

# TEXTS AND TIMING

by Douglas Wilson, Christ Church

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I have been in the thick of the classical Christian school movement from the very start of it, and I like to think I have been around. I have been to all the ACCS conferences. I have browsed more vendor tables than Carter's got pills. I have visited numerous classical Christian schools, both the start-ups and the established ones. I have served on the board of Logos School from the beginning, have taught numerous classes at Logos, and in my role at New St. Andrews, have taught many alums of classical Christians schools (and home schools) from around the country. I am a close observer, and a big fan.

So if I were to make one *academic* criticism, what would it be?

There is a very pronounced tendency within the classical Christian school movement to emphasize texts over timing. What do I mean? When this problem happens, the badge of the classical education provided is the mere presence of the "great books" in the curriculum, and the sooner the better. As classical schools start to compete with one another (which can be healthy within limits), one way to do this is by moving the great books

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up to an earlier point in the curriculum. And this is how you wind up teaching Boethius to sixth-graders.

This in turn starts to create other problems. Ironically, to accelerate the pace of learning in this way is to disregard Dorothy Sayers' great insight on the *timing* relevance of each stage of the Trivium. A big part of the reason why classical education can get such powerful results when done right is that you deliver the right material at the right time. It is not enough to have the right tennis ball. It needs to hit the sweet spot on the racket. A thorough classical education in a Christian context is about both material and pacing. We are talking about both texts *and* timing.

One problem is that the students choke on it. And the problem is not the book itself, the problem is the timing. If material from the dialectic stage is pushed down into the grammar stage, the kids will not process it well. The

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same is true of material from the rhetoric stage pushed earlier. What would be edifying and enjoyable when taught at the appropriate time becomes at best a chore and at worst an affliction.

If the students stick around through their logic course in junior high, they will learn, or should learn, what is happening to them. The fallacy is called affirming the consequent. True classical learning is hard. This thing I am doing right now is hard. Therefore, this thing I am doing right now is true classical learning. But it followeth no way. Eating a bowl of driveway gravel is also hard, but that is not true classical learning either.

Some students don't make it through. They assume they are not good or smart enough to make the grade, or that classical education is a scam being run on parents who for some reason want to send their children to a school for show poodles. They leave with a bad taste in their mouth, soured on the whole thing. *Blech*.

Other students make it through, but have simply done a difficult thing, which prepares them for the next difficult thing, which is admittance to a prestigious college. They do their chores because they are good kids and know that we were not put into this world for pleasure alone. They have a certain kind of smart going for them, a will-that-be-on-the-test? kind of smart, but they are not acquiring any kind of real *love* for what they are learning.

When they graduate from their classical Christian high school in this frame of mind, they do so believing that they have now "done that." It has been checked off the list. They have read Homer. Sure, they did it before they could mentally chew and digest and enjoy any of it, but they *did* it. When the prospect of going to a school like New St. Andrews is raised, they recoil. You expect me to do all that *again*? That reaction misses the point almost entirely, and it is an indicator that the school providing such alums may *also* be missing the point almost entirely.

But of course, a K–12 course of study is preparation

for a lifetime of learning. The students are being given the tools of learning. They are practicing their tools on good materials, but those materials are capable of repaying return visits, and repaying them with interest. They can do so for the rest of their life.

In his great work, *Experiment in Criticism*, C.S. Lewis argues that a book should be rated by whether or not it attracts return readers. Who wants to read that book again? We do not evaluate algebraic skills in the same way. I learned certain things about math in high school that I still use today, but on rainy Saturdays I don't go back to browse through old math textbooks. That math skill—for most people at any rate—is something you learn, and then you use. There is a difference between learning such skills in high school, and being introduced to the Brandenburg Concertos in high school.

If someone dismissed an invitation to listen to a glorious piece of music because they had "done that" at some time in his life before, we might be excused for thinking that whatever he had been doing before, he had not done *that*.

So in my view, the fruit of a solid basic education is being challenged from *two* directions. The first is the obvious one. Those who fail to provide such an education are the adversaries of it. Students cannot receive what no one offers to give them. But a second challenge to classical education is coming from well-meaning classical educators, and it is being done in the name of classical education. There is a better way, one that pays close attention to *pacing*. The classroom should be life-giving milk for the students, and one of the things Scripture teaches us to do with milk is to not cook the kids in it (Ex. 23:19).