

Understanding the Classical and Christian Difference - A Parent's Primer

To many, the term "classical education" conjures images of ivy-covered institutions with more interest in striking a child's knuckles and teaching dry subjects than in educating. As with any "image," truth is determined not by the "angle" or "spin" applied by Hollywood producers in movies like *The Dead Poets Society*, but by the real and tested results proven through centuries of educating children with the classical method. Please take a moment to read through this brief outline of what classical education really was and is today. We believe that you will find more myth than truth in the modern image of classical education.

Classical Christian education is unique in that it seeks to faithfully restore the most proven form of education ever developed. This education produced the greatest thinkers, leaders, and scientists in the Western world from the time of the Greeks until the late 19th century, including America's founding fathers. From the heritage of America's Ivy League colleges and classical day schools, leaders in every field continue to emerge from the fragmented legacy of classical education. Unfortunately, its pure form, including a Christian worldview, has been lost until its revival in the early 1980's.

What makes classical Christian education so effective? First, it is based on what has been called the Trivium. No matter how your child learns, he or she goes through three phases. In grades K-6, students are excellent at memorizing. In grades 7-8, students become more argument-oriented. They are ready to be taught logic and critical thinking. In grades 9-12, students become independent thinkers and communicators particularly concerned with their appearance to others. To this end, classical education teaches them "rhetoric," the art of speaking, communicating, and writing.

In classical schools, core subjects like literature, history, language, art, math, and science are integrated. Students read the great works of Western literature and philosophy. Classical languages (Latin and Greek) help students understand and think with greater depth about the world around them. Formal logic and rhetoric help students become great leaders and communicators. Classical teaching methods range from class lectures, to debates, to Socratic (discussion-oriented) teaching. Independent learning skills are sharpened at all grade levels.

Is classical Christian education still relevant? Yes, more now than ever. Our world is accelerating as technological, cultural, and geo-political forces reshape our daily lives. The subject matter and skills required in the market are evolving and changing rapidly. However, thinking, articulate people are always in demand. Those who are able to acquire new skills rapidly and independently are sought after regardless of the field. Classical Christian education has a proven track record of turning out these types of students.

Those who assume that methods used for millennia can be dismissed within a generation forget that time is the best laboratory, especially regarding human behavior.

It has taken modern educators only 50 years to disassemble an educational system that took thousands of years to refine and establish. The classical method was born in ancient Greece and Rome, and by the 16th century, it was used throughout the Western world. This system educated most of America's founding fathers as well as the world's philosophers, scientists and leaders between the 10th and 19th centuries. What other period can claim so many advances in science, philosophy, art, and literature?

Why Classical Education?

For education to be effective, it must go beyond conveying fact. Truly effective education cultivates thinking and articulate students who are able to develop facts into arguments and convey those arguments clearly and persuasively. Parents from Seattle to Orlando are recognizing that classical education adds the dimension and breadth needed to develop students' minds. Rigorous academic standards, a dedication to order and discipline, and a focus on key, "lost" subjects is fueling the rapid growth of the nation's classical schools.

There is no greater task for education than to teach students how to learn. The influence of "progressive" teaching methods and the oversimplification of textbooks make it difficult for students to acquire the mental discipline that traditional instruction methods once cultivated. The classical method develops independent learning skills on the foundation of language, logic, and tangible fact. The classical difference is clear when students are taken beyond conventionally taught subjects and asked to apply their knowledge through logic and clear expression.

In 1947, Dorothy Sayers, a pioneer in the return to classical education, observed, "although we often succeed in teaching our pupils 'subjects,' we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think." Beyond subject matter, classical education develops those skills that are essential in higher education and throughout life - independent scholarship, critical thinking, logical analysis, and a love for learning.

A Love for Learning

Occasionally, parents who are interested in classical education express concern that it will be too difficult or too demanding for their children. Disciplining and challenging students is certainly part of the classical method. However, we believe that education is inherently enjoyable for children. The classical method is based on the philosophy that students should be encouraged to do what they naturally enjoy during particular phases of their life.

In Dorothy Sayers' essay, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, she promotes teaching in ways which complement children's natural behavior. For example, young children in grammar school are very adept at memorizing. They enjoy repeating songs, rhymes, and chants to the extent that they often make up their own. In classical education, the "Grammar" phase

corresponds with this tendency by focusing on the teaching of facts. During the junior high years, children often become prone to question and argue. Classical education leverages this tendency by teaching students how to argue well based on the facts they have learned. We call this the "Logic" phase. During the high school years, students' interests shift from internal concerns to the external. Teenagers become concerned with how others perceive them. This stage fits well into the "Rhetoric" phase of classical education, where students are taught to convey their thoughts so that they are well received and understood by others. The education culminates with the debate and defense of a senior thesis.

The classical method not only "cuts with the grain," but it develops a true sense of accomplishment in students. Many educators are artificially positive and soften grading scales in an effort to bolster their students' self-esteem. We believe that a sense of self-worth comes from accomplishment. The student who excels after working hard achieves a greater sense of accomplishment than one who is given the grade. By holding students to an objective standard, they gain a true understanding of their abilities. Where self-esteem offers an artificial appreciation, classical education provides a realistic and true estimation of a child's ability.

Latin and the New Millennium

The most frequently questioned piece of classical education is its use of Latin. Why do students in the Information Age need something so arcane as Latin? Considering the number of quality schools that for centuries taught Latin as an integral part of any good academic training, the instruction in Latin should need no defense. However, like many traditions lost in the name of "progressive" education, Latin's advantages have been neglected and forgotten by recent generations. Latin was widely taught even in American high schools as late as the 1940's. It was considered necessary to the fundamental understanding of English, the history and writings of Western Civilization, and the understanding of Romance languages.

Recommended Reading List

"The Lost Tools of Learning," by Dorothy Sayers

The Abolition of Man, by C.S. Lewis

Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning, by Douglas Wilson

The Case for Classical Christian Education, by Douglas Wilson

Classical Education and the Home school, by Douglas Wilson, Wes Callihan and Doug Jones

The Seven Laws of Teaching, by John Gregory

Repairing the Ruins, edited by Douglas Wilson

Classical Education, by Gene Edward Veith, Jr. and Andrew Kern

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