



## What is Classical Education?

I'm afraid I can't really tell you what classical education is, because I'm not quite sure of it myself. I could tell you that the Classical Education Movement in the US has been steadily growing for about two decades, that it is particularly strong in Reformed Christian circles, that its founding manifesto is a 1991 essay by Douglas Wilson, entitled "Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning," which was inspired by a 1947 essay by Dorothy Sayers, entitled "The Lost Tools of Learning." The hallmarks of this movement are an adherence to Sayers' interpretation of the medieval Trivium as a curricular organizing principle, the study of Latin beginning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, an emphasis on the study of history and the "great books," and an implicit critique of the modernist educational techniques utilized pervasively by Secular and Christian private schools and public schools alike. This critique of modernism has as its obverse, an admiration of the past, of the 'great books' and 'great ideas' that have shaped Western Civilization. In this way the modern classical education movement has been compared with the educational reforms of the Renaissance and Reformation era in Europe and Colonial America.

Backward looking as it might seem, the contemporary Classical Christian Education Movement is growing in popularity and may soon, if it hasn't already done so, qualify as a bona fide educational trend, some might even think of it as the "cutting-edge" of education today. This ironic twist could cause some to see Classical Education as unsettlingly ambiguous, duplicitous even, if not schizophrenic. Historically savvy critics might rightly point out that the phrase "Classical Education" is itself a modern innovation, thus, perhaps, not very classical. Neither Cicero nor Erasmus used the term "classical" in reference to education. Nor would they find familiar our curriculum or teaching methods. Not even Dorothy Sayers used the phrase "classical education." Our critics might go farther. They might charge us with fabricating a sham reconstruction of a by-gone era in education. An era which, they would intone never existed anyway. In our nostalgia, they might believe, we are ignoring the advancements, complications and pluralities of the modern, or, some might say, post-modern world.

Now that I've characterized the CCCEM in terms of its sources, beliefs and inherent anomalies, let me point out that advocating a classical education and participating in a movement are not quite the same thing. We at Veritas Academy and, presumably, many of our colleagues in the CCCEM, though we use certain curricular aids and employ time-tested techniques, such as phonics and rote memorization, are not primarily interested in methods so much as in the purpose of education. We are not attempting to resurrect Plato's Academy, Eton College or Edward VI's Grammar Schools. We are not trying to go back to the way things were per se. We are advocating neither a "new" or "old" system of education. What we are calling for is an ongoing quest to discover "the classical" in education.

So what is the Classical? Well, as I said before, I'm not quite sure. I suppose that it is many things, perhaps many more than any of us will ever know. It is, indeed, a relatively new term when applied to education. I'm certain that Classical education looks different in 21<sup>st</sup> century Savannah from the way it appeared in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Boston or 16<sup>th</sup>-century Geneva. So, classical education is, has been and will be many things.

So too in other fields, it seems to be many things. For example, we recognize the word when we speak of “classical music,” or classic cars, or, as Kreg Bryan, our former chairman, reminded us, “Classic Coke.” Classical sometimes refers to the ancient world of Greece and Rome, but don’t expect to hear ancient Greek choruses crooning on a “Classic Rock” radio station. Don’t expect to find Greco-Roman roots when you study “Classical Chinese.” I struggle in my own studies to define “Classical Architecture.” Is it architecture that imitates Greek and Roman temples? Or, is it an approach to design that emphasizes order, balance and harmony?

We do look to and admire the Greeks and Romans for making a huge contribution to the methods and content of what we call Classical Education. In fact, we acknowledge that we cannot possibly study philosophy, literature, music, art, theology, politics or science without borrowing from them. We also look to and admire the Early Christian Fathers, the Medieval Schoolmen, the Protestant Reformers and our nation’s Founding Fathers not to mention the 20<sup>th</sup>-century writings of Lewis, Tolkien and Sayers. And, we even study the lives and writings of great atheists, heretics and international criminals.

So, Classical Education is always changing. It is many things. It is a moving target. Thus, to identify something as “classical” is not an easy task. I’m quite certain that no one can give it a universally acceptable or adequate definition. But I’m equally sure that we basically understand each other when we use the word Classical, even when it is used in such disparate ways.

Maybe the word classical is so elusive in itself because it always meant to be a predicate adjective, wholly dependent on the subject it describes. Classical music, for example, whether symphonic or rock, likewise, can be recognized only by knowing the forms and techniques of the genre. Classic Coke can only be fully appreciated by knowing the nature and purpose of Coke. Those examples of an art or a practice which we call “classical” are those which most completely fulfill the purpose, what Aristotle would call the *telos*, of that art. Following this line of thought, we might conclude that word “classical” is synonymous with the “best,” which is to say that what we mean by a classical education is simply the “best” education.

We could have avoided a lot of confusion by simply proclaiming that we are advocates and practitioners of the Best Education Movement. You can readily see, however, that our friends involved in non-classical education might consider this presumptuous. After all, aren’t all educators seeking the best education possible? To this I would say, maybe so, but too many in the ‘educational establishment’ in America today have forgotten or intentionally discarded much of what was best in education.

There are, thus, two reasons why I believe that the word classical is helpful in clarifying what I believe is the best approach to education. A classical educator presupposes that the ‘best’ education is one that is rooted and fully engaged in an ancient and ongoing educational discourse, a discourse found in what Mortimer Adler called, “the great books.” A classical educator always seeks the highest goods that can be found within his art, i.e., he constantly asks the question: What is the purpose of education?

Does it seem reasonable that an educated person would be well read in the great books? Is there any wisdom to be gleaned in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Dante or Shakespeare? Do modern authors have more to offer than the great minds of history? The classical educator asks of his modernist colleague: Why would you NOT require students to read classic literature?

Was Augustine well-educated? How about John Quincy Adams or John Calvin? Have you ever been astounded by the breadth of learning or the eloquence of an 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup>-century English writer

(the list is endless: Addison, Johnson, Pope, Swift, Defoe, Austen, Carlyle, the Romantic poets, et al.)? I suspect that you have been. But how often do we likewise marvel at the general level of literacy and learning of 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup>-century American authors? Do we consider today's schools to be the 'best' they could be when measured against the educational achievements of the past? If not, then why would we not seek to imitate what we recognize was excellent in the past? Why would we pursue modern methods which are either untested or have been found wanting when we have excellent models from the past to guide us?

Adler also said of the Great Books that they represented a "Great Conversation," a three or four-thousand-year-old conversation. As Susan Wise Bauer notes, we enter into that conversation as late comers, ignorant of most of what has been said. Do we moderns have anything to contribute to the conversation? How can we do so if we willfully remain ignorant of all that has been said before? A reasonable requirement for participating in this conversation is knowledge of the history and origin of the great ideas. Who came up with this or that idea? Why? What were their presuppositions? Why, for example, is a phonics-based approach preferable to a whole-language approach to reading? What does this presuppose about the nature of language?

One reason why modernists ignore or downplay the Great Conversation is their belief that ideas are culturally constructed, that the ideas found in Augustine were shaped by the cultural forces of late antiquity, and, thus, they have little relevance for what we believe or how we live our lives in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. For them, there is no Conversation, only fragmented texts.

The second reason why a classical education is the best is that it seeks the highest goods that education has to offer. In other words, a classical educator is constantly asking what is the purpose or *telos* of education? One should naturally ask this question since the root meaning of the Latin based verb to educate, means literally, 'to lead.' The obvious question is: If we are leading our children, where are we taking them? Here, we find a remarkable disjunction between classical and modernist educators. I've addressed this topic before in the three short essays included in your packets. Much of contemporary education, which I call modernist, is utilitarian. Education is commonly understood as a social tool, a means to a particular social end. How often do we hear politicians and social reformers crying, "Education is the answer"? Individual parents and students often believe a modified form of this social engineering approach to education, they believe that a 'good' education will lead to a 'successful' career, which will bring an ample income. Classicists don't deny that social and individual goods can be gained from a good education. But these are secondary, external goods; they are not directly related to the *telos* of education and they should not be used as a measuring tool for pedagogy or curricula. By the way, test scores are not legitimate ends either.

So what is the purpose of education? Where are we to lead our children? For the Christian the answers to these questions should be obvious. In fact, we would claim that the only truly classical education is a Christian classical education because the 'best' can be found nowhere but in Christ. The ultimate goal of education is the chief end of man, to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Education aims at this ultimate goal by having knowledge as its end, not practical or even useful knowledge, but knowledge of things that are really worth knowing in themselves, what the Roman and medieval pedagogues called the Liberal Arts. What exactly are those things? Once again, I can't give you a definitive list, but I can mention a few. How about Mathematics? History? Physics? Botany? Theology? Music? Law? or Philosophy? Or, let me suggest another list of what we should learn: ". . . whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if

there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” (Philippians 4:8) These are things worth knowing. These are the best things.

So, I can't tell you exactly what Classical education is, but I can tell you what it seeks and I can tell you about its rootedness in a great conversation, a conversation among the sons of Adam, but ordained and superintended by the God of all history. The true and living God has plainly revealed himself in the creation and spoken to us in his Word. He has created us in his image that we might know him and that we might delight in that knowledge. Ultimately, this is the knowledge and these are the rewards we seek classical education.

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