



## What is the Classical Christian Approach to Testing?

In the seven years that I have been involved with Veritas Academy, I have often had to ask myself the question, “What is the classical Christian approach to \_\_\_\_\_?” The blank could be filled in with such subjects as: “*teaching history*” or “*classroom discipline*” or “*wearing uniforms*.” In each case, by studying past practices and presuppositions we have developed approaches that we believe are congruent with the goals of Classical Christian education. One question, however, continues to haunt me: “What is the classical Christian approach to *testing*?”

We live in an age of testing. Pop quizzes, weekly tests, midterm examinations, standardized tests (Stanford Achievement, ACT’s, SAT’s, etc.), 21<sup>st</sup>-century American students are becoming full-time test takers. Even at the Veritas Academy, students and (their parents) spend hours preparing for and taking tests. Teachers stay up late grading tests. Students mope or gloat alternately over test scores. Parents punish or praise according to the numbers found on tests and report cards. High test scores are seen as a measure of success for students; high averages represent success for schools and classes. But what is it we are testing? Why? Are test scores authoritative? Why do we test students so much more frequently now than was done in the past? F. Allan Hanson, in his book, *Testing, Testing: Social Consequences of the Examined Life*, makes some observations about the role of testing in education that are worth pondering (please note that I do not agree with all his viewpoints).

Broadly speaking, according to Hanson, there are two types of tests: Authenticity tests and qualifying tests. *Authenticity* tests are used to identify the moral character or legal standing of a person. The result of an authenticity test is usually either negative or positive. Is the person telling the truth or lying? Is he innocent or guilty? In the fairy tale of the *Princess and the Pea*, the test of placing a pea under the alleged princess’s mattresses was an authenticity test to see if she truly was a princess. The type of testing found in the Bible primarily pertains to authenticity testing. God tested Abraham’s faith by having him sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22). Christians are told to test the spirits to see if they are from God (I John 4:1f). Deacons are to be examined to determine whether they are beyond reproach (Tim. 3:10). *Qualifying* tests, on the other hand, measure knowledge, ability or aptitude. This is the kind of test that is primarily given in school and which is my principal focus.

In the pre-industrial West, the primary type of testing done was authenticity testing. It was not until the Medieval and Renaissance periods that we find examples of qualifying tests. In the East, however, the Chinese began using qualifying tests as early as 115 B.C. during the Chou Dynasty. They began recruiting candidates for public office by giving a formal oral and written exam in archery, horsemanship, arithmetic, writing and music. Over the next few hundred years, these tests became the standard method China used to staff their governmental posts. Passing this exam at various levels was the main avenue to power and success. Surprisingly, this system lasted till the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest instances of qualifying tests did not appear in the West until the Medieval and Renaissance periods. The tests given were used to prove mastery of skills, such as craftsmen submitting their work to be judged. Similarly, candidates for graduation from the universities had to prove their eligibility in oral examinations. The common form this type of

examination took was for a candidate to expound on a given text and then defend his views against the questions and critiques of faculty examiners. The earliest record in North America of testing was in 1646 when seniors at Harvard University were required to read and dispute competently about the Bible in Latin before they were allowed to graduate. Exams were not common in colonial times. Annual oral examinations were done at the elementary and secondary school levels but when they became too burdensome for the examiners, schools began switching to written examinations. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, exams increased dramatically in frequency and importance, beginning at the college levels and spreading to the public schools.

What contributed greatly to the growth and proliferation of testing was the philosophy of Positivism. Postulated in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Auguste Comte, Positivism is a philosophy concerned only with positive- or *scientific* facts about the world, those that could be observed or experienced. Any speculation about God or anything metaphysical is considered fruitless and meaningless. Positivists believe that all nature is governed by laws, and these laws when discovered and applied by scientific means, will produce peace, prosperity and social justice. Positivism views man as an animal to be studied, just like other animals. Human traits could be quantified and measured and the data used to benefit individuals and society. The tool that they seized upon for gathering scientific information about human beings was *testing*. Interestingly, the invention of the multiple-choice question in 1915 was eagerly adopted as a technological innovation for testing unprecedented masses of people. The quantification of knowledge and aptitude among the masses was seen as a means to scientifically engineer an efficient and optimal society. Positivist philosophy lies at the heart of 20<sup>th</sup>-century, modernist educational theory in Americas. Through its influence, what used to be a very small part of the educational process became a dominant feature of it.

So ingrained have positivist methods and presuppositions become that most everyone assumes that testing is a vital and essential part of education, if not an end in itself. Should we not be wary of such non-classical, non-traditional methods? If testing is useful, and I'm not denying that it is, what is its purpose? Is the goal of schooling to obtain good grades? Do good grades translate to true learning? Do we give more credence to test results than we do to our own day-to-day judgment of how our child or student is learning?

Students focused solely on preparing for tests, too easily forget the broader purposes of education. They lose concern for the subject matter itself. They develop a love of high scores and not of learning. The desire to excel in exams could prevent a student from delving into subjects that have whet their interests but which won't be covered on a test. Teachers are pressured to obtain high grades because they may be evaluated on how well their students perform on tests. This being the case, they "teach to the test" or manipulate their tests so that results are generally high. This may account for the grade inflation that's been observed nationwide since the 1970's.

I am not advocating that we do away with tests. After all, tests have been around for a long time. As a teacher I find tests and quizzes to be handy tools for assessing what students know. Placement exams are helpful in placing students in appropriate classes. Tests can also be a useful motivator for students to study. But there are many other ways to assess and review. Homework, writing reports and papers, discussion and just plain observation are other ways to review and assess. A test result is only a snapshot of how the student is doing and not the whole picture. We, as parents or teachers, are doing a disservice to our children or students if we equate test grades with true learning. Yes, there is a correlation between test scores and true learning, but the two are not equivalent. While we should be pleased with good grades, we should be even more pleased when there are sparks of

interest in the student's face, or when he asks good questions or when he makes an astute observation. Conversely, a student who produces poor grades should not necessarily be viewed as not learning. The *Parable of the Talents* (Matt. 25:14f) reminds us that God has gifted each individual differently and that, while quantitative results will be different on earth, our heavenly rewards reflect an infinitely wiser judgment. How we as teachers and parents view tests will influence how our children or students view them.

I'm afraid I do not have a full answer to my original question: "What is the classical Christian approach to testing?" To begin to answer this question, I think we must first ask the more fundamental question: "What is the goal of education?" A fitting answer to this question would be *the obtainment of knowledge and the tools of learning, and not successful performance in tests*. I believe that this is what we are trying to do at Veritas Academy. As long as our ultimate goals are knowledge and wisdom for our children we should be able to discern how to put testing to its proper use.

Fun Gobel, Teacher  
December, 2004

Sources:

Hanson, F. Allan. *Testing, Testing: Social Consequences of the Examined Life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1993.

Karen Arenson, "Is It Grade Inflation, or Are Students Just Smarter?" *The New York Times Online*, 18 April 2004. See: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

Laban Carrick Hill, "Compromise in the Class Room" *Vanderbilt Magazine*, Spring 2003. p. 33.