persuasive (Greenleaf, 1977).

Servant leadership that focuses on building people instead of using people, cultivates a lasting, functional environment. Greenleaf (1977) maintained the path towards building people starts with a methodology that builds people first. Discipleship facilitates the "spiritual building"

of people. RT can become an additional source of ministry equipment supporting the construction of a biblical worldview among adolescents. "Biblical leadership is taking the initiative to influence people to grow in holiness and to passionately promote the extension of God's kingdom in the world" (Howell, 2003, p. 3). Leaders may need to take the initiative and use RT as a builder of disciples.

### ***Transformational Leadership Theory***

Paul writes, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (*New King James Version, 1979/1994, Romans 12:2*). Effective leadership transforms the mindset of the follower to change actions and outcomes. The Savior, Jesus Christ, transformed the minds of the disciples and changed the world's outcomes. The disciples willingly followed the mandate or teachings of Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20) and furthered the message of salvation for Jesus. Through servanthood as well as through transformational leadership, Jesus inspired change. Transformational leadership theory was proposed by James MacGregor Burns in 1978. Burns defined the transforming leader as follows (as cited in Miller, 2007):

The transforming leader looks for potential motives in followers to satisfy higher needs and engages the full person of the follower. The result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents. (p 183)

Transformational leadership theory focuses on the leader's capacity to facilitate positive change based on the interests of the individual and the group. A similarity between transformational leadership and servanthood leadership is the focus on the follower. Transformational leadership theory acknowledges the importance of a vision; however, the follower is not seen as a means to the vision but as a part of the vision. In an educational environment, the transformational leader exclusively serves to impact the student (Miller, 2007).

A transformational leader possesses a vision yet recognizes the importance of serving the interest of those who follow. Transformational leaders seek to empower followers to reach their maximum potential (Arenas et al., 2017). By nurturing followers, transformational leaders have a desire to see the follower become more significant than the leader. Jesus comforted His disciples with these words, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father" (New International Version, John 14:12). Jesus desired for those who followed Him to do even greater.

Unlike the seminary structure in the Mormon religion, the Christian community lacks a widely accepted biblical educational framework dedicated to transforming the lives of adolescents in the public-school system. Adolescents need transformational Christian leaders to spearhead an educational movement that galvanizes their lives to transform the Kingdom.

### ***Reference Group Theory***

Reference group theory suggests outcomes reflective of contradictory views experienced by a subject" (Mirande, 1968). According to the theory, behaviors of an individual placed under the cross-pressure of opposing views will be consistent with the expectations of the group (Mirande, 1968). Specific to the adolescents and religion, reference group theory suggests adolescents will reference foundational religious principles to formulate individual approaches to influence behaviors (Haglund, 2009). Within the framework, students who participate in released time programs would reference their association with instruction and peer-group socialization when considering decisions contradictory to the association.

### **Religiosity and Behaviors**

Studies document the advantages associated with religion, including health, higher levels of well-being, and offering people a greater sense of purpose (Petts & Jolliff, 2008). Brickhill's

dissertation uncovered the existence of a positive relationship between church attendance, personal prayer, and Bible study, and the worldview score (2010). Furthermore, the researcher acknowledged results bearing the presence of sound biblical instruction, but the ineptness of biblical application was apparent. The researchers summarized his perspective of the need for biblical instruction in the lives of children as follows (Brickhill, 2010):

This will only be accomplished (protection from the demise of our culture) when Christian schools join with parents and churches in a deliberate effort to teach young people how to critically analyze all facets of life through the lens of God's word. (p. 87)

According to Schnitker et al. (2021), “Religiosity also facilitates positive development in adolescents; researchers have begun to demonstrate the positive effects of religiosity on outcomes such as well-being and prosociality or generosity, controlling for substantive covariates such as character strengths, positive affect, or group belonging” (p. 156).

### **Religion, Release Time, and Academics**

The church’s concession of religious rights has contributed to the dishevelment of Christian education within the public school system. Released time may contribute to the restoration of Christian education for students attending public schools. However, released time is not immune to opposition. Critics of release time contend a reduced time in the classroom negatively impacts academic achievement (Hodge, 2012). However, two pivotal studies determined that students who attended release time had equal to or higher outcomes academically.

In the study, *Release Time and English Language Proficiency: Does releasing students for spiritual instruction negatively affect test scores?* Hodge (2012) concluded there is no significant difference in academic achievement between release time students and their classmates regarding language proficiency. Hodge (2012) furthered his position stating, "This



line of reasoning helps explain research that suggests spirituality can be a particularly important factor in academic achievement among youth in urban, low-income neighborhoods” (p. 9).

Hodge alludes to the speculation that participation in religious communities may undergird values conducive to academic attainment, integrity, and intrinsic value of learning (Hodge, 2012). The results established a relationship between academics, release-time, and elementary age students (Hodge, 2007). The scope of research for release-time has been limited to elementary-age children and academia. The comprehension of biblical content and its relationship to behaviors can be challenging to assess with elementary age students. On the contrary, high school participants of RT programs are more likely to communicate their experiences with RT and the relationship between release time and personal changes.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Adolescents are being misguided, misused, and manipulated by the onslaught of immoral conduct perpetuated in today’s culture. The pillars of Bible-based morality are failing under the weight of indifference, biblical illiteracy, and the influence of various media platforms. Morality has been replaced by tolerance, destructive behaviors, a covetousness for power and financial excess, and sexual misconduct. This affinity for immorality has created an adolescent exodus from moral living. However, the revitalization of bible-based morality in adolescents can be addressed using an educational platform dedicated to instilling Christian principles and the promotion of a biblical worldview

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of instructional leaders and high school graduates in relation to behavioral transformation and the development of a biblical worldview within a released time (RT) learning center. Participants

will be selected from Christ's Learning Center, a release time organization based in Georgia. At this stage in the research, behavioral changes will be defined as any transformation or modification of human behavior observed from students enrolled in the RT program. Also, a biblical worldview will be defined as an acceptance of the Bible as the infallible Word of God and its application in everything one says or does.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will be addressed during the progression of this phenomenological qualitative study:

**RQ1** What are the perceived benefits of release time related to biblical worldview as observed by leaders who actively participate in RT Bible-based instruction?

**RQ2** What are the perceived benefits of release time on behaviors as observed by leaders who actively participate in RT Bible-based instruction?

**RQ3** What are the perceived differences between students who attend release time and a designated place of worship compared to those who only attend the RT program?

**RQ4** What are the perceived benefits of release time to high school graduates who attended RT educational programs

### **Research Assumptions**

Assumptions are areas of the study design beyond the control of the researcher, as well as what the researcher expects to happen. Roberts notes, "assumptions are what you take for granted relative to your study." (2010, p.139). The premise of honesty in the responses of participants in the interviews and the focus groups are beyond the control of the researcher yet are necessary for the validity of the study. Participant truthfulness relative to instructional experience and tenure is another assumption for the study. Interviews and focus groups are the means of data collection for qualitative research. The researcher can control the questioning in both settings; however, the researcher cannot control the authenticity and openness of the

responses. One method for controlling research bias is to ensure the participants are presented with the same questions. Additionally, the questions are open-ended to prevent steering answers toward a particular direction.

### **Delimitations of Research Design**

This study is designed to examine the behaviors observed by release time educational leaders. The delimitations associated with the study pertain to geography and purposive sampling. Release time education is a biblical platform utilized throughout the United States. Christ Learning Center in Georgia is the only RT program that will provide data for this study. CLC is a release time program associated with Release Time Christian Education (RTCE). CLC is affiliated with RTCE; however, RTCE operates as a decentralized entity and CLC did not require approval from an RTCE executive or executive board. CLC has been operational for over 20 years. As the study seeks to identify the influence of RT, Christian schools will not be included.

The participants being surveyed and interviewed will consist of leaders directly involved in facilitating the learning environment. Administrator, parent, coach, and teacher observations will not be studied. The study will only include those leaders who have a tenure greater than one school calendar year. Additionally, the influence of release time on students will be determined solely by the facilitators, not by current students. Student behaviors will be assessed based on the perception of church leadership without any tangible data records. The 2019-2020 school year will not be used as a reference due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Additional behavioral data also will be provided by high school graduates who participated in release time provided by CLC. The focus group age will be based on the participants. Release time also occurs in elementary and middle school; however, these students will not participate in the study.

### Definition of Terms

The following terms are pertinent to the research that will be pursued:

- 1) *Attitudinal Transformation*: Any noticeable change in attitude or character associated with biblical instruction and activities within the release time setting.
- 2) *Behavioral Transformation*: Any noticeable change in actions associated with biblical instruction and activities with the release time setting.
- 3) *Biblical Worldview*: An acceptance of the Bible as the infallible Word of God and its application in everything one says or does.
- 4) *Establishment Clause*: The first clause in the First Amendment which prohibits the government from executing laws supporting the establishment of a religion.
- 5) *Focus Group Protocol*: Data collection method, using semi-structured, opened-ended questions to triangulate the findings. Participants are identified according to favorite television show and the initial of the first name.
- 6) *Interview Protocol*: Data collection method using semi-structured, open-ended questions. Participants are identified according to favorite television show and character.
- 7) *Mormon / LDS*: The religion of the Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints.
- 8) *Phenomenological Qualitative Research*: Phenomenological research attempts to focus on the participant's experience from their perspective (Roberts, 2010). Qualitative research involves examining and interpreting interviews to reveal meaningful patterns descriptive of a distinct phenomenon (Aurbach & Silverstein, 2003).
- 9) *Purposive Sampling*: Purposive sampling involves researcher selected individuals and groups who have knowledge or experience of a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015).
- 10) *Release Time (RT)*: Programs that allow public schools students to participate in religious studies and a designate site off-campus, for the purpose of indoctrination in a specific religion.
- 11) *Release Time Education (RTE)*: An acronym interchangeable with RT, with the same the meaning.

### Significance of the Study

The spiritual and psychosocial infrastructure of society is deficient in moral sustenance whereby right is right, and wrong is wrong. From political and corporate sources, today's youth

are inundated by narratives of monetary, sexual, and political improprieties. Furthermore, in some instances, transgressions by leadership within the religious community model similar indiscretions. Establishing a corrective institution that seeks to facilitate ethical comportment is paramount to the resurrection of Bible-centered thinking. One solution for the myriad of societal deprivation may be the use of a moral model designed to provide ethical training for youth in a public-school setting. In 1941, it was determined that release time for religious education was the most effective method for reaching the most significant number of youth (Howlett, 1942).

### **Summary of the Design**

Philosophy is the foundation of phenomenological research and aims to understand the lived experiences of people (Creswell, 2014). If the researcher asks similar questions to individuals who operate within a similar environment, an analysis of multiple experiences can produce generalizations about their experiences (Peoples, 2021). This research was a phenomenological study designed to explore the lived experiences of educators and students within a release time setting. The study design used two means of instrumentation, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group, to understand the phenomenon experienced by the participants. Using multiple data collection methods increased the possibility of producing rich findings (Peoples, 2021).

Data-collection, by one-on-one interviews and a focus group, was acquired using the Zoom video-conferencing platform. The emphasis was on behavioral transformation and the development of a biblical worldview. Transcriptions of the interviews and focus group were produced using the Nvivo Transcription software application. Codes were identified and a content analysis of the codes was generated using the Dedoose software application. Dominant themes were isolated, and rich findings were produced.

## CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

The concession of religious rights by Evangelicals may be an underlying cause for the deficiency of Christian education within public schools. The epidemic of biblical illiteracy is suggested to have originated with the rulings of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963) (Dinham & Francis, 2015). The illusion of the removal of religion from the classroom in totality, has contributed to the of lack of biblical exposure during the pivotal learning stages of a child's life. Evangelicals need to understand the study of religion was not banned, only the promotion of religion was banned ((Dinham & Francis, 2015). Barna summarized the biblical illiteracy situation as follows:

Bible reading has become the religious equivalent of sound-bite journalism. When people read from the Bible, they typically open it, read a brief passage without much regard for the context, and consider the primary thought or feeling that the passage provided. If they are comfortable with it, they accept it; otherwise, they deem it interesting but irrelevant to their life, and move on. There is shockingly little growth evident in people's understanding of the fundamental themes of the scriptures and amazingly little interest in deepening their knowledge and application of biblical principles (2009)

However, the hanging fruit for the spiritual maturation of today's adolescent's may be connected to the utilization of release time education (RTE).

The story of biblical illiteracy is in pencil, capable of being erased and re-written, if Evangelicals are willing to implement a paradigm which provides adolescents with a theological education within public schools. Evangelicals must revert from allowing culture to impose its will over submitting to the will of God. The Church of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) did not submit to allowing the legislative culture to impose its will within the educational system; on the contrary, the Mormon Church used the legislative decisions in their favor. Evangelicals must be willing to adopt a similar methodology if the story of Christian education is to be re-written with an ending

that glorifies God and reduces biblical illiteracy in America. Release time education may be the eraser that prepares the way for a new story to be written.

### **Theological Framework for the Study**

#### **The Old Testament Mandate for a Biblical Education – Deuteronomy 6:1-7**

The cultivating and influential importance of a community cannot be overlooked. Buildings, curriculum, and Common Core Standard were not the learning centers during the period of the Ancient Near East. Children learned from the community they lived in and from their parents (Anthony & Benson, 2003). Parents provided their children with “spiritual homeschooling” according to the prerequisites established in Deuteronomy 6:1-7:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you. Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up (*New International Version, 1973/1984*)

Parents were to be actively involved with teaching their children the Mosaic Law (Anthony & Benson, 2003). The Law, not society, established the moral standard for living. Children were not abandoned to somehow find God on their own. Authenticity, and relevance of living for God was impressed on their hearts by their parents.

The adults were instructed by Moses to communicate to their children the significance of crossing the Jordan River. The story of righteousness, power, and grace needed to be shared so the children would recognize the importance of following God’s commands. Sharing the narratives of God’s involvement in the lives of His people furthers one’s reliance or faith in God.

Cultivating faith in God allows an individual to develop a relationship with God. According to Byars (2006), “It is not possible to form a biblical faith without serious acquaintance with the Bible itself” (p. 195).

The foundation of faith directly correlates to the transference and acceptance of biblical doctrine. However, without a means to transfer information, there is no connection or commitment to the Creator of the content. Byars (2006) reinforces the importance of the communication of content as follows:

It is absolutely crucial not only for our children, but for the integrity of the church, that we form religious commitments out of deep acquaintance with the biblical story, both the parts of it we affirm, and the parts with which we quarrel or struggle. (p. 195)

Instituting a platform for biblical education constructs a bridge between the Creator and the created. However, people often require a guide to help them cross the bridge. The Israelites crossed the Red Sea and Jordan River under the guidance of Moses. Moses provided the Israelites with information that allowed them to move forward. Biblical education is meant aid God’s people in moving forward by faith and living according to His Word. God mandated that Moses and the people impress on their children the importance of living according to His commands. Children have the right to a biblical education, and the torch of responsibility lies not only with the parents but also with the community within which they reside.

### **The Leader/Teacher Role in the Old Testament**

Children received enlightenment from observing the lives of the familial community and from leaders commissioned to teach the Laws of God. Whether in the Old or New Testament, the leaders were appointed to identify the message, transmit the information, and provide direction (Mitchell, 2010). In the Old Testament, the Levitical priests were charged with the



instructional task for the community. Anthony and Benson (2003) describe the twofold task as follows:

First, they were to provide religious instruction to those who were being apprenticed in the priestly vocation. They trained younger priest how to present the sacred offerings and how to maintain the various altars and the table of the showbread. Second, they were to instruct the people who came to the tabernacle regarding the proper procedures for the presentation of the offerings. They were also involved in explaining the meaning behind the festivals, religious observances, and special days in the Hebrew calendar. Their instruction was instrumental in helping young people understand the character and nature of God Himself. (p. 28)

The leadership in the locality was instrumental in the spiritual formation of the children within the community. Leaders had an interest in the biblical edification of the young people living in the community. Leaders were intimately involved with cultivating the biblical knowledge of the younger generation. In stark contrast, today's church leaders appear to focus more on the young people who attend the church than those in the community.

In addition to priests who were the primary educators of the nation pre-exile (Anthony & Benson, 2003), judges and prophets were also appointed to transform the immorality existing in the community. These leaders/teachers, under the guidance and inspiration of God, attempted to encourage the people to repent and live according to the commands God had established with Moses. The importance of producing educated prophets was evident by the establishment of schools. History suggests schools developed to provide instruction in the Law, prayers, and rituals in Bethel, Ramah, Gilgal, Jericho, Carmel, Samaria, and Gibeon (Anthony & Benson, 2003). The existence of schools implies leaders accepted the role of providing a biblical education for the community members. The Evangelical community needs to reconsider whether the church has upheld the same responsibility.

## **The Evolution of Education in the Old Testament**

The Lord appointed priests and prophets to communicate the laws, decrees, and ways of God. Leaders were responsible for the moral development of the community for which they served. Levites were responsible for the operations of the tabernacle and teaching the laws and precepts to Israel (Deuteronomy 33:10). The priest were the primary educators of the Jewish community (Anthony & Benson, 2003). As the dysfunction of the community amplified, God used prophets to redirect the behaviors of the Israelite community. Prophets fulfilled the role of public teachers for the people of Israel (Anthony & Benson, 2003). Unfortunately, the teachings were ignored, and eventually, decimated the Northern Kingdom, and the Southern Kingdom was exiled to Babylon.

In the postexilic period, synagogues under the tutelage of rabbis evolved into centers for Bible-based education. The emergence of the Torah in written form as the Talmud was the biblical textbook used in the synagogue. The rabbinical institutions were transformative platforms which duplicated and interpreted the Hebrew scrolls (Anthony & Benson, 2003). Although the synagogue was not receptive to women, it was the epicenter of religious learning for young men. Furthermore, the synagogue was a place of worship, and the educational system for children (Anthony & Benson, 2003). The history of the Old Testament solidifies the religious institution as an influential component for discipling adolescents.

The Old Testament established the importance of indoctrinating children in the Word of God. Educating children in the ways of the Lord was an effective means of discipleship. Whether in the home or the community, the Old Testament reinforced the importance of training children. The training was essential to the growth of the individual as well as to the community. Children who are not prepared biblically are likely to transition into biblically inept adults. For

example, in 2013, the American Bible Society published results revealing 57% of adults 18-28 read the Bible less than three times a year or even never (Watson, 2014). Students who participate in release time programs are exposed to the Bible weekly. It is possible for release time to be a platform to address biblical illiteracy at an early age.

### **The Mandate for Spiritual Training**

In 1 Timothy 4:7-8, the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, that training in godliness is necessary for life (*New International Version*, 1973/1984, 1 Timothy 4:7-8). The adolescents of the Christian community need spiritual fitness training to bring forth holiness that pleases the Lord. Children need nurturing to live according to the Scripture, "As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live, to please God, as, in fact, you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more " (1 Thessalonians 4:1-2). What is missing from the cultivation of God-fearing adolescents is intentional, consistent bible-based instruction.

Paul was intentional with the continual biblical training of Timothy and others he encountered. Spiritual maturity is manifested when leaders are dedicated to developing the potential in others. Leaders, like Paul, invested their lives into the spiritual development of pupils like Timothy and Titus. Paul deposited careful thought, endless patience, and genuine Christian love into the life of Timothy (Sanders, 2007). Paul sought to maximize the spiritual growth of those in his presence by increasing their godly character.

In the academic classroom, students are instructed in the metric and standard measuring systems. However, the measuring stick for spiritual maturity is not clearly defined outside the Bible. Paul provides a reference point in Galatians. According to Yount (1996), Paul identifies two traits to formulate a spiritual measurement system:

One contains traits that should decrease in Christians over time. These “works of the flesh” include immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry, and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, drunkenness, orgies, and the like (Gal 5:19-20). The second list contains traits that should increase in Christians over time, called “fruit of the Spirit”, these include love joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control - Gal 5:22-23. (p. 19)

Without instruction, Christians of all ages will increase in the works of the flesh and decrease in the traits of God. People may unintentionally violate laws because they are unaware of the legal standard. Similarly, Christians may violate the moral laws of God because they are unaware of biblical statutes. Intentional Bible-based training is a preemptive measure to decrease biblical illiteracy. Dr. E.V. Hill used an illustration of a baseball diamond whereby each base represented an educational task of the church. The educational bases related to education are proclamation, community, service, and advocacy. Education for the community, the second base, focused on developing fellowship with God and others through training, nurturing, and instruction (Pazmino, 2008). One may ask the question how can the church make it home if it cannot get to second base.

Training is a system of lessons designed to promote growth and a unified standard of “operations” or actions. Biblical illiteracy continues to plague the Christian community partly because there is not a unified operational standard. Denominational differences create an obstacle to training in. To combat the enemy of illiteracy, Christians may need to consider a platform of sameness or uniformity for Bible-based training. According to Pazmino (2008), “Education for community involves the quest for sameness or what persons hold in common with others” (p. 48). Paul developed a training pattern of sameness to enable others to grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ. Similarly, Jesus provided the people with knowledge that changed their attitude, behavior, and character. The people were no longer illiterate but were possessors of life-changing wisdom.

## **Jesus the Model Teacher**

The purpose of teaching is to transform the mind and behavior of the pupil. The effectiveness of sound teaching is manifested in the listener presently, and by the transmission of the teaching in the future. For example, Broughton (2014) states the following:

The earliest evidence of Jesus' words known as the 'Sermon on the Mount' are recorded by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, chapter 12 beginning at verse 14 'bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them'. Jesus' radically different relationship with his enemies – summarized by the command to 'love your enemies' (Matthew 5:44) – is interpreted and applied by Paul in 12:14–21 with multiple direct quotes (for example, 'do good' and 'do not return evil for evil') plus many other allusions. (p. 22)

The teachings of Jesus transcended time to impact the teachers and students of the future. The message was not limited to a specific group but was available to both Jew and Gentiles. Jesus was a teacher of the Law, ensuring the people understood the will of God. Unfortunately, an ignorance of constitutional law has led the Christian community to neglect the model teaching patterns of Jesus Christ.

Jesus taught everywhere He went (Matt 4:23), people were amazed by His teaching (Matt 7:28), and Jesus commanded His disciples to be teachers (Matt 28:20). Models are to be replicated for reproduction. As a model teacher, Jesus was an instrument for combating biblical illiteracy. Jesus did not allow location to deter His teachings (Luke 6:6, Luke 13:22), nor did he limit His teachings to the background of an individual (John 8:4). Jesus taught to transform minds so that people would live according to the will of God (Rom 12:2). Children were not excluded from the teachings of Jesus. When the disciples attempted to exclude children, Jesus welcomed the children (Matt 19:13-14). Transformation facilitated by the teachings of Jesus Christ was necessary because without Jesus, change was impossible. Throughout the Gospels, the teachings of Jesus Christ encouraged the hearers to do right (Culpepper & Culpepper, 2015).

## **Biblical Illiteracy and Immoral Behavior – Ephesian 5**

Carnality causes the mind to focus on earthly things (Eph 3:19); however, embracing the Word of God transitions the mind to focus on spiritual things (Col 3:2). The adolescents of today are bombarded with immoral instruments, which act as magnets attracting them toward sinful activity. The objectification of humanity and currency holds a higher value than sanctification. As defined by Wang & Krumhuber (2017), objectification is a deleterious form of prejudice, where one views and treats others as objects. On multiple occasions, Paul mentions sexual immorality and greed as sinful behaviors, both are by-products objectification. However, without sound biblical instruction, individuals may not understand the value of glorification versus objectivation. The ideology of living a life which pleases God versus one that seeks to please self (Eph 5:17).

The requisite for the created to accept the conditions of the Creator has been rendered obsolete by the acceptance of the carnal creed, "I have the right to what I want" (*New International Version*, 1973/1984, 1 Cor 6:12). On the contrary, the Bible instructs an individual to avoid using the body for sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:13). Data exists which concluded exposure to religion influenced sexual decision making. Though not statistically significant, of the 76% of adolescents (N=2409) who believed religion was important, 27% were less likely to have had sex than those who did not consider religion important (Haglund & Fehring, 2010). As stated earlier in this section, Paul taught that training in godliness is necessary for life (1 Tim 4:7-8). The adolescents of the Christian community need biblical training to bring forth holiness that pleases the Lord. A lack of knowledge that leads to darkness fails to please God. Therefore, children need to be nurtured to live according to the Scripture, "As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live, to please God, as, in fact, you are living. Now we ask

you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more "(*New International Version*, 1973/1984, 1 Thess 4:1-2). What is missing from the spiritual cultivation of today's adolescents is an intentional and consistent Bible-based instruction, designed to abort the pregnancy of biblical illiteracy.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

Many researchers have postulated theories about the influence of religiosity on behaviors with inconsistent outcomes. The outcomes of the relationship between religion and health are ambiguous due to the variables within a study (Eliassen, 2013; Nagel & Sgoutas-Emech, 2007)). As a coping mechanism, religion or spirituality fostered benefits to individuals with depression. (Eliassen, 2013). Christians have been urged to deploy "spiritual coping mechanisms" such as prayer and meditation; however, the suitable employment of those mechanisms may or may not influence outcomes of a person's life. The individual's lack of faith or spiritual disciplinary practices influences the success of such spiritual measures. Coping can be defined as actions people take to avoid harmful life-strains, exercised by eliminating or modifying the conditions, controlling the meaning, neutralizing the situation, and managing the emotional consequences. (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

Harmful coping mechanisms, including sex, drugs, alcohol, and even suicide, are considered by adolescents. Although with differing outcomes, religious activity has been shown to augment negative behaviors. Religious interactions have been shown to deter drug use as well as crime. (Regnerus and Elder, 2003). Accumulated research has provided relevant empirical evidence to support religion as both a positive and constructive influence on attitudes and behaviors. (Smith, 2003). Religious activity and spiritual awareness have also been shown to impact outcomes for substance-use disorder treatment in adolescents. Specifically, prayer,

meditation, Bible study, and worship service attendance influenced participant activity in the 12-step program; thereby, increasing the probability of a successful treatment outcome. (Krentzman, et al., 2012). Drug use among adolescents lessens through social associations. Specifically, students considered religious were less likely to associate with students who used drugs (Bahrm et al., 1998). The evidence for spiritual practices and positive results trend towards significance in multiple areas for adolescent dilemmas. Release time may provide adolescents with social associations as well as religious practices.

Studies document the advantages associated with religion, including health, higher levels of well-being, and offering people a greater sense of purpose (Petts and Jolliff, 2008; Mochon et al., 2011). The increase in bullying, whether physical or social media, has created a pandemic of depression among adolescents; consequently, the incidence of suicide due to bullying appears to be increasing. Hence, the health and well-being of students are at risk. Depression can develop from harassment, which directly coincides with suicidal ideation. Study outcomes suggest religious participation indirectly decreases depression in adolescents (Fruehwirth, 2019). Theoretically, the data supports religious practices as a "spiritual treatment" for the children's emotional, behavioral, and physical issues. The possibility exists that release time may provide significant behavioral changes beyond the standard religious practices.

Influence creates an action or inaction by an individual, initiated by a voice of authority. Adolescents are susceptible to becoming metaphorical schizophrenics because of exposure to hearing multiple voices. Pronouncements from parents, peers, the pulpit, and various social media platforms create messages in contradiction. Consequently, moral confusion can occur because of the numerous views which send mixed messages to the youth. "Counterinfluences from interactions in other social associations (neighborhood, work, school, the media, etc.) that



promote competing moral orders and practices (risk behaviors, delinquency, family, conflict, apathy, school drop, etc.)" (Smith, 2003, p. 28). For example, a child can hear the proclamation of the sin of homosexuality from the pulpit, live within the home of a same-sex family, and be solicited to enter a same-sex relationship. The adolescent must determine which voice will move them to an act of sin or inaction to sin. Sexual activity, like many at-risk-related behaviors, general proposition presented to adolescents. However, research supports religious beliefs, and a high level of religiosity curtails risk-taking behavior (Abbott-Chapman, J., & Denholm, C. 2001).

Limited studies have focused on identifying a direct correlation between religion and adolescent social behaviors (Sinha, J., Cnaan, R., Gelles, R., 2007), (Regnerus, 2003), (Smith, 2002). Attendance at religious services is not the sole causation for the internalization of behavioral changes. For example, in multiple studies, African American adolescents were more likely than Caucasians to attend worship services regularly. However, the same studies determined, African American adolescents were more likely to submit to sexually related behaviors (Sinha et al., 2007). The findings of a higher level of religious participation for African Americans than Caucasians are consistent within the literature (Chatters, L., Taylor, R., Bullard, K., & Jackson, J. 2008).

Previous adolescent religious research was confined to either religious services and or a weekly youth session (Petts & Jolliff 2008; Eliassen 2012; Bahr et al. 1998; Regnerus & Elder 2003; Regnerus 2010). The literature review supports the efficacy of religious beliefs and practices in addressing some harmful behaviors in adolescents. The research gap does not discuss the potential impact of biblical instruction on behaviors due to the limited awareness of RT programs in various demographic areas.

## **The Worldview Influence**

The influence of religion may not be connected to instructional platforms to but the internalization and application of a Christian worldview. Robert Neville (2009) defines worldview as a cultured perspective for the orientation of intentional behaviors. Neville further explains the connection as follows:

Orientation" here means taking a stance toward things so that they have meaning within one's field of engagement. "Intention" here means purposive but not necessarily conscious behavior. Behavior" includes internal impulses and thinking, as well as overt action. That a worldview's set of signs is "cultured" means that it is learned, with at least three dimensions of learning: ritualization or habit-taking, age-specific development, and vulnerability to correction. (p.234)

A Christian worldview among adolescents must be learned and cultivated so that intentional behavior is produced, which allows them to remain steadfast in the face of societal immoralities.

Research conducted to assess the impact of religion and adolescence relates to the description of "religiosity". A set of institutionalized beliefs, doctrines, rituals, and ethical standards for living a good life is a broad definition of the term religious (Haglund & Fehring, 2009). Research related to adolescents and religiosity is typically assessed by attendance and participation. Studies are needed to determine whether adolescents who receive direct biblical instruction formulate an applicable worldview that reflects behavioral changes.

## **Data Limitations for Adolescent Influences**

There are many limitations associated with research involving adolescents and behaviors. In several studies, including a large random sample of 2,004 teens (11-18), many of the adolescents surveyed attended Christian private schools ((Sinha, J., Cnaan, R., & Gelles, R.,2007). The study population may have weakened the results. Those surveyed may have been compelled to provide positive feedback because of their association with a private religious school. Also, the methodology for data collection for surveys may have been influenced by

parental supervision. The previous national study used telephonic surveys that required parental consent. Parents were surveyed over the phone and questioned on the adolescent's attendance at worship services and participation at auxiliary religious programs. The study also used telephonic surveys to ask adolescents about risk-related behaviors. The probability exists that some adolescents may have responded inaccurately due to the possible presence of a parent.

### **Limitations of the Worship Service**

Worship services provide an instructional environment; however, the services lack the ability for the transference of knowledge through a trusting relationship. Academic studies have demonstrated the influence of teacher credibility based on trustworthiness. In a worship service, the pastor may appear credible but may connect with the younger audience. The components of the framework for source credibility, based upon social scientific research, are competence, trustworthiness, and perceived caring (Teven, J. J., & Hanson, T. L. 2004). The receiver must believe the deliverer is competent, trustworthy, and demonstrates genuine compassion. Some pastors are limited in making meaningful relationships; therefore, the worship service fails to become a means for establishing credibility.

Jesus Christ made connections with His disciples; consequently, all but one of the disciples remained to establish and serve the church, "Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James" (*New International Version*, 1973/1984, Act 1:13). Jesus Christ demonstrated a character of competence, trustworthiness, and perceived caring. Source credibility, whether on a mountainside or classroom, created a positive response within the receiver of the teaching. Adolescents who receive instruction according to source credibility may internalize and institute the education which is received. Consequently, a program such as

release time may be a viable platform that produces source credibility, leaving a lasting impression on adolescents.

### **Limitations of Christian-Specific Data**

Minimal research has been conducted to assess the variable of Christian-specific beliefs and doctrine and the relationship with adolescent behaviors. Regenerus (2003) references data supplied by Weaver et al. (2000), stating that less than 15% of the studies published in five adolescent journals considered religion as a probable influence. According to Sinha et al. (2007), minimal studies evaluated the correlation between religiosity and youth risk behaviors, using the level of engagement in religion. Furthermore, research evaluating religiosity incorporates all faiths in the data pool. In a study of 2,004 adolescents, 48.2% were Protestant Christians, 26.7% were Roman Catholic, 12% religious with an affiliation, 1.5% were Jewish, and less than 1% (0.4%) were Muslim (Sinha et al., 2007). Religious affiliation was incorporated within the descriptive statistics associated with determining religious participation, that included Protestants, Jewish, Jehovah's Witness, and Christian Scientists (Smith et al., 2002).

Data reflecting a specific variable provides a higher probability of directly correlating to a particular group (Christian) versus to religions. The need exists to determine whether a platform exists that embeds Christian adolescents' hearts and minds the willpower to follow Christ and the "won't power" to avoid societal immoralities. Church attendance provides a generalization towards the level of religious indoctrination in the life of an adolescent. Missing from the data set is a quantification of church attendance. For example, smaller churches may not have dedicated volunteers to teach adolescents as compared to larger churches. Therefore, some adolescents are relegated to sitting in a worship service while attempting to understand the message. On the contrary, adolescents who attend churches with dedicated ministry leaders

receive doctrinal understanding. Nonetheless, church attendance is considered an accidental association of social integration that establishes or reinforces teachings (Regenerus, 2003).

Furthermore, when church attendance as a variable is questioned, the argument is made "that the ritual action of attending worship services, in contrast with theological differences that mark distinct religious affiliations and beliefs, is a process that operated independently of particular belief systems and organizational affiliations" (Regenerus, 2003, p.402). The problem associated with church attendance in research occurs when it is used as a broad reference to identify a localized place of worship for various religions. In these cases, the outcomes do not correlate to Bible-based doctrines and beliefs.

### **Reference Group Theory**

Reference group theory will provide the framework for the proposed research. Reference group theory suggests outcomes reflective of contradictory views experienced by a subject" (Mirande, 1968). According to the theory, behaviors of an individual placed under the cross-pressure of opposing views will be consistent with the expectations of the group (Mirande, 1968). Specific to the adolescents and religion, reference group theory suggests adolescents will reference foundational religious principles to formulate individual approaches to influence behaviors (Haglund, 2009). Within the framework, students who participate in release time programs would reference their association with instruction and peer-group socialization when considering decisions contradictory to the association.

The theoretical framework for the literature review aims to uncover the data relative to discovering the relationship between religiosity and adolescent behaviors. Risk behaviors are destructive to the moral and psychological well-being of adolescents. Unfortunately, the consequence of risk-related actions is life-altering. For example, sex-related behaviors have

resulted in 780,000 pregnancies among adolescent girls between the ages of 10-19 years of age, 9.1 million sexually infections, and 20,000 cases of HIV infections (Haglund & Fehring, 2009). Data suggests religiosity can positively influence sexual behaviors (Haglund & Fehring, 2009), (Smith, 2003). However, most of the data provided is the minimal correlation to Christianity versus other religions. A significant gap in the literature rests on the level of exposure or involvement in religious activities. Uncovering whether a relationship exists between adolescents of the Christian faith who participate in release time programs, behaviors, and the application of a Christian Worldview will fill a gap in the literature.

### **Summary**

"Youth and adults can know about their religion (intellectual aspect), attend or participate in religious services (ritualistic aspect), attach considerable importance and emotional attachment to religions things (the experimental aspect), and internalize the belief system of their religious tradition (ideological aspect)" (Regenerus, 2003, p.396). The aforesaid defines the purpose of religion for many. However, the ritual of attending worship service is not a reliable source for determining the cause and effect between religion and behaviors. Pastors lead worship services, yet in a poll of 1,050 evangelical pastors, 30% reported having a sexual relationship a member during their tenure (Hamilton, 2013). Therefore, church attendance is not a valuable variable to determine high-risk behaviors. Nonetheless, the availability of intentional instruction in the form of release time may reveal appreciable benefits to transforming adolescent behaviors and developing an applicable Christian worldview.

### **Related Literature**

Justice William O. Douglas of the United States Supreme Court, who heard the two most essential cases of release time, *McCullum v. Board of Education* and *Zorach v. Clauson*, made this comment about release-time programs:

We are religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being. When the State encourages religious instruction or cooperates with religious authorities by adjusting the schedule of public events to sectarian needs, it follows the best of our traditions. For it then respects the religious nature of our people and accommodates the public service to their spiritual needs. To hold that, it may not would be to find in the Constitution a requirement that the government shows a callous indifference to religious groups. That would be preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe (Wallfisch, 1980, p. 202).

Amid a constitutional battle, in his heart, Justice Douglas was a constituent for religious education. Justice Douglas and eight other Supreme Court Justices would oversee proceedings that would determine the future of religious release time education. They would be the driving force behind whether adolescents would have access to religious education, which upheld a standard from living morally.

The spiritual and psychosocial infrastructure of society is deficient in moral sustenance whereby right is right, and wrong is wrong. From political and corporate sources, today's youth are inundated by narratives of monetary, sexual, and political improprieties. Furthermore, in some instances, transgressions by leadership within the religious community model similar indiscretions. Establishing a corrective institution that seeks to facilitate ethical comportment is paramount to a resurrection of morality. One solution for the myriad of societal deprivation is using a moral model designed to provide ethical training. In 1941, it was determined that release time for religious education was the most effective method for reaching the most significant number of youth (Howlett, 1942).

Release-time is a religious paradigm that may cultivate a biblically literate generation capable of coping with societal perspectives without compromising moral principles. From the inception of the release time movement, the banishment of adolescent spiritual illiteracy was an objective (Howlett, 1942). Howlett furthered the position speculating nearly half of 1,250,000 children in New York City were spiritually illiterate (1942). The ideology of separation of church and state hindered religious sects' constitutional rights to develop and deploy platforms for spiritual growth.

Release time is religious freedom validated by two critical judicial cases, one of which was *Zorach v. Clauson* (1952). In the case *Zorach vs. Clauson* (1952), the United States Supreme Court declared release-time education constitutional. The legality of release-time was confirmed on the stipulation the religious activities were to be held off school grounds (Sorauf, 1959). In a 6 to 3 vote, the Supreme court ruled the First Amendment's Establishment Clause was not violated; consequently, release-time was made available to all religions. (Hodge and Cuddeback, 2010; Greenwalt 2005). Although the Supreme Court confirmed the constitutionality of religious release time, the interpretive issue of Church and State was a constitutional impediment.

### **De-Establishment by the Establishment Clause**

Reconciliation with the past can create a reformation for the future. The solidarity of the amalgamation between religion and education was severed with unprecedented consequences. Historically, religion was a necessary ingredient in the overall educational system. Textbooks were inundated with biblical principles, and the church directly influenced the education provided in public schools. In contrast, the church of today is no longer connected with the public education system. Legislative interpretation of the First Amendment separated "church and state" and separated biblical applications from adolescent behaviors.



A primary criticism of judicial jurisprudence relates to the interpretive freedoms of constitutional statutes, which leads to inconsistent legislative resolutions. Religious jurisprudence removes the element producing contextual decisions. Instead, a gap exists between content and contextual decisions. According to Horowitz (2013),

They (scholars) argue that an inevitable gap exists between "the meaning of constitutional guarantees, on the one hand, and judicially enforceable rights, on the other."<sup>4</sup> The gap arises because courts are institutional actors, hemmed in by imperfect knowledge of the "pure" meaning of the Constitution, of the facts of actual cases, or both. Moreover, discovering and applying "pure" constitutional essence— if it even exists—is not their only task. They must also find ways of doing constitutional law that can be applied by courts, lawyers, and other actors. (p. 282)

The Supreme Court faced a similar issue as the church, which placed historical content into a contemporary context. Finding ways of doing constitutional law created inconsistency among legislative decisions resulting in interpretative practices void of conceptual truth from the amendments' inaugural placement. Religious expression is a legal right; however, the First Amendment's Establishment Clause was used to de-establish religious influence in public schools.

The case of *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) initiated judicial review in matters of Church and State (Formicola, 1995). The source for the dissolution of religious freedoms in public schools is the Establishment Clause. Nonetheless, the Establishment Clause, though not consistently implemented judiciously, has a purpose. The purpose of the Establishment Clause is to institute the following values: (1) protect religious liberties while shielding taxpayers from financially supporting religious dogma, (2) establishing equal citizenship without regard to religious affiliation, (3) guards against weakening influence between religious entities and polity, (4) advancement of the political community, (5) protect autonomy between state and public

interest, (6) shelters churches from the damaging influence of the state and (7) endorses the practice of religion privately (Shiffrin, 2009).

### **De-Establishment and the Decline**

Everson v. Board of Education (1947) was the prelude to the decommissioning of sharing the Great Commission in the public school system. The legal ramifications of Everson v. Board of Education centered on the New Jersey law that granted permission to local school districts to arrange public transportation for children who attended parochial schools while reimbursing the parents for transportation cost (Theissen, 2001). The outcome from Everson v. Board of Education had a resounding impact on religious freedoms. Considering Thomas Jefferson's declaration of separation between church and state led to the incorporation of the Establishment Clause (Smith, 2009), "Incorporation means that the relevant constitutional provision (in these cases, the religious clauses) are made binding on the states through the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment" (Ravitch, 2012, p.159). This legislation was not limited to Congress's actions but was to be enforced by state and local governing bodies (Bindwald, 2015), (Witte, 2006).

### **Establishment Clause vs. Religious Cause**

As previously mentioned, the interpretive risk of constitutional law is context misapplication. Context misapplication can occur when the meaning or basis of constitutional statutes are manipulated by individual bias. For example, Justice Hugo Black presided over the Everson v. Board of Education case was a former member of the Ku Klux Klan. Judge Black is thought to have asserted his partial and strict separationist view of the Establishment Clause, which affirmed his anti-religious and anti-Catholic sentiments (Witte, 2006), (Fessenden, 2005). The former Klansman wrote into law a "legislative wall," impeding Catholicism in public

schools. The *Everson v. Board of Education* case was the first cast involving and rejecting governmental aid to parochial schools (Fessenden, 2005). The partiality exposed in *McCollum v. the Board of Education* created a wall between religion and public schools. According to Witte (2006):

The Court purged religion from the public school and removed religious schools from many traditional forms of state support. In more than two dozen cases after *Everson*, the Court held that public schools could not offer prayers or moments of silence, could not read Scripture or religious text, could not house Bibles or prayer books, could not teach theology or creationism, could not display Decalogues, could not use the services or facilities of religious bodies. (p. 41)

Some believe the Establishment Clause metaphorically initiated the exodus of God from the public school's system. Whether individuals support or deny the plausibility of such a statement, the obvious implication of the Establishment Clause is the elimination of a source for moral and character development. The Supreme Court decided that student-lead prayers before football games violated the Establishment Clause (Epley, 2007). The Establishment Clause eradicated numerous religious practices; however, the institution of release time, though injured, did not become a fatality.

### **Release Time – *McCollum v. Board of Education***

The previous section was dedicated to presenting the legal implications of the Establishment Clause, sectarian groups, and religious freedoms. Without understanding the foundation for religious liberties or the lack thereof, the plight for release time instruction is underappreciated. Similar to climbing a mountain, base camps are necessary to the summit. The release time summit was not easily attained; however, individuals endured the necessary legislative storms and base camps, before reaching the summit. *McCollum v. the Board of Education* was one of the base camps.

McCorm v. Board of Education (1948) contested the constitutionality of religious education on school property during school hours, organized by church leaders. The contention of release time or weekday religious education culminated when a community member opposed the program's methodology and constitutionality. In 1945, in Champagne, Illinois, Vashti McCorm voiced her displeasure of release time and its constitutional violation of state requirements (Setran, 2012). McCorm was an atheist (Zucker, 2007). The issue surrounded the distribution of cards in Champagne public school, requesting permission for students to participate in weekday religious education. McCorm argued the enablement of religious instruction in public schools constituted the illegal use of state sustenance, which violated the First Amendment Establishment Clause (Zucker, 2007). McCorm further argued the voluntary perception for student participation was a façade, which created unnecessary embarrassment for those not affiliated with any religious group (Zucker, 2007).

Release time instruction was provided by local religious leaders (from churches and synagogue) and conducted on the premises of public schools. Participation was not required; however, students who abstained from attending release time were placed in a separate room. Vashti McCorm's son was the only student in his class who preferred not to participate and was placed in a separate room for individual study time. (Setran, 2012). Figuratively, Vashti McCorm's son was placed in isolation within the school.

The conflict in a town of less than 22,000 would have religious reverberations across the nation, starting first at the Sixth Illinois Circuit Court on September 1945 and culminating December 8, 1947, at the Supreme Court (McCorm, 1982). McCorm's stance for opposing release time was based on the program's underhanded approval. On the contrary, Rev A. Ray Cartledge, the pastor of a local church of influence, disputed the unfounded assertion and

countered in support of the program, "It was not put in at a secret meeting," he said. "There has been no effort to hide this from anyone" (McCollum, 1982, p.139). The case would be heard and defeated first at Sixth Illinois Court in September 1945 and then again in the Illinois Supreme Court in December of 1947 (McCollum, 1982). The United States would hear the case and overrule the two previous court decisions on December 8, 1947. Justice Black would make the following edict which rendered the release time program in Champagne unconstitutional (McCollum, 1982):

Justice Hugo Black wrote the majority decision: "Pupils compelled by law to go to school for secular education are released in part from their legal duty upon the condition that they attend the religious classes. This is beyond all question a utilization of the tax-established and tax-supported public school system to aid religious groups to spread their faith. And it falls squarely under the ban of the First Amendment (made applicable to the States by the Fourteenth). Here not only are the State's tax-supported public-school buildings used for the dissemination of religious doctrines. The State also affords sectarian groups an invaluable aid in that it helps to provide pupils for their religious classes through the use of the State's compulsory public-school machinery. This is not separation of church and state. (p.146)

Two other justices, Justice Burton and Justice Reed, shared similar concerns relative to whether the program was unconstitutional. Justice Burton viewed the sharing of public-school facilities as rent-free as the primary concern. Similarly, Justice Reed saw the case only as a question of whether religious entities could use public facilities; consequently, Justice Reed believed they could and voted in support of the release time constituent (Zucker, 2007). The use of public-school facilities would play a significant role in the Supreme Court case of *Zorach v. Clauson*.

### **Release Time – *Zorach v. Clauson***

Released time programs existed before 1926; however, it was not until 1940 that the New York State Legislature implemented statutes allowing for religious education under the governance of the Commissioner (Constitutionality, 1949). The Commissioner of Education

established regulations for the conduct of religious release time according to the following parameters:

These regulations provide that the religious instruction be given outside of the public school and that there be no announcement or comment of any kind in the schools relative to the program. Utilizing a card provided by a particular religious organization, parents are to request school authorities to release their children for religious instruction. The child is thereupon dismissed one hour early one day each week. The attendance records are to be maintained by the host school for religious education. (Constitutionality, 1949)

Six of the nine members of the Court held the New York release program distinguishable compared to the *McCullum* case (Constitution, 1952). In the *McCullum* case, three essential components supported the unconstitutionality of the release time program: (1) The religious education was facilitated in publicly funded facilities. (2) The influence between religious groups and school authorities was tainted by proximity. (3) Absence from school was predicated upon attendance at sectarian educational assemblies (Bowen, 1952).

On the contrary, upholding the New York State release time program's constitutionality was grounded on the following: (1) Public funding was not used. (2) School and sectarian authorities do not foster the conduct of the program. (3) Attendance requirements were to comply with state laws (Bowen, 1952) (Constitutional Law, 1951). A significant consideration for the constitutionality of release time was based on the stipulation of religious activities are to be held off school grounds (Sorauf, 1959). The Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of release time; however, implementation is governed by state statutes and is not a federal right (Hodge, 2012).

### **Release Time and Mormonism**

The *McCullum v. the Board of Education* verdict had a pronounced negative impact on the evolution and progression of Bible-based religious education. School leaders' erroneous assumption that release time was extinct led to its placement on the endangered list (Bindwalde,

2015). The utilization of the release time paradigm experienced further decline under legislative scrutiny, which included the removal of school-sponsored praying and Bible reading in public schools (Bindwalde, 2015). Although Christian Bible-based religions succumbed to legal pressures, the Church of Jesus Christ–Latter Days, also known as the Mormons, continued to flourish despite judicial setbacks.

The first Mormon-based release time seminary was opened in 1911 at a high school in Utah, where students held classes in LDS-owned buildings and received one elective credit towards graduation (Griffith, 2011). The growth of LDS release-time religious programs would spread to include all states but New Hampshire. Despite the growth of the program, like its predecessors, it would encounter constitutional opposition. The Latter-Day Saints have perfected the use of released time programs. The released time model is utilized to proselytize the Mormon faith. During the school year before the start of the day, students congregate at Mormon facilities for indoctrination.

In many cases, the facility is within walking distance of a public school. Other faith-based religions succumbed to the pressure of legislative obstacles and abandoned the public-school mission field. In contrast, the LDS establishment discovered a segue that allowed them to abide by the law and fulfill their mission.

The Mormon institution developed the released time or seminary plan to assure the continuance of LDS culture and theological foundations (Griffiths, 2011). LDS seminary? or release time was introduced to bridge the gap between generational doctrines and beliefs, simultaneously, bridging the gap between Church education and public schools (Griffiths, 2011). The LDS seminary platform faced legal ramifications; however, unlike the Protestant and Catholic predecessors, legislative changes led to the progression of, instead of the regression of

the utilization of release time. The unexpected case of *Lanner v. Wimmer* (1978) created an uprising within the Mormon community and threatened the seminary program's authenticity.

Ronald Lanner, a Jew, and his wife Harriet, a converted to Judaism, objected to seminary attendance qualifying for high school credit (Griffiths, 2011). The Lanner's proposed that "entanglement of the public school's business and that of the LDS must be ended" (Griffiths, 2011, p.154). The LDS community recognized the severity of losing the seminary programs and the fallout that would upend the LDS community's educational system. The magnitude of the prospective loss was as follows: "Statistics from the era showed that 90 senior high seminaries and 46 junior high seminaries were functioning in Utah alone. Closure of these seminaries would have meant the firing of 496 full-time teachers. Furthermore, a 1978 report issued by the Utah State Board of Education placed student enrollment in Utah's release time program at 60,072" (Griffiths, 2011, p.157).

The primary issue of concern related to school credit is the use of the Old Testament and New Testament teachings to support Mormon indoctrination. In the end, the verdict removed school credit but gave the LDS educational program more latitude integrating LDS theology. Before the decision, the LDS program provided a diversified approach to Old Testament and New Testament instruction. After the verdict, teachers no longer required interdenominational education when presenting the Old and New Testament content (Griffiths, 2011). The Mormon seminary was free to proselytize without constraint.

In some states outside of Utah, high school students receive credits for Old Testament and New Testament studies, which counts towards the graduation prerequisite (Griffiths, 2011). The level of engagement is another advantage of LDS release time. Unlike some release time programs under various religious umbrellas, the Mormon religious education program does not



meet once per week but every day during the school week. The significance of the immense exposure to LDS doctrines and beliefs is crucial to constructing a Mormon worldview. Based on attending high school for four years and seminary for 50 minutes per day during the school, LDS students receive an estimated 500 hours studying all things related to Mormonism (Dollahite, 2009). The curtailment of risk-related behaviors and applying a Mormon worldview are more likely to be practiced by LDS adolescents because of the submersion in Mormon theology.

### **Release Time and The Church**

This literature review's theoretical and theological framework identified behaviors impacted by religion or religiosity; however, similar data is unavailable for release time. Nonetheless, two pivotal studies determined that students who attended release time had equal to or higher outcomes academically. Critics of the release time contend a reduced time in the classroom negatively impacts academic achievement (Hodge, 2012). In the study, *Release Time and English Language Proficiency: Does releasing students for spiritual instruction negatively affect test scores?* Hodge concluded there is no significant difference in academic achievement between release time students and their classmates regarding language proficiency (2012).

Hodge furthered his position stating, "This line of reasoning helps explain research that suggests spirituality can be a particularly important factor in academic achievement among youth in urban, low-income neighborhoods" (2012, p. 9). Hodge alludes to the speculation that participation in religious communities may undergird values conducive to academic attainment, integrity, and intrinsic value of learning (Hodge, 2012).

Additional research related to religion and or release-time focused on academic outcomes. In previous studies, the impact of religion, defined primarily by church attendance, had a noticeable effect on academic proficiency in low-income neighborhoods (Regnerus and

Elder, 2003). Antagonists of release-time participation submit to the possibility of an educational decline. On the contrary, research determined release-time participation did not adversely impact academics (Hodge and Cuddeback, 2010). The results established the existence of a relationship between academics, release-time, and elementary age students (Hodge, 2007). Limited information is available on the impact of release-time on academics and other outcomes (Hodge 2007).

The scope of research for release-time has been limited to elementary-age children and academia. Comprehension of biblical content and its relationship to behaviors can be challenging to assess elementary age students. On the contrary, middle school and high school age students are more likely to understand the value of biblical instruction along with the practical application. The practical application of biblical education would include living morally in an immoral world. Research is needed to determine whether students who attend release-time educational programs transform morally. Through the advancement of technology, the opportunities to engage in depravity has permeated the classrooms of schools and corrupted the minds of today's generation. The possibility of determining if release-time modifies behaviors could be a segue to transforming worldviews at the high-school level.

### **Release Time Today**

The use of release time education is expanding; however, comparative to the early years of RTE there is significant room for growth. Currently, the data for operational release time programs across the United States is 1000 communities, with approximately 250,000 participants from grades one through twelve (Brevik, 2019). School Ministries, Inc. is a non-profit organization that assists local communities with creating Released Time Bible Education (Ciavolino, 2019). South Carolina has become an evangelical epicenter for the development and

placement of release time programs throughout the United States. "As a result of the movement's lobbying efforts, in 2006, South Carolina became the first state to enact legislation allowing public schools to award graduation credits for participation in released time courses.

Ohio recently adopted legislation modeled after South Carolina's, and other states are presently considering similar bills" (Bindewald, 2015). Release time appears to be experiencing growth; however, numerically, the level of involvement pales comparatively to its early inception. Before the legal hurdles in the 1940s, release time "reached nearly 2000 communities in 49 states enrolling over two million students" (Bindewald, 2015, p.84). The possibility exists for positive outcomes related to release time research to create an interest which spurs explosive growth not experienced since its inception.

### **Summary**

Release-time is an opportunity overlooked or ignored by church leaders, educators, and parents (Erickson et al., 1996, p.2). Effective teaching is the catalyst for change; however, the learner suffers when those responsible for providing Bible-based instruction evade their obligation. Millions of possibilities are missed because the Christian community has written off the opportunity to educate a misguided generation. An estimated fifteen million students, or 27% of high school students, were enrolled in public schools in 2018 (NCES, 2019). Approximately 90% of the 56.6 million American children (50.7 million public, 5.9 private million) still attending public schools have been disregarded Christians who no longer believe they influence within the education system (Erickson et al., 26). Implementing release-time platforms can regain this lost ground.

### **Rationale for the Study and Gap**

Biblical illiteracy is a contagion infecting the Christian community. The banishment of spiritual illiteracy was an objective from the introduction of release time (Howlett, 1942). The Body of Christ lacks a substantial and widely accepted paradigm that facilitates the spiritual development of believers during adolescence. Currently, the Christian church appears to have become less theologically literate instead of becoming more theologically literate (Barna, 2017). In addition to spiritual illiteracy, biblical abandonment is prevalent. For example, the percentage of adolescents who make up the Z Generation who claim to be atheists is double that of the general population (Barna, 2017). Barna's research should not be surprising considering how the evangelical community has migrated away from its Christian education foundation. Anthony and Benson (2010), justly declared, "What began as freedom of religion evolved into freedom from religion."

Comparatively, the Church of Latter-Day Saints continues to indoctrinate adolescents into the Mormon faith. Unlike Christianity, Mormonism has stayed true to the objective of sustaining a Mormon identity and transferring that identity to the next generation using the release time paradigm or seminary (Griffith, 2011). The purpose of Mormon release time program is to cultivate Mormon culture and theological doctrine to ensure the future generation has a sound Mormon foundation (Griffiths, 2011). Current research around Christian release time programs focused on the impact on academics. Results from the study (Hodge, 2007) demonstrated similar academic performance to non-participants. The research gap relates to whether release time education impacts behaviors and plays a role in the development of a Christian worldview.

### **Profile of the Current Study**

Evidence for outcomes is best provided by witnesses directly involved with the situation. The qualitative nature of the study design will obtain observational behavior data, and informative data contributed by students who experienced the RT. Leaders will be interviewed individually to determine whether a phenomenon exists relative to behavioral changes and student participation in RT. Focus groups, consisting of students involved in RT, will either confirm or contradict behavioral findings provided from the leader's observational experience. Positive behavioral changes related to the hearing and application of Bible-based instruction may demonstrate the value of a paradigm which addresses biblical illiteracy.

This phenomenological study aims to discover the leader observed behavioral changes in adolescents participating in release time at Walton County Christian Learning Centers, a release time program that operates in Georgia. At this stage in the research, the behavioral change will be defined as any noticeable transformation in actions, attitudes, and character associated with biblical instruction. The data will be analyzed to determine whether the availability of once-weekly Bible-based education impacts adolescent behaviors and helps form a biblical worldview over an extended period. There is no record of a study evaluating potential behavioral changes and the development of a Christian worldview in students attending release time programs associated with public high school institutions.

### **Conclusion**

The protagonist of the continual decline in morality is indifference and unwillingness to stand on truth. The moral compass for 44% of Americans is circumstantial (Barna, 2018), and 24% of Gen Z believes society determines what is morally correct (Barna, 2011). The antagonist to stop the decline in morality is the establishment of "practice fields." The application of

learning is crucial to profound change (Dreyer 1996), (Poe, 1996). Students in RT programs encounter normative social immorality during their tenure in high school. Adolescents are succumbing to societal influences at an alarming rate. Adolescents' worldview has been transformed by an acceptance of immorality facilitated by people of influence (i.e., entertainers, athletes, politicians, etc.). The Body of Christ has a responsibility to preserve the minds of the future generation by creating spiritual, academic options transformation. Release time paradigms may be the spiritual, educational platform capable of facilitating said transformation.

### CHAPTER THREE – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Only the person who has experienced a situation or event in their life knows the deep and sometimes intimate details of their experience. In a research study, they must be allowed to share their experiences without external influence. Flowers, Smith, and Larkin describe this sharing as phenomenological, exploring experience in their own terms (Flowers, Smith, Larkin, 2009, p. 9). Husserl describes this research as “going back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 2020, p. 10), the firsthand experience from the participant. A foundation of this research is the lived experience of leaders concerned about the morals and behaviors of today’s adolescents.

Former Governor of South Carolina, David Beasley (2017) wrote the following paragraph on the state of children in school in 2019 in South Carolina:

A long time ago, children got into trouble for chewing gum or skipping down the hallway—but not now. Today it is much more serious -- drugs, murder, sexual assault, and other serious violent felonies. Today children are reaching out—no, screaming out for help. Released Time education pays off in that students have more self-respect, better behavior at school and home, and improved academic performance. (School Ministries, 2019)

In summing up his comments, the former Governor endorsed the benefits of released time education.

According to Barna (2017), biblical illiteracy plagues the Christian community. Consequently, the emulation of Jesus Christ is tarnished by behaviors complicit with societal norms. The separation between Church and State appears to have compromised the cohesion between moral living and biblical principles, thus facilitating the deterioration of the Christian institution's integrity. The omission of biblical instruction from public school curriculum and Scripture based lesson plans led to the calamity of a valueless and spiritually bankrupt educational system. (Anthony and Benson, 2003). The release time or RT platform, which provides biblical instruction to public school students, can become a behavioral modification

program addressing the calamity described above. Release time provides students with a Bible-based education, which may aid in developing a biblical worldview, providing the students with God's perspective for decision-making.

### **Research Design Synopsis**

#### **The Problem**

The Christian community assumes the government removed prayer and evicted God out of public schools. On the contrary, the government removed school-sponsored prayer, to negate the controversy of "which" religion can be practiced in public schools (Waters, 2009). While much of the Christian community is oblivious to the option of release time education, the Church of Latter Saints uses RT to indoctrinate students in Mormonism daily. Consequently, millions of students attending public schools are deprived of the right to receive a Bible-based education. The spiritual growth of the Christian community would benefit significantly from a Bible-based education system made available to public school students consistently. Spiritually invading the public-school systems by providing a Bible-based curriculum would curtail non-biblical behaviors by exposing students to a biblical worldview. Release time education (RTE) is a model capable of transforming behaviors and addressing biblical illiteracy in adolescents through the development of a biblical worldview.

Adolescents are continuously exposed to harmful stimuli through social media as well as within the walls of public schools. Researchers have identified an increase in screen time and accessibility to social media has increased depression and suicide, especially in adolescent females (Twenge et al., 2017). According to a study conducted by Barna, out of 1,450 teens, 33% percent of the participants experienced cyberbullying via social media (Barna, 2018).



Providing teens with an option to address issues from a biblical perspective, can modify behaviors and avert the prevalence of unpleasant thoughts and actions.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of instructional leaders and high school graduates in relation to behavioral transformation and the development of a biblical worldview within a release time (RT) learning center in northern Georgia.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1** What are the perceived benefits of release time related to biblical worldview as observed by leaders who actively participate in RT Bible-based instruction?

**RQ2** What are the perceived benefits of release time on behaviors as observed by leaders who actively participate in RT Bible-based instruction?

**RQ3** What are the perceived differences between students who attend release time and a designated place of worship compared to those who only attend the RT program?

**RQ4** What are the perceived benefits of release time to high school graduates who attended RT educational programs.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This study examined the possible influence of RT on adolescent behaviors and the development of a biblical worldview. Minimal research has been conducted on the topic of RT. Previous research focused on academic outcomes and did not seek to identify the emotional and spiritual transformative relationship between students and release time education. Nor did previous research address the influence of RT on the development of a biblical worldview. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to identify whether noticeable-behavioral changes occurred within a release time setting. This research focused on the lived experiences as described by the participants through interviews and a focus group (Creswell, 2014). The

perceived behavioral transformations in students authenticated the contribution of this study.

Perceived behavioral transformations were identified by the instructors and corroborated by the changes experienced by graduates who participated in a RT program. The positive behavioral changes documented in this study may encourage Christian leaders to expand the utilization of release time education.

Phenomenological research attempts to focus on the participant's experience from their perspective (Roberts, 2010). The study's focus was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the commonalities of the phenomenon experienced within a release time setting. Observational data, collected through interviews, provided insight into the participants knowledge, opinions, and feelings related to student behaviors within a release time setting (Roberts, 2010). "Qualitative research involves examining and interpreting interviews to reveal meaningful patterns descriptive of a distinct phenomenon" (Aurbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 3). The focus of qualitative research is understanding the meanings people attach to activities (Roberts, 2010). The interview participants disclosed a meaningful pattern associated with release time, positive behavioral changes, and the construct of a biblical worldview. Additionally, graduate participants in the focus group attributed their personal growth to their involvement with release time education.

### **Setting**

The current COVID pandemic prevented the option of conducting face-to-face interviews. CLC is a release time program in Georgia, established by the executive director over twenty years ago. CLC partners with eleven schools in the county, including five elementary, three middle, and three high schools. The interviews were held using the Zoom videoconference platform, and the participants chose either their home or the CLC location for the interview. The

Zoom platform provided a safe and flexible option for conducting the interviews. Nine of the eleven participants chose their home as the site for their interview. Seven out of eight participants in the focus group completed the study from their home. One student participated from a vehicle enroute to an appointment. Each environment provided the participants with a familiar and comfortable setting.

### **Participants**

According to Creswell (2014), the sample size depends on the type of qualitative research undertaken. Phenomenological qualitative studies usually have between three and ten participants (Creswell, 2014). The researcher's objective was to have between 10 to 15 participants to maximize the data credibility. Based on purposive sampling by the researcher, the participants for the interview were identified by the executive director/founder of the organization. The researcher provided a consent form to the executive director that identified the study's requirements and expectations (see Appendix C). Twelve candidates were selected to participate in the research; however, two participants failed to meet the tenure requirement and, one participant had a scheduling conflict.

Nonetheless, the researcher completed the study with nine participants, more than enough to meet saturation. The participants for the interviews were selected based on their instructional experience and functionality at the release time site. The functionality of the participant relates to the individual's level of instructional involvement within the RT program. The current assistant director previously served as an instructor.

Table 1.

*Participant Demographic - Interviews*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Educational Instructional Level</b>
This is Us - Rebecca	Female	Caucasian	High School
The Office - Dwight	Male	Caucasian	High School
Shark Tank - Cuban	Male	Caucasian	Middle School
Seinfeld - Kramer	Male	Caucasian	Middle School
Seinfeld - Elaine	Female	Caucasian	Elementary
NCIS - Gibbs	Female	Caucasian	Middle School
I Love Lucy - Lucy	Female	Caucasian	Middle School
Father Brown – Father Brown	Female	Caucasian	Assistant Director
Andy Griffith - Opie	Female	Caucasian	Elementary School

**Role of the Researcher**

As a former Army officer, this researcher values the elements of discipline and integrity in all endeavors. This researcher did not have a prior relationship with the participants or interview location (Crewell, 2014). Prior to interviews and the focus group meeting, the researcher and participants met in a group via Zoom to address the purpose of the study and ensure the ability to address any concerns or issues.

The researcher had a passion for biblical and academic literacy. The researcher was a bi-vocational pastor and a middle-school educator. Therefore, the desire to see adolescents maximize their potential by making better choices was of significant interest. The researcher's observations of the LDS community and their commitment to indoctrinate students without reservation were instrumental in pursuing this research. As a Christian leader, this author was befuddled by the absence of a similar paradigm within the Christian community, and even more so, the ignorance of Christian leaders who were unaware of RT as a discipleship vessel. The

researcher's desire to implement Christian release time in the state of Arizona is one noteworthy bias. The favorable outcome of the study could encourage other Christian leaders to consider release time as an option for "Kingdom Building".

### **Ethical Considerations**

The proposal received IRB approval on January 25, 2021 (see Appendix A). The researcher submitted all documentation in compliance with the IRB to protect the rights of the participants (Creswell, 2014). The "gatekeeper" for the site was the executive director/founder of the RT organization. Access to the site and permission to conduct the research was coordinated with the "gatekeeper" (Creswell, 2014). The researcher contacted the gatekeeper via telephone to provide an overview and rationale for the study. This author received a letter from the RT organization granting permission for the research (see Appendix B). Following authorization to conduct the study a Zoom meeting was held with the prospective participants. The gatekeeper transferred the scheduling responsibility for interviews and the focus group to the administrative director. The consent forms were emailed to the executive director, and responsibility was transferred to the administrative director. All participants were provided copies of the consent form (see Appendix C).

The interviews were scheduled using Sign-up Genius. Participants were provided a link to the scheduling software to enable them to schedule an interview. The researcher and administrative director scheduled a date for the focus group. The administrative director contacted the participants and agreed to a date, and the focus group was facilitated with the eight participants. Consent forms were provided to all participants (see Appendix D).

Anonymity during the Zoom interviews and focus group was maintained by limiting communication to first name only. Additionally, all data files and documents were identified

using pseudonyms. Participant interview filenames were based on their favorite TV show and actor. Focus group participants chose one show and the first letter of their first name as identification. One participant required two letters of their first name since two participants had the same letter in their first name.

Purposive sampling, as compared to other non-randomized sampling methods like convenience sampling, allowed the researcher to streamline or focus on a specific population (Creswell, 2014). Researchers can deliberately choose participants based on their qualities, knowledge, and experience (Etikan et al., 2015). "Purposive sampling strategies are designed to enhance understandings of selected individuals or groups' experience(s) or for developing theories and concepts" (Devers and Frankel, 2000, p. 264). The purposive sampling method best fulfilled the aim of this research.

### **Data Collection Methods and Instruments**

Creswell (2014) suggests "to triangulate different data sources of information by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes" (p. 201). Triangulation requires data observation from at least two sources (Flick, et.al., 2004). The researcher chose to use interviews and a focus group to address behavior transformation and the development of a biblical worldview in a release time setting. Triangulation was achieved and saturation occurred as no new themes or insights were uncovered (Creswell, 2014).

As previously discussed in the procedures section, the interviews were conducted after obtaining site and IRB approval. The participants provided the researcher with in-depth information about their personal experiences as instructors within the release time setting. The focus group followed a similar process.

Interviews and focus groups were the methods used to collect data for qualitative research. Phenomenological research seeks to identify themes, personal experiences, or the essence of a central phenomenon. Interviews can be used to investigate and disclose the personal experience of individuals and groups. Structured, semi-structured, and unstructured are the fundamental types of interviews used. Semi-structured interviews address key questions and allow the interviewer and the interviewee to expound on a topic or idea (Gill et al., 2008). Interviews can provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon by exploring the views and experiences of people (Gill et al., 2008).

Focus groups are used to explore communal views and shared experiences. Focus groups generate a deeper understanding of the participant's motives, beliefs, and experiences (Gill et al., 2008). Interviewing individuals in a group setting does not constitute an effective research focus group. The researcher's construction of focus groups should consider the following: 1) the impact of the group mix, 2) using pre-existing groups, 3) and group size (Gill et.al., 2008).

### **Collection Methods**

Data collection aimed to determine the level of behavioral transformation observed by instructional leaders who provide biblical education within the release time paradigm.

Qualitative research seeks to collect, identify, and produce measures with in-depth descriptions rather than hypothesizing and testing variables (Azungah, 2018). Lived experiences can be captured using interviews and focus groups. In contrast, quantitative research concentrates on numerical variables to determine a scientific meaning to explain a presumed reality (Rynes & Gephart, 2004).

Qualitative research starts with and ends with words, descriptive text, and communication, which provides a meaningful representation of concepts ((Rynes & Gephart,

2004). It "studies, documents, analyses, and interprets how human beings construct and attach meanings to their experiences" (Patton, 2014, p. 23). The phenomenological exploration of leadership experiences at a release time education organization were studied to disclose behavioral changes among students as well as the development of a biblical worldview.

Qualitative research allows the investigator to construct meanings, as explained through participatory, interactive experiences. The in-depth interactive approach focuses on participant interpretations and provides for the discovery of emerging phenomena (Azungah, 2018).

Interviews are a valuable collection instrument, capable of revealing the "thick descriptions of members' talk and nonverbal actions in specific settings" (Rynes & Gephart, 2004, p. 457). The use of open-ended questions, in a conversational format provides a naturalistic inquiry in contrast to questionnaires (Patton, 2014). Egon Guba described the naturalistic investigation as "a discovery-oriented approach that minimizes investigator manipulation of the study setting and places no prior constraints on what the research outcomes will be" (as cited in Patton, 2015, p. 48). A naturalistic inquiry will allow the research to implement an inductive approach to data collection. The inductive process prepared the researcher for the deductive analysis of the study (Creswell, 2014).

The researcher used interviews and a focus group as the means for data collection. The interview protocol was used to ensure that data collected relates directly to the research questions (See Appendix E and F). For example, R1 states, "What are the perceived benefits of release time related to biblical worldview as perceived by leaders who actively participate in RT Bible-based instruction?". Questions 4, 5, and 7 will allow the researcher to examine and answer the aforementioned question.



## Instruments and Protocols

There are a variety of sampling methods that can be used in research. Qualitative research primarily utilizes a purposive or non-random sampling method. Purposive sampling in qualitative research is used to identify and select information related to a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling involves the researcher's selected individuals and groups who have knowledge or experience of a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). "Purposive sampling strategies are designed to enhance understandings of selected individuals or groups' experience(s) or for developing theories and concepts" (Devers and Frankel, 2000, p. 264). In contrast, random sampling ensures generalizability and minimizes the potential for bias in selection and control for known and unknown confounders (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Furthermore, purposive sampling, compared to other non-randomized sampling methods like convenience sampling, allows the researcher to streamline or focus on a specific population. Researchers can deliberately choose participants based on their qualities, knowledge, and experience (Etikan et al., 2015). "Purposive sampling strategies are designed to enhance understandings of selected individuals or groups' experience(s) or for developing theories and concepts" (Devers and Frankel, 2000, p. 264). The purposive sampling method best fulfills the aim of the research.

The researcher used semi-structured, open-ended questions to facilitate the investigative process of the study. Qualified participants included those who had been involved with the instructional portion of the release time program. Instructors included pastors, ministry leaders, and laypeople. Although the researcher excluded participants whose instructional tenure was less than a school calendar year, the feedback from the disqualified participants was just as "thick and rich" as the qualified participants.

## *Interviews*

The researcher's goal was to identify the phenomenon or relationship between release time as a discipleship platform and the possible manifestation of behaviors connected with a Bible-based education. Some questions may be theoretical other questions may be considered practical. Theoretical questions may be posed to determine the relationship between the program and behavioral outcomes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Quality questions develop from the researcher's passion and connect to the research statement (Agee, 2009).

“The focus of a phenomenological study is uncovering and interpreting the inner essence of the participants' cognitive processing regarding some common experience” (Worthington, 2020, p. 2). Interviews were the initial means for data collection for the study. Initially, the researcher desired to use two of the interview participants to pilot the interview protocol. However, after the potential number of participants decreased to twelve, the researcher determined the pilot was not as essential as having enough participants to meet saturation. The interview, using semi-structured, open-ended questions, was conducted using the Zoom videoconferencing platform. Semi-structured interviews provided participants with the flexibility to elaborate on the questions, revealing significant and rich information to the researcher (Gill et al, 2008). Table 2 provides the questions used to facilitate the interview as well the associated research question.

Table 2.

### *Semi-structured open-ended interview questions.*

Interview Questions	Research Question Addressed
1. What are the objectives of release time? How are these objectives tracked?	RQ 1 / 2
2. How does release time contribute to the behavioral development of adolescents?	RQ 1

3. How important is peer interaction to the student's behavioral transformation?	RQ 1
4. What value does release time add to the development of a biblical worldview?	RQ 2
5. Does rapport influence behavioral change? What other mitigating factors (if any) influence behavioral changes within release time education?	RQ 1
6. What role does release time play in a student's emotional responses to tragedy?	RQ 2
7. How has release time supported students with addressing ideologies contrary to the Bible.	RQ 2

The purpose of interview question one was to elicit a general response related to the participant's perspective of the objectives of release time and how they identify goal attainment. Interview questions two and three were designed to discover any behavioral changes observed in the release time setting and the instigating factors. These questions allowed the respondent to recall their experiences, provide examples, and expound on any follow-up inquiries. Question four focused the participant's recall on uncovering the impact of release time on helping the students see life from a biblical perspective.

Question five, allowed the participants to reveal the importance of relationships and any other factors that contribute to behavioral changes within the release time setting. Question six provided the participant with the opportunity to address the emotional aspect of behavioral change. Question seven afforded the participants a chance to provide relevant information on a biblical worldview. The structure of the questions enabled participants to expound on their lived experience in rich detail and provide relevant examples to the question.

### ***Focus Groups***

Using focus groups elicited participants' perceptions, attitudes, and opinions and appeared to produce believable results (Wilson, 1997). The focus group protocols were used to encourage discussion about the participants' perception of being transformed by the religious education provided by the release time program. The focus group provided both a secondary

means of data collection as well triangulation for the study. Similar to the interview protocol, the researcher used semi-structured, open-ended questions.

Focus groups yield large amounts of qualitative data that usually does not emerge using other methods, including interviews (Flynn, et.al, 2018). Question one and three were used to uncover information relative to the impact of the release time setting. Question one allowed the participant to provide a self-assessment detailing personal experiences as well as the observations made of others. Questions two and three provided the focus group with an opportunity to highlight any advantages, disadvantages, or similarities between release time and church settings.

Questions four and five allowed the focus group an opportunity to share information relative to the development of a biblical worldview. Question six allowed participants to elaborate on the significance of the instructors vs. curriculum. Question six also allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences within the release time setting, choosing to expound on information relative to behaviors or the development of a biblical worldview. Table 3 illustrates the relationship between the focus group and research questions.

Table 3.

*Semi-structured open-ended focus group questions.*

Focus Group Questions	Research Question Addressed
1. What behavioral changes have you experienced personally through your involvement with release time? What changes have you observed in your peers?	N/A
2. What types of changes (emotional, physical, etc.) are more noticeable between students who only attend release time and those who attend releasee time and other church ministry activities	RQ 3
3. What are the benefits provided by release time that may not be provided in a general church setting?	RQ 3
4. How does release time use biblical content to address modern-day events?	RQ 4

5. What is the role of release time as a tool for forming a biblical worldview?	RQ 4
6. What plays the most significant role in the transformative process of the students...the instructors or the curriculum?	RQ 4

The data collected for the research was maintained and stored in a secure environment. Datafiles from the Zoom videoconferences are saved on an external drive and secured in a safe. The researcher has the only key to the safe. Three years after the study, all data will be destroyed.

## **Procedures**

The research proposal was submitted to the Liberty University IRB for approval. A release time site, selected for the study, was included in the in the research request. The IRB provided the researcher a conditional approval on October 27, 2020, based upon approval from RT. The projected research site rejected the research proposal on November 24, 2020. However, on January 14, 2020, the research site used in this study provided a letter of approval for the research (see Appendix B) and IRB granted approval on January 25, 2021 (see Appendix A). After receiving approval from the IRB, the researcher initiated the process of acquiring participants.

First, the director was given the selection criterion and requested to provide participants for study. Second, the researcher conducted a Zoom meeting with the executive director and the projected leader participants to explain the study's complexity and to address any reservations or questions. Third, consent forms were sent to the interview participants via email from the assistant director. The participants signed the consent forms and emailed them to the researcher. Afterward, the researcher emailed the assistant director a link to Signup Genius to schedule the interviews. The confirmations for scheduling were emailed through Sign-up genius directly to the researcher. Finally, the interviews were conducted the week of March 15-19, 2021. The

participants being interviewed included youth pastors and general laypeople. Two of the participants served as youth pastors at a church within the community. Twelve participants were scheduled; however, one participant was unable to participate. Two participants conducted interviews but failed to meet protocol requirements due to lack of tenure.

The focus group participants were selected based on their personal experiences as students at the release time site. First, the assistant director of CLC identified potential alumni to participate in the research. The initial outreach failed to produce the desired number of participants. Fortunately, two of the participants were able to identify and contact additional participants for the focus group. Consent forms were sent to the additional focus group participants. The participants returned the consent forms to the researcher, and the focus group was conducted on April 14, 2021. For confidentiality purposes the participants were asked to provide the name of a TV show, and all of them suggested “The Chosen”. Since the group selected the same show, the researcher used the first initial of each participant’s first name as the identifier in the study and for the individual filename. Two participant names started with the letter C; therefore, an additional letter was added to one of the participants. One hundred percent of the participants were Caucasian. The demographic of the county is primarily Caucasian, therefore, this characteristic is not surprising. Three of the focus group participants were female, and five were male. The focus group participants included one member who was previously an instructor at CLC.

The interviews and focus group sessions were recorded using the Zoom videoconference platform and both collection methods were transcribed using the Nvivo qualitative data analysis software. Although the software provided an adequate transcription, the availability of the videorecording allowed the researcher to determine accurately who was speaking.

### **Data Analysis**

The goal of data analysis in qualitative research is to make sense of word data. In contrast to quantitative research, data analysis in qualitative research proceeds as the data collection occurs (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative researcher began assessing data as the information was received. According to Creswell (2014), the qualitative researcher needs to "winnow" the data, concentrate on relevant data, and disregard other parts of the data. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) "Doing an analysis of a word, phrase, or sentence consists of scanning the document, or at least a couple of pages of it, and then returning to focus on a word or phrase that strikes the analyst as being significant and analytically interesting" (p. 93).

While the Strauss and Corbin (1990) comments are more than 30 years old, the message they convey remains vital to qualitative research. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) commented that out of the steps of detailed analysis, studying each word and phrase, and even the inflections of voice in an interview, arise a clear phenomenological focus on the data content. Data analysis is possible only through extreme familiarity with the data.

### **Analysis Methods**

The researcher used thematic analysis during the examination of the transcriptions for both the interviews and the focus group. The thematic analysis allows the researcher to analyze, organize, describe, and report themes identified within a data set (Nowell et., 2017). Through the utilization of thematic analysis, the researcher explored the lived experiences of the participants. The following are advantages of using thematic analysis: 1) flexible approach that can be modified accordingly, 2) easily comprehensible, and 3) useful for summarizing key features relating to the data set (Nowell, et. al, 2017).

### ***Epoch/Bracketing***

According to Peoples (2021), the epoch process allows the researcher to suspend judgments to focus on the studied phenomenon. Peoples adds, “It is not about eliminating biases but suspending them or setting them aside” (Peoples, 2021, p. 30). Bracketing experiences as an educator and pastor allowed the author to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon within the research of release time education from the participant’s perspective. Methods of bracketing include writing memos, engaging in an interview with an outside source, and reflexive journaling before defining the research question (Tufford and Newman, 2012). The researcher used memos during the data collection process.

### ***Horizontalization***

The first step horizontalization was to transcribe the Zoom videoconference files using the Nvivo software application. The transcriptions were printed out, and the researcher initiated the process of reading each transcript to understand the participants’ experiences. The researcher used an inductive approach to identifying the presence of in-vivo codes. The researcher completed multiple reading passes of the transcriptions before finalizing the codes which created the themes. On the first pass, the researcher reflected on the content and highlighted provocative quotes that appeared to validate release time education’s influence on behaviors and development of a biblical worldview. On the second pass, the researcher color-coded similarities between the participant’s individual responses to the semi-structured questions.

After recognizing similar responses to specific questions, the researcher continued to assess the data a third time inductively and identified where the same codes appeared throughout the transcriptions. The researcher composed a chart that separated the codes by participant (see Appendix H).



## **Trustworthiness**

Although objectivity and integrity are critical for all research disciplines, the criterion for qualitative research differs from quantitative research. “First and foremost, the research seeks believability, based on coherence, insight and instrumental utility and trustworthiness through a process of verification rather than through traditional validity and reliability measures” (Creswell, 2014, p. 206). To maintain the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher used member checks, allowing the participants to review the transcript for accuracy and a codebook. According to Yin (2014), trustworthiness is achieved by the triangulation of the data. Triangulation occurred using the interviews and a focus group. Providing multiple sources helped to capture a broader range of attitudes, behaviors, and perspectives (Yin, 2014).

## ***Credibility***

Credibility was maintained by remaining unbiased. Adhering to the interview and focus group protocols limited bias ensuring a systematic approach to data collection. Using an external source to transcribe the interviews and focus group recordings maintained data credibility. Using an outside source (Nvivo) for transcription and data analysis removed the possibility of manipulating the data.

“Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checks as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (as cited in Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 127). Member checks were completed after the transcriptions were downloaded from the Nvivo software platform. Participants were emailed a copy of their transcription for review, correction, and return.

## ***Dependability***

The study methods sustain the dependability of the research processes as well as the protocols established. The researcher provided the reader with a clear and concise purpose

statement, method, questions to be considered data collection processes, and effective and efficient measures for data analysis. A detailed explanation of the research processes was supplied and documented to maintain the dependability of the research. This author believes repeating the protocol of this research could reveal a similar phenomenon and yield a comparable outcome.

### ***Confirmability***

As previously mentioned, epoch was experienced, ensuring personal bias and or prejudice was avoided. The researcher focused on identifying the lived experiences of the participants in both data collection groups. The study's confirmability will be apparent by replicating the phenomenological qualitative study's protocols and processes. Strict adherence to the protocols and maintaining journal entries will add to the dependability of the research.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability pertains to the applicability of research findings in other settings. Various factors influence the transferability of findings. The transferability judgment for this research would include the following:

1. Location (suburban, city, Bible-belt state, etc.)
2. Demographics (race, gender, etc.)
3. Days of operation (number of RT class days)
4. Type of research (qualitative versus quantitative)
5. Academic level (elementary, middle, and high school)
6. Curriculum

The current research was conducted in a Bible-belt state in a predominantly Caucasian community. Fifth grade through high school students attended release time five days a week for

nine consecutive weeks. Not all academic levels had a defined curriculum; however, high school students were involved in courses with a defined curriculum (See Appendix I). Comparatively, in studies conducted by Hodge (2010) and Cuddeback & Hodge (2007), the research was confined to fourth and fifth graders. Also, students were predominantly Hispanic or African, living in impoverished areas. Furthermore, students attended RT once a week. The transferability judgement for this research would be determined by the aforesaid research descriptions.

### **Chapter Summary**

The researcher used a transcendental phenomenological design to facilitate the outcomes of the study. Interviews and a focus group ascertained the essence of the phenomenon. Using two methods of data collection provided triangulation for the study. The interviews included nine participants who addressed RQ1 and RQ2, answering open-ended, semi-structured questions. Data addressing RQ3 and RQ4 were provided by disclosures from the participants of the focus group. The researcher maintained the identities of the participants as well as the security of the data.

No record exists of a study evaluating potential behavioral changes and the development of a biblical worldview in adolescents who participated in release time programs associated with public school institutions. Several research studies have demonstrated that religious associations improved overall mental health and longevity. The possibility exists that an extension of the Church through release time paradigms can serve as a behavioral modification platform for students who attend public schools. Some believe religiosity can lead to desirable behaviors. However, others believe such biblical teachings can “exacerbate the oppression of women, gay people, religious dissenters and others” (Bindewalde, 2015, p. 115). This study revealed the benefits of the former and not the latter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of instructional leaders and high school graduates in relation to behavioral transformation and the development of a biblical worldview within a release time (RT) learning center in northern Georgia. The researcher sought the experiences of RT instructional leaders to determine the behavioral impact of RT and to determine whether RT aided in the construct of a biblical worldview. A focus group composed of high school graduates who participated in RT validated the insight provided by the interview participants. The researcher collected data from nine participants through interviews, and the focus group consisted of eight participants. Triangulation of the research findings occurred using dual sources of data collection. This chapter presents the results of the findings gathered from the investigative process.

This chapter begins with the researcher's coding process establishing the framework for discovering the themes surrounding the research. Next, the researcher addresses RQ1 and RQ2, the correlating themes, and the "rich and thick" statements which support the themes. Third, the researcher provides an overview of the focus group, repeating the aforesaid with RQ3 and RQ4. Fourth the research summarizes the themes. Finally, the researcher summarizes the information provided in the chapter.

The first three chapters of the dissertation explored the purpose, problem, literature review, gap in the literature, and methodology and design for the study. Chapter four provided an analysis of the interviews and focus group. Chapter four is divided into the following sections: Compilation Protocol and Measures, Demographic and Sample Data, Data Analysis and Findings, and Evaluation of the Research Design.

## **Compilation Protocol and Measures**

In this section of Chapter four, the reader will find a description of the compilation protocol that reveals the processes followed in conducting the study. The researcher used an Interview Protocol, Transcripts Protocol, and a Qualitative Codebook Protocol.

### **Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol was developed to ensure the study thoroughly answered the four research questions. The researcher developed seven separate questions for the interview and six questions for the focus group. The questions were semi-structured, open-ended questions that allowed the participants to elaborate accordingly and allowed the researcher to improvise as needed (Kallio, et. al, 2016). Although the researcher asked clarifying questions to gain further understanding, the researcher never deviated from the order in which the questions were answered. The researcher systematically asking questions provided a comparative blueprint and reference points between participants during the transcription analysis. All interviews, including the focus group commenced and ended with prayer.

### **Transcription Protocol**

The researcher chose to use a transcription service provided by the Nvivo data analysis platform. Utilizing the video recording maintained the accuracy of the transcription for future data analysis. The transcriptions were reviewed multiple times, annotations for significant themes, and coding designators were digitally highlighted on a Word document.

### **Qualitative Codebook Protocol**

According to Creswell (2014), a qualitative codebook “contains a list of predetermined codes that researchers use for coding data” (p. 199). The researcher chose to develop a codebook

annotating the codes, definitions, and examples relating to the codes (see Appendix G). Themes within the research were identified using the codes and examples.

### **Demographic and Sample Data**

The demographics for the interview and the focus group reflected the county in which CLC exists. Seventy-five percent of the population in the county was Caucasian, and 100 percent of the participants were Caucasian. Six of the nine participants interviewed were female, and five of the eight participants in the focus group were male. The researcher did not acquire demographic information beyond what was needed to participate. For example, age was not deemed significant beyond the requirement of the focus group participants who were required to have graduated from high school and be over the age of 18.

Research revealed the influence of the CLC release time organization on graduates. Several graduates served as instructors or in ministry. Examples of the influence were seen in members of the RT staff. Two of the female instructors, including the assistant director, graduated from the program. One of the female interview participants also provided leadership for a women's ministry at a community church. The focus group participants were involved in either CLC or community-based ministry. One of the female participants was serving as an intern at CLC. Two of the male participants were serving as youth leaders at a community church. One of the male participants was a youth pastor, who previously served as an instructor at CLC.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

In this section of Chapter Four, the researcher presents the data analysis and findings relative to understanding the influence of RT on the behavioral transformation and the development of a biblical worldview. The researcher separated the data analysis between the

interview and the focus group. Data revealed four distinctive themes, each associated with a research question. Within this section, the researcher revealed the codes identified from the interviews. Next, the researcher established the themes associated with RQ1 and RQ2 and supporting significant participant statements. This systematic review was repeated for the focus group and RQ3 and RQ4.

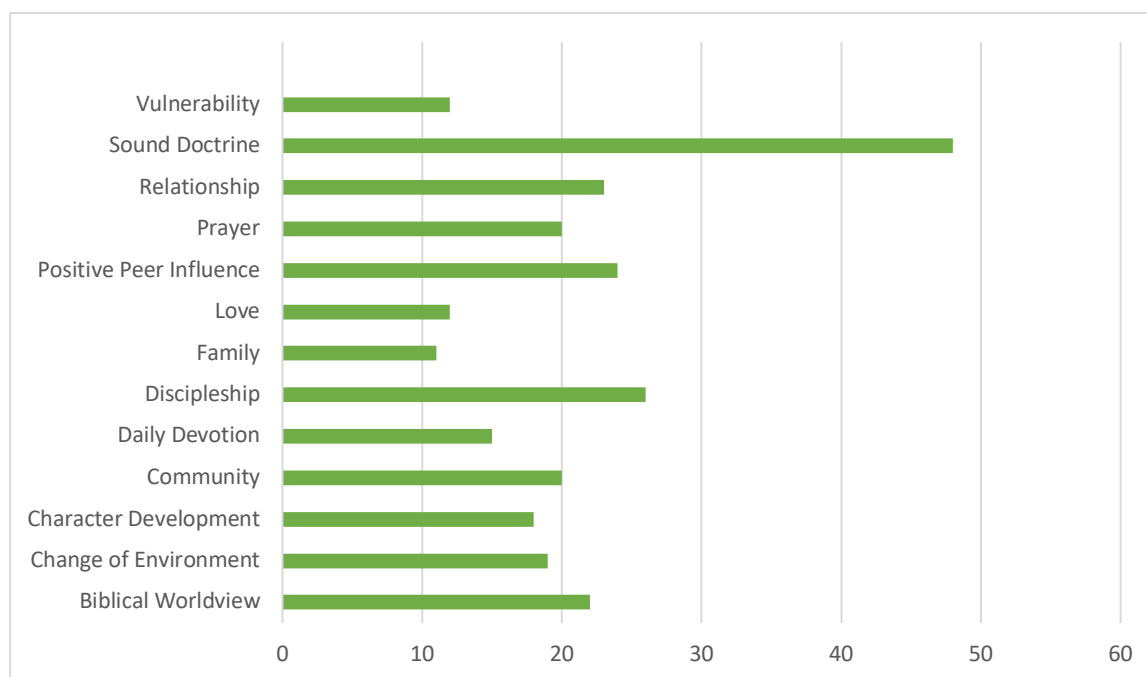
### **Coding Approach**

The researcher used an inductive approach to identifying the presence of Nvivo codes. The researcher completed multiple reading passes of the transcriptions before finalizing the codes which created the themes. On the first pass, the researcher reflected on the content and highlighted provocative quotes that appeared to validate release time education's influence on behaviors and development of a biblical worldview. On the second pass, the researcher color-coded similarities between individual participant responses to the semi-structured questions. For example, when the researcher asked the question, "What are the objectives for release time and how are those objectives tracked?" Elaine (all names used in this research are code names protecting the participant) stated: "One of our goals is to have them to be able to recite Galatians 5:22-23 on the Fruit of the Spirit by the end of the quarter and we go over all the concepts of the fruit of the spirit." When asked the same question, Rebecca stated, "We talk about the reliability of Scripture. We talk about its uniqueness and its continuity, its circulation, and all of those things. We give them a general overview. But then we also teach them about interacting with Scripture personally." The aforesaid statements support the coding for *sound doctrine* because of the emphasis on Scripture. The synopsis of the interview codes is found in Table 4.

Table 4

*Synopsis of Interview Codes*

## Synopsis of Interview Codes



In the example above, the researcher chose “Sound Doctrine” as the code to identify references to the importance and influence of Scripture. After recognizing similar responses to specific questions, the researcher continued to assess the data a third time inductively and identified where the same codes appeared throughout the transcriptions. The researcher composed a chart that separated the codes by the participant. The researcher introduced the Dedoose software platform at the final stage of the coding process. Dedoose is a web-based software program that helps organize research data for qualitative and mix-methods methods. The coding process required approximately three months to complete. Taking breaks from the analysis, also termed as “passive activity,” provided the researcher with further insights into the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021).



## Coding and the Supporting Examples

The researcher used the Dedoose software to provide a color-coded chart to facilitate further the extrapolation of data relevant for the construct of thematic analysis. Thirteen codes were generated that described the phenomenon or lived experienced communicated by the participants. The code *biblical worldview* was used when participants used statements that referenced the use of Scripture to understand a situation, concept, or God's perspective. Examples of the code include the statements, "lens of the Bible," framed by the Bible, or situational experiences describing how Scripture shaped an individual's perspective of a situation. The code *change of environment* was used each time a participant discussed transformative processes experienced outside of the public-school environment. Examples of this code include statements such as "because they're coming to a classroom where they're not being judged" and "a lot of those issues you can't address at school, teachers can't tell them the truth about abortion. I can tell them what the Bible says about homosexuality, and they need to be told the truth."

The code *character development* was used for statements related to either a perceived behavioral need or an expectation. Also, it identified perceived personal growth observed by the leader. Examples of this code include statements such as "we take responsibility, we do things well" and "I think our discipline and our standards work together to give us some really positive behavioral changes as well." The code *community* was used when participants shared information connecting the relationship between release time to outside entities including churches, public schools, and families, and the overall tribal environment within a release time classroom. One participant stated, "we have seen ourselves as an asset to the school system as

well, because I've had a lot of opportunities to work with the counselors at the school." Another participant shared "and then we had prayer vigils in our town and at a church."

The code *daily devotion* was used when participants made statements about the significance of meeting daily, spending time in the Bible daily, and anytime an inference was made to the significance of meeting consistently. Examples of this code included the following comments, "I feel like we got a lot more time than the church to kind of develop in them what is a biblical worldview" and "even though it's only for a quarter for a semester at a time, having that density and seeing them every single day." The code *discipleship* implicitly identified statements related to spiritual growth and explicitly when salvation was experienced. An example of an implicit identifier is "I think the intentional discipleship that we're trying to do with them influences behavior changes."

The code *family* was used when participants disclosed the development dynamic of a family environment within the release time setting. One participant stated, "this is a family, and that's how we're going to make this is a safe environment for you." Another participant shared, "once you start seeing people as family, you stop seeing their different roles." The code *love* pertains to student exposure to the concept of God's love, having a personal experience with love, and understanding the need to love others. An example of a student experience with love is, "And one of my students put thank you for showing me how to be loved."

The code *positive peer influence* was used to identify observed changes induced by other students within the release time setting. One participant deemed positive peer pressure as essential for behavioral transformation. The participant stated, "So I would think peer interaction, I mean, would almost use the word essential to student behavior transformation." The significance of positive peer-influence was reinforced by another participant who stated,

“It’s just because they learn more, and I’ve learned that at times they learn more from each other than they do for me.” The code *prayer* was used when prayer was practiced and when prayer was considered essential to a given situation. One of the participants stated, “So they pray with each other.” Prayer was vital to the salvation experience of a student. The student told the participant, “I know the day that you guys prayed for me, I got saved that day.”

The code *relationship* was used to signify the importance of rapport between participant and student, student to student, and the student’s relationship with God. An example of the value of the student-teacher relationship is apparent in the statement, “A lot of our teachers are more kind of mom figures to their little middle schoolers.’ Similarly, the emphasis placed on relationships between students is evident in the statement, “the students tend to buy into that and to really build relationships with each other.” The code *vulnerable* was used to indicate the existence of an emotional submission, the willingness to expose one’s heart and hurts. An example of this code is apparent in a participant’s declaration, “they learn to trust each other enough that when tragedies do strike...”

The code *sound doctrine* was used to unveil the influence of the use of Scripture, whether in the formulation of a worldview, dealing with tragedy, or the consistency in which the Bible was the foundation for transformation. Sound doctrine was the most frequently identified code. Examples of sound doctrine include, “we also teach them about interacting with scripture personally,” “we talk about here’s what the world says, here’s what God’s word says,” and “everything that we teach comes directly from Scripture.”

The first theme that materialized, indicating release time and its’ impact on behavioral transformation and the development of a biblical worldview was the connection to Scripture. Connections manifested in a multitude of ways throughout the interview process.

Research showed that student engagement is paramount to developmental change in an educational environment, whether academic or biblical. Educators are required to create connections between instructional curriculum and student applications. Release time educators are responsible for presenting the Scripture in a comprehensible and palatable manner, whereby students willingly embrace and respond to the message.

In an online study consisting of practicing Christians of 1,066 U.S. adults in July of 2015, Barna (2017) discovered that only 17% possessed a biblical worldview. In the same study, 61% agreed with the New Spirituality ideology, 54% acceptance of postmodernist perspectives, 36% embraces Marxist beliefs, and 29% assented with secular dogma (Barna, 2017). Considering Barna's study, the absolute inerrancy of the Bible has been infiltrated by the acceptance of teachings outside of the Scripture. There is a disconnect between the principles of the Bible and the believer.

Data revealed that the development and employment of a biblical worldview view is imperative to possessing a consistent and unwavering faith, refusing to be swayed by beliefs contrary to the Scripture. According to Phillips, "If a superficial knowledge of a biblical worldview continues to dominate that evangelical community, we cannot expect the community to stand unblemished against the onslaught of other worldview choices" (Phillip, 2008, p.2). To contest the continual compromise of the acceptance and enhancement of a biblical worldview, solutions must be unearthed. Early exposure to a biblical worldview during adolescence can facilitate an acceptance and adherence to a biblical worldview. If not, generational withdrawal from Christianity and the Church may perpetuate a continual retraction from a biblical worldview. Barna (2017) discovered that Millennials and Gen-Xers were eight times more likely to accept the views of New Spiritualism, postmodernist, Marxism and secularism (Barna, 2017).

Release time education is a plausible solution to addressing the unfamiliarity of a biblical worldview during the early stages of learning. During this research, multiple experiences were shared revealing how students who were both unbelieving and unchurched at the beginning of release time education were transformed into future Bible-based educators. Additionally, their beliefs and behaviors changed because of their involvement in release time education. The magnification of the manifestation was uncovered the participant who was a once non-believer, and now serves as ministry leader. Release time education is a definite resource for the advancement of a biblical worldview.

### **RQ1 – Sound Doctrine**

Research question number one asks, “What are the perceived benefits of release time related to biblical worldview as observed by leaders who actively participate in RT Bible-based instruction?” Paramount to the development of a biblical worldview is the establishment and employment of a biblical curriculum. The Christian Learning Center employs a designated worldview curriculum for high-school students. Although not as in-depth, elementary students receive a basic Bible instruction to initiate or further a biblical worldview. One can view the development of a biblical worldview as a plane wanting to take off. Without a runway, the plane remains grounded. Release time can be the runway which allows the development of a biblical worldview to take off among adolescents.

All participants reported sound doctrine as foundational to the development of a biblical worldview. Sound doctrine, the establishment of the Bible as a “lens.” appeared in each interview. The consistent daily exposure to biblical principles perpetuated the construct of a biblical worldview. Although all grade-level instructors provided examples, the lived experience of sound doctrine was more pronounced and detailed with instructors at the high school level due

to the curriculum design. For example, courses and course descriptions are provided at the Christ's Learning Center website:

- Family, Community, and Careers – This course examines God's plan for our lives and relationship, specifically outlining the top 4 priorities we should have, based upon Scripture. We will study eternal biblical principles for establishing a personal relationship with Christ, understanding our roles within God's design for our families, establishing trust-bond friendships and developing God-honoring courting or dating relationships in order to realize God's plan for a lifelong mate, and finally understanding our individual spiritual gifts in order to use them in ministry for God's glory.
- Life Skills and Careers – This Course examines how to understand God's will for our lives, careers, and ministries, specifically outlining how to make wise decisions when planning for college, pursuing a career, handling money, and leading in ministry, based upon Scripture.
- Current Issues – This course examines how the truth of Scripture as it relates to the current issues facing society and the Church today. We will discover how worldviews are formed and what components make-up the framework of a worldview.
- Comparative Religions – This course will examine the core beliefs, values, and worldviews of the major religions around the world, beginning with Christianity, which will be taught as absolute truth. We will conduct an in-depth study at the Christian Scriptures: how we got them, how we can know they are truth, and the history behind their preservation and translation.

Connection to Scripture created a pathway for the establishment and employment of a biblical worldview. Each instructor had curriculum designed to support the advancement of developing a biblical worldview. Dwight specifically expounded on the purpose of the Comparative Religion course and highlighted the importance of the “strength of the Bible”.

Part of comparative religion goes through a unit explaining your personal worldview and then what a biblical worldview looks like. Then you can start looking at different religions. We want to teach them how to frame all the questions as easy as how am I going to perform in the classroom or how am I going to act on it? Everything needs to be from the strength of the Bible. What does God say that I should be doing with this? And a lot of them come in, and they do not know. Their worldview is just what they see on TV or what they've been told or what or how social media affects their worldview. However, coming in and actually getting the Bible and learning what God says about abortion, what God says about dating, God says this about how I need to interact with my mom and dad. God tells me those things, so I shouldn't base my opinion on what everyone else says. I need to base my opinion on what God's Word says.

Although the high school instructors had more formative curriculum, the leaders for the other grade levels were not without a strategy and tactics for the formulation of a biblical worldview.

Rebecca, a former instructor was serving as the assistant director, reaffirmed CLC's commitment to sound doctrine regardless of grade level.

Each student, obviously, no matter what kind of grade level they're at, are going to receive a tailored kind of message to their age group, specifically a unit on what is kind of an overview of scripture. How did we get scripture? How was it written? High school students get in a little bit more detail. We talk about canonist with them. We talk about the reliability of scripture. We talk about its uniqueness and its continuity, and its circulation. We give them a general overview. But then we also teach them about interacting with scripture personally.

Lucy affirmed CLC's commitment to providing all students, regardless of grade level, with an introductory curriculum to construct of a biblical worldview. Lucy, who taught fifth through seventh graders said, "most children don't know about a biblical worldview and to view the world through God's eyes is very new to some." However, to simplify the concept, Lucy used illustrations related to making choices. Lucy stated,

They know God is a choice. The don't realize that God is really the only choice that we should make. And I use that illustration a lot of the time, which would you choose, the winning team or the losing team? You choose God, and you're on the winning team. He's already won.

By connecting the mind to the message of the Word of God, the participants established a framework for students to live according to God's will. Furthermore, enlightenment from the Scripture provided students with an entrance and an exit strategy for navigating life's travails.

Gibbs stated the basics are essential to developing a biblical worldview,

What we're teaching them is just the basic principles of how God's word is going to help them to know how better to navigate themselves through this thing called life. And the curriculum that we have really helps with all of that. Drawing from different scriptures and just kind of putting that into the curriculum just to help them better be able to go through life with a different perspective of what is a worldview.

Sound doctrine provided the support for decision-making and was an integral part of developing a biblical worldview. Developing a biblical worldview during the early stages of life can contribute to how they perceive God later in life. Mark, a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade instructor, stated:

We focus on the relational side of our faith. So that starts with seeing God as a good Father who loves us, who created us in His image and also created others in that same image. And so how does recognizing that other people are created in the image of God, and we are created in the image of God, change the decisions we make, change the way that we speak to others, speak about other people, build healthy friendships, and relationships. And it comes to us that this is who God is.

The importance of the connection to Scripture and the development of a biblical worldview was magnified by the consistent exposure and experience students receive. Students outside of a release time setting usually attended church on Sundays and possibly mid-week. At CLC elementary, students were submerged in the Bible for 30 minutes a day for nine weeks, eighth graders received 40 minutes, and high school students an hour and a half for nine-weeks. Unlike the church setting, release-time participants attendance was not optional because the course was attached to public school credit.

One of the advantages of daily exposure was the ability to build a worldview without interruption. Release time provided students with an opportunity to receive daily, uninterrupted enlightenment.

Mark stated,

I get them for about 40 minutes over the course of forty-five days. That is a substantial amount of time. You are not teaching them one thing, and then you have got to wait until the following Wednesday. I mean, you just build and build, and we can go on a deep dive for three or four days if something comes up that we need to talk about. The consistency of it and the immediacy of it is really huge.

Father Brown also emphasized the importance of daily immersion in the Gospel. Father Brown stated, “I’m presenting the Gospel on a daily basis whether that’s verbal or an active thing or even if it’s engrained in our lesson somewhere. There is no doubt on what the Gospel is.” When



speaking to the development of a biblical worldview Kramer stated, “I think release time education adds a huge, strong voice to that. The extra 45 minutes or hour and a half a day is just going to reinforce it.” Rebecca put the numbers into perspective when assessing the importance of student’s consistent exposure to Scripture and the development of a biblical worldview.

Rebecca stated,

We did the math last year essentially, we see the students three times as much as a church will in a year. And so that is huge. I mean, it is major. When you think about it, we’re talking 50 hours a week if that child goes to church once a week for a year. But we are talking 150 plus hours, depending on which grade level. I just I feel like that’s hugely important for people to know because I feel like we just get to do so much more today.

The benefit of providing students with daily devotional time with the Bible and its correlation to the development of biblical worldview cannot be overlooked. Additionally, possessing a biblical worldview provides students with a vehicle for traveling through the valleys and mountains of life events. The development of a biblical worldview prepares students for life events, social issues, and other matters where conflict arises.

The connection to Scripture and the implementation of a biblical worldview was most apparent when discussing tragedy, fears, and different religious ideologies. The prevalence of viewing a situation from the perspective of Scripture intensified with leaders at the higher grades. However, the instructors at all grade levels had situations whereby leading the students back to Scripture provided them with eyesight and the insight to look to God. Lucy shared a story involving students sharing their fears. One student shared the fear of their parents getting a divorce, which caused another student to share his fear of being alone for two hours by himself until a parent arrived. Lucy stated, “I just want to let them know you are going to be OK. God’s taking care of you.” “And we did a verse. I stopped and did a verse right then with them about

peace and had them write it down.” The use of a Scripture is essential for the development of a biblical worldview.

Gibbs shared a situation of a student’s involvement in a life-altering vehicle accident. Amazingly, the students’ view of God and His sovereignty prompted them to ask if they could pray for the student. Gibbs stated,

Before I even mentioned anything about it, there was a prayer request. It was can we pray for D. It is a place where they feel confident in knowing He’s going to answer our prayers. And they get to see that. They get to see the results of prayer.

Their exposure to Scripture led them to believe God’s Word to be true. Barna stipulates a Biblical worldview based on the life of Jesus Christ should be biblically sound, focus on the will of God, assist in making decisions, and initiate faith-based actions (as cited in Schultz and Swezey, 2013). Prayer in response to tragedy directly reflects the definition above.

Research supports the premise that students who possess a biblical worldview believe God is intimately involved regardless of the situation and His sovereignty is irrefutable. Opie, who teaches 5<sup>th</sup>-graders shared a situation involving the question of modern-day miracles. When asked if God still performs miracles. Opie responded,

They may not be God parting the water like He did for Moses and Joshua, but it may be that he protected someone. My neighbor had a car accident due to a seizure. The cause of the seizure was a tumor. Without the accident, he would have never known about the seizure. So, giving them that biblical worldview demonstrates God still works in big ways and little ways.

How an individual views a situation relative to the Bible ultimately determines the actions taken. In the above situation with Gibbs, it was prayer. Additionally, when tragedy arises, answers are sought, and students need a source where answers can be found. Father Brown stated,

I think this is probably the best place where students can come to understand tragedy because when you put the lens of the Gospel on having a place like this and answering questions, why did God allow things like this to happen, it helps them to see and realize this is not our home, and it’s not like this wasn’t part of God’s original plan, but that sin

broke everything, and this is why we need Jesus. Because when you know Jesus, I mean, He defeated sin and death on the cross. And it helps them shift their focus from why this is happening to I can endure this because of who Jesus is, and I know where I'm going.

The establishment of a standardized instructional system at CLC ensured student exposure to biblical principles. Utilizing a structured approach to biblical content provided the students with a simplistic yet comprehensive overview of the Scripture and the Savior. The systematic methodology for instruction correlated to the student's ability to develop a biblical worldview.

## **RQ2 – Connection to Community**

Connection to Community was the second theme deduced from the applicable codes. The importance of community on behaviors was multi-faceted in the release time educational setting. Community consisted of the physical area operation, the individuals operating within the community, and the extension of community outside of release time. The first application of the theme was transporting the student to a "safe place." Release time education removed the student from the stressors experienced in the usual public-school setting and placed them in a "safe place." For some students, leaving the campus was the initial attraction to release time. Gibbs explained,

They hear about getting off-campus and the fun of it. That just sparks their interest in coming, not completely understanding the whole concept of what's going on. Thankfully, we get a lot of lost people in our class, and they get to hear the Word, and some come to Salvation.

For some students, the initial attraction to release time pertains to escaping a tense environment, to enter a safe place. Mark stated a similar opinion related to the importance of moving into a different environment,

I think having that space where they are taken out of their normal routine, out of the normal rhythms, out of their normal friendship groups and classroom, and moving into a unique space with this very intentional nature. And there is almost an expectation of change.

The change of environment released the student from the shackles of impersonation and gave them the freedom to be who they are and sharing how they feel. Dwight shared,

Coming out of school for a little bit of time every day releases them to be a little bit more honest and a little bit more free to say the things that are on their mind because they are guarded at the school. When we start getting into our lessons and stuff, you just see that they come in hopeless, and then they leave with hope.

The benefits of a change in environment were initiated once the students left the campus and entered a “safe place”; additionally, the process of behavioral change was furthered by the opportunities offered within a release time setting.

Exclusive to the release environment was the opportunity to address the student’s emotional needs during periods of difficulty. Previously, the connection to the Scripture theme addressed tragedy and the development of a biblical worldview. Similarly, the connection to community, provided students with emotional support initiating a behavioral transformation. Within the walls of release time, the option of prayer was a resource not available in public schools. Elaine explained it as follows:

It’s another layer of counseling for these students. When things happen, they have their school counselors. But being at school and having a counselor, you can’t openly pray with them. I think just to have that interaction and somebody that they know that’s in their group, they can pray with them and talk to them, and we encourage them to continue even when they’re on campus.

Environmental change also granted the instructors the freedom to maximize the utilization of the Gospel to develop the spiritual formation of the students. Father Brown expressed the liberation experienced when being able to provide the essential emotional support needed from a spiritual perspective,

Regardless of whether it’s comfortable for me to be emotional, to deal with emotion, to be sympathetic or empathetic, I still know the only hope is Jesus. I can do all of that here. Whereas, if I were on a campus, it would be inappropriate. But here, it allows me to.

The connection to community began with a change of environment. The students established a connection with the positive experience that occurred when leaving the public-school campus relocating to the release time campus. The connection to the community theme extended from the arrival on the physical campus to the positive interactions within the classroom.

Facilitated by the instructors, communal interactions created a loving, respectful, and non-judgmental environment leading to a variety of behavioral changes. Students demonstrated a willingness to be vulnerable within the community, created extended relationships, and broadened their perspective of the influence of the Bible in their lives. A key component for behavioral change was the ability of the instructors to establish engagement with the students.

Mark addressed behavioral change as an observer as well as a receiver of a good report.

Mark recalled a small victory related to a difficult-to-reach student. Mark stated,

One student who was an athlete was done with everything and was not engaged in anything. A victory for me was by the end of the class, he started to participate in discussions and increased the amount of writing in his journal. It was a small yet noticeable difference.

Mark further expounded on the reported behavioral benefits from the perspective of the public schools. Mark shared,

We absolutely see a difference in the lives of our students in our classrooms, but then I also hear reports from teachers on the school campus. Teachers will say, I don't know what happened, but he's a different person since he attended CLC. We have built a reputation as a place where students are excited about coming because they have fun and enjoy the class, but also a place where they will learn how to conduct themselves as young men and women out in the world. The public schools are noticing the difference.

Behavior transformation was observed externally as well as experienced internally. When asked about the relationship between release time and behavior change, Gibbs responded,

It helps them to develop a moral compass. They can decipher between good and evil and right and wrong because sadly, the world that they are living in right now is pretty much all about the bad. And depending upon their home life, you really don't know what they

are getting at home. And I do have some students where my class is the only place they hear about hope, joy, or love.

Gibbs later shared an experience where the students were asked to write a note about what CLC meant to them. One of the students put on the note, “thank you for showing me how to be loved.” Emotional character development, improving a student’s confidence, gaining an understanding of love, and embracing self-worth, contributed to the process of behavior transformation. Elaine mentioned her emphasis on the importance of developing a sound moral character because of the difficult environments where the students reside. Elaine stated,

I would say one big thing with some of my students is self-worth and just feeling like someone cares, and someone loves them. They don’t necessarily understand that there’s a loving God that actually loves them even when they don’t feel loved and when they don’t feel like they are enough. Getting that concept and understanding that you are enough because you’ve been created in the image of God. That’s one of the big ones that I see with a lot of these students that by the end of the quarter, they really have that confidence to know, yes, I am somebody in Christ.

Behaviors, negative or positive, were influenced by environments. The negative behaviors exemplified by students may result from a dysfunctional background. Dwight shared how release time can bring peace to those where disorder is normalized. Dwight stated,

Sometimes we get kids that are just dropped in the class because they don’t know what else to with them. It’s cool because sometimes those students are the ones that you see the most growth from because they are from chaos.

The exchange of environment provided by release time, whether from the public school or a home environment, contributed significantly to behavioral transformation.

Furthermore, the communal atmosphere, whereby the students positively influence one another, was equally important. Contributing factors to the community development included the establishment of meaningful relationships cultivated through trust, being vulnerable, and prayer. The instructors established the parameters for constructing a tribe-like environment and working in collaboration; the students adhere to the blueprint and change transpires. Rebecca stated,

In our class, we talked about this is a family, and that is how we are going to make this a safe environment to learn. No questions are stupid. We are coming from different backgrounds, but we are going to treat each other as if we are family. We cultivate that family environment, and then they know they have somebody in their class that can help them and relate to those kinds of things.

Father Brown made a similar assertion about the importance of establishing a family environment from the onset. The development of relationships occurred through proximity by instituting classroom arrangements. Father Brown shared,

We have long vertical tables. And when they come in, they are assigned a table. They are also assigned people, and they do life with those people all semester. They pray with each other. They learn together. They do group projects together. They even eat together.

The community atmosphere fosters behavioral changes that can become infectious in the classroom. Peer influence is a significant factor in behavioral changes in the release time setting.

The positive behaviors of one or a few can facilitate change in others. Gibbs shared,

You see one, and you start seeing the changes in their life, and then it kind of ripples on out to the other students in the classroom, and they begin to be like iron sharpening iron, and they are helping to build each other up and encourage each other. And it's just a joy to watch that.

Elaine shared a similar perspective relative to how students influence one another positively.

Elaine stated, "I always tell them to lead by example. When one student is showing the love and the care and reaching out to others, it becomes infectious. They all start to show that loving, caring relationship." Elaine continued with the following example,

I had a student who was suicidal in fifth grade. The student had numerous behavioral issues. He did not know how to make friends. He bullied most people. The rest of the class saw this behavior, and instead of him influencing the other students in a negative way, I ended up seeing some of the stronger students who were already Christians come alongside him and started working with him. And they came alongside him, prayed with him, and we all prayed together over him. And from that day forward, we prayed that he would not be able to do any harm to himself.

Later in the quarter, the student shared with Elaine that he believed that he was "physically and spiritually" saved. Elaine's experience spoke to the influence of the release time community on

the emotional behavior of the students. Kramer shared a similar viewpoint. After providing an example of a student who finally disclosed the dysfunction experienced at home, Kramer stated, “Every quarter emotional health goes up both from the Word of God, but also just as a Christian. Just as a community of people that are supporting and that’s loving. I believe it’s the Christian community that does that.”

The connection to the community aspect of release time and the benefit on behaviors extends beyond the walls of the release time setting to the church community. Many of the students who attend release time are unchurched. Even for those who are church, many lack the ability to attend worship service consistently because they need parental assistance. Fortunately, release time is a segue, assisting students with becoming involved with a local church. Continued involvement outside of release time supports the furtherance of spiritual formation, and thus behavior transformation.

Kramer mentioned that part of the mission of CLC, outside of salvation and spiritual formation, was to ensure students are connected to a local church to continue their spiritual growth. Specifically, Kramer stated,

The culture has evolved, and CLC has as well. It used to be where a lot of the students were already church. Now we are seeing a trend where it’s half and half where they might say they’re church, but what that means is they just know of a church. They kind of know of a church, but they’re not super involved, or some of them just straight up don’t have one. And so, as far as helping prepare students for God’s call, our greatest win is, first of all, salvation can take place, obviously. But outside of that, it’s really to connect them to a community, a church.

The connection to the local church is intentional. Father Brown shared,

As far as getting plugged into church, we are very community-oriented organization. We try to have youth pastors come in on a regular basis. That is the best way to kind of get kids to go to church. And in doing that, we see families get more and more interested. They have to take their kids, and they see the change in their kid. And we see families as well come to know Jesus through and become active members of the church body.



The connection between CLC and the church community is also evident during times of tragedy. The demonstration of their learnings comes full circle when they see the churches participation during periods of misfortune. Gibbs shared a situation where a student was tragically injured in a vehicle accident. Gibbs stated the students requested to pray for their fellow student. Gibbs continued, “and then we had prayer vigils in our town at a church where everybody would gather together and pray from him and his family.”

The influence of release on behavioral changes was evident and articulated through the summative statements within the connection to community theme. The data collection method revealed the connection to community was a reoccurring theme for the majority of the participants and connection to Scripture was the theme reported by all participants. The emphasis on connections, whether to Scripture or community, encompassed the lived experienced related to the development of a biblical worldview and the benefits of release time on behaviors.

### **Overview – Focus Group**

After completing the leader interviews, the researcher conducted a focus group of high school graduates who were alumni of the release time program. Eight individuals, five males, and three females provided the researcher with insight pertaining to lived experiences associated with release time religious education as high school students. The focus group served as a means of triangulation, validating the transformative impact of release time students as perceived by the instructional leaders from the individual interviews. Additionally, the purpose of the focus group was to understand the influence of release time education and the lived experience of adults who attended public schools and participated in RTE. The two research questions which guided the focus group portion of the study were:

- RQ3 What are the perceived differences between students who attend release time and a designated place of worship compared to those who only attend the RT program?

- RQ4 What are the perceived benefits of release time by high school graduates who attended RT educational programs.

This study sought to disclose the lived experiences of adults who participated in release time education. The researcher identified commonalities shared between the participants to extrapolate relevant codes and develop applicable themes. Coding the focus group transcript, the researcher recognized codes analogous to the ones identified in the leader interviews.

### **Coding Approach**

The researcher used an inductive approach to identifying the presence of in-vivo codes. The researcher completed multiple reading passes of the transcriptions to finalize the codes that created the themes. On the first pass, the researcher reflected on the content and highlighted provocative quotes that appeared to validate release time education's influence on behaviors and development of a biblical worldview. On the second pass, the researcher color-coded similarities based on individual responses to the semi-structured questions. The researcher composed a chart that separated the codes by the individual participant. The researcher introduced the Dedoose software platform at the final stage of the coding process. The duration between the initial reading the code finalization was approximately two months. Taking breaks from the analysis, also termed "passive activity," provided the researcher with further insights into the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021).

### **Coding and the Supporting Examples**

The researcher used the Dedoose software that provided a color-coded chart to facilitate further the extrapolation of data relevant for thematic analysis. The thematic analysis generated the same thirteen codes to describe the phenomenon or lived experience-communicated by the participants. The code *biblical worldview* was employed when participants used statements such

as the “Bible is the basis for your worldview.” The code *change of environment* was used each time a participant discussed transformative processes experienced outside of the public-school environment. Examples of this code include statements such as “everyone in the environment” and the “flexibility that comes with this environment.”

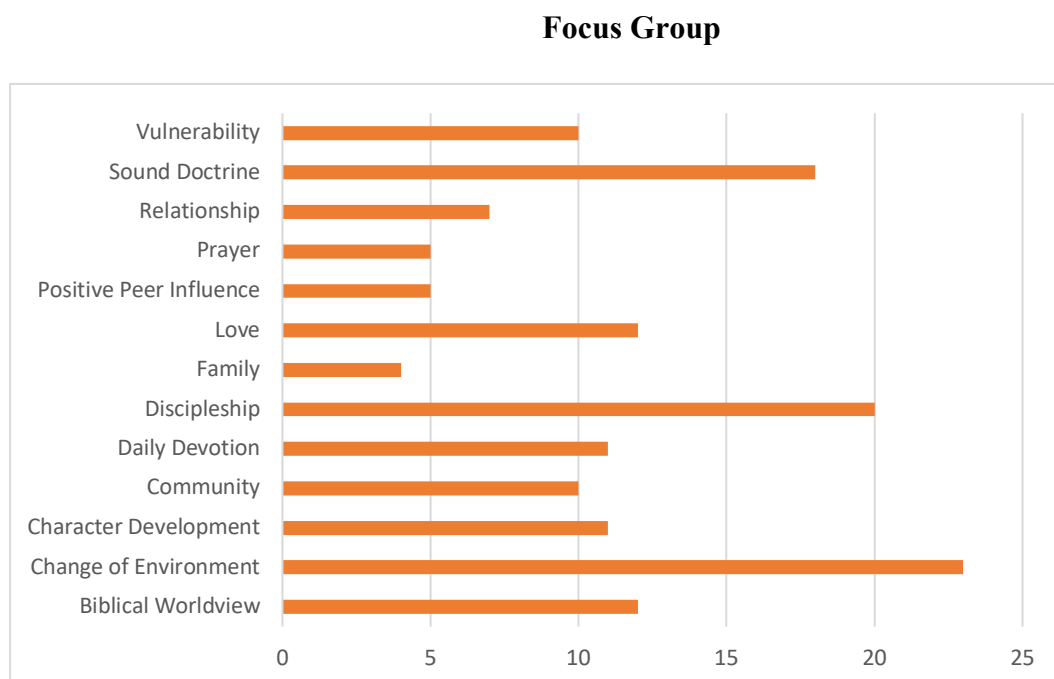
The code *character development* was used for statements related to either a perceived behavioral need or an expectation. Examples include statements such as “to give you confidence” and “I learned how to be comfortable with other people.” The code *community* was used when participants shared information connecting the relationship between release time to outside entities including, churches, public schools, and families. One participant stated, “working at a church, we have kids come here all the time because of CLC.” The code *daily devotion* was used when participants made statements about the significance of meeting daily, spending time in the Bible daily, and anytime an inference was made to the significance of meeting consistently. An example of this is “being able to learn through Jesus every day.”

The code *discipleship* implicitly identified statements related to spiritual growth and explicitly when salvation was experienced. An example of an implicit identifier is “I’m intended to live a life that exists for the benefit of others, for sharing the love of Christ.” The code *family* was used when participants disclosed the development dynamic of a family environment within the release time setting. One participant stated, “I knew if I was going through something hard, I just had a rough day at school. They were my safe haven.” The code *love* pertains to student exposure to the concept of God’s love, having a personal experience with love, and understanding the need to love others. An example of a student experience with love includes, “everyone is looking at him with the opportunity to love him” and “he was able to see the love of God through that.”

The code *positive peer influence* was used to identify observed changes induced by other students within the release time setting. One participant stated, “I saw a complete transformation in my own behaviors and then my peers.” The code *prayer* was used when prayer was practiced as well as when prayer was considered essential to a given situation. One of the participants described how the instructors laid the foundation for prayer, “the teacher has already prayed over names and interns have already prayed over names.” The code *relationship* was used to signify the importance of rapport between participant and student, student to student, and the student’s relationship with God. A descriptive of the significance of relationships, “I took CLC four times, and it changed the way I looked at relationships.”

The code *vulnerable* was used to indicate the existence of an emotional submission and the willingness to expose one’s heart and hurts. An example of vulnerability is identified in the statement, “you get just raw vulnerability.” The code *sound doctrine* was used to unveil the influence of the use of Scripture, whether in the formulation of a worldview, dealing with tragedy, or the consistency in which the Bible was the foundation for transformation. One participant stated, “CLC really made us go to the word first.” One participant described their personal experience as “the consistency of knowing every day I was going to hear the Word of God.” Sound doctrine, discipleship, and change of love were the coded most often. However, the codes of discipleship and love were profound in research question three. Research question three was answered by six of the eight participants. Overall sound doctrine, discipleship, and love were coded most often.

Table 5

*Synopsis of Focus Group Codes***RQ3 – Connection between discipleship and love**

The connection between discipleship and love is the theme the researcher identified responding to research question three. The presence of love, the need to be loved, and the responsibility for loving played an integral role in the relationship between students who attended release time and a designated place of worship compared to those who only attended the RT program. Presumably, one may believe the church individual who attends release time shows minimal changes compared to the student who only attends release time. One could surmise the church student has less to know; therefore, having less to grow. However, growing in Christ and growing in love is constant and immeasurable. The data gathered from the focus group demonstrated a strong tie between love and relationships. Participants revealed that the experience of love among RT students fostered a deeper understanding of the love of Christ,

hence discipleship took place. The RT experience removed some critical barriers that prohibited adolescents from seeing others as equals and allowed them to “see” the others differently. This different relationship, built on acceptance and love, was the catalyst for the relationship between love and discipleship among the two groups of students.

Change of environment is a causative factor for establishing love as an influential force.

Chosen C (codename for a focus group member) referred to CLC as a “real space”. The atmosphere of CLC sets the tone for the development of the students, whether church or unchurched. Chosen C further explained,

It diminishes all barriers and all dividing lines and puts everybody on an equal playing field. And I just I think that’s really cool because a lot of students, especially in high school, feel like you’re trying to fake it till you make. And everybody has these walls and this masquerade they’re trying to put on in order to be somebody. But those kinds of things are left at the door at CLC. I think so much change takes place because of the level playing field and in both of those camps, not just one or the other.

The establishment of an equal playing field allowed students protection from other’s judgement and condemnation due to differences. Chosen C also shared,

The kids who have grown up in church all their life and who appear to know it all have their faith put to the test. They have to decide, am I going to judge these people who don’t know as much as I do or much as you think that you do, or am I going to love them with the love of Christ and like really live out the Gospel? And then those people who have never really given Christianity or Jesus a second are really faced with a lot of these tough, hard questions. And they can’t put up these walls that they’ve mastered this insecurity, and I think it’s really a beautiful space because those two collide and a lot of kids, whether they did grow up in church and they think that they know it all and have it all together, they realize that, oh, shoot, I don’t. I don’t actually know the person of Jesus. I just know all of this information and don’t actually know Him.

Chosen CY expounded on the transformative power of love from the perspective of synergy.

Love was an actionable item addressed as a team. Chosen CY described the opportunity to love and the environment where love abounded as follows:

You could really recognize when a kid walked in who has never been loved before. I was walking into a room where everyone was looking at the person with the opportunity to

love. The kids who knew Jesus saw it as an opportunity to love. And the teacher had already prayed over the names. The interns had already prayed over names. They prepared the room. They are like, “we see you.” “And you are not just a name on a page. You are a person. And we want you to understand and know Jesus from that.” So that was cool because you could always see the kids who would break down and not really know how to act or even get emotional because they have never been loved like that.

Chosen N provided insight from the perspective of an individual who attended church and release time; however, the church was not a vehicle for growth, merely a place for him and his family to gather.

It wasn’t like one (church vs. church and RT) was stronger than the other at the end of the day, especially because we learned to love each other at the same time. We also try to build each other up in those times to make sure we all got everything we could out of the time when we were there...”for” the ones that knew or the ones that didn’t know anything. Like they (other participants) were saying that for the ones that didn’t feel loved or know what it really felt like to have a nonjudgmental love going in there, I think everybody really tried. We all tried our best to make sure that we all came out. Everyone just growing as much as we could.

Chosen N’s response revealed the objective was of greater importance than a perceived presence of “spiritual superiority” due to “church experience.” Chosen N’s important observation was growth is facilitated by the giving and sharing of love. Chosen D provided a different yet pertinent perspective of the question. Chosen D highlighted the significance of students connecting with a church versus simply attending RT. Chosen D stated,

I think that speaks hugely to the importance of the involvement of the local church in cooperation with release time education. The sad reality is that there are going to be students who come through CLC and release time education and, it ends in high school. They don’t connect anywhere, and they fall away. CLC can absolutely change lives on its own because it’s Jesus who does that through CLC. But it doesn’t take away that community that you experience there. What I would just like to say is, you know, as people are preparing to begin conversations about release time across the country, that it’s a cooperation, it’s not just release time. Education is not a church by itself. It comes alongside and there’s a cooperation with the local church.

Chosen B discussed a personal experience as compared with the experience of a sibling. Chosen B stated,

I started going to church because of CLC my first semester and joined a youth group. On the other hand, my sister took CLC, but she did not join a youth group. There's a very big difference in how much each of us have gotten out of it. And we were talking about this actually today when I was talking about this call. And she definitely thinks that she did experience good things at CLC. It helped her grow, but long term, there are things she has gone back to. I've definitely changed more and did more of a 180 because I had both CLC and church.

The lived experiences discussed by the focus group revealed release time stimulated change in students regardless of church affiliations. Love was the architect for constructing a conducive environment for effective discipleship.

#### **RQ4 – Connection to the Environment**

The benefits of release time, as explained by the focus group participants were both experienced and observed. Influences contribute to the lived experiences and beliefs of an individual. Entertainers and athletes are influencers in the lives of adolescents, creating within them a desire to emulate their idols. Similarly, because of the impact of RT on their lives, several alumni were inspired to become teachers within the release time or church setting. Their experience within the release time setting created a bridge between them and God, as well as between them and their purpose.

While not all students who participated in RT saw their purpose unfold, research demonstrated significant change in student's lives. The changes shared by participants were primarily related to their relationships with Jesus, His Word, and other believers. The data revealed a desire for understanding the Word of God, being bold in sharing the Word, and obtaining victory over issues plaguing adolescents. The RT platform was consistent in encouraging youth to express themselves and communicate with others. Each of these proclaimed life-changing experiences. The connection to the environment was a theme the researcher identified through the coding process. The participants stated how the physical



environment was causative to the benefits experienced while attending release time. The release time setting was different; therefore, the difference contributed to the benefit of maturing emotionally and spiritually.

Positive emotional and spiritual changes require an “incubator “as a controlled space for development. Students need a controlled environment, which encourages truth and vulnerability. Chosen T acknowledges the difference the release time setting made on the emotional disposition of the students,

I think one of the biggest differences between release time and a church setting is you’re liable to get more honesty. It’s very laid back, but it’s a serious environment. And it’s amazing because of the relatability of the teachers and the relatability of the student pastors that are allowed to come through. You get just raw vulnerability. I think the difference between release time and the safety in a church is the atmosphere is so laid back. And it creates this environment void of silos and cliques. Instead, we’re going to intentionally do our best to get to know one another.

The relational value to positive behavior change is significant. Within the confines of the environment described above, both the instructors and the peers become a reference for change. Intimacy between the students provided opportunities to share views, receive opinions, and respond to the truths within the Scripture. Chosen J shared,

I heard from every single student in my class, and there was room to share perspectives; there was room to share honest opinions and views and things like that as we all grew together. In the church environment, there is one way to receive what the Lord has given the youth pastor. However, within the classroom, “it’s hey, let’s all dig in together” in a two-way conversation or fifteen-way conversation where we’re really diving in together.

Release time as an incubator allowed the students to experience growth in various areas.

Character development was a code identified by the researcher. Within the code, various changes were identified, including improved self-confidence and self-worth. Chosen B shared a personal testimony of release time aiding in addressing depression, provided this advantage of release time,

I think that one of the biggest differences is the consistency in the accountability. Because when you're doing it every single day and every single day, we're opening God's word and doing journals and discussing it with one another, and we're able to be real with one another. And having somewhere every single day that if I had a question the night before, I could go talk to the instructor about it the next day. The consistency of knowing every day I was hearing the word of God made a huge difference for me.

The ability to consistently have hope revealed through the Scripture enhanced the probability of change in the reader's life. Personal accountability to reading the Scriptures aids in the probability of personally living out the Scripture. Chosen K revealed,

I was able to learn what it looked like for me to dig into Scripture myself and to come to conclusions on my own that built my faith so that I no longer relied on another person or my parents. And I was really, really thankful for that. And just teaching me what an individual relationship with Jesus looked like on a daily basis, not just on a weekly basis. It held me accountable to grow my faith in that way and just to learn what it looked like to minister to people outside of the faith. It gave me some boldness that I never had before.

Throughout the focus group, the participant's passion reflected a personal responsibility for individual and corporate spiritual success. Chosen CY referenced how along with another teammate, they accepted the responsibility of encouraging other players. Chosen CY shared this regarding the influence of CLC and being a bridge to the church,

Let me be an example for them and let me reach them for Jesus. And it's just a practical way for them to see Jesus and to see your walk with Christ as opposed to maybe sitting in front of a sermon and hearing maybe some parables and some stuff you might not understand.

Similarly, Chosen CY referenced an advantage between CLC and the church. Neither inferred release time as a substitute for church. However, all participants identified release time as a difference-maker in their lives personally. Chosen CY shared,

And to me, it was just that raw meeting with the real Jesus is what made CLC different from the church to an extent. Now, obviously, like we said earlier, there's a difference, but there were times where I felt like I had more of church at CLC than at church because of the real raw interaction.

The raw encounter with the “real Jesus” is a significant benefit. Revealed within the focus group discussion was an authentic appreciation for the growing environment provided by the release time entity. Positive changes were experienced within the release time setting that would not have occurred elsewhere. When the researcher asked, “how many of you had a biblical worldview prior to attending release time,” two said kind of, and all others said no. The raw encounter with Jesus provided the participants with a new direction and motivation for life.

Chosen B shared the following:

I barely knew anything about God, and I suffered really bad depression and really bad anxiety. You would never catch me speaking in front of people at all. CLC gave me a place where I learned how to be comfortable with other people, to make friends, to speak in front of people. My depression got so much better. My anxiety got so much better. Like my life did a complete 180 change. And now I love talking about Jesus with anybody I meet and even in front of groups, which is, like I said, something that never would have happened before.

Without release time, many of these changes may have never occurred. Without CLC providing the student with an environment to have a raw encounter with Jesus, the student’s condition may have worsened. Chosen B’s authentic response to the release time experience at CLC illustrates the behavioral benefits of RT and authenticates observed behaviors provided by the leader interviews.

### **Summary of Themes**

The researcher chose to preface the themes based on the connections observed during the study. The connection to Scripture permeated throughout the leader interviews as well as the focus group. The personal interaction with Scripture and the leader’s consistent use of “lens of Scripture” unquestionably contributed to the transformative process as well as to the development of a biblical worldview. Dissection of the connection to the community theme revealed “sub-communities” whereby release time benefits were unveiled. Uprooting students

from the public-school classroom and planting them in the “rich soil” of the release time setting environment initiated a spiritual and emotional change.

Connection, as a theme, continued in the focus group. The presentation and presence of love were instrumental in the development of those who attended release time and those who attended release time and church. Finally, the interviews substantiated the connection to environment. The participants’ emphasis on the positive environment of release time, even compared to the church, was unmistakable. The significant statements and themes are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6.

*Themes and significant statements.*

**Themes and Significant Statements**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Significant Statements</b>
<b>Connection to Scripture</b> <b>RQ1</b>	We talk about canonist with them. We talk about the reliability of scripture. We talk about its uniqueness and its continuity and its circulation. We give them a general overview. But then we also teach them about interacting with scripture personally.
	Drawing from different scriptures and just kind of putting that into the curriculum just to help them better be able to go through life with a different perspective of what is a worldview.
<b>Connection to Community</b> <b>RQ2</b>	We absolutely see a difference in the lives of our students in our classrooms, but then I also hear reports from teachers on the school campus. Teachers will say, I don’t know what happened, but he’s a different person since he attended CLC.
	We cultivate that family environment and then they know they have somebody in their class that can help them and relate to those kinds of things.
<b>Connection to Discipleship through Love</b> <b>RQ3</b>	You could really recognize when a kid walked in who has never been loved before. I was walking into a room where everyone was looking at the person with the opportunity to love.
	Like they (other participants) were saying that for ones that didn’t feel loved or know what it really felt like to have a nonjudgmental love going in there. I think everybody really tried. We all tried our best to make sure that we all came out. Everyone just growing as much as we could.

<b>Connection to Environment</b>  <b>RQ4</b>	And having somewhere every single day that if I had a question the night before, I can go talk to the instructor about it the next day. The consistency of knowing every day I was hearing the word of God made a huge difference for me.
	For me as an early Christian, CLC taught me how to study the word and how to be in a Christian community with other people outside the church.

### **Evaluation of the Research Design**

The research design was distinctive and exclusive due to the lack of literature available on the topic. As noted previously, recent research regarding release time education was limited to academic influence. Establishing precedence for using release time as an effective discipleship tool is unprecedented in the current literature. Christian leaders and even professors' lack of awareness further validates the unfamiliarity with Christian release time education. The final section of this chapter identifies the strengths and weaknesses of this study as designed.

#### **Research Design Strengths**

The strength of the research is validated by the raw interactions and feedback provided by the participants. The qualitative nature of the study captured the perceived benefits of the giver (interview), which were authenticated by the receiver (focus group). Implementing a research design focused on two parameters, behavior transformation, and biblical worldview development, complemented the data collection process. The connection between the participants added to the credibility of the data collected. For example, the assistant director, along with another current instructor, were referenced during the focus group. Finally, the opportunity to observe and hear the passion associated with information communicated further demonstrated the credibility of the impact of release time education.

#### **Research Design Weaknesses**

The weakness of the research relates to the sample size and the inability to conduct a pilot study. From the onset of the development of the study, the researcher desired to conduct

interviews with at least fifteen participants. Initially, the site provided twelve participants; however, the lack of tenure prevented two from participating, and one was no longer available. Although the preferred number of participants was not achieved, the study reached saturation, the point where no new data was obtained (Peoples, 2021). Identifying specific behaviors to evaluate was another weakness of the study. For example, within a focus group, I would not ask an individual whether their release time experience impacted their temptation for drugs, alcohol, fornication, or pornography. However, a questionnaire sent by the executive director to alumni of CLC could survey specific behaviors impacted without the fear of judgment or condemnation.

## **CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSIONS**

### **Overview**

Currently, research related to release time is limited to the impact on academics; however, research was needed to determine the degree of influence of RT on behaviors and the construct of a biblical worldview. This research provides evidence for the utilization of release time beyond the scope of academics. Using interviews and a focus group, the researcher addressed four research questions to determine whether release time education was a stimulus for behavioral transformation and the construct of a biblical worldview. In this chapter, the researcher provides the following: 1) Research Conclusions, 2) Implications and Applications, 3) Summary of the Findings, 4) Research Limitations, and 5) Future Research. This chapter will provide the reader with a connective assembly of the research.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of instructional leaders and high school graduates in relation to behavioral transformation and the development of a biblical worldview within a release time (RT) learning center in northern Georgia.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will be addressed during the progression of this phenomenological qualitative study:

**RQ1** What are the perceived benefits of release time related to biblical worldview as observed by leaders who actively participate in RT Bible-based instruction?

**RQ2** What are the perceived benefits of release time on behaviors as observed by leaders who actively participate in RT Bible-based instruction?

**RQ3** What are the perceived differences between students who attend release time and a designated place of worship compared to those who only attend the RT program?

**RQ4** What are the perceived benefits of release time to high school graduates who attended RT educational programs.

### **Research Conclusions, Implications and Applications**

The researcher was led to gain an understanding of release time education and determine whether it influenced adolescent behavior and aided in the development of a biblical worldview. Release time was a prevalent tool for Christian education and development in the early 1900s before *Everson v Board of Education* in 1947. Before legal hurdles against RT in the 1940s, two million students were enrolled in 2,200 communities (Bindewald, 2015) compared to only 250,000 in 1000 programs in 2019 (Brevik). Preceding this research, studies regarding release time focused on the academic progress or regress associated with the release time. Hodge concluded, “This line of reasoning helps explain research that suggests spirituality can be a particularly important factor in academic achievement among youth in urban, low-income neighborhoods” (2012, p. 9). However, the challenges which were not addressed by this lone study pertained to the development of a biblical worldview and behavioral change,

The banishment of biblical illiteracy was an objective of release time from its introduction (Hewlett, 1942). According to Barna (2018), the Christian church appears to have become less theologically literate. Generation Z adolescents claim atheism more than the general population (2017). Can release time return to the days when millions of young people were involved with its programs and address the issues of biblical illiteracy? Can release time reclaim the lost by establishing and developing a biblical worldview? Although this research is merely an inkling of what is possible, the data provided in support of release time for addressing the aforesaid is unquestionable. The study contributed to the gap in research relating to the impact of release time on behaviors and the development of a biblical worldview. Data from the participants’ lived experiences revealed the influence of RT on adolescents of today.



## **Research Conclusions**

### ***First Theological Research Conclusion***

This researcher's first theological conclusion relates to the literature review supporting the need for a biblical education. According to Ephesians 3:19, carnality causes the mind to focus on earthly things; however, when the Word of God is learned and applied, the mind focuses on the spiritual things (Col 3:2). Whether in the Old or New Testament, leaders were appointed to identify the message, transmit information, and provide direction (Mitchell, 2010). Cultivating a faith in God allows an individual to develop a relationship. According to Byars (2006), "It is not possible to form a biblical faith without serious acquaintance with the Bible itself" (p. 195).

The researcher concluded by answering RQ 1 and RQ 2 that the use of Scripture in a release time setting transformed student behaviors and supported the development of a biblical worldview among the participants, as observed by the instructional leaders. The leader's observations were reflected in the comments of the participants. All of the participants referenced the importance of the Bible daily as a catalyst for change in adolescents. Additionally, the importance of a "change of venue," physically and mentally, transferring the students to a different environment was important in making the adolescents feel safe and protected. The changed environment was an instrumental component to the student's acceptance of the Bible and the application of biblical teachings in the student's lives.

### ***Second Theological Research Conclusion***

This researcher's second theological conclusion relates to the focus group and RQ3 and RQ4. Paul's writing to Timothy shows that training in godliness is necessary for life (1 Tim 4:7-

8). Paul deposited careful thought, endless patience, and genuine Christian love into the life of Timothy (Sanders, 2007).

In the responses in support of RQ3, the transference, practice, and acceptance of love, whether by students who attended church and release or those who attended release time only, contributed to discipleship. The role of love as a stimulus in the release time environment was virtually unanimous among the focus group participants. The responses to questions in support of RQ 4 affirmed the release time environment served as an incubator for spiritual growth and overall maturation. The principal evidence for the benefits of release time is apparent by the testimony of the personal changes experienced by each participant.

### ***First Theoretical Research Conclusion***

The researcher selected servant and transformational leadership as guides for the study. Servant leadership focuses on building people instead of using people to cultivate a lasting, functional environment (Greenleaf, 1977). According to Howell (2003), “Biblical leadership is taking the initiative to influence people to grow in holiness and to passionately promote the extension of God’s Kingdom in the world” (p. 3). The feedback provided by the leaders at CLC unveiled the prominence of servant leadership in the release time setting. Furthermore, the adherence to their mission statement, “We exist to prepare students for God’s call on their lives” is a reflection of their commitment to servant leadership.

### ***Second Theoretical Research Conclusion***

According to Miller (2007), “the result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (p. 183). Transformational leadership recognizes the follower plays an essential role in the future. The commitment to serve the Kingdom by several focus group

participants is a testament to the presence of transformational leadership. In addition, several of the leaders attended the CLC release time program as students. The conversion of the student to leader is a recognizable behavioral transformation and a testament to the discipleship that occurs at CLC.

### ***Third Theoretical Conclusion***

Specific to adolescents and religion, reference group theory suggests adolescents will reference foundational religious principles to formulate individual approaches to influence behaviors (Haglund, 2009). Within the framework, students who participate in release time programs would reference their association with instruction and peer-group socialization when considering decisions contradictory to the association. Positive peer influence was a code identified during the leader interviews as well as the focus group. An example of this behavior was explained during the focus group. Chosen CY shared the result of having conversations with another athlete and a note received,

As I got in the car and read the note, he said because of these conversations, I went, and I joined CLC. And from the things that I learned in CLC, me and my whole family started going to church. And my whole family has been baptized. And we all surrendered our life to the Lord because of this one class.

The reference to CLC and release time by Chosen CY impacted the lives of an entire family. One student shared the influence, and the influence developed into a spiritual contagion, changing the lives of many.

### **Research Implications**

The research results suggest a relationship between release time education, transforming behaviors, and the development of a biblical worldview. Under the heading Significance of the Study, the researcher stated, “In 1941, it was determined that release time for religious education was the most effective method for reaching the most significant number of youth” (Howlett,

1942). Under the heading, Summary of the Design, the researcher concluded, “obtaining observational data provided by RT leadership may disclose the feasibility of release time as a ministry model for discipleship and the development of a biblical worldview.”

***RQ1: Implication for Release Time***

The leader interviews revealed the definitive impact release time education had developing a biblical worldview. Providing the students with daily Scripture references, giving them a biblical prescription for doing life, and providing them with a safe learning environment enhanced their relationship with God. The focus group participants validated the value of Scripture and its application in their lives. This finding implies that religious release time education should be considered a viable tool for addressing the biblical illiteracy uncovered that plagues the Christian church (Barna, 2017).

***RQ2: Implication for Release Time***

The dynamics of the Christian community would benefit from a biblical education system designed to provide adolescents with Bible-based moral teachings to combat an immoral society. Church attendance has been shown to deter sexual activity (Miller et al., 1997) and positively affect personal prayer, Bible study and the worldview score (Brickhill, 2010). Church attendance is usually relegated to once or twice per week. In contrast, at CLC, students were exposed to the Scripture daily, five days a week for a duration of 30 minutes to an hour and a half. The leader interviews, as well as the focus group, revealed positive behavior changes. Whether a student was considering suicide or grieved the loss of family from suicide, release time played a major role in the behaviors that followed. The findings of the research imply release time has a considerable impact on student behaviors. Whether the students embraced the power of

accepting love, conquering depression, developing a feeling of self-worth, or overcoming suicidal ideation, release time manifested these beneficial changes.

***RQ3: Implication for Release Time***

The subtle differences revealed during the focus group related to connecting to the local church. Two participants disclosed the relevance of attending release time as well as being connected to a local church. A significant difference based on personal experience with a sibling Chosen B stated, “But I’ve definitely changed a lot more and done more of a 180 because I had both CLC and church.” Chosen D also reflected on the importance of connecting to a community church. The other participants expounded on the difference CLC made through providing a loving and positive learning environment and how the environment exposes similarities more so than differences. The research implies students who attend church and release time may benefit more because of the continuance of community experienced beyond one semester of release time.

***RQ 4: Implication for Release Time***

Understanding the existence of a purpose for a life beyond self was exemplified throughout the focus group discussion. Chosen T revealed how dealing with cerebral palsy was once a source of his anger and impacted personal relationships. However, after taking CLC, Chosen T stated, “it changed the way I handled and coped with my anger and insecurities.” Chosen B “barely knew anything about God,” but now interns as an instructor for CLC. Chosen D did not grow up in the church and never owned a Bible, but now attends Bible college and serves in the student ministry at the community church. The research implies, by influencing behaviors and aiding in the construct of a biblical worldview, release time provides students with

a Bible-based map for moral living. The direction is not solely to serve in ministry but in whatever discipline that glorifies God.

### **Research Applications**

“Phenomenology, step by step, attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected, everyday experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41). The researcher’s desire is to remove any presuppositions undergirded by personal beliefs to ensure the authenticity of the data is maintained. Removing prejudgments and or prejudices allows the research to determine relevant applications from the research.

### ***Application for Christian Leaders***

Release time is a discipleship gem that continues to be undervalued. A lack of research on RT clouds the reasons the platform is not widely used. The researcher believes an unawareness of RT by Christian leadership is the primary obstacle to the utilization and growth of release time religious education. Indifference to the public school system is another obstacle for church involvement with schools. According to Nicole Baker-Fulgham, president of The Expectations Project, “many of our churches see helping our schools as a parental responsibility rather than a spiritual responsibility” (as cited in Barna, 2014). In context, Baker-Fulgham, made the statement about academics. However, the researcher believes the church also refrains from the school system because of the stigma associated with the separation of Church and State.

### ***Application for Christian Universities***

Implementation of a discipleship strategy goes beyond the church, general ministry, and missions. The Mormon community realized the public-school system provides an opportunity for

discipleship in addition to general membership. There are approximately 15.4 million students in the public school system (NCES, 2020). A roadblock to accessing this mission field is ignorance of the law. Since the revocation of school-sponsored prayer over 55 years ago, the fight continues over religion in public schools (Lupu, et.al, 2019). Consequently, some Christian universities may be unaware of the need to prepare leaders to plant both release time programs and churches. Education of future leaders on the constitutionality of release time and the value it provides needs to occur at the earliest stages of education and leadership. Students and professors at Christian universities and colleges need to provide leadership in areas beyond the traditional church. It would be advantageous for leaders and educators who are being called and cultivated to provide spiritual insight to receive training about release time.

### ***Applications for Christian-led Corporations***

Hobby Lobby and Chick-fil-A are large corporations led by devout Christian leaders. Whether the leaders are fully aware of the opportunity release time plays in the spiritual development of students is unknown by the researcher. However, the opportunity exists for Christian universities to partner with these large corporations to support staffing, resource acquisition, and facilities management expenditures of release time organizations. Release time entities can become the “new charter school.” “Between 2004 and 2015, the percentage of all public schools that were charter schools increased from 4 percent to 7 percent, while the total number of charter schools in the United States increased from 3,400 to 6,750” (Goodridge, 2019, p. 276). The charter school system developed the ability to create an educational environment reflective of the founders and autonomy not available to traditional schools (Goodridge, 2019). Release time provides an opportunity to make a spiritual, educational environment reflective of the Scripture and autonomous to the restrictions of the public school system. Christian-led corporations can provide the resources necessary to support the creation and sustainment of

release time programs nationwide. Similar to charter school systems, release time institutions can provide financial employment within the community and spiritual empowerment within the educational system.

### **Summary of the Research Findings**

#### **RQ1 Research Findings**

Each leader believed RT provided students with an enhanced Bible-based worldview; however, the findings were more pronounced in high school students. The utilization of a structured curriculum may have contributed to the observed benefits. When asked the question, ‘What value does release time add to the development of a biblical worldview?’, Dwight referenced the Comparative Religions course taught at the high school level. Specifically, Dwight stated, “Everything needs to be from the strength of the Bible.” Dwight further explained,

And a lot of them come in and they don't know. Their worldview is just what they see on TV or what they've been told. Social media effects their worldview but coming in and actually getting that Bible and learning, God says this about abortion, God says this about dating, God says this about how I need to interact with my mom and dad and even, we need to be equally yoked. I mean, God tells me those things, so I shouldn't base my opinion on what everyone else says. I need to base my opinion on what is God's word say.

Providing students with a Bible-based moral compass for decision-making is a benefit from the leader’s perspective. Additionally, leaders perceived RT as a tool for providing students with a foundational understanding of the Bible in comparison to other religions. Rebecca referenced how the course Comparative Religions and Current Issues addresses questions “Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose? Who is God? And can I have a relationship with him?”, Rebecca furthered the relevance of these courses stating, “We pose those questions in those



classes and talk about it in Comparative Religions. We talk about how each major world faith answers those questions.”

## **RQ2 Research Findings**

While the research did not demonstrate a clear picture of specific risky behaviors transformed in a release time environment, precursors to such personal change, attitudinal and character transformation, were evident in each participant’s interview. The data revealed that RT influences attitude and character, and in some cases behavioral changes were observed by the leaders and experienced by the participants of the focus group.

Attitudinal and behavioral transformation are interrelated and dependent on established values. According to Swartz (1996, as cited in Blankenship 2015), values are “desirable, transituational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in people’s lives” (p. 1739). Additionally, values reinforce the ambition of an individual, and the adherence to these standards influence future actions (Bernard, et. al, 2003). Religious identity and belonging, whether as an individual or within a group, has been considered as a factor for understanding the role of religious values (Ives & Kidwell, 2019). Data revealed the daily interjection of Bible-based values within a release time environment influence attitudinal transformation to the point that signs of behavioral transformation appeared to have begun in some students.

Attitudinal transformation, which is a considered a precursor to behavioral transformation was prominent in the research. Leaders observed relevant character changes in the disposition of the students. Character development and attitudinal transformation were cultivated by the establishment of Bible-based learning and the establishment of a tribal learning environment. The leaders instituted guidelines to ensure expectations were comprehended.

Attitudinal transformation which leads to behavioral transformation was established by understanding the value of accepting personal accountability. Rebecca shared,

And I feel like those two things that I'm holding to a high standard, talking through that responsibility and respect all the way through, kind of driving back to that and then really trying to get into that kind of mentality. We take responsibility. We do things well. And I feel like that kind of an overarching kind of conversation then trickles down into behavior transformation.

The importance of accountability in relation to transformation resonated with other leaders as well. Dwight believed accountability was essential to building relationships, which eventually lead to transformation. Dwight shared,

I think the biggest thing is accountability. When they see that there's kids that walk the walk, if they gain that accountability with them, if they can do it, then I can do it and they'll hold me accountable.

Accountability was exemplified by application. Accountability by the students was demonstrated in the suicidal scenario. Elaine shared the student's reaction after the suicidal student stated he no longer wanted to live:

And they came alongside him, prayed with him, and we all prayed together over him. And from that day forward we prayed that he would not be able to do any harm to himself, that he would not be able to.

Accountability is an example of attitudinal transformation revealed in the research. Students were encouraged to be accountable, and their accountability was demonstrated through their behaviors.

Attitudinal transformation resulted from the student's willingness to be vulnerable in a communal environment. Mark Cuban revealed how the vulnerability of one student impacted the learning environment. Mark discussed a situation involving the death of a relative of one of the students. Mark shared,

And one morning, John (pseudonym) asked to pray, and he raised his hand. He started praying and he started praying about his cousin, who apparently had died the night

before. And he just broke down in the middle of his prayer and was overwhelmed. And some of his classmates, like, came over, put their hands on him. And it was such a bold move. And then the next day, another student prayed about something pretty deep and significant goings on in his life, too. And all of a sudden, you're just seeing these students' kind of pushing each other to be more vulnerable and open and honest, their being able to care for each other and take that responsibility.

Gibbs provided a similar finding regarding the attitude of vulnerability. Gibbs spoke of how students transition from being guarded to being open. Gibbs shared,

And some of them come in, you know, very quiet and unsure of themselves in the classroom setting. But then once they kind of see that it's a safe space and it's where you say what you want to say without judgment, they just begin to really open up. And when they do it, it allows some of those other students, their peers, to feel okay about opening up about things too and we do prayer request and we do all kinds of things, things that are very personal to them.

Vulnerability allowed the students to express their true self. The ability to express oneself was due to the change of environment. The instructors provided the students with a “safe place,” free of judgment and condemnation. A vulnerable attitude plays an essential role in the transformation process. The mindset of a student changed, before the behavior of the student changed. The research revealed the presence of both attitudinal and behavior transformations.

The researcher sought to investigate the lived experiences of leaders and past RT students to examine whether behaviors were altered. Disclosure of specific or risky behaviors, i.e., alcohol and drug use, sexual activity, bullying, etc., was not provided by the participants. The specificity of distinct behaviors not being revealed may have been due to the ambiguity of the questioning. For example, when answering the question, “How does release time contribute to the behavioral development of adolescents?”, all the participants provided a response whereby they perceived a change in behavior. However, all did not specify a specific behavior.

One example, when questioning Elaine about behavior transformation, Elaine responded, “And so just teaching those kinds of concepts to them to me, it totally changes sometimes their

behavior by the time they leave the course, not for all of them.” Another example of a reference to perceived behavioral change was shared by Opie. Opie discussed how a student wanted to know if Opie had noticed a change in him. Opie stated, “But the fact that he's trying to make a difference, it led several others to start making a difference, making a change”. Although a specific behavior was not mentioned, the presence of behavioral transformation was perceived. Mark Cuban addressed how behavior change is expected by CLC as well as by the schools attended by the students. Mark stated,

And we've kind of built a reputation of being able to not only be a place where the students are excited about coming because they have fun and they enjoy the class, but also a place where they're going to learn how to conduct themselves as young men and women out in the rest of the world as well, so the public schools are actually noticing the difference for sure.

The leaders perceived behavior transformation; however, they did not specify or clarify the behavioral change observed. The absence of the disclosure of definitive behavior change does not invalidate the perception of behavioral changes observed by the leaders. Mark's reference to the school's endorsement of CLC adds to the validity for the attitudinal and/or behavioral influence of release time on students.

Furthermore, although not every participant disclosed distinctive changes in behaviors, all participants in the interviews as well the focus group believed CLC contributed to behavioral transformation. Elaine referenced a suicidal student known for bullying, who eventually accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. Gibbs referenced a student who believed CLC, “sparked her desire to want to be more actively involved in church again.” When referencing behavioral changes, Chosen CY recalled a student whose appearance scared him because the student dressed in all black, wore earrings and cussed a lot. Eventually Chosen CY noticed that a changed occurred in the student. In the high school classroom setting they shared together, the student became kind

and interacted with other students. Chosen CY later questioned the student and asked what caused him to change. Chosen CY stated, “And he gave all that credit to the Lord and CLC.” A distinctive change in the behavior of the student was credited to CLC.

A perceived benefit of release time on behaviors relates to helping students address emotional issues. Students who experienced depression and even suicide changed because of their involvement with release time. Another perceived benefit on behaviors pertains to RT fostering healthy relationships with others. The daily interactions with peers, as well as a consistent devotional time aided in the cultivation of the relationships. Pertaining to the influence of peers, Rebecca stated “So I would think peer interaction, I mean, it's, I would almost use the word essential to student behavior transformation. And we've seen some really cool evidence of that.”

### **RQ3 Research Findings**

Several of the focus group participants addressed this question from the perception of love shared and received equally. Two relevant finding expressed by the focus group pertained to the significance of a constant connection between RT and church attendance. Students who participated in RT and attended a place of worship were more likely to be involved in church ministry and experience continual spiritual growth. Chosen D shared,

We were all changed by CLC, but that change in CLC led us to involvement in the local church or vice versa. And that's why we're still the changed people that we are today because we're still plugged in the local church. I think that's because the growth didn't stop, the growth was continued.

Chosen B expressed a similar perspective sharing a personal experience. Chosen B stated,

I started going to church because of CLC my first semester and joined a youth group. On the other hand, my sister took CLC, but she did not join a youth group. There's a very big difference in how much each of us have gotten out of it. And we were talking about this actually today when I was talking about this call. And she definitely thinks that she did experience good things at CLC. It helped her grow, but long term, there are things she

has gone back to. I've definitely changed more and did more of a 180 because I had both CLC and church.

The perceived differences as provided by the focus group pertained to the likelihood of RT students who also attended church were more likely to be involved in church and further their spiritual growth.

#### **RQ4 Research Findings**

The focus group participant's personal reflections revealed multiple benefits of attending RT. Attitudinal as well as behavioral transformations were identified within their responses. Additionally, participants disclosed the significance of peer and instructor relationships, as well the influence of being involved in a communal environment. Chosen T provided insight relative to the attitudinal transformations whereby individuals are more vulnerable. Chosen T shared, "It's amazing because of the relatability of the teachers and the relatability of the student pastors that are allowed to come through. Like you get just raw vulnerability." Chosen B referenced how RT encouraged accountability, "I think that one of the biggest differences is the consistency in the accountability, because you're doing it every single day and it's like time set apart that you leave school and do it."

Release time also provided the students with an "emotional sanctuary" in times of trials and tragedy. Chosen D discussed a situation when two high school students committed suicide in one month. Chosen D reflected on how the instructors invited several youth pastors to provide grief counseling to the students. Release time provided students with a means for addressing difficult situations. Additionally, RT provided students with a Bible-based course of action for dealing with conflict. Chosen K summed it up, "And so CLC, like what Katherine and Bobby (pseudonyms) were talking about, made us go to the word first. So, I know it's not up to our opinions, but it's based on the truth that isn't arguable."

Attitudinal and behavioral changes were also experienced by the participants of the focus group. Chosen B stated, “And CLC gave me a place where I learned how to be comfortable with other people, to make friends, to speak in front of people. My depression got so much better. My anxiety got so much better.” Chosen C shared from the perspective of observing change. Chosen C stated, “I had friends that were Muslims who took that class, and it was incredible to see them change. Even then, I would not say all of them became Christians. I saw them change their behaviors, like the way they just treated people.” Chosen T addressed how CLC helped to address personal struggles relating to bitterness, anger, and trust issues. Chosen T stated, “And then I took CLC four times, and it changed the way I looked at relationships. Kind of like John (pseudonym) was saying. It changed the way I looked at my family dynamic, like, hey, this isn't normal or healthy. And it changed the way that I kind of handled and coped with my anger and insecurities. So just like everybody here, I can say that program changed my life.”

As stated by Chosen T, RT changed the lives of those who participated in release time. Changing a life for the better is a significant benefit of release time. Rebecca summarizes the benefits of RT stating, “It's people, so I don't know that answer to the question, but I think it's a major role that it plays because we offer a safe place to ask questions, to run back to scripture, to point them to Jesus, to give them hope.”

### **Research Limitations**

The limitations of the research are numerous; however, the limitations provide opportunities for future researchers. The initial limitation of the study relates to the lack of research associated with the topic of Christian release time education. As mentioned previously, research in adolescent behavioral transformation has been limited to the influence of religiosity (church attendance). Research pertaining to release time has also been confined to its association

with academics. Second, the sample size and elimination of the pilot study was a limitation. The researcher initiated the study with the projection of 12 participants; however, two did not meet the protocol requirements and another was unable to participate for reasons unknown to the researcher. Third, the location of the study site was limited to Georgia, “Bible-Belt” state, which may limit the generalizability to other parts of the country. Fourth, the data in the interviews, as well as the focus group is self-reported. Self-reported data is a limitation for the following reasons:

(1) selective memory [remembering or not remembering experiences or events that occurred at some point in the past]; (2) telescoping [recalling events that occurred at one time as if they occurred at another time]; (3) attribution [the act of attributing positive events and outcomes to one’s own agency but attributing negative events and outcomes to external forces]; and, (4) exaggeration [the act of representing outcomes or embellishing events as more significant than is actually suggested from other data] (Brutus, et.al, 2013).

Fifth, the researcher was not concerned with the participants’ demographics, only whether they met the research entry criteria. Therefore, the questions of time or tenure are limited. For example, the exact tenure of each leader is unknown. Consequently, the question of tenure and the relationship to effectiveness cannot be addressed. Sixth, the study was limited to release time; therefore, the data cannot be generalizable to Christian public schools. Seventh, the study is limited to one release time program; hence, the data cannot be generalizable to other release time programs which use different curriculum, whose demographics are different, and duration of operations (number of instructional days) may differ.

### **Further Research**

Based on the limitations above, the researcher believes numerous research opportunities exist to further the potential value of release time religious education. Comparative research studies between release time education centers and other religious, educational platforms may



provide further insight into the usefulness of release time education. For example, a focus group comparing the lived experiences of graduates from Christian high schools with those of release time centers may further an appreciation for release time education. Comparative studies between release time centers may reveal differences relating to the curriculum.

A mixed-methods research study using a questionnaire to answer specific behavior changes or changes in perception may further the advancement of release time. The researcher did not ask specific questions about sex, drugs, alcohol use, etc.; however, a questionnaire maintaining the participant's privacy could disclose valuable information relative to the behaviors mentioned earlier. The demographic of the leaders, as well as the focus group participants, was 100% Caucasian. CLC serves a community where over 75% of the population is Caucasian. Comparatively, the release time study by Hodge and Cuddeback (2010) was conducted in a predominantly Latino (82%), low-income socioeconomic background (Hodge & Cuddeback, 2010). The Hodge and Cuddeback study was limited to fourth-grade participants. By comparison, this researcher's study included student observations by 5<sup>th</sup> grade through high school, leaders and a focus group of participants who experienced release time in high school.

Future research on the topic of release time education is unlimited. Although not mentioned in the limitations, release time education is available to all religions. A focus group comparing Christian release time to Mormon seminary graduates could reveal a significant outcome. Mormon seminary participants are inundated with Mormon doctrines and practices, whereas Christian release time focuses solely on biblical principles. Research could reveal significant behavioral changes along with a difference in worldviews. The purpose statements between the Mormon seminary and CLC are different; consequently, the hypothesis could be made that the outcomes differ. For example, the purpose of the Mormon seminary is "to help

students understand and rely upon the teachings and Atonement of Jesus Christ, qualify for the blessings of the temple, and prepare themselves, their families, and others for eternal life with their Father in Heaven” (2012, p. x). The mission statement for CLC is “to prepare students for God’s call on their lives” (WCCLC). Differences in purpose usually impact outcomes.

### **Summary**

The research revealed the importance of connections. Connectivity was a theme unveiled in both the interviews and the focus group. Paramount to behavioral transformation and the construct of a biblical worldview was the connection to the Scripture. All participants in the interviews, and the focus group, reported sound doctrine as foundational to the development of a biblical worldview. The consistent daily exposure to biblical principles perpetuated the construct of a biblical worldview. The systematic methodology for instruction correlated to the student’s ability to develop a biblical worldview. Every instructor validated the value of Scripture as the foundation for all teachings. Scripture was the lens needed to ensure students encountered life situations from God’s perspective.

The theme of connection continued when addressing the second research question. The researcher identified the theme of connection to community. First, the connection to community was expounded upon based on the transport of the students to a “safe place.” Release time education removes the student from the stressors experienced in the usual public-school setting and places them in a “safe place.” Second, the theme of connection of community was explained based on the communal interactions facilitated by the instructors. The creation of a loving, respectful, and non-judgmental environment was a platform for developing behavioral changes. Finally, the theme of connection to community progressed to the external connections with the church, furthering spiritual formation, and thus behavior transformation.

The themes of sound doctrine and connection to community were developed by analyzing and reviewing the participants' responses to the interview questions (see Appendix E). For several of the participants, sound doctrine was disclosed from the onset. When the researcher asked the question, "What are the objectives of release time and how are those objectives tracked," Elaine responded, "We want them to be able to show a life that reflects the character of God...understand core doctrine of the Christian faith...and how to use the Bible." Mark responded, "to deepen their knowledge of Scripture, to deepen their relationship with God and to deepen their relationship with one another." The participants recognized, regardless of grade level, establishing the infallibility of Scripture was essential to developing of a biblical worldview.

Scripture was the launching pad for the mental and spiritual renovations occurring within the classroom. The impetus for all changes was the connection to Scripture. When the researcher asked the question, what role does release time play during times of tragedy, the participants provided passionate responses of how leading the students to Scripture provided them with hope even in tragedy. Rebecca shared, "It's beautiful to be able to give them hope through the Word at their darkest time." Participants recognized the value of supporting the needs of the students with Scripture. They revealed how important it was for the students to know Scripture, but even more important to connect with Scripture. Due to the passion and dedication of the instructors, strategic objectives, and the curriculum, especially at the high school level, it was inevitable for students who participated in release time to develop a biblical worldview.

The theme of connection to community revealed behavioral transformation was connected by relationships. Instructor to student and student to student relationships created an environment fostered by vulnerability and trust. Students were willing to share their hurts, and

through prayer and the study of Scripture, many received healing. Elaine revealed a situation involving a student with suicidal ideation and how the students in the classroom came alongside their fellow student and prayed. Elaine said the student would eventually confess Jesus as his Savior. Father Brown validated this level of community when a student's parent committed suicide. Father Brown shared how the students came alongside the hurting student and prayed. Father Brown stated, "I think this is probably the best place students can come to understand tragedy because you put the lens of the Gospel on." Prayer, compassion, trust, and a willingness to be vulnerable are obsolete in the public-school setting. However, these behaviors are present and promoted in the release time setting, creating a pathway for emotional and spiritual growth in the participant's lives.

The two themes centered around connections explained the essence of the phenomenon. The participant revealed Scripture was essential to the development of a biblical worldview. Also, the use and principles of the Scripture served as the blueprint for facilitating positive behavioral transformation. The mission statement for CLC is "We exist to prepare students for God's call on their lives." The participants committed this statement to memory, and it manifested in their desire to use the Scripture to prepare the students for God's call on their lives.

The connection to the mission statement and application is evident in the lives of the alumnus who participated in the focus group. Chosen D had never owned or opened a Bible; however, Chosen D is now attending Bible college and leading a student ministry at a local church. Chosen CY is also attending Bible college leading a student ministry at a local church. Chosen B currently serves as an intern at CLC with a desire to spiritually enrich the lives of public school students. Chosen J is a youth pastor who also served as an instructor at CLC. The impact of release time, especially through CLC, is undeniable.

The primary purpose of this research was to investigate the role of release time education behavioral transformation and the development of a biblical worldview in adolescents. The secondary objective was to fill a gap in the research of release time education. Nine release time instructors from a release time site in Georgia participated in the study to provide valuable insight relative to the study's outcomes. The focus group of eight high school graduates, who were alumni of CLC, supplied relevant information validating the influence of release time education in behaviors and the development of a biblical worldview. Both data collection methods identified that the connection to sound doctrine was essential in adolescent's personal and spiritual development. A transition from biblical illiteracy to the development of biblical worldview through release time was established. Although the generalizability cannot be connected to all release times, the influence on biblical literacy is evident at CLC. The researcher is reminded of Chosen D, who had never owned or own picked up a Bible but currently attends Bible college and serves in the student ministry at the local church.

As a researcher, I wonder how my life could have been changed had I had an opportunity to participate in a release time program. Like Chosen D, I was not raised in the church. I did not attend church regularly until the age of 26 and was baptized at 27. I was licensed as a minister at the age of 34 and planted a church at 39. However, from the ages of 16 to 26, I made decisions that did not align with a biblical worldview. I was one of the biblical illiterates, and it manifested in my behaviors. Would I have made different decisions in college if I had access to the biblical knowledge provided by a release time education? Would I have accepted my call into the ministry instead of fighting it for years? Would I be further along in the pastorate? The verdict on my deliberation will never be known. Unfortunately, I am not alone! Gibbs shared,

I would have loved to have been able to have this type of teaching in my school when I was younger. You know, I don't want to get off on my personal issues, but I was raised in

a Christian home. I thought that I was saved at the age of nine but didn't really get saved until I was 20. I had a hidden knowledge. I did not truly apply it into my heart and truly grasp exactly everything that Christ truly did for me until I was 20 years old. And I just truly feel like if this (release time) had been in my life. I might not have made some really raunchy, and awful choices that I'm so ashamed of.

Gibbs is not alone either. Rebecca shared, "I just remember telling my husband the other day, if someone had those conversations with me before my senior year in high school, I would have made so many different decisions, eternally different."

Students in the public-school need and deserve conversations that provide a foundation for making better choices. Many students in the public school system are vulnerable to societal viruses infecting them with immoral temptations and an indifference to biblical truth. The Christian community must be willing to submit to the Lord, and commit to organizing, implementing, and maintaining a vehicle that gives them the chance to make decisions to better their future. This study has proven release time education through Scripture, a change in environment, and the cultivation of a loving community can lead students towards making decisions beneficial to their growth emotionally and spiritually. If the Christian community fails to deploy discipleship vehicles like release time education, we will fail the next generation and Bible-based morality will continue to erode due to biblical illiteracy.

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**APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

January 25, 2021

Steven Rathers  
Gary Bredfeldt

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-85 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF LEADER-OBSERVED AND STUDENT IDENTIFIED BEHAVIORAL TRANSFORMATIONS EXPERIENCED WITH CHRISTIAN RELEASE TIME PROGRAMS

Dear Steven Rathers, Gary Bredfeldt:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:

101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research



## APPENDIX B: SITE APPROVAL LETTER

[REDACTED]

---

January 14, 2021

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

P.O. Box 678  
Monroe, GA 30655

Dear Mr. Rathers:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled "A Phenomenological Study of Leader-Observed and Student Identified Behavioral Transformations Experienced with Christian Release Time Programs", we have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study with leaders and alumni associated with our organization. We will provide you with the contact information for the individuals who have agreed to participate in the study.

Sincerely,  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]



## APPENDIX C: CONSENT FOR INTERVIEW

### Consent for Interview

**Title of the Project:** A Phenomenological Study of Leader-Observed and Student Identified Behavioral Transformations Experienced within Christian Release Time Programs

**Principal Investigator:** Steven Louis Rathers, Jr., Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 21 years of age or older, have served as a primary instructor for release time curriculum, and have provided continual instruction over a period of one school calendar year for release time education. Due to the current pandemic, the 2019-2020 calendar year will not be considered. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to discover if behavioral changes occurred in students who participated in Christian release time programs.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a video-recorded interview, using either Zoom or Microsoft Teams, for approximately 30-45 minutes.
2. Review the interview transcript to validate the accuracy of your comments. This should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. The transcript will be emailed to participants within 2-3 days of the interview. The transcript will need to be emailed back to the researcher within 1 week after receipt.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the promotion of a feasible paradigm that addresses the negative behaviors currently exhibited by some adolescents. Historically, churches have contributed to the advancement of the community. The research may provide churches with evidence for implementing release time programs as a means of addressing behavioral issues in the public school system.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Liberty University  
 IRB-FY20-21-85  
 Approved on 1-25-2021

#### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes.
- Data will be saved on a portable drive, which will be stored in a locked safe. Any physical data will be stored in a separate safe. The researcher will be the only individual with access to the safes. Three years after completion of the study, all data will be deleted or shredded.
- The interview will be recorded and transcribed. The interview recording and transcript will be maintained on a separate portable drive. The recording will include the Zoom / Microsoft Teams recording as well the backup recording provided by a separate video recorder. The video recorder will be used as a contingency in case of technical issues with the video conference application but its recording will be deleted after the recording is saved on the external hard drive. Only the researcher will have access to the recording.

#### How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Each study participant will receive a \$25 VISA gift card by email. It may take up to 24-48 hours to receive the gift card from the date participants email their interview transcripts back to the researcher.

#### Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

#### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Steven L. Rathers, Jr. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at ~~740-253-1~~ or at ~~smth@liberty.edu~~. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gary Bredfeldt, at ~~740-253-1~~.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

☐ The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

Liberty University  
IRB-FY20-21-85  
Approved on 1-25-2021

## APPENDIX D: CONSENT FOR FOCUS GROUP

### Consent for Focus Group

**Title of the Project:** A Phenomenological Study of Leader-Observed and Student Identified Behavioral Transformations Experienced within Christian Release Time Programs

**Principal Investigator:** Steven Louis Rathers, Jr., Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, a high school graduate, and you must have participated in a release time program for at least one school calendar year. Due to the current pandemic, the 2019-2020 calendar year will not be considered. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to discover if behavioral changes occurred in students who participated in Christian release time programs

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a video-recorded focus group with 5-7 other participants, using either Zoom or Microsoft Teams, for approximately 45-60 minutes.
2. Review the transcription of your recorded portion of the focus group to validate the accuracy of your comments. This should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. The transcript will be emailed to participants within 2-3 days of the focus group. The transcript will need to be emailed back to me within 1 week after its receipt.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the promotion of a feasible paradigm that addresses the negative behaviors currently exhibited by some adolescents. Historically, churches have contributed to the advancement of the community. The research may provide churches with evidence for implementing release time programs as an alternative means of addressing behavioral issues in the public school system.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Liberty University  
IRB-FY20-21-85  
Approved on 1-25-2021

**How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes.
- Data will be saved on a portable drive, which will be stored in a locked safe. Any physical data will be stored in a separate safe. The researcher will be the only individual with access to the safes. Three years after completion of the study, all data will be deleted or shredded.
- The focus group will be recorded and transcribed. The focus group recording and transcript will be maintained on a separate portable drive. The recording will include the Zoom / Microsoft Teams recording as well the backup recording provided by a separate video recorder. The video recorder will be used as a contingency in case of technical issues with the video conference application but its recording will be deleted after the recording is saved on the external hard drive. Only the researcher will have access to the recording.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Each study participant will receive a \$25 VISA gift card by email. It may take up to 24-48 hours to receive the gift card from the date participants email their interview transcripts back to the researcher.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.



**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Steven L. Rathers, Jr. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gary Bredfeldt, at [REDACTED].

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

☐ The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

Liberty University  
IRB-FY20-21-85  
Approved on 1-25-2021

## **APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. What are the objectives of release time? How are these objectives tracked?
2. How does release time contribute to the behavioral development of adolescents?
3. How important is peer interaction to the student's behavioral transformation?
4. What value does release time add to the development of a biblical worldview?
5. Does rapport influence behavioral change? What other mitigating factors (if any) influence behavioral changes within release time education?
6. What role does release time play in a student's emotional responses to tragedy?
7. How has release time supported students with addressing ideologies contrary to the Bible.

**APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

1. What behavioral changes have you experienced personally through your involvement with releasee time? What changes have you observed in your peers?
2. What types of changes (emotional, physical, etc.) are more noticeable between students who only attend release time and those who attend releasee time and other church ministry activities?
3. What are the benefits provided by release time that may not be provided in a general church setting?
4. How does release time use biblical content to address modern-day events?
5. What is the role of release time as a tool for forming a biblical worldview?
6. What plays the most significant role in the transformative process of the students...the instructors or the curriculum?



## APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW CODEBOOK

Code	Description	Example
<b>Biblical Worldview</b>	Used for statements which referenced the use of Scripture to gain understanding of a situation, concept, or God's perspective.	"...lens of the Bible", framed by the Bible, or situational experiences describing how Scripture shaped an individual's perspective of a situation.
<b>Change of Environment</b>	used each time a participant discussed transformative processes experienced outside of the public-school environment.	"...because they're coming to a classroom where they're not being judged" and "a lot of those issues you can't address at school, teachers can't tell them the truth about abortion. I can tell them what the Bible says about homosexuality, and they need to be told truth".
<b>Character Development</b>	Used for statements related to either a perceived behavioral need or an expectation. Also, identifies perceived personal growth observed by the leader.	"...we take responsibility, we do things well" and "I think our discipline and our standards work together to give us some really positive behavioral changes as well".
<b>Community</b>	Used when participants shared information connecting the relationship between release time to outside entities including churches, public-schools and families and the overall tribal environment within a release time classroom.	"...we have seen ourselves as an asset to the school system as well, because I've had a lot of opportunities to work with the counselors at the school and another shared "and then we had prayer vigils in our town and at a church".
<b>Daily Devotion</b>	Used when participants made statements pertaining to the significance of meeting daily, spending time in the Bible daily, and anytime an inference was made to the significance of meeting consistently.	"I feel like we got we got a lot more time than the church to kind of develop in them what is a biblical worldview" and "even though it's only for a quarter for a semester at a time, having that density and seeing them every single day".
<b>Discipleship</b>	Related to spiritual growth and explicitly when salvation was experienced.	"I think I think the intentional discipleship that we're trying to do with them influences behavior changes".
<b>Family</b>	Used when participants disclosed the dynamic of the development of a family environment within the release time setting.	"...this is a family and that's how we're going to make this is a safe environment for you" another shared "once you start seeing people as family, you stop seeing their different roles".
<b>Love</b>	Pertains to student exposure to the concept of God's love, having a personal experience with love, and understanding the need to love others.	"And one of my students put thank you for showing me how to be loved".
<b>Positive Peer Influence</b>	Used to identify observed changes induced by other students within the release time setting. "So I would think peer interaction, I mean, would The One of the participants stated "So they pray with each other". Prayer was vital to the salvation experience of a student. The student told the participant, "I know the day that you guys prayed for me, I got saved that day".	"So I would think peer interaction, I mean, would almost use the word essential to student behavior transformation". "It's just because they learn more, and I've learned that at times they learn more from each other than they do for me".
<b>Prayer</b>	Used when prayer was practiced as well as when prayer was considered essential to a given situation.	"So they pray with each other". Prayer was vital to the salvation experience of a student. / "I know the day that you guys prayed for me, I got saved that day".
<b>Relationship</b>	Used to signify the importance of rapport between participant and student, student to student, and the student's relationship with God.	"A lot of our teachers are more kind of mom figures to their little middle schoolers". / "the students tend to buy into that and to really build relationships with each other".
<b>Vulnerable</b>	Used to indicate the existence of an emotional submission, and the willingness to expose one's heart and hurts.	...they learn to trust each other enough that when tragedies do strike".
<b>Sound Doctrine</b>	Used to unveil the influence of the use of Scripture, whether in the formulation of a worldview, dealing with tragedy, or the consistency in which the Bible was the foundation for transformation.	"...we also teach them about interacting with scripture personally", "we talk about here's what the world says, here's what God's word says" and "everything that we teach comes directly from Scripture".

## APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW CODES

### Interview Participants

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Rebecca</b>	<b>Dwight</b>	<b>Mark Cuban</b>	<b>Kramer</b>	<b>Elaine</b>	<b>Gibbs</b>	<b>Lucy</b>	<b>Father Brown</b>	<b>Opie</b>
Biblical Worldview	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Change of Environment	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Character Development	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Community	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Daily Devotion	X		X	X	X		X	X	
Discipleship	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family	X			X	X			X	X
Love	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Positive Peer Influence	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Prayer	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Relationships	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sound Doctrine	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Vulnerability		X	X		X	X	X		

### APPENDIX I: – CLC CURRICULUM

Course	Description
Family, Community and Careers	This course examines God’s plan for our lives and relationship, specifically outlining the top 4 priorities we should have, based upon Scripture. We will study eternal biblical principles for establishing a personal relationship with Christ, understanding our roles within God’s design for our families, establishing trust-bond friendships and developing God-honoring courting or dating relationships in order to realize God’s plan for a lifelong mate, and finally understanding our individual spiritual gifts in order to use them in ministry for God’s glory.
Life Skills and Careers	This Course examines how to understand God’s will for our lives, careers, and ministries, specifically outlining how to make wise decisions when planning for college, pursuing a career, handling money, and leading in ministry, based upon Scripture
Current Issues	This course examines how the truth of Scripture as it relates to the current issues facing society and the Church today. We will discover how worldviews are formed and what components make-up the framework of a worldview.
Comparative Religions	This course will examine the core beliefs, values, and worldviews of the major religions around the world, beginning with Christianity, which will be taught as absolute truth. We will conduct an in-depth study at the Christian Scriptures: how we got them, how we can know they are truth, and the history behind their preservation and translation.