

Book Review: Teenagers and Classics

reviewed by Todd Wagenmaker

One of the advantages of being a classical school is our emphasis on a “Great Books” curriculum for our upper school. Whereas many schools ignore the classics because modern schools are too politically correct or because the students are not able to handle them, we treasure the insight and wisdom gleaned from these literary giants.

You will find Russian authors in our modern classic repertoire—authors like Fyodor Dostoevsky. In ***Crime and Punishment***, the main character, Raskolnikov, starts his journey with a very man-centered perspective. Echoing the German philosopher Nietzsche, he believes that the truly great persons’ “will to power” makes them exempt from social norms. He plots the perfect murder of a repulsive pawn broker woman—first to show that he is exempt from social norms, and second, as revenge against God for handicapping his brilliance with his

poverty.

Although Raskolnikov is able to carry out his murder without getting caught, he ultimately gets caught by his conscience and by the message of a simple, suffering peasant girl. Although she is not as brilliant as the great Raskolnikov, her reading of the account of Lazarus’ resurrection jars Raskolnikov into considering the necessity of being spiritually re-born.

After he confesses his

suffering peasant girl. He sees how the world only continues through self-sacrifice and love. Although Raskolnikov had performed many generous deeds to others, he had never truly grasped the importance of the richness of these Gospel virtues until he saw them lived out by the suffering peasant girl.

Crime and Punishment is not a distinctively Christian book. You will not find it sold in any “Christian bookstore.” It only quotes the Lazarus account once, and you have to read about 300 pages before you read this snippet from the Gospel of John. And yet, Dostoevsky does more to teach us about the necessity of being God-centered and the perils of being man-centered than any modern Christian author.

The challenge we face is to resurrect classics like ***Crime and Punishment*** in our current cultural climate. Thankfully, we have seen God bless the lives of our students with a curiosity and a love of these Great Books.

Crime and Punishment

by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Various editions and translations available such as
New York: Random House, 1993, 608 pages, \$20

crime and does his time in Siberia, Raskolnikov has a dream of what the world would be like if everyone thought like he did (what we would call a Hobbesian vision—human life would be nasty, brutish and short). In contrast to his destructive, self-centered worldview is the Gospel—personified by the

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