



In Defense of the Classical Tradition in Christian Education

“Quid Athenae Hierosolymis?” “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” asked Tertullian in the early 3rd century. Or, he added, “What does the Academy have to do with the Church?” Many modern-day Tertullians have asked why the Veritas Academy builds its curriculum upon the classical tradition. Why do we look to godless pagans from antiquity as we seek to teach our covenant children how to live for Christ in a postmodern age? Why don’t we invent, instead, a new paradigm for Christian education, one relevant for today’s culture? Why not a “*Contemporary Christian Education*” rather than a “*Classical Christian*” one?

The answer is, in part, that we consider it both arrogant and foolish to think, as modernist educators have so often proposed, that we can reject all that is past in order to reinvent education. It is equally suspect to suggest that we can construct a definitive model of Christian education that avoids all taint of unregenerate thought. Rather, God, in his providence, has allowed and ordained human traditions, arts, inventions and even educational models to develop and flourish over the centuries. This is part of his Common Grace. We cannot conceive of this world apart from inventions, practices and traditions that have developed since classical antiquity: the wheel, the alphabet, the printing press; geometry, music, poetry, architecture, political science. None of these inventions or arts is peculiarly Christian, none of them is directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. Let’s be concrete: Latin is not a Christian language. But, then again, who can tell me which earthly language is most Christian? What is a Christian alphabet? A Christian music?

God’s people often distinguish themselves by their adherence to the principle of *sola scriptura*. Indeed, the very words of God are contained in the scriptures, which give us all that is necessary to glorify and enjoy him forever. This is our chief end. But the scriptures do not give us all we need to know concerning language arts, science, math, history, music *et cetera*. Human arts are necessary. By producing what is necessary, the arts and learning of mankind may be considered good and even delightful. There is much that is praiseworthy, noble, true, lovely in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Nietzsche as well as in Augustine, Calvin, Edwards and C.S. Lewis.

The Classical Tradition considers that which is great, true and noble. It is a great conversation. It is not specific to a time or culture. Critics claim, by the way, that classicists are nostalgic and eurocentric, that they neglect diversity and the multiplicity of cultures and lifestyles. But it is the critics who are enslaved by their devotion to worldly culture, to the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age. The classical question is not: “What is old or what is new?” but rather, “What is true?” The Classical Tradition, therefore, seeks the transcendent and timeless. That’s why our earlier question—Why not a Contemporary Christian education?—is flawed. We serve a true, eternal, omniscient God, not the god of this age.

Here we must introduce a crucial caveat: by itself, the classical tradition is both insufficient and irreparably flawed. Aristotle was not always right. Nietzsche was frequently wrong. Not even Calvin was perfect. Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling is idolatrous. Dignity and depravity are commingled. All knowledge, all education, is tainted by sin. The classical tradition will never produce what Aristotle called happiness. It will never produce what Paul called “peace that transcends all understanding.” *Solus Christus*, Christ alone, the *Logos*, who became flesh and dwelt among us brings ultimate good to man.

God's truth must invade the tradition. Our approach must be constantly weighed and measured by God's Word. Accordingly, we must not be "conformed to the pattern of this world"—or even to the Classical Tradition but that does not mean that we ignore or disdain the achievements of civilization. Rather, that we seek the transformation of civilization by first being transformed by the renewing of our minds. A Classical Christian education takes every thought, every art, every tradition captive to Jesus Christ. It proclaims the dominion of Christ over all things; it seeks to claim every square inch of our culture for him; it declares that all truth is God's truth. Classical education without Christ is striving in the wind. It banks on borrowed capital, it deals in stolen goods. Nevertheless, those goods are indeed real. It is the task of a Classical Christian education to reclaim those goods for Christ.

David Gobel
Savannah, 2001

Professor of Architectural History at SCAD and father of two Veritas' students
This talk was given at this year's Parent Student Orientation, August 20, 2001