

Classical Charter Schools

The one thing they cannot teach changes everything.

“*What will justify your life?*” is engraved over the entrance of Ridgeview Classical School, one of the most successful charter schools in Colorado. The mission of Great Hearts Charter School in Arizona is to graduate “*young men and women who possess a sense of destiny and purpose that is directed to the service of the greater good.*” These, and countless other charter schools across the country have discovered the strength of classical education. Unfortunately, these schools are constrained by a chain that will not allow Christian students to reach these goals.

Let’s look at why.

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are independently operated, but which must still restrict teaching on religion. On the surface, parents and donors see that these schools have curriculum that looks almost like a classical Christian school. They read similar books. They study rhetoric. And, they are free, at least to parents. The conversation doesn’t usually go much further.

But, many great minds in history have argued that these types of schools actually do more harm than good. Why? We’ll need to dig into the essence of classical education to understand the risk.

Classical education is a powerful instrument. Most parents today view classical education as an excellent college preparation that teaches you to think. Others go a little deeper and see a school that teaches citizenship and values. But both of these underestimate what it really achieves and how it really works.

Classical educators agree that education’s purpose is to pursue truth and cultivate something called *paideia* in students.

Paideia has proven to have exceptional power. So what is it? *Paideia* is an ordered set of affections, a base of knowledge and beliefs, a collection of virtues, and a way of seeing the world that is cultivated into children through classical education—at home and at school. *Paideia* is like a worldview on steroids. It translates into the way you live as an adult. The original Greek purpose of intentionally shaping the *paideia* through formal education was to build a

strong culture, pointed toward the “logos”—the key to classical education.

“Truth is the agreement of our ideas with the ideas of God.” Jonathan Edwards

In February of 2013, I was invited to Great Hearts

headquarters in Arizona to view their classical charter school. It was very impressive, but an unusual turn of events shed light on the problem. Earlier that week, I observed a class at a classical Christian school. Students were discussing a passage about midway through Dostoyevsky’s *Brother’s Karamazov*. The discussion was rich with the teacher guiding students through some deep stuff: The burden free will creates, the purpose of suffering in God’s creation, and a beautiful depiction of love as the ultimate conquerer. She framed the work in the theological system of Christianity. The students engaged in a spirited discussion, but they also clung to her course corrections along the way. In this classroom, the Logos was the living person of Jesus Christ.

Later that week, at Great Hearts, I sat in a classroom full of students around a table reading, by some turn of

fate, the same book, near the same passage! What I saw said volumes. The teacher began the discussion and then stepped back. Mormon, Roman Catholic, and a variety of indiscernible views were suggested by students. The teacher could not step in and guide spiritually because he was forbidden to advocate for Christian ideas. Theology is out. And, without theology, philosophy is neutered. All that was left for the students in the class was to pool their youthful “wisdom” and answer questions about ultimate meaning from their 17- and 18-year-old peers. The imbalance of this arrangement was obvious. The *paideia* they will embody will much more approximate the ancient Greek schools than Christian ones. To understand why, we must first understand the Logos.

All forms of Classical education depend on a truth center—“The Logos.” The DNA of classical education—what makes it tick—what makes it work—is the cultivation of a *paideia* that is in pursuit of the Logos. You can see the logos in every classical classroom. Socratic discussion, reading the great books, the pursuit of logic (note the base of this word), the pursuit of rhetoric and many other defining attributes hinge on the Logos, as the school’s center of truth.

Christians should ask what God’s word says about the logos, truth, and education. You are probably aware that John starts out his gospel “In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God ... And the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory ... grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” John is speaking into a classical world that had a strong idea of the importance of the logos. You may not be aware that in Ephesians 6, Paul tells fathers to raise their children in “the *paideia* of the Lord.” **Our instructions for education are pretty clear—cultivate in children the *paideia* of the Lord by pursuing the truth system of Jesus Christ (the Logos).**

But, the classical connection goes deeper. Jesus said something vital to every Christian pursuing classical education: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one reaches the father except by me.” And, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” To our modern ears, we hear Jesus talking about what it takes to be saved. But in His time, His audience understood it differently. A significant segment of his audience were hellenistic Jews or Greeks who pursued a “way” based on the philosophic school they held to. Jesus was talking about pursuing His way to live life abundantly. Today, we would call this “to thrive” or “to flourish” or “to live the good life.” These are just what classical education pursues—in Jesus’ time and now.

At the time Jesus said the words above, a Jewish Stoic philosopher had widespread influence over the Jewish people and the Roman world—Philo of Alexandria. So, Jesus addressed his stoic ideas head-on.

The Stoics believed in a life “lived” according to a “way” that led to “truth.” Their idea of the divine “truth” was the logos. The logos represented the ideas, the language, the design of the universe. But, the logos wasn’t a person, or even a personal god. In John 1, we see that Jesus

stood the whole idea of the logos on end when he claimed to be The Logos. Jesus was the very logos of God—God’s ideas, God’s thoughts, God’s actual son. So, when Jesus said he was “the way,” he meant more than he was the path to God. He adds “the Truth and the life” to make his point clear.

If Jesus is the Logos, and the Truth, how can classical charter schools claim to pursue either of these things? Jesus is off limits in the charter classroom.

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comes exceptional danger. Classical schools have a divine center by which they train students. Other schools don't need this. Public or common Christian schools today cultivate what the Greeks would have called a weak *paideia*. By this, they meant that you can teach children mere knowledge and skills like engineering or business with relative neutrality. This creates a benign *paidea* without much influence. But if you want to cultivate influential leaders (a strong *paideia*), you need classical education. The danger of classical charter schools, cut off from the truth system of Christ, is that you create a powerful engine (*paideia*) that does not view the world rightly. This can cause a devastating wobble.

When the object of a school changes, the whole educational basis changes. Westpoint is a college whose object is to train soldiers. If that object were to change to training politicians, it would be a very different institution. Jesus Christ is not a part that can be safely extracted from classical education and taught at home. He's integral to the nature of the thing. If you remove Him, you create the ugliness of a person without a face, of a soul without love, a truth without the author of truth. It simply doesn't work.

We've been warned. Martin Luther said, *"I am much afraid that schools will prove to be the great gates of hell unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures, engraving them in the hearts of youth."*

C.S. Lewis is said to have used the term "*clever devils*" to refer to those likely to graduate from schools that fail to recognize God. Clearly, classical charter education has the potential to develop students who are excellent rhetoricians, excellent thinkers, and excellent artists but who aren't quite sure how Christ relates to any of these. Worse yet, they will implicitly understand the world without Christ.

But, if parents can only afford a classical charter school with an impersonal logos, isn't that better than nothing?

Unlike other forms of education, classical charter schools exist in a state of tension. Charters can teach the Bible as literature, but not as a truth system. Parents can interject Jesus in their homes. But charters cannot "take every thought captive to Christ." There's a hidden and dangerous cost to this compromise.

With so much at stake, we may need to ask why classical charters are so popular? Pragmatism says "if you can't afford the real deal, the next best thing is charter classical schools."

Jesus said "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added." What things? Clothing, money, food ... education. But, when we enroll our children in a charter classical school, we're not pursuing the Kingdom first. And, with one quick reading of the Old Testament, you can hardly miss a major theme: Do what you may, do what you might, but do not, under any circumstances, forget God. God is jealous. God says to trust in Him, not to trust in the next best thing.

A friend of mine is a consultant for classical schools, and he once visited me while consulting for a classical

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charter school in our area. I asked him, "What is their center? Without Christ, what do they point students toward as an ultimate source of truth?" "The Logos" he replied. But, I protested, "what keeps them from going right back where the Greeks did, to despair?" I think he said, "I guess we'll see." For my children, no matter how attractive the school, I just can't accept "we'll wait and see."

Classical charters present another problem for Christian donors and organizers—they are naturally linked to the statutes of the state in which they operate, and the federal courts. The interpretation of the Constitution by our courts is increasingly hostile to conservatives and Christianity. State regulations can change quickly. Once parents and donors have committed to these types of schools, they are "in for a penny, in for a pound." It's very

likely that the future will hold new regulations related to Common Core, LGBT issues, Bible literacy instruction, and as yet unknown restrictions. A classical charter school has already been shut down on these grounds.

Classical charters control their hiring to a point, but they offer a “public good” and they are not religious, so they will fall under most local anti-discrimination laws that includes LGBT and religious categories. Students at charters must typically be chosen by lottery, not by entrance standards. This presents another problem. The student body is the “third leg” of education, effecting the very nature of a school. These realities will continue to compromise classical education within these schools.

One final observation: From before 400 AD to about 1750, classical education had Christ as the Logos. Then, the enlightenment happened. If you look at the leading schools in about 1800, you’ll note they are classical with a deistic god as the logos. By the mid 1800s, the common American school had rationalism as its logos.

Around 1900, the schools took a decided shift away from classical methodology, which abandoned the logos altogether for a more pragmatic form. This led us to the vacuous K-12 education of today. Retracing our steps back to those deistic or rationalistic classical schools 200 years ago likely places us back on the same on-ramp. We’ll be back to our present situation momentarily. I prefer investment that has a longer track record of success—the medieval form of classical Christian education.

So, can a charter school produce *“young men and women who possess a sense of destiny and purpose that is directed to the service of the greater good”*? Can righteousness exist apart from Christ? Can we get a healthy sense of destiny or purpose with an impersonal logos as our objective? Can we serve the greater good when we don’t know the author of the plan? Are we asking students to “justify their life” without knowing the only One who can justify?

It seems these charter classical schools know they’re about something big—something eternal. But the length of their chain keeps them from the true power of a Christian paideia. Engraved above the door at my former school, it reads *“Take Every Thought Captive to Christ.”* This,

too, is an impossible task. But we are free to pursue it. And in the pursuit, students are formed to pursue Christ in all things, throughout their lives. This formation is why classical Christian schools exist.

Jonathan Edwards observed that *“Truth is the agreement of our ideas with the ideas of God.”* G.K. Chesterton said that *“Education is not a subject and does not deal in subjects, it is instead a transfer of a way of life.”* What way of life do you want to transfer to your children? What Truth do you want them to know? We at the ACCS realize that private education is out of reach for some. And, we work daily to help make it available to more Christians. There are online options and homeschool options. But we implore you to seek the Kingdom first. We know that the Lord honors those who honor Him. Soli Deo Gloria.

David Goodwin, ACCS President