

HOPE WELL: LESSONS FROM A HISTORIC BAPTIST CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

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Many people are under the impression that Baptists historically have been anti-education. There is some degree of historical truth to the stereotype. In England, John Gill told Samuel Davies in 1753 that the English Calvinistic Baptists of his day, on the whole, were “unhappily ignorant of the Importance of learning.”¹ Nor was education a major priority to American Baptists in the eighteenth century. There are several reasons for this attitude. For one thing, there simply were not enough of them around to establish many schools. Some Baptists also were suspicious of an educated clergy, concerned that it led to a dry spirituality. Nor was it lost on these Baptists that the Anglican ministers persecuting them were highly educated.

Edward Wallin of London illustrated this thinking in a letter he wrote to Elisha Callendar of Boston in 1720:

*Surely a man blessed with good natural genius, who has been brought to a true sense of sin, and the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, though he should want the advantage of human literature, must be better capable than one that has it, and is destitute of the other, to guide souls into the way of salvation . . . Therefore, though I have a high esteem for human learning, and wish every minister had the advantage of a good degree of it, yet I conceive it is far from being necessary to a man's being employed in the public ministry.*²

Yet this attitude didn't tell the whole story. Despite their erstwhile rhetoric, by their actions, the early Baptists demonstrated that they believed in education. Both here in America and back in England, many notable figures in Baptist history were associated with education. Andrew Fuller, the preeminent eighteenth century Baptist theologian, was a school teacher before he became a minister.³ The first Baptist missionary, William Carey, opened a school before departing England for India. Indeed, his language education helped birth his love for missions. “He thirsted for knowledge and showed remarkable ability to learn, especially languages.”⁴

According to McBeth, in the United States, “[b]efore 1800 a number of . . . Baptist academies had been founded at different places, usually by pastors who had some education and realized its importance and who needed to supplement their income.”⁵ Baptist associations at Philadelphia, Charleston, and Warren all established funds or committees for the encouragement of education.

Moreover, even if Baptists could not establish their own schools, this does not mean they did not value learning. Students interested in ministry would live with the local Baptist pastor in an apprenticeship, thus, as McBeth put it, “combining the advantages of classical and practical learning.”⁶ Such historical figures as J.R.

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Graves were school teachers.⁷ Richard Furman received a classical education at home, having memorized the first book of the *Iliad* by age 7.⁸

Concededly, information about Baptists and classical education is hard to come by. We have tantalizing statements in dusty, old Baptist history books, but few details. J.H. Spencer, for example, says that Elijah Craig, a Baptist minister, established the first classical school in Kentucky at Georgetown in 1788. But the reference is only in passing.⁹

THE HOPEWELL ACADEMY

We do know a bit more about one New Jersey Baptist academy, the Hopewell Academy, established in 1756. The Hopewell Academy was a “Latin grammar school.” Latin grammar schools were the classical Christian schools of the day. They were private secondary schools designed to prepare students for a university education. The first Latin grammar school in the United States was established in Boston in 1635. As do today’s classical Christian schools, Latin grammar schools instructed students in classical languages, classical literature, and of course, Bible.¹⁰ They provided a “liberal education through the medium of classical instruction.”¹¹ The Latin grammar schools in colonies like Massachusetts were supported by the state.

Not so Baptist schools. Because Baptists were independents and non-conformists, they received no state support for their churches or schools. Thus, as is the case with today’s classical Christian schools, it devolved to parents and churches to fund a classical education for their children. The minutes of the first association of Baptist churches in America, the Philadelphia Association, in 1756, speak of the resolve of the association to raise money for a school “for the promotion of learning amongst us.”¹² This school, the Hopewell Academy, became the first Baptist classical Christian school in America.

We know little about the Hopewell Academy’s curriculum, but we can be fairly confident that students obtained a traditional classical Christian education. David Spencer said the school was formed to furnish “a liberal education to the young.”¹³ Historian David Benedict intriguingly adds that students were taught “the rudiments of science.”¹⁴ The word “science” in that day did not refer only to the natural sciences, but to the broader field of human learning that encompasses philosophy.

The headmaster of Hopewell Academy was Isaac Eaton. At age 24, Eaton became pastor of the Hopewell Baptist Church in 1748, eight years before he opened the Hopewell Academy. Eaton appears to have been something of a Renaissance man. He studied and practiced medicine before entering the pastorate. His church had 94 members and 400 “hearers” in 1761 and 108 members in 1764.¹⁵ Membership jumped to 196 in 1765, as 86 new converts were baptized.¹⁶ Eaton died in 1772 at the young age of 46. Samuel Jones said of him at his funeral oration:

The natural endowments of his mind; the improvement of these by the accomplishments of literature; his early, genuine, and unaffected piety; his abilities as a divine and a preacher; his extensive knowledge of men and books; his Catholicism, prudence, and able counsels, together with a view of him in the different relations, both public and private, that he sustained through life with so much honor to himself and happiness to all who had connection with him, would afford ample scope, had I but abilities, time, and inclination, to flourish in a funeral oration. But it is needless, for the bare mentioning them is enough to revive the idea of him in the minds of all who knew him.”¹⁷

Eaton also was beloved by his parishioners and students. His tombstone is inscribed:

In him with grace and eminence did shine

Eaton was concerned that students became disciples as much as scholars. Students at the Hopewell Academy were expected to attend services at the Hopewell Baptist Church. In keeping with the Puritan approach of the day, sermons were extensive and expository. One student recorded in 1757: “As Mr. Eaton had a sore throat, he fortunately stopped at the end of an hour and a half, and I confess I was glad to hear him say ‘Amen.’”¹⁹

In 1757, the year after the Hopewell Academy opened its doors, the minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association again record a request to local Baptist churches “to contribute their mite” towards the support of the Latin Grammar School “to promote useful learning among us.”²⁰ The next year, in 1758, the Association again recorded: “Resolved, to desire our churches to continue a contribution toward a Grammar School, under consideration that what has been done hitherto in that way appears to have been well laid out, there being a number of well inclined youths applying themselves to learning therein.”²¹ Perhaps ominously, however, the minutes of the following year’s meeting and those of subsequent years contain no similar recommendation. The historical records hint of money troubles. The minutes of the Philadelphia Association meeting of 1761 record the contents of a letter sent to the board of Baptist ministers in London. It says that “some of the churches are now destitute,” but new ministers were available to serve “partly by means of a Baptist academy lately set up.” The school was “yet weak, having no more than twenty-four pounds a year towards its support.” The association asked for funds, books, or “some pieces of apparatus” to be donated.²² Cathcart records that after only eleven year of existence, the school closed.²³ Vedder comments that the school would have been “far more successful had the financial support of the academy been equal to the excellence of its training.”²⁴

Despite its short existence, the Hopewell Academy produced several luminaries as graduates. James Manning (1738–1791) grew up to become the first president of the College of Rhode Island (now Brown University). Hezekiah Smith (1737–1805) became a New England pastor and Revolutionary War chaplain. He was well known to contemporaries as an able pastor, a “gentlemen” and a “scholar.”²⁵ Samuel Jones (1735–1814) became the “most influential Baptist minister in the middle colonies.”²⁶ Smith and Jones also assisted Manning in the foundation of Brown University. David Jones (1736–1820) became a missionary to Indians, pastor, and chaplain in both the Revolutionary War and War of 1812.²⁷ Samuel Jones and David Jones compiled selection of hymns for the Philadelphia Association. Undoubtedly, Samuel Jones’ classical Christian education contributed to his reputation as a “ready writer and a fluent speaker.”²⁸ Other graduates became lawyers and physicians. One, David Howell, became a member of Congress.²⁹

Interestingly, Manning and Williams believed in classical education so much that they opened classical academies themselves at Warren and Wrentham, Massachusetts, respectively.³⁰ The Warren school, moved to Providence in 1770, when Rhode Island University moved to Providence, and became the University Grammar School.³¹ Historian J.M. Cramp, writing in 1868, calls these schools “useful efforts” that “were the germs of the noble undertakings which have characterized the present age.”³²

The Hopewell Academy was only a beginning. Spencer called this beginning “small, very insignificant.” Nonetheless, he observed that it led to “that magnificent system” of Baptist education of later generations.³³ Thus, John Albert Broadus was justified in calling the Hopewell Academy “the famous Baptist School at Hopewell, N.J.”³⁴

PRACTICAL LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THE HOPEWELL ACADEMY

What practical lessons can we in twenty-first-century America learn from this short-lived eighteenth century Baptist Latin grammar school?

1. *Yours is not the first classical Christian school to have financial struggles.* This point is obvious, perhaps painfully obvious to many readers. The Hopewell Academy struggled financially. It did not have a wealthy donor to provide it with financial stability. We do not know why it closed its doors after eleven years, but the reason may well relate to a lack of operating funds. Our school, the Paideia School, likewise has had its share of financial struggles over its eleven-year history. Like the Hopewell Academy, our school too is primarily supported by average, middle-class American Christian families who are dedicated to giving their children the lost tools of learning, despite the financial sacrifice this entails. Most classical Christian schools are in the same boat.

This means, of necessity, that our schools need to be disciplined and resourceful to survive and thrive. Our schools must live within our means. Budgeting must be based on hard income from tuition, not hoped-for fundraising. It also means that most of us must be content to share space with like-minded churches who support our mission, rather than having our own buildings and land. We must rely on volunteers and enthusiastic parents to fill in gaps in faculty, programming, and extra-curricular activities. These are simply the financial realities for most of us.

2. *Nonetheless, do not grow weary in well-doing.* This was Paul's message to the Galatian church in Galatians 6:9. Why? Because in due season, we will reap if we do not give up. Every school has its ups and downs. Sometimes it seems as if we take two steps forward only to take two or three steps back. This can be true

in enrollment numbers, faculty hiring, or student discipline. Yet, of course, God is sovereign over all these things.

The struggle is real, but so are the results. Classical education gave America most of our founding fathers. Even in the Baptist world, as our brief survey illustrates, the historical record is compelling: classical Christian education works. But it is not just the historical record that demonstrates the success of our model. In our own day, SAT, ACT, and PSAT scores of classical Christian students are well above the national norm.³⁵ Our students are making a legacy.

3. *Insignificant beginnings can lead to significant results.* In its short eleven-year history, the Hopewell school produced a number of graduates who made an indelible mark on their own society and American history. Who knows but that your own school may produce young men and women who leave a similar mark? Community leaders in 1757 may have seen the Hopewell Academy as small and insignificant. But God saw it through the lens of eternity. He sees your school in the same way.

4. *While a student is still in school, don't pre-judge the legacy a student will leave.* Did Isaac Eaton know when James Manning was a student at Hopewell that he would grow up to start a prestigious university? Did Eaton know when young Sam Jones was a student that he would grow up to be a powerful evangelist? Doubtful. Similarly, for us too, our students may seem full of promise and ultimately flame out. Or they may struggle while in school but later blossom to impact the world for Christ. We never know who our students will grow up to be.

5. *Use natural connections to grow.* The minutes of the Philadelphia Association show that a local pastor, Abel Morgan, was designated as one of several men to "inspect" students at the Hopewell Academy to ensure their learning was satisfactory. His nephew was David Jones, one of the students at the school, who grew up

to become a missionary to Indians and chaplain to American armies in two wars. In the same way, we have natural connections in our own schools that must be cultivated to ensure continuity and growth. In our own school, we have tried radio advertising, fliers, pamphlets, bumper stickers, and a robust social media presence. Despite these things, we continually are reminded that the best form of advertising is word of mouth. As one satisfied family tells another of the great things happening at the school, organic growth occurs.

6. *Make an active effort to cultivate support from churches in your community.* The Hopewell Academy was supported most directly by its parent church, Hopewell Baptist Church. It also drew on support from the Philadelphia Association, and it appears, even Baptists in London. While this support appears to have been meager, the principle of drawing on and reaching out to your families' local churches for mutual support and encouragement is a sound one.

7. *Be encouraged and hope well.* Our job is to be faithful with the resources he has given us and pursue the calling to which we have been called. God is in charge of the result. When Paideia was founded in 2006, our founding faculty and students put together and buried a time capsule containing letters and artifacts from the year of our founding to be opened 50 years later. If God allows, in 2056, the school will still be pursuing its mission of graduating disciples, scholars, and citizens. No matter how long your school has been around, and how long it will continue to operate, rejoice in God's providence that you are called to make an eternal difference in the lives of young people for as long as He gives you.

The Hopewell Academy was appropriately named. We too can "hope well" and continue to fulfill the calling God has set before us.

ENDNOTES

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35. <https://classicalchristian.org/what-is-cce/>