

# FIVE TEMPTATIONS FOR CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

*by Brian Douglas, All Saints Presbyterian Church*

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Having taught at a classical Christian school for five years and followed the classical Christian education movement for some years prior, I have come to believe that it is the best approach to K—12 education available today.

Due to its understanding of education as the reshaping of a child's soul (in contrast to "discovery" models of education, for example), the method tends to develop thinkers defined by who they are instead of workers defined by what they do. Its focus on the Great Conversation gives students respect for history and helps them see themselves as contributors to that conversation. Unlike inward-facing fundamentalist approaches to education, this movement does not shy away from the world, but instead teaches students to interact thoughtfully with contemporary culture.

Classical Christian schools do these and many other things well, and consequently their numbers, acceptance, and influence are on the rise. However, as this form of education comes of age, it needs to be wary of certain temptations. Five specific cautions come to mind.

The first temptation is to overemphasize mistaken notions of success. The bigger our schools grow, the more respected a faculty we attract, the better we implement a Trivium-based curriculum, and the more accomplished our graduates become, the more we will be tempted to slip

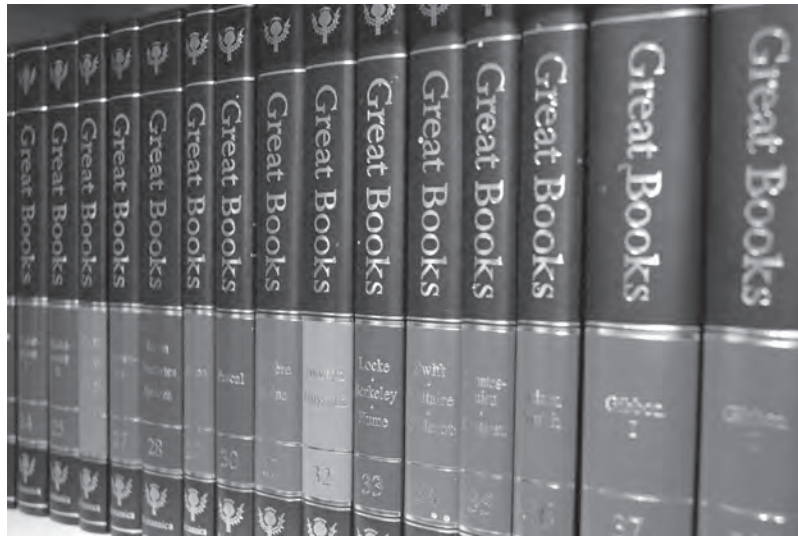
into something of a prep school mentality. Staff members and families begin to think of their school as an elite academic institution, one that produces a better "product" (by whatever measure) than others in the area.

In contrast to a more "successful" classical Christian school, less established schools may feel inferior because they lack the appearance or reputation of other schools. They might yearn for the facilities and programs that they see as their ticket to being an elite school: "If only we had . . ." It is easy for any educator to mistake the trappings of education for education itself.

The history of the movement demonstrates that amazing things can be done despite want, but as our schools grow richer, the temptation grows to consider these things the keys to success. Buildings, labs, athletics, the best materials, and other tangible things are good and helpful (and probably even necessary), but they can become the same kind of covetous idolatry that Israel displayed when it asked God for a king. Our focus must always be on the one thing that actually determines our success—God's power and promises.

Mistaken notions of success are best revealed by our attitude toward our graduates. When they are prominent and successful, we hold them up as evidence that our school is prominent and successful. We must be doing

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something right, the argument goes. But when graduates fall short of our expectations, we feel the need to explain them away: they failed because of family influences, they had spent years in public schools, they had a weak church background, etc.

The reality is that our students are like our own children. Parents know that even if they do everything in their power to bring their children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, whether or not the children ultimately have genuine Christian faith is beyond our control. Likewise, teachers can guide students toward God, but only the work of the Holy Spirit in their souls can make them into the kind of Christ-honoring graduates that we would like to produce.

Instead of lifting up our best students as proof that we are doing things “the right way,” our response to their success should be gratitude. God be praised for His work in the lives of these students, in many cases despite our flaws. Rather than feeling ashamed of less successful students, we should pray that the seeds once planted would come to life by God’s grace. The idea that they are evidence of our failure reveals an errant and unhealthy understanding of success.

The second temptation is to believe that academic rigor plus disciplined behavior equals a good education. It is easy for a classical Christian school to become known more for its uniforms, homework expectations, strictness,

and the like, than for its gracious, loving environment. Yet we ought not treat education like a simple input-output situation, in which the right learning environment can program our students to be Christians. While students do need high expectations for their work and conduct, focusing on order becomes hazardous when it overtakes the joy of experiencing God’s grace. When this happens, students may learn to jump through the hoops, obey the rules, do the right things, but they do not learn to love God and others. That is moralism, the worst enemy of true Christianity.

Creating a truly gracious classroom is much harder than creating an orderly classroom. It is a challenge that requires spiritual preparation far beyond classroom management techniques. But the only Christian education is a thoroughly gracious education. It sounds so basic, but it remains true: without God’s grace, we can only produce narcissists who are more focused on their own successes and failures than on the eternal reality of God’s love for His people.

The third temptation is to rely on ourselves rather than on God’s work in the hearts of students. It is easy for classical Christian schools to feel like we have the moral high ground in the midst of a fallen culture. After all, anyone who seeks out such a school believes it to be superior to other systems, especially secular ones. But the people of Israel are warned to not trust in their own

goodness; it is not because of their own virtue that they will conquer the land.

The same is true for our schools. We will not successfully overhaul the education system just because we have the right methodology. Education cannot be reduced to a formula, even if the formula is a good one. Education is ultimately God's work in the soul of a child, and forgetting that fact leads some educators to feel inadequate. We err frequently, do things for the wrong motives, misjudge students academically and spiritually, and fall short of the glory of God.

Focusing too much on our educational methods will lead us to despair. Self-assessment can easily leave us feeling either too strong or too weak. We praise our own accomplishments, and we feel inadequate based on what qualifications we lack. Whether our response is overconfidence or despair, anything but faith in God's power and promises is idolatry. Our strength is from the Lord and not ourselves; He will accomplish His ends despite both our strengths and our weaknesses. We must remind ourselves, if God is not blessing our work as educators, then no measure of training, skill, or finances can overcome that. But if He is blessing our labors by changing our students' lives, then nothing can overcome that either.

The fourth temptation is to neglect the Word of God. Although it may sound counter-intuitive, classical Christian schools need to integrate the Bible into our entire curriculum. Some in these education circles criticize other Christian schools for having what amounts to a secular curriculum with a Bible class on the side. The complaint is that this approach functionally teaches a secular-sacred divide that undermines real Christian faith and practice.

While this complaint has merit in many cases, we need to take care lest our schools fall into the same pit. Unless we carefully integrate biblical education throughout the entire curriculum, across every subject and grade, it would be very easy for our graduates to know more about Achilles and Dante than Abraham and David. The Word of God is

our source for God's wisdom; without it we only have the wisdom of man.

The final temptation is to assume that a classical Christian school will automatically influence a student more than the broader culture. We should pay careful attention to our students' long-term goals, for they most clearly reveal the depth of the culture's influence. Students tend toward materialistic goals because that is what they learn from the culture around them. Overcoming the intrusion of materialism into our schools is probably the biggest obstacle a Christian educator faces.

Students are humans, and humans are perpetual factories of idols. Every student brings some variety of idolatry into the classroom. The most common and most subversive idols are divine gifts that become valued above God Himself: intelligence, finances, skills, moral goodness, even a good Christian education.

Although this kind of culture conflict is a problem for Christian education of every variety, it might be a more striking problem in classical schools because of the expectation that our graduates will be uniquely equipped to stand against the world and change the culture. That said, classical Christian education is perhaps also uniquely capable of addressing the conflict because it defines education in terms of the health of a student's soul rather than the strength of a student's skills.

The primary job of every Christian educator, regardless of grade level or subject matter, is to shape the heart. We should begin by warning students about the subtleties of pride in both its forms: arrogance and despair. We must teach them to think less of their own abilities and more of God's. It will be difficult, but it is even more central to the goals of classical Christian teaching than the Trivium or the Great Books. The only way we can accomplish our task as educators is to demonstrate with our own lives that a truly successful life is one in which God is glorified for His faithfulness and love regardless of our personal performance.