

C L A S S I S

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Sine doctrina vita est quasi mortis imago

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School Culture

by Nancy Wilson

We would all agree that a classical Christian school should want a God-glorifying school in every respect: the academics, the teachers, the students, everything. This means striving to make the school not man-centered, not even school-centered, but God-centered: love for the Triune God has to be at the very center.

Though we can all “amen” this first principle, that doesn’t mean we can package “God-glorifying school culture” in some marketable form to sell along with curriculum and materials. We express our love for God in both tangible and intangible ways that simply cannot be woodenly applied. Nevertheless, we can teach and strive for and pray that our schools will reflect our desire to honor God.

Just as each of our homes is unique and each of our families lives out love for God and His Word in different ways, so each school will have its own one-of-a-kind school culture. For example, a school located in the Deep South will look different (and sound different) from our school in northern Idaho. The history of the region, the kinds of families in the school, the building, and the superintendent will all have a very big impact on the kind of culture that develops. For example, it is no accident that Logos School is a very jolly place; with a superintendent like Tom Garfield, it would be next to impossible to be anything else. The school cannot help but reflect the personality and tone of the administration.

But the administration does more than just model the culture; it has to establish and protect policies that steer the school in the right direction. This includes determining what kind and caliber of students (as well as teachers) will be admitted and what kind will be expelled. Though the faculty and staff must be heavy contributors to the school’s tone, the students have to be from the kind of families who understand and appreciate the school’s vision. If the school admits kids who don’t want to conform to the standards set by the board, they will hinder the establishment of a godly school culture.

At the same time, though the administration may do all that is humanly possible to steer it, we all know that without the kindness and mercy of God, a godly culture just won’t happen. So prayer for the kids, for the tone, for the staff has to be a regular feature.

Culture includes the tangible things like the way the school buildings

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Inside this issue:

Teacher training.....	3
Book Review.....	4-5
Quid Novi.....	6
New Members.....	7
Classifieds.....	7-13
Conference Info.....	14

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Continued on page 2

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School Culture

continued from page 1

and grounds look, what the teachers and students wear, how the classrooms are organized and decorated, what songs are sung at assemblies, what subjects are taught, what books are read, what kinds of extracurricular activities are promoted, and how everyone behaves in the halls. These are each very important in contributing to the whole effect.

But the intangibles play an even bigger role and they are much harder to steer than the class schedule or the school calendar. A school that has meticulously kept hallways and an impressive library but doesn't have joy spilling out in the halls is falling short of a godly Christian

culture. A school with a tight dress code but no fat souls jostling each other is not glorifying to God. So how can we have it all?

Teaching the students to *think like Christians* is a large part of their education. This means that the teachers will insist on a reverence for God's Word whether it is in the singing, the speech meet selections, or how the Bible is quoted in the science fair projects. This will also guide the teachers as they instruct the students to love what is lovely in music, art, literature, and film. After all, the whole purpose of education is to get the students to think with wisdom, to apply God's Word to all of life, and to live it out faithfully.

Teaching the students to *act like Christians* requires diligence as well. This means the teachers will model and require respect and courtesy toward parents, pastors, teachers, and fellow students. Rewarding diligence and hard work, while penalizing laziness and sloppiness are duties that have to be per-

formed faithfully by the faculty and staff. If we are aiming for maturity, then that means no dumb assignments that are time wasters. It means requiring the students to listen, and not repeating ourselves over and over.

Psalms 144:2 describes the culture that is blessed by God this way: "That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth; that our

daughters may be as cornerstones, polished after the similitude of a palace." Teaching the kids dumb songs that trivialize God's Word is not going to promote maturity. But a choir that teaches four-part harmony and beautiful works of music will definitely push them to reach more of their

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potential. Setting the bar higher, not lower, gives the students genuine motivation to achieve.

This does not mean that we want (as my daughter aptly described it) a school for show poodles. If we want to see our students pass up the culture around them (and we do), there will always be those who use it as an occasion for pride. But as with everything else, if the administration is modeling and requiring a genuine humility before God and gratitude to Him for all He has given us, this will make pride and arrogance, when it appears, entirely out of place.

A school with high principles on paper but with no follow-through, will soon be exposed for what it is—a masquerade. So a wise faculty and administration will learn to discern the difference between a student who needs mercy and a student who needs discipline.

And of course we want the students to *look like Christians* as well, so modesty must be required and slovenliness cannot be

Continued on page 3

School Culture

continued from page 2

tolerated. Again, just having the standards is not enough; they have to be enforced. So a loving and firm discipline must keep the school's backbone. If the standards are not enforced, things will deteriorate pretty fast.

Not only should the students look like Christians, but the school's surroundings should reflect an appreciation of beauty, embracing a godly aesthetic that includes cleanliness and organization, but also admires lovely furnishings and creates classrooms that are a pleasure to be in. Ceremony creates real opportunities to display beauty and joy—whether it is commencement, an awards banquet, or a protocol night. These can be designed to reward maturity and build an appreciation for duty, nobility, honor and solemnity.

You may have already noticed that I smuggled in those three essentials: truth, goodness, and beauty. You just can't escape these things. Simply put, truth is thinking like a Christian; goodness is acting like a Christian; and beauty is looking like a Christian. These categories really do encompass just about everything that a culture needs to be truly God-glorifying.

When things are going well in a school, it is like a choir that is hitting all its notes: a lovely piece of work. But the inevitable is always crouching at the door: things are going well, so we can begin to relax and coast a little. And then it just takes one teacher getting discontent with his salary and grumbling to co-workers, or one teacher being harsh to his class and refusing to apologize, before the loveliness begins to erode. When staff members start back-biting, the students will start back-biting and gossiping as well. If the administrators are divided, the students will be divided. If those in authority are refusing to be submissive themselves, then the students may as well go ahead and rebel too. If a teacher is lying, the students will cheat. God has never looked kindly on hypocrisy, and a school that tolerates such behavior can start numbering its days.

God blesses faithfulness with more faithfulness, pressed down and overflowing. We are to be diligent to stand fast in the faith, living in our schools in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then we will indeed have something to export.

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"We do not need to burn all the books to destroy our Western civilization. All we need to do is leave them unread for one generation."

Dr. Robert Maynard Hutchins,
former president of the University of Chicago

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