

## The Uniqueness of Classical Christian Education

### Education for True Citizenship

“Since for the most part the nature of man inclines towards evil, and furthermore no nature is so blessed at birth that it cannot be corrupted by perverse training, how can you expect anything but evil from a prince who, whatever his nature at birth ... is subjected from the very cradle to the most stupid ideas and spends his boyhood among silly women and his youth among ... degenerate comrades, the most shameless flatterers, buffoons, ... and pleasure-mongers as foolish as they are worthless. In this company he hears nothing, learns nothing, and takes in nothing except pleasure, amusement, pride, arrogance, greed, irascibility, and bullying.

-Erasmus in *The Education of a Christian Prince* <sup>1</sup>

Erasmus recognized in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that a true leader needs a true education. Although not all of our children are going to become high-level leaders, they can all become true citizens. But this is no automatic process, especially in our modern age when most kids are exposed from the cradle to a society filled with stupid ideas, degeneracy, pleasure-seeking, and much more. How do we counter these forces in our children’s lives?

#### 1. Exposure to Beautiful and Enduring Things

While knowledge is an important bedrock in a child’s life, the kinds of things that a child enjoys, loves, and seeks are perhaps even more important in directing their path in life. We cannot determine a child’s passions—but we can expose him to things worth loving.

It is no sin to read cheesy novels, but if you happen to enjoy good literature, you are better off for a number of reasons. Good literature elevates and enlightens us, vigorously exercises our brain, and increases our empathy. So if you have learned to love good literature, you will naturally and abundantly pursue good literature and thus reap its rewards.

This idea can be extended to many aspects of life, including art, food, clothes, music, and more. What we enjoy becomes an ordering force for our lives.

“Taste and elegance, though they are reckoned only among the smaller and secondary morals, yet are of no mean importance in the regulation of life. A moral taste is not of force to turn vice into virtue; but it recommends virtue

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Gamble, Richard, Ed. *The Great Tradition; Classic Readings on What It Means to be an Educated Human Being*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007. Pg. 367.

with something like the blandishments of pleasure; and it infinitely abates the evils of vice. -Edmund Burke<sup>2</sup>

Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder—it is an absolute, something determined by God because beauty gains its meaning as a reflection of God’s beauty. The apostle Paul was not thinking of a toilet in a modern art museum when he entreats us in Philippians to think on those things that are lovely. It is controversial today to apply this same logic to music. However, I would similarly argue that Plato was not thinking about rap music when he said that, “rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace.”<sup>3</sup>

At a classical school, children hear music that has withstood the test of time. They read literature that inspires big questions. They dress with modesty and decorum. They gaze upon art from the masters of Western Civilization rather than pondering the newest statement of modern art. They memorize classic poetry, the Gettysburg address, and other foundational passages of our society. Will each child grow to love all these things? Certainly not. But exposure to what is beautiful forms a person and provides a different frame of reference than if that child begins with a reference point celebrating the new, the provocative, the different, and the attention-getting.

## 2. Education to Be a True Citizen

Then let us not leave the meaning of education ambiguous or ill-defined. At present, when we speak in terms of praise or blame about the bringing-up of each person, we call one man educated and another uneducated, although the uneducated man may be sometimes very well educated for the calling of a retail trader, or of a captain of a ship, and the like. For we are not speaking of education in this narrower sense, but of that other education in virtue from youth upwards, which makes a man eagerly pursue the ideal perfection of citizenship, and teaches him how rightly to rule and how to obey. This is the only education which, upon our view, deserves the name; that other sort of training, which aims at the acquisition of wealth or bodily strength, or mere cleverness apart from intelligence and justice, is mean and illiberal, and is not worthy to be called education at all.

-Plato<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Gamble, Richard, Ed. *The Great Tradition; Classic Readings on What It Means to be an Educated Human Being*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007. Pg. 495.

<sup>3</sup> Plato. *The Republic*. Book III. 401d.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Gamble, Richard, Ed. *The Great Tradition; Classic Readings on What It Means to be an Educated Human Being*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007. Pg. 16.

Most people today would fall into Plato's definition of uneducated. According to a 2012 survey of native-born American adults from the Center for the Study of the American Dream at Xavier University:<sup>5</sup>

- 75 percent did not know the function of the judicial branch.
- 71 percent were unable to identify the Constitution as the supreme law of the land
- 62 percent could not identify the Governor of their state.
- 77 percent could not name one power of the states.
- 82% could not name two rights stated in the Declaration of Independence

You can be a great engineer, or an accomplished doctor, and not be educated in the sense Plato talks about. To be truly educated, you need to be prepared for full citizenship, to know how to “rightly rule and to rightly obey”—both predicated on being fundamentally oriented to our society. How are we governed? What is our history?

In addition to knowing these fundamental facts, being a truly educated person involves being able to participate in what Os Guinness calls the “great conversation” which is “the Western contribution to the ongoing discussion of the primary themes of life and death, right and wrong, triumph and tragedy, which we all confront in being human.”<sup>6</sup> This discussion happens through the classic works of the Western Canon.

### 3. Cultural Renewal

Most Christians have their children in public school, and one of the major reasons for this after the cost of private education is the opportunity for evangelism. Critics of private Christian education say that Christians ought to be salt and light to the public school system. The question we should consider is whether that model of evangelism is working. On the surface, it seems that the pagan culture is using the public schools as an evangelistic tool on Christian children more successfully than vice versa.

This idea of sending Christian children to public schools as an outreach tool fails to account for how our society currently perceives dissent. We live in a time when dissent against the mainstream doctrine of tolerance is not tolerated. A philosophy professor offering a thoughtful analysis of how radical feminism has challenged the boundary between sexes leading to transgenderism's challenge to gender itself was recently excoriated as a white

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<sup>5</sup> Xavier University. One in Three One in Three Americans Fail Immigrant Naturalization Civics Test. April 27, 2012. Available at: [https://www.xavier.edu/campusuite25/modules/news.cfm?seo\\_file=One-in-Three-Americans-Fail-Immigrant-Naturalization-Civics-Test&grp\\_id=319#.WfDX2YhrzIU/](https://www.xavier.edu/campusuite25/modules/news.cfm?seo_file=One-in-Three-Americans-Fail-Immigrant-Naturalization-Civics-Test&grp_id=319#.WfDX2YhrzIU/). Accessed 10/25/2017.

<sup>6</sup> Cowan, Louise, and Guinness, Os Eds. *An Invitation to the Classics; A Guide to Books You've Always Wanted to Read*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998. Pg 13.

supremacist responsible for inciting the neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville.<sup>7</sup> If a philosopher offering a logical and articulate analysis of the world of ideas is publicly humiliated for his dissent - how do we expect our children to speak up against modernity's sacred cows in their own classrooms?

Classical Christian education is evangelistic in a different sense. It provides a beacon of light in a dark culture. It is salt to a decaying world. Os Guinness writes that, "With the Western world at large urgently needing renewal, we should all remember that great periods of renaissance and reformation spring from a return to first things. [The classics'] capacity to restore is fundamental to our continuing liberty and vitality."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to being a beacon of hope in our current tumultuous times, classical Christian schools are also an anchor to help the Christian community. Rod Dreher expresses this eloquently in *The Benedict Option*:

Education not only has to reset our relationship to ultimate reality, it also must reestablish our connection to our history. That is, education is key to the recovery of cultural memory. The deeper our roots in the past, the more secure our anchor against the swift currents of liquid modernity. The greater our understanding of where we came from, the more securely we can stand in the post-Christian present, and the more confidently we can chart a course for the post-Christian future.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

Bernard of Chartre said, "We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than [our predecessors], and things at a greater distance, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are carried high and raised up by their giant size."<sup>10</sup>

But we cannot stand on the shoulder of giants if we don't take the time to participate in this conversation and learn what has already been said. It is through exposure to beautiful things that we learn to love beautiful and enduring things. It is through reading the classics that we are able to synthesize logic, philosophy, and history and answer enduring questions of

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<sup>7</sup> Shapiro, Ben. "The Purge: Scott Yenor and the Witch Hunt at Boise State." *The Weekly Standard*. Oct. 18, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Cowan, Louise, and Guinness, Os Eds. *An Invitation to the Classics; A Guide to Books You've Always Wanted to Read*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998. Pg 13.

<sup>9</sup> Dreher, Rod. *The Benedict Option; A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. New York, New York: Sentinel, 2017. Pg. 152.

<sup>10</sup> Ratcliffe, Susan, Ed. *Oxford Essential Quotations* (4 ed.) Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. 2016.

meaning, purpose, morality, humanity, government and so on. It is through deepening our children's roots that they will be able to stand fast and anchor themselves against the threatening storm clouds in post-Christian society.