

The Liberty of Classical Christian Education

We involved in Classical Christian Education must be very clear about the terms we use to describe our schools. What is Classical Education? What is Christian Education? What is Classical Christian Education?

What is Classical Education?

Most often we read that Classical Education is only a method of educating, not a reference to specific content. While only partially true, the method of Classical Education is an important aspect of understanding Classical Education, so let's start with defining the method of Classical Education.

Classical education refers to a pattern of "training the mind" which proposes that learning takes place in three stages. We start with the content (Grammar), we put the content in order (Logic), and finally we put the content and order of the content into practical use (Rhetoric). These stages are formally known as the Trivium[1]:

1st Stage: Grammar – Instruct in Knowledge (gather information)

- early years
- focus on subject content - building blocks for all other years
- phonics, rules of grammar, poems, vocabulary of foreign language, math facts, stories of history, description of plants, animals, human body
- absorption of information and facts
- not a focus on criticizing or analyzing
- not a focus on self-expression or self-discovery

2nd Stage: Logic – Guide in Understanding (arrange information in logical order)

- middle years
- how the Grammar facts relate to one another and make up the big picture – who, what, when, where, how, why, where, to what degree
- organized thought process, cause and effect, scientific method
- abstract thought
- logic/algebra
- paragraph construction
- criticism & analysis of texts
- why something in History happens

3rd Stage: Rhetoric – **Challenge in Wisdom** (put information and ordering of information into practical use)

- upper high school years
- builds on the first two stages
- have mastered the facts, understand relationships, now ready to apply

- how to write and speak with force
- express conclusions in clean, forceful language
- specialization – art, apprenticeship

This method is anything but new. It is the academic foundation upon which Western culture has been built.

Now, let's expand the definition of Classical Education beyond the method. Just look at any listing of courses and subjects taught at your typical Classical school and you must acknowledge that Classical Education implies certain content:

- World history with emphasis on Greek and Roman cultures
- Greek religion and mythology
- World history with emphasis on the Renaissance
- Latin I, II, III
- Ancient literature
- Roman heritage

Why are these subjects found in Classical Christian schools? Here is where the broader definition of Classical Education comes in. Classical Education is an education that teaches children that their culture was not purchased for them by their parents at the local mall!^[2] Our culture and civilization did not begin yesterday or with our own generation. This is a shortfall of many churches today: congregations ignore the teachings and lessons from centuries of church history and act as if church history begins today with their little congregation. We must not allow this mentality to be said of our children.

“We like to believe that we create our little worlds from scratch and then live in them. But the reality is, we step into a world and culture that already exists, and we learn to interact with it. The game has been conceived long before us, the rules and boundaries already decided.”^[3]

Our culture and civilization are an outgrowth of the classical/ancient world, medieval world, renaissance world, and reformation world, an outgrowth of ideas, philosophies, science, literature that span across the centuries having massive consequences on world events, theology, the arts, culture, as well as in our everyday lives. A Classical Education enables young men and women to write and argue persuasively and to understand where philosophies and ideas come from.^[4]

If we stop here, however, our education is no different than a Classical Humanist Education. We must add the Christian part. What then is a Classical Christian Education? A Classical Christian Education is an education that “grapples” with the ideas and philosophies of history, science, and literature, looking through the spectacles of God's Word. Christian Education adds to Classical Education the **discernment** and **wisdom** needed as students encounter the ideas of history, the good and the bad, the true and the false. A Classical Education **alone** enables young men and women to write and argue persuasively and to understand where philosophies and ideas come from, but it leaves them at risk to fall into bondage to those very philosophies and ideas, just like the pagan cultures of history and unfortunately, like our culture today. A Classical Education

alone provides no safeguards. A Classical Christian Education, on other hand, which views everything through the spectacles of God's Word, creates young men and women who can write and argue persuasively, understand where philosophies and ideas come from, and discern from all those centuries that which is redeemable for Christ and the advancement of His Kingdom. They learn to see in the world around them, the media, music, bookstores, public policies, and classrooms, how the ideas of history's thinkers affect us still.

“Only as you familiarize yourself with the ideas that have shaped our culture over the centuries will you begin to understand the people and culture around you and influence that culture for Christ. Understand the history of ideas and then can you initiate a dialogue which seeks to replace in the lives of others the deceptive thinking of the world with the truths of God's Kingdom.”[5]

Only through the spectacles of God's Word, specifically His law, are we free and safe to enjoy and study all of His creation and all “His-story.” With the law of God as our safeguard, we can span across the centuries and ground our children in the “good things, the great things, and the true things”[6] of ‘His-story,’ while not enslaving them to vain philosophies such as the Greek's love of the perfect man or the Roman's love of the glorified state. We approach no culture on neutral ground because God and His law are not neutral. Cultures are either for Christ or against Him. Education is either for Christ or against Him. We either stand with Christ or we stand against Christ. As we study cultures, our focus is to find that which is redeemable in Christ.

In a Classical Christian Education, that which is purely classical is always the servant to that which is Christian. John gives us a practical example of how this can be done in I John 3:11-12 as he shows us God's way by pointing out the opposite error: “we should love one another, not as Cain, who was of the evil one, and slew his brother.” This approach can be very useful as we pull from the centuries that which is good (righteous), true, and beautiful, and throw out that which is bad, false, and ugly. Children taught in this manner will become dependent on the sovereign, Triune God alone and will be free children indeed. They will develop into young adults who will one day lead our families, churches, communities, state, and nation for the glory of Christ. Young adults, dependent on Jesus Christ and living within the liberty of His law will always lead those that are enslaved to the love of self or state. For true freedom is only found within God's law.

How do we ensure that our Classical Christian School truly has a curriculum of liberty? We must include teaching on the nature and meaning of law in all stages of the Trivium:

- Grammar – content of law (biblical and constitutional)
- Logic – understanding of law (biblical and constitutional)
- Rhetoric – application of law to every area of life

The law of God is an expression of His holiness and order. When included in the curriculum, we give our children a curriculum of Christian liberty and the discipline to live a joyful and faithful life unto the Lord.

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- [1] Harvey & Laurie Bluedorn, *Definition for Classical Education*, Trivium Pursuit Online
- [2] Douglas Wilson, *Classical Education*, www.home-school.com/Articles/ClassicalEducation.html
- [3] R.C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas* (Crossway Books, 2000), p. 10.
- [4] Susan Wise, *Interview with Debra Bell*, www.debrabell.com/classical_education.html
- [5] R.C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas* (Crossway Books, 2000)
- [6] George Grant, *Our View of Education: Classical & Covenantal* (www.kingsmeadow.com/headline_view.html)