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Sine doctrina vita est quasi mortis imago

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Postmodern Wanderings

by Douglas Wilson

Chesterton once said (Chesterton *always* once said) that the purpose of an open mind was the same as the purpose of an open mouth—it is meant to *close* on something. A man who is not closed in certain respects is a man who was never open in the right kind of way. The apostle Paul once took a jab at a certain kind of woman who did not know this glorious truth, the kind who was always learning and never coming to a knowledge of the truth. Always learning and never arriving.

This principle is important because those of us who are involved in the resurgence of classical and Christian education are not doing this in a void. We are seeking to reestablish this particular kind of education in a postmodern world, one that has lost all its fundamental moorings, which means, I guess, come to think of it, that we *are* trying to do this in a void.

So we really have to watch our step. A perennial temptation for bookish types has always been to enjoy the peace and quiet of the ivory tower. This temptation is ancient, but the world of postmodern flux has given studious types even greater incentives to avoid landing in the truth. Coming to the truth has always been like coming to a lit stick of dynamite. And it has always been the case that quiet academicians (like Calvin) have felt pressure to study the truth in such a way as to avoid colliding with the reigning orthodoxy. And that was Calvin's intention until Farel's hair-curling exhortation that prevailed upon him to remain in Geneva. Searching for the truth faithfully might get you unaligned with the prevailing lie, and so there have always been reasons for keeping your head low. One good way to keep your head low has always been to shove your nose in a book.

But today, we do not so much have a prevailing orthodoxy as a pandemonium of prevailing orthodoxies, and the one epistemological rule is that you must not speak any kind of final word. The pandemonium, the pluralism, the polytheism, must be preserved. You *may* have (indeed, you must have) a place at the table with all the other chattering professors at the University of Athens, but you must never declare that Jesus is Lord over the whole business.

Now throw the resurgence of classical Christian education into this postmodern whirl. There are two ways to approach the situation. One is the way of faithfulness. This is to maintain the antithesis, where the Mars Hill encounter is not to simply add the voice of Paul to that of the Epicureans and Stoics, but rather to *declare* the ultimate and final alternative. What

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CLASSIS

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Paul says in this hubbub of polytheism called Athens is striking: "... but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead." (Acts 17:30b-31.) Note the words: commands, repent, appointed, judge, righteousness, ordained, *assurance*. Because, Paul did *not* add, "this is what works for me."

The other alternative is to treat classical Christian education as one option among many, kind of like the resurgence of retro swing dancing a few years back. In the tornado of postmodern relativism, *lots* of things fly by. There is a cow, for example, and then there is a Honda Accord, and *there* goes a classical Christian school. Here in the tornado, we have lots of options, and ain't it grand? The central characteristic of this kind of classical approach is to go through life with your mouth open, but never to close on anything, never to say, "Ah, at last! *This* is the truth." The point is endless discussion, to be always learning and never coming to a knowledge of the Truth Himself.

The liberal cleric in hell in C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* thinks this way, and Lewis nails it for what it is—posturing.

"... for I will bring you to the land not of questions but of answers, and you shall see the face of God."

"Ah, but we must all interpret those beautiful words in our own way! For me there is no such thing as a final answer. The free wind of inquiry must *always* continue to blow through the mind, must it not? 'Prove all things' ... to travel hopefully is better than to arrive."

"If that were true, and known to be true,

how could anyone travel hopefully? There would be nothing to hope for."

"But you must feel yourself that there is something stifling about the idea of finality? Stagnation, my dear boy, what is more soul-destroying than stagnation?"

"You think that, because hitherto you have experienced truth only with the abstract intellect. I will bring you where you can taste it like honey and be embraced

by it as by a bridegroom. Your thirst shall be quenched."

"Well, really, you know, I am not aware of a thirst for some ready-made truth which puts an end to intellectual activity in the way you seem to be describing. Will it leave me the free play of Mind, Dick? I must insist on that, you know."

"Free, as a man is free to drink while he is drinking. He is not free still to be dry." The Ghost seemed to think for a moment. "I can make nothing of that idea," it said.

And neither can our contemporaries make anything of that idea. But it is our task to experience it, know it, pursue it, love it, and teach it. And we have to teach it as though we wake up in the morning *knowing* that we believe it. The tepid tentativeness of emergent compromisers with postmodernity (whether that tentativeness is real or feigned does not really matter) is a profound capitulation. The same kind of tentativeness is found in those classical Christian educators who want to discuss everything endlessly, one foot nailed to the floor. In short, there are classical Christian educators who are comfortable in our current setting precisely because they are as postmodern as anybody else around here. In a relativist world, anything goes—except a challenge of the relativistic world. For your-

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self, you can do anything you want, and it is encouraged and applauded, no matter how weird. But there is a difference between teaching Latin because “Jesus is Lord” and teaching Latin because “it takes all kinds.”

Good schools are full of truth claims. Godly schools are full of truth claims. Classical Christian schools are full of truth claims. But to pretend that there are severe philosophical problems with all “truth claims,” and to avoid declaring the truth (as in, unapologetically) because of feigned problems with “arid propositionalism” is to simply provide an excuse to those who want to turn their head away from the offered *honey*.

It is not possible to love Jesus Christ without loving the propositions about Him revealed to us by God. We are to love the *words* of God, and if we do not, we do not love the Word of God. We all know of the punctilious scribe, who substitutes true words for the Word, but it is no improvement to go the emergent route, and substitute confused words for the Word. We are to come to God through Christ, and this means *using the means provided to us*. One of the means (not the only means, but one of them) would be the great blessing of dogmatic truth claims. “Jesus died for my sins. Jesus walked on the water. Jesus is the only way to the Father. Jesus cleansed the Temple.” All these are what arcane investigators of paranormal phenomena call true statements. We can put

them in the bank. We can teach them to our children, in every classroom. We can declare them to the world. We can stand in them, or sit on them. And, in these pressing times, we can refuse to apologize for their dogmatic and blunt character. We can give Rorty and Derrida the raspberry. We are Christians, and are not post-anything.

Is arid propositionalism a problem? Sure, and always has been. Are there “truth-oriented” classical Christian schools that do nothing but stuff dry facts into parched heads, with no experience of the sweetness of truth? Certainly, and that’s bad. If you were to ask a certain man if you could meet his wife, and he

color her eyes were, he could not wave off the question with, “Oh, I think it is *much* more important to focus on I-Thou-relationship-encounters than on arid truth-claims. Analytic statements like ‘her eyes are blue,’ or ‘her eyes are gray’ are such *soulless* propositions, you know?” Yeah, right, you hoser.

“Even so faith, if it hath not propositions, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, ‘Thou hast faith, and I have propositions: shew me thy faith without thy propositions, and I will shew thee my faith by my propositions.’” Some might argue that this restatement is leaning in the opposite direction from James’ expressed concerns. So it is, which does not make it false or unnecessary—Paul did it too.

Paul and James were in full fellowship, both their concerns were legitimate, and they extended the right hand to one another. They did this, and what they both wrote is in the Scriptures because sinful men constantly want to veer off in one direction or the other. Paul opposed dead works, and James opposed dead faith.

What they shared was their hostility to *death*.

In our recovery of classical and Christian education, we are confronting all the same issues. We too are opposed to the death that unbelief always brings, however it is decked out. We are opposed to dead truth claims, and we are opposed to dead skepticism about truth claims. Modernity? Postmodernity? A plague on both your houses.

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pulled out a manila folder that was filled with data about her, and admitted that he had not actually talked with *her* for years, you would think you were in a conversation with a moral idiot. And the more propositional facts he substituted for direct knowledge of her, the worse you would think it.

But if a man had lived with his wife for years, and someone asked him one day what

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