

Abdication for Dummies: The Best Ways to Ruin a Classical Christian Education

by Ty Fischer, Veritas Academy

Recently, I was talking with a seasoned headmaster from another ACCS school. It was his second day of school—we had yet to start. He had to cut away from the conversation for a moment. When he came back on the phone, he apologized.

Friend: Sorry about that—we have an angry parent and I am going to have to deal with an issue.

Me: On the second day?!?!?

Friend: Yep. Day two. You know what is funny is that I have never heard from this parent in all the time that their child has been here at school. I have never seen them at events. I have not run into them at class field trips. I have not heard word one . . . and now we have a big problem.

Our conversation went on from there and took a more general direction. Both of us are truly blessed. We serve in schools with a very high percentage of extremely excellent parents. Still, the idea of a book came to mind. My working title is: *How to Destroy a Classical Christian Education in Five Easy Steps*. Every year I could add a chapter or two to it. If I could choose one issue that represents the biggest problem for parents and causes the most damage to their children, it is, without a doubt, the sin of abdication. In this article, I will try to expose some telltale signs of abdication in hopes that you, by recognizing these patterns, can root them out of your life. If you do, you can optimize the education and training that your child can receive as you give them a classical Christian education.

Before I jump into this topic, I should lay my cards on the table. I empathize with abdicators. I am the father of four daughters. I know the feeling of seeing some ugly sinful pattern in one of them and being shocked by it. As I waded into the issue, I can see that there is a bigger issue—not with my daughter, but with me. Their sins were once little problems that could have been dealt with by simply nipping them in the bud. Now, I, and (sadly) they, are going to have to suffer for my reticence, distraction, and sloth. In summary, I know something about abdication, but all of this knowledge does not come from observation of the sin in others. Finally, I also have played another, trickier role in abdication: the role of facilitator. As a school, we are not a day-care center, a church, a restaurant, a semi-pro sports franchise, a health club, or a mall. Sometimes parents would like us to be. Sometimes parents leave us because we are not enough of these things for their tastes or for the tastes of their children. This is fine and well, but, of course, I have to pay people twice a month, so I know and understand the tension that headmasters feel when they try to strike a biblical balance as a school. Schools should desire to be a superb social environment with a good athletics program and tasty and inexpensive hot lunches once a week (a.k.a., pizza), and it is not bad to have a few super t-shirts that tastefully bear images of our school symbols. We hope to do this without becoming something

like a surrogate parent. I live in the soup every day. This article is written mainly to parents. So, with all cards facing you I will begin describing some of the top trends concerning parental abdication. These patterns of life destroy the classical Christian education that parents are giving to their sons and daughters.

First, we have the Environmental Fallacy. This occurs when parents falsely believe that parenting is only about finding a good environment and then letting your kids loose in it. These parents are only rumors at your school. To the teacher they might just be the distracted voice on the end of the phone line when they try to communicate to the parent. This type of parent fails to recognize the weight of Deuteronomy 6. In this famous passage, parents—particularly fathers—are required to make sure that Christian education is the air that their child breathes. It happens over doorways, on foreheads, and as you walk, lie down, and rise up. For this type of abdicator, they imagine their job as parents simply to be finding an environment where other people will do all the walking, rising up, and forehead training. This devastates a classical Christian education which is to unite—rather than divide—parents from children (see Malachi 4:6).

Next, we have an odd form of abdication which I call Poisoning the Delegate. Teachers in ACCS schools work with children because the parents of these children have *delegated* some of their authority for part of the day to the teacher. The teacher then becomes the eyes and the ears of the parent

Ty Fischer is the headmaster at Veritas Academy and serves on the ACCS board of directors. Read his blog, "The Leaky Bucket" on the Veritas website at www.VeritasAcademy.com.

Abdication for Dummies . . .

in the classroom. The teacher and the parent must keep lines of communication open and clear. Anything that gums up or distorts this communication should be of utmost concern to parents. At times, parents themselves can so harm this communication that they will inevitably lose some of the benefit of clear, prompt, and transparent communication from their child's teacher. Typically it occurs when an overbearing parent verbally levels a teacher the first time the teacher mentions anything negative about his child. In these sorts of situations the parent would rather keep a distorted view of their child than see the child with all of his problems and work diligently to fix them. We have had to ask families to leave because of this behavior (rarely, thank the Lord). It is a form of abdication that refuses to see reality or deal with it biblically.

The third type of abdication might be the most prevalent. It is called Male Pattern Abdication. This started a long time ago in a garden far, far away. It happens when Dad delegates everything educational (in the worst cases everything having to do with their child) to mom. Interestingly, I have noted that some dads who follow this pattern are strong proponents of male leadership in the home. They, unfortunately, seem to have read Ephesians 5:22 and 23, memorized it, applied it, and refused to read the next few verses, the Bible, or, I fear, any other literature. That world of words and books is surrendered to the feminine, permanently. These dads seem almost disoriented when I talk to them about their child. You might be involved in this type of abdication if you cannot name the academic

areas where your child is strong, or where they are struggling.

The fourth type of abdication is the Jane Austen Fallacy. Austen's writing is great because she shows you what is happening. She does not tell you everything. I tell my students time and again that if you want to write well, *show don't tell*. This type of abdication happens when parents tell their child how important a classical Christian education is and then live as if it is not important. Our personal statements of faith eventually shine through our lives. Our kids will know what we value. If you, as a parent, pay lip service to reading the Great Books or learning your times tables, but do not value books or learning, do not be surprised when your child smells hypocrisy. Too often these parents want the fruit of classical education without the roots. We do not give kids a classical Christian education because we want them to have the tools to wield dominion and economic dominance over the world. If Christians are faithful and as we faithfully train up our children, we can hope for God (who already gave us His Son) to supply us with all other good things that we need. The question as we educate our children, however, is do we want the tree or only the fruit? We teach them, pray for them, and work with them so that they would be engrafted into God's covenant people (Romans 11:11ff)—not so that we could be masters of the universe and drive really shiny cars. God calls us to love Him—not the blessings that He gives.

Finally, we come to the most deadly and most culturally pervasive form of abdication, the One Stop Shop Fallacy. This occurs when parents decide that their school should become

everything for their child and family. They want a school's devotional life to become a substitute for church. They want the activities and opportunities at school to dominate—yeah, squelch out—all other spheres of life. While schools should offer wonderful activities, sports, and should have clubs, schools are not churches—and should not be; schools are not surrogates for the family—and should not be. My school has no homework in most of grammar school. We do this so that families can have time to do other things. Schools cannot stop this sort of abdication, but they should be sensitive to it and influence families away from it.

Too often, parents—even Christian parents—have learned bad patterns of abdication from the culture. As schools, we have to carefully consider how we should—and should not—serve parents in a culture of abdication. Here are a few practical admonitions—ones sure *not* to solve all your problems in this area. These suggestions, however, might help you start to build a school that encourages and supports good parenting and discourages abdication. Here are two suggestions:

First, let your school be a school. (I have to say this to myself from time to time.) Your school is a school. It is not a church. It is not a family. It feels like a church sometimes because it is full of Christians and it feels like a family sometimes because we bear each other's burdens, but we are neither. Because of this, we are not able to correct all negative cultural patterns. We need the church to do this. When we see, or even worse and much more often true, think we see

Continued on page 16

A Different Perspective . . .

the drinking fountain. Right conduct in accordance with the teachings of Christ must be lived out by teachers and modeled in the cafeteria, practiced on the athletic fields, spoken in parent-teacher conferences, and discovered in science labs. The music of God's Word must resonate in the hallways and classrooms; He is the cellist, Scripture is the bow, our bodies are the strings, our lives are the symphony. The staff of the school is not only involved in offering education to students, but actively seeks out books and lectures not only on the subjects they teach, but on the very nature of education and discipleship which can then be shared and discussed with parents. The staff must seek out training to recognize when students miss the mark and how to tender thoughtful admonition, reproof that addresses the heart of the issue and leads students to an acknowledgment of their wrongdoing. With this understanding, students can be led to make proper and meaningful atonement for any offense and then be kindly placed back on the path of righteousness.

Garbed in his graduation gown, Trey stood smiling beside his mother and sisters. It was a joyous picture. His father walked up beside me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Thank you for a great four years," he said. "Quite honestly, I don't know who has learned the most from Trinitas—Trey or his mother and I."

parenting problems with a family, we must recognize that we might not have the authority, power, or jurisdiction to fix the problem. We might find ourselves pointing parents back to their church for instruction and then hoping that they receive good counsel. Sometimes this will not happen. This can be terribly discouraging, but we need to keep teaching people to go to their ministers for instruction, because, believe me, as a headmaster, I do not have the time to be a pastor to all of the school families. I have another job because we are a school.

Second, make sure that open and honest communication flows in a consistent, regular manner from teacher to parents. Schools cannot act *in loco parentis* if teachers and parents do not know each other. This communication might look different in different circumstances, but I would encourage schools to make sure that this communication has both objective and subjective elements. This means that some of the communication needs to be in things like letter grades and numbers. This communication tells parents with a level of objectivity how their child is doing. This alone, however, does not tell the whole story about the student, so teachers need to make sure that they also communicate the growth or struggles that they are seeing in the life of the student in the classroom, in the hallways, and on the playground. This communication is critical.

Finally, I would highly recommend that teachers provide as much communication as possible to parents in a personal manner. Some do this by having a parent-teacher conference. I like having more regular phone communication. During these

Abdication for Dummies . . .

interactions, teachers need to be the eyes and ears of the parents, helping parents see their child in all of his or her glory and with all his or her warts. Teachers also need to listen. Parents can help teachers see struggles that children are having and understand why these struggles might be occurring. All too often, odd behavior in a student makes so much more sense after a brief call to the parents. Once, I had a student who—without warning—started skipping homework, falling asleep in class, and being generally cranky. A frustrated teacher brought this concern to me and wanted to start disciplining the student. I recommended that we call the parents. When the teacher called, she found that the family's church was having a weeklong series of special services. These services lasted from 6 to 10 or 11 p.m. The child's normal bed time was 8 p.m. Adjustments were made, but they were made because a line of communication was opened.

Parenting is hard work. Abdication, at least initially, seems much, much easier. In the long run, however, the abdicator has a dreadful price to pay. The faithful parent who daily heads out to the garden to pull weeds, train vines, and sometimes shovel manure which will make the ground fruitful later, will see the harvest of thirty, sixty, and one hundred fold. The Bible points this parent toward this final, wonderful blessing in Psalm 128:3 and 4:

"Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD."