

REIGNITING EXCELLENCE: WHY CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

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Recently, the Gospel Coalition (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-exponential-growth-of-classical-christian-education/>) published an article touting the amazing academic progress made in an inner-city school where most had not graduated high school and the ones who did read at an eighth-grade level. The instructional method utilized in this amazing, turnaround school? The classical Christian educational method.

If you are reading this article, you already have a vested interest in classical Christian education. Whether a parent, teacher, administrator or board member of a school practicing this instructional method, you have embarked on a journey to reignite excellence in education.

And well so. The classical Christian method encompasses the seven liberal arts of grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music; liberal from the Latin *liber* meaning “free” meaning the virtuous, wise, and self-controlled man is free toward self-governance. As the Apostle Paul stated in Galatians 5:23, against such there is no law. Our founding Fathers understood this, as John Jay, First Supreme Court Justice, stated, our system of liberty and self-governance was designed for a Christian nation with elected Christian rulers. Or as John Adams, second president of the U.S. stated, our system of liberty and self-governance with

the Bible as its basis would be wholly unsuitable for any group other than a virtuous, Christian people.

And to that end, a couple of working definitions: The *Christian educator* believes we are called to teach Truth, Goodness (Godliness), and Beauty. Teaching is a calling to parents first and the church (Ephesians 6:4 and Deuteronomy 6:4–7). Teaching as a profession is a calling (Ephesians 4:11–16). There is Truth and God’s Word reveals it (John 17:17). Virtue is to be co-taught with knowledge (2 Peter 1:5–8). We are commanded to think on things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8).

The *classical educator* teaches a man to fish by providing the tools of learning and inculcating the joy of learning.

The *classical Christian educator* accomplishes *both*—molding the heart toward God and inculcating discernment of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty through tried and true methods of teaching. Our Founding Fathers are a good example; so are 1800s reading lists from eighth-grade classrooms compared to modern lists (<https://thefederalistpapers.org/us/middle-school-reading-lists-100-years-ago-vs-today-show-how-far-american-educational-standards-have-declined>).

Again, the method of instruction we are discussing has been around for hundreds of years. In my doctoral

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dissertation, I trace it back to the Essentialists such as William Chandler Bagley in the 1920s. It was only after the Progressive movement took over teacher colleges and John Dewey's teachings became prevalent starting in the 1930s and 1940s that public education started shifting away from the idea that children need molding and disciplining, guiding into maturity. Instead, our culture fell for the child-centered, if-it-feels-good-do-it mentality that erupted in our society in the 1960s. Prayer and the Bible were banned from the public square and as a society we began to lose our moral compass.

If we are to recover that moral compass, we must reignite educational excellence through a rediscovery of the centrality of Truth. There is Truth and we know where to find it and we are called to teach it to the next generation (Deuteronomy 6 and Ephesians 6).

How will we reignite Truth in education? It can be accomplished through that tried and true method of the Trivium, as explained by Dorothy Sayers in her famous essay, "The Lost Tools of Learning," which expresses what child development researcher Jean Piaget and any parent can observe about how young children learn.

It is both a model and a method, teaching with the grain of the child's God-given makeup. Playing to our strengths, as it were. In a 2010 Liberty University dissertation (Leading Classical Christian Schools: Job Satisfaction, Job Efficacy, and Career Aspirations), E. J. Dietrich observed that classical Christian methodology "differs significantly from postmodern American education" in that "children are taught how to think and learn rather than viewed as great silos that need to be filled to capacity with information" (pp. 28–29).

And as I emphasize in my doctoral dissertation, you can find echoes of the Trivium model for instruction in the Bible:

The Trivium emphasizes mastery learning: from milk to meat—1 Corinthians 3:2, 1 Peter 2:2, and Hebrews 5:13; putting away childish things as a man—1 Corinthians 13:11, the Scriptures learned as a child helps

develops wisdom—2 Timothy 3:15. And why not? Our Maker designed our brains and our faculties and showed us how best to learn. He revealed it in His Word. As a culture, we are rediscovering and reigniting those God-given tools and insights.

My doctoral dissertation, soon available through Liberty University, was a quantitative, statistical analysis of averaged school scores on the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test or PSAT. This carries more weight in academic circles than anecdotal, or self-reported statistics as found on the ACCS and other school websites. What I found in my statistical analysis was evidence for academic excellence in schools utilizing the classical Christian method of instruction. Specifically, in my study, taking a random sampling from schools responding to a headmaster survey providing year-by-year averaged school scores, I found that schools using the classical Christian method scored significantly higher on the PSAT than Christian schools not utilizing the classical Christian method. Through additional analysis, the predicted magnitude of the difference was high and the amount of the difference attributable to instructional method was compelling (more than 40 percent in reading, more than 30 percent in writing, and more than 20 percent in math).

This compares to the recently reported January 2018 *Education Week* K–12 national score card of "C" with scores mostly from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/01/17/nations-schools-stuck-in-average-range-on.html>).

The good news is that private schools, for the most part, are not accounted for in the NAEP.

But test scores are not all we are after as Christian parents and educators, correct? With more than 27 years of scholarly statistical analysis of Christian worldview retention among high school students, the Nehemiah Institute reports that children from Christian households only grow up retaining a Christian

worldview if they are taught from that perspective. Public school, where religious views are minimized, scores about 5% retention in 2015; mainstream Christian schools score only a little bit better at about 15%; homeschoolers are at about 50% retention, but the only two instructional methods that have 70% or better retention of Christian worldview—that is they think of everything from a Biblical perspective—are the classical Christian method and the Principle Approach. You can find much more material like this on their website <http://www.nehemiahinstitute.com/> and access to statistical analysis.

The implications of my doctoral study reach far beyond current classroom instruction. In order to fulfill our calling to teach Truth, Goodness (Godliness), and Beauty along with the tools of learning and associated joys, we must improve teacher training. We must found more institutions training teachers in the classical Christian method and philosophy. We must inspire more Christian researchers to identify which variables may hold the most promise as correlated to standardized test performance and biblical worldview retention.

We must reignite the educational fire Plutarch praised while molding young hearts toward the Good and guiding them from times of milk to digesting meat. We must recognize we are held to a higher account (James 3:1). Let us remember the Apostle Paul's admonition to not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart (Galatians 6:9, NKJV).