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Sine doctrina vita est quasi mortis imago

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A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Adulthood

by Roy Alden Atwood

College happens.

For better or for worse, a college degree is expected in today's marketplace. Yet the college experience—arguably the most powerful influence on a child's intellectual and spiritual development between the teen years and adulthood—is also the least scrutinized of all levels of education among Christians, including those associated with classical Christian schools.

Parents, teachers, and administrators will obsess over the smallest details of the educational philosophy, curriculum, staffing, and pedagogy of their primary and secondary programs, but suddenly go numb to those concerns when they look to the thirteenth grade. They will demand academic competency and unimpeachable moral integrity from every teacher who crosses their children's paths at school, but shrug off the fact that many of their children's future professors reject biblical authority, defend immorality, and treat the Christian faith with disdain.

Why do we tolerate at the college-level what we would rightly abhor at the primary and secondary levels? Why do we, who have labored so long to help our children recover the lost tools of learning and declare the Lordship of Christ over all of life, knowingly send our children off for the finishing touches of their education to colleges fundamentally at war with the Western tradition and the Christian faith that nourished it?

This disconnect in our thinking between secondary and post-secondary education is truly stunning. And the problem has only grown worse in recent years because parents and educators increasingly hold one or both of the following assumptions:

- that the goal of higher education differs significantly with the goal of primary and secondary education, and/or
- that having received a classical Christian high school education means students are *fully* prepared to “handle” campus secularism and God-hating professors.

Both assumptions are *dead wrong* and are potentially *lethal* to our children and to the future of our classical Christian schools. Examining these assumptions more carefully should loosen the grip of the dominant secular paradigm and help us become better advisors to our covenant children facing college. Hopefully, in the process it will also refresh our own thinking about the goal of classical Christian education at all levels and revive a vision for

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Inside this issue:

Book Review.....	4
Quid Novi.....	6-7
Classifieds.....	5, 8-13
New Members.....	14

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Continued on page 2

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Adulthood

continued from page 1

reformation in every area of life beyond the twelfth grade.

The Goal of Education

The idea that the goal or *telos* of education changes between high school and college was a novel one introduced at the end of the 19th century. Since the Middle Ages, higher education's singular purpose has been the same as education in the younger years: to guide a person through the *paideia* of the Lord into Christian maturity and adulthood by illuminating His works of truth, beauty, and goodness across the ages. Educators did not train them to *do* something, but educated them to *be* someone: a man or woman of unimpeachable Christian character equipped for every good work (Ephesians 2:10). The common goal of virtually all high schools and colleges in America until the 19th century, was to grow up the next generation of covenant children into knowledgeable, wise, and godly adults.

Academic specialization and vocational training came later. They understood that the classical Christian model prepared men and women to succeed in almost any field because they had learned how to learn, how to see relationships between things, how to solve problems, how to reason well, how to work hard. In other words, a classical education from a Christian worldview was career preparation rightly understood for 20 or 30 years down the road, not just for entry level skills.

But we don't view education and career preparation that way today because of what happened in the years following the War Between the States. The philosophy of pragmatism made being "practical" and making things "work" into idols. As theological liberals, pragmatists called students to "seek first job training" and to leave all that kingdom of God and righteousness stuff for later.

Wealthy captains of industry funded scores of colleges and universities to start vocational training programs and research labs. They offered so much cash for teaching "practical skills" that few classical Christian colleges could resist. Soon the liberal arts were reduced to an anemic "core curriculum," and "general education" was reduced to half or less of four year programs.

Land grant colleges were established in every state to revamp higher education as training programs for industry and government. They were also designed to end the dominance of the classical Christian college and to make Christians pay for the new academic secularism with our own tax dollars.

These forces have seriously undermined Christian higher education today and blurred the biblical distinction between education and training. Even historically Christian colleges have become almost indistinguishable from pagan schools in chasing after vocationalism and higher rankings in *U.S. News & World Report*. The result has been the worst of both worlds: students are now poorly trained and poorly educated—and still immature. As the former dean of Harvard College recently observed in his new book, *Excellence Without A Soul: How A Great University Forgot Education*,

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"[Universities] have forgotten that the fundamental job of undergraduate education is to turn eighteen and nineteen-year-olds into twenty-one and twenty-two-year-olds, to help them grow up . . . and to leave college as better human beings" (p. xii).

Overestimating a High School Graduate's Preparation

Classical Christian school graduates are generally better prepared academically for college than government school graduates. But that does not mean they have the maturity or backbone to stand up to today's overwhelming campus secularism. In fact, it takes a lot of *hubris* and naiveté to think that *any* 18-year-old is up to that task just because they went through a classical Christian high school.

The moral corruptions at today's universities are legion. During my 25-plus years in public and private higher education, I have personally witnessed undergraduate professors have affairs with their students, students cheat *en masse* on exams and papers, faculty members lie about their professional record in order to get tenure, an accrediting body reject a Christian college because its commitment to creation *ex nihilo* was deemed "contrary to basic knowledge," and on and on.

The problem is not that sin happens, but that today's postmodern institutions have no meaningful standards by which to distinguish between right and wrong, moral and immoral. And what standards they have are often enforced for ideological reasons. The result is an academic world turned upside down: sin is institutionalized, righteousness vilified. Homosexuals have tax supported campus organizations and a privileged place in the pantheon of "campus diversity," while college administrators forbid Christian professors from even discussing intelligent design in a science class.

Anyone who thinks that our college-bound sons and daughters can "handle" today's campus secularism without serious collateral damage has not been on today's university campuses recently or is not doing their own homework.

Continued on page 3

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Adulthood

continued from page 2

Conclusion: The Cement is Still Wet

The intellectual and spiritual dangers today's colleges pose to Christian students would be less worrisome if new college students were firmly set in their worldview or immune to the forces of darkness. But they are not, and every professor knows it. Professors know better than most just how wet and pliable a college student's cement still is. Even a secularist knows that a college student, when he matures, will become like his teacher.

The idea that Christian students will have more influence on their peers and professors than the other way around would be laughable, if it weren't so tragically misguided. Of course, God protects

His own and He can work miracles, but the missionary-student just out of high school, classical or otherwise, is ill-prepared to face the fierce spiritual warfare waging on university campuses. Secular profes-

sors can see naïve Christian students coming a mile away and they can be very skilled at turning the tables, casting doubts about everything they hold sacred and dear. Many leftist professors, especially, see it as their mission to devour such weak and overconfident evangelicals.

High school graduates may have much on the ball, but they are still young and impres-

sionable. The hard work of nurturing them into mature adults is not done. Leaving that work to a secular campus or Christian college that has swallowed the secular vocational paradigm is not the answer. They are the problem.

As long as Christian parents and teachers and their children blindly follow the dominant paradigm for higher education, secularists will continue to dominate our colleges and universities and the way to Christian maturity and adulthood for our children will remain constricted. The way to bring the next generation into full Christian adulthood is to recover the biblical goal for higher education. That will require creating and supporting a new generation of classical Christian colleges which main-

tain continuity with the good work begun at our primary and secondary classical Christian schools.

The reformation of K-12 education has not happened over night. It has worked like leaven

over the past 25 years. The reformation of higher education may take longer. But we start where we can and ask God to bless our modest efforts. But if we can revive the classical Christian paradigm in higher education, then perhaps there won't be so many funny things happening to our children or our children's children on their way to adulthood.

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For more resources about higher education, see the bibliography posted at www.nsa.edu/community/faculty/atwood.html.

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Dr. Atwood has received many national research and teaching awards. His scholarly research articles and reviews have appeared in various journals published around the world. He has taught a range of courses, including the Research Seminar, Rhetoric Colloquium, Biblical Greek, Philosophy Colloquium and various electives, since NSA was founded.

He and wife Beverlee, the College's Registrar, have been married 33 years and have two married children, five grandchildren—all grandsons!

His full biography can be viewed at www.nsa.edu/community/faculty/atwood.html.