

## Don't Boil Your Teachers in Classical Milk

by Tom Garfield, Logos School

The covenant people of God were told three times in the Old Testament: “*Do not boil a kid in its mother’s milk*” (Exodus 23:19, Exodus 34:26, Deut. 14:21). Each time God commanded (that is, prohibited) this was in the context of eating laws and tithing. It’s also a command unlike most other eating commands—it’s a prohibition on *how* to cook, not necessarily what to eat (or not).

Let’s see if we can articulate and then apply the principle behind the prohibition: **they were not to take what is precious and meant for nourishment of offspring to use as a means of death.**

What is classical “milk”? We as classical Christian educators believe, along with Dorothy Sayers, that there really is a value in the Trivium for nourishing and training young ones. We know it works because we see the delightful consequences in the way our children grow, display curiosity and wonder, seek to imitate, ask questions about what is good and what is bad, argue well, probe, define, and ultimately, in a winsome way, articulate and defend what is good, true, and beautiful. This is all as a result of nourishing, tasty, classical “milk” served up with biblical wisdom and love.

What does “boiling” entail? Are we classical Christian education administrators really boiling teachers? Well, yes, actually. Don’t misunderstand; I believe we actually do understand how *valuable* this classical milk really is or can be. We know this is good stuff that we dish out. But

it’s just at that dishing out point that I want to stop and focus: How do we who head up ACCS schools treat our teachers, the ones doing the actual dishing out of the classical milk? I have derived both the impetus and the content for this discussion

much time our teachers put in each week or weekend? Do we have a good grasp on what our change of schedule does to them or our additional training assignment? Do we even have a clue about their personal lives and the challenges in time they face there?

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from knowing many classical Christian teachers. So, in what ways do we “boil” our teachers?

**We boil away time.** We administrators set calendars, daily schedules, class times, school rules, classroom rules, special programs, etc. We tell our teachers how much and what we want them to teach; we give them texts and primary documents to master for every discipline they teach, as well as our own unique curriculum guides. We expect them to do recess duties, plan for assemblies, Christmas programs, Open House displays and talks, and Grandparents’ Days, not to mention making out (student-specific, of course) comments and report cards. We want them to carefully follow the seven laws of teaching, become proficient in classical methodologies, and, oh yes, be a living example of Christ-likeness—all while maintaining great control of their classrooms. Oh, and can they coach a team and/or direct a play, too? Do we have a really accurate idea of how

**We boil away energies.** It takes a lot of physical energy to teach any length of time. To do it right, any and all teaching is draining. One of the worst things, therefore, we can do to our teachers is to give them the idea that their work has been in vain. How do we do that? By any seemingly arbitrary change in our program priorities, plans, or emphases. Obviously we want to always be improving our schools, but these changes may need to take longer than some of our impatient personalities may like. (Being a Navy man, “trying to turn an aircraft carrier on a dime” really resonates with me.) The teachers need to be brought along gently and wisely, not making sharp turns without time for teacher input. You want them to be as excited and even energized by good changes as you are. By the way, I strongly believe that all administrators should teach a class and/or coach a team regularly. Even one class will give you amazing insights into the tasks your teachers live with every day.

**We boil away enthusiasm.** When your teachers are over-

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burdened, tired, and lacking long-term motivation, your school will suffer. How do we boil away our teachers' enthusiasm, that is, being excited and secure in their purposes? A couple ways come to mind: lack of protection and a lack of respect.

**Protection:** Do we adequately protect them from chronic student problems? Of course we expect the teachers to address and even nip the majority of student problems in their classes, but do we do enough observing to know what's really happening? Sometimes novices don't even realize what problems they've got, they just go home each day discouraged. Or how about protecting the teachers from overbearing parents? Your teachers are adults, but they need to know that you will back them up or even directly take on parental concerns that have elevated to complaints.

**Respect:** This is particularly needed for your male teachers, although the ladies can feel its absence, too. Unlike what the world says, the Bible says to give respect, even, and maybe especially, if it's not "earned." We have lots of small ways of making teachers feel small—the way we word memos, the tone in a staff meeting in front of their peers, the way we speak to them with students or parents present. Related to this is how we recognize, or not, our teachers' accomplishments. Do we even give them a note of thanks after a particularly difficult program, or season, or presentation? Do we have ways of acknowledging their years of service to the school?

**We boil away effectiveness.** All the above could be happening every day in our schools and we might still be under the impression that we have a strong, healthy

program. As far as you might see, the honor rolls are still pretty full and you had three National Merit winners last year. Right. Your teachers teach because they love seeing students grow and learn; that doesn't necessarily mean they don't get discouraged or over-taxed by your (no doubt) unintentional boiling of them. Sooner or later, this low-grade fever of unhappiness will affect their job performance. Maybe they'll leave before that happens. Is that the best option? Their effectiveness is the measure of success or not for your school, and that depends a great deal on the solid connection between you, as the voice of the vision, and the teachers—those that put feet on the vision.

**Remember teachers' frames.** It's simple: treat them as you want them to treat the students. You expect the teachers to understand and work with, not against, the frames of their students. The classical methodology uniquely promotes this very idea. Have you taken the time to understand the frames of your teachers? How much do you talk with each one? Do you know the conditions that would best cut with their grain? Do you know them well enough that you could describe their unique characteristics to their parents? Have you noticed the unique teaching qualities that distinguish your male teachers from the ladies? You want your students to love learning, right? Do your teachers love learning? If not, why not? You want the students to grow in their love for the knowledge they are gaining, right? Are your teachers growing in love and depth of the knowledge they impart?

**Nourish your teachers.** One of the best ways we have cooked up to help teachers grow is through individual scholarship projects.

Yes, it's work, but it's work that fits into their own schedules, is chosen by them, allows them to pursue deeper knowledge in an area they feel weak in, and is assigned well in advance of the completion date. Especially for our veteran teachers, this kind of training is much preferred to yet another series of in-house basic training exercises. Assigned in the fall, the teachers present the results of their projects in front of their peers in mid-spring. Our teachers have come up with amazing and worthwhile projects, all done without a single complaint or major stress.

How else can we nourish our teachers? How about giving them several personal days off, no questions asked? Or how about adjusting the school calendar to allow them valuable catch-up, prep, and grading time—a workday minus students? What about providing a four-day work week during long stretches between holidays? Even just limiting your staff meetings to once a week, with time for prayer and singing, would be an encouragement. If you run out of ideas, try asking the teachers—in a healthy Christian environment they won't ask for the moon.

**Channel enthusiasm.** What can an excited, protected, respected, and nourished teacher accomplish? Teachers, given practical encouragement from us, want to improve their teaching and curriculum from year to year. They find that it's exciting and fulfilling to know they are doing a better job this year than last year, and not only that, the program is better because they had the opportunity and liberty to fix some things and improve lessons! They love to know the students will benefit from their labors!

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**Provide accountability and practicality.** Without the proper application of accountability, you are depriving your teachers every bit as much as not paying them their due wages. Simply put, they need to hear from you, in an orderly, planned out, and non-threatening manner regarding the quality of their work. Another word for all this is **evaluations**. You'd probably be shocked, as I have been, to hear the stories from Christian school teachers who don't have a clue about how well they're doing since their administrator never evaluates them. Here again, the simple equation is do unto the teachers as you would

have them do unto the students.

**Nourished teachers foster nourished students.** All this good nourishment, not boiling, leads to joyful, contented and improving teachers, working in harmony with you, the administrator. Do you think this might have a healthy affect on their students? Classical milk, with all its nourishing, vitamin A content and methods, is not for boiling either young ones or their teachers in. Make sure everyone in your school delights in the refreshing taste and benefit!



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