

What is a Classical Christian Education?

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I would like to accomplish three tasks this evening, the first is to explain what classical Christian education is, the second is to suggest why our world needs classical Christian education, and the third is to propose why parents should choose classical Christian education for their family. To accomplish the first task we have to look at the end or purpose of our education. John Milton, the great 17th century Christian poet wrote in his “Tractate of Education”:

“The end then of Learning is to repair the ruines of our first Parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the neerest by possessing our souls of true vertue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection.”

We seek this end or purpose in classical Christian education, which we share not only with John Milton but tracing back all the way to the first century Church Fathers. Further, we share not only this purpose but we also



share a method, consistent from the first century into the 17th century and now again in the 21st century. This method, the academic arts, which we use to achieve our purpose are the seven Liberal Arts. In that phrase Liberal Arts, “Liberal” means freeing. Arts that make us free in the sense of training us to see or create choices in the situations we find ourselves and then choosing a wise course. Specifically, those arts are divided into two groups, one having to do with Matter or creation and the other having to do with our Minds.

We prepare ourselves to understand Matter or creation through the four arts the Quadrivium (Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy). We may also think of these arts as arts of quantitative reasoning. The Quadrivium teaches us about discrete objects and how they exist in continuity both of time and space. Over the centuries we have added subjects to the Quadrivium as our understanding of Creation has grown, subjects such as Algebra, Trigonometry, Calculus, or Physics, but we are still at a fundamental level teaching our students about discrete objects and how they exist in continuity both of time and space.

We prepare our Minds through the study of the three arts of Language, the Trivium of Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric. These arts teach us that our reason is not a tool of coercive mastery but, to quote Phillip Donnelly, “rather a capacity for peaceful participation in a reality whose goodness is a gift.”[1] Dr. Donnelly goes on to say that Milton understood reason as God’s “poetic gift of peaceful difference.”[2]

- Grammar is the art of utilizing and inventing symbols. “Utilizing” is another way to refer to decoding or reading, and “inventing” is another way to refer to encoding or writing.
- Logic is the art of rational or critical thinking. Isaac Watts called the Art of Logic, “the right use of reason in the inquiry after truth.”[3]
- Rhetoric is the art of persuasive discourse or as Quintilian wrote Rhetoric is the art of a good man speaking well.[4]

The origins of classical education can be traced back before 450 BC and the golden age of Athens. By God's unfathomable grace, he allowed a pagan Athens to understand and introduce the Seven Liberal Arts to a world in desperate need of them. Isocrates wrote that eloquence or the Trivium makes us gentle towards one another, and Plato wrote that mastering Mathematics or the Quadrivium is necessary to be fully human. Both of these pagan Athenians, though they could not articulate the reality, observed the repairing effects of this education.

The Christian origins of classical Christian education derive from the first century Church Fathers who, with every great Christian educator for the next 1600 years, articulate the thoroughly biblical and Christian nature of the Seven Liberal Arts. Men like Boethius and Bonaventure demonstrate how the Liberal Arts of the Quadrivium helps us understand that all of creation reveals to us aspects of God's nature, specifically his power and divinity as Paul writes in Romans chapter one. Men such as Augustine of Hippo and Hugh of St. Victor demonstrate that the Liberal Arts of the Trivium are training students in a Biblical understanding of language, as an image of the Triune God. And we see that God's image exists not only in the larger arts of Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric but in the very nature of a conversation itself—a speaker's presence and choice of words (ethos), the ideas communicated by a speaker to an audience (logos), and the imaginative response of an audience to the ideas and the speaker (pathos). Not only does classical Christian education provide us with the most practical way to understand and teach the language arts but in fact as God's image bearers, most closely image our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Western civilization began to depart from classical Christian education with the coming of the Enlightenment in the middle of the 17th century, not because we discovered a more effective or efficient model of education, but for wholly philosophical and ideological reasons. Time does not allow us to go into detail here, but Enlightenment educators following Enlightenment philosophers, denied the biblical view of man and his gift of language, and eliminated the subjective components of language, ethos and pathos from

language instruction, leaving only the idea (logos) and objectivity. This approach has come to be called “Traditional education,” which we should not confuse with classical Christian education.

Romantic educators, following Romantic poets and philosophers in the 19th century, denied the deification of objectivity the Enlightenment had insisted upon, but instead of remarrying the subjective and objective components of language—eliminated logos, retaining only pathos or ethos depending on one’s romantic emphasis. This approach has come to be called “Progressive education.”

This is where those of us here tonight come in, and I turn to my second task, which is to propose why our world needs classical Christian education.

The truth is that whenever or wherever children are taught language, inherent in that instruction, in the training of the mind that comes with language instruction; those children are also being taught a system of morality and to internalize virtue. Language instruction mirrors language theory. If the theory of language is not aligned with Scripture, then the morality that comes with the instruction cannot be biblical. If we wish to teach true morals we must teach true language. This instruction of true language necessitates what we might call true practice. True practice requires three components. A standard of excellence, rules of obedience, and the achievement of goods—both external and internal goods.[5] External goods are seen—a correctly spelled word, a well-written essay, or comprehension of a text. Internal goods are unseen—the virtues developed in the heart of a child. Internal virtues cannot be imparted through lecture through knowledge alone. They can only be developed by practice, and practice requires standards of excellence or discrete knowledge, rules of obedience or multiple contexts, and the achievement of goods or deep mental cognition. Discrete knowledge, multiple contexts, and deep mental cognition is the pedagogy or methodology of classical Christian education. Within our classical pedagogy true practice is embedded. The achievement of virtue and the resulting morality

is inherent in how we teach the Seven Liberal Arts. Why does our world need classical Christian education? Because our world is in desperate need of virtue.

And now to my final task, why should parents choose classical Christian education for their families. I would like to propose my answer to this question in terms of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, and by suggesting just one each of a multitude of possible goods we could choose from.

Truth—When your children graduate from Whitefield Academy they will have developed the practice or habit of reading for wisdom. The most important use of this habit will of course be in their ongoing reading of their Bibles and resultant advancement of God’s Kingdom in their own lives and the lives of their communities. In addition, when they graduate from Whitefield, they will also have access to the wisdom expressed in the literature of Western Civilization. I read last week that the prominent NPR commentator, Ira Glass, pronounced that Shakespeare is “not relatable.” Yet, for four hundred years there has been almost universal agreement that Shakespeare writes about human experience with profound wisdom and insight that transcends his own time and speaks to every generation about being human. The loss of being able to read and appreciate his plays is a grave blow to our world, our country, and our communities. Your children will always have access to Shakespeare, and all the rest of the great literature, for they are practiced in the art of reading the most difficult of texts.

Goodness—Your children will graduate from Whitefield with the ability to write coherently and cohesively. By that I mean that whether they are writing a college paper, a business email or memo, or just a letter to the editor, they will be able to make a cogent argument and develop that argument with compelling clarity. If your child struggles with writing, contrary to their peers in a traditional or progressive school, they will graduate from Whitefield with that skill to communicate. If your child is gifted in writing,

contrary to their peers in a traditional or progressive school, they will graduate from Whitefield with a set of skills equal to the skills possessed by Milton or Shakespeare when they completed their education in the Seven Liberal Arts. All of your children will possess the poetic gift of peaceful difference.

Beauty—We will delight in students who are practiced in Mind and Matter with the use of language and reason that allows a grateful participation in God’s good gift of creation. Our graduates will not see reason as a fundamentally coercive tool to master the situations and relationships in which they find themselves, but will gain the virtue of imaging to others the peaceful difference emanating from the persons of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They will solve problems, not exacerbate them.

Whitefield restores a quality of Christian education we have not seen for 200 years. Like finding a lush, green oasis in the midst of a parched, barren desert the seven liberal arts of classical Christian education are a wonderful gift to give to our children.

We are implementing in this wonderful school a historic repairing of the “ruines of our first Parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the neerest by possessing our souls of true vertue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection.”

Such an end or purpose is certainly what both our world and our families need at this point in time.