

Why Classical “Christian” Education?

by David John Seel, MDiv, PhD

Ever since the church father Tertullian pondered in the second century, “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?” Christians have wrestled with the relationship between Jewish and Greek thought. Some have sought to strip Christian theology from

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any vestige of Greek thought by advocating a return to the “pure moral categories” of the Old Testament or to an alleged “primitive Christianity.”

Others accept that over the centuries the gospel has been preached and theology developed in Greek categories of thought. It was the Greeks, even more than the Jews, who were open to Christ’s saving message. Some have gone so far as to say that the biblical reference in Hebrews to Christ’s coming in the “fullness of times” refers inevitably to that unique period of history where Greek culture was protected by Roman law and armies—*pax Romana*. One’s approach bears directly on the question of how one should educate a child in the “*paideia* of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

We are committed to a Christ-centered and classical curriculum. Why the “classical”? Doesn’t “classical” conflict with the “Christ-centered”? These are important questions to ask. We believe that the Jewish and Greek cultures serve as foundational categories for both Christian and Western thought. Obviously, classical study requires discernment. It took the early church two hundred

years to overcome the pagan heresy of gnosticism. Nor were early Christians accepting of homosexuality and infanticide, which were commonly practiced in classical society. Yet the church and theology owes a debt to Greek thought. C.S. Lewis observed, “To lose

what I owe to Plato and Aristotle would be like the amputation of a limb. Hardly any lawful price would seem to me too high for what I have gained by being made to learn Latin and Greek.”

Boston College philosopher Peter Kreeft provides some helpful insights into this question. He writes, “The Jews gave us conscience; the

Greeks, reason. The Jews gave us the laws of morality, of what ought to be; the Greeks gave us the laws of thought and of being, of what is.” The Greeks discovered the nature of truth and goodness, the Jews were discovered by the God who was Truth and Goodness. “Hebraism and Hellenism meet—Hebraism in its Christianized form, Hellenism in its Romanized form.... The meeting and blending of these two great rivers, the biblical (Judaeo-Christian) and the classical (Greco-Roman) produced the Middle Ages.”

Our modern world has its beginnings in this medieval synthesis—what historians rightly refer to as “The Age of Faith.” But modernity is a cut flower. As the roots of faith were abandoned, the flower of Western civilization withered.

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fear Him, to grow into diligent workers for His kingdom, we cannot afford to train them in an institution which has as its fundamental presupposition that I am entitled to as much money as I can vote out of my neighbor’s pocket.

Prayer doesn’t belong in a public school (Proverbs 28:9). Your money doesn’t belong in a public school. Most of all, your children don’t belong in a public school. Institutions premised on sin must not be redeemed, but abandoned. We cannot send young maidens into brothels in the interests of “equal time for chastity.” As the light of the world, we must set the standard. Our Lord never called His people to help build the tower of Babel in the hope of getting a Bible study in the basement. He commanded us to build our own city on a hill.

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David Chilton M.Div., Ph.D., (1951-1997) was a pastor, Christian Reconstructionist, and author of several books on eschatology and preterism. He contributed three books on eschatology which have proved quite significant: *Paradise Restored*, *Days of Vengeance*, and *The Great Tribulation*. He died unexpectedly in 1997 at the age of 45.

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Today, we have “modern” Christians and “postmodern” Christians. But we have too few Christians who think in pre-modern categories. Recovering these categories is the educational burden of Christ-centered classical schools. Our goal is to equip apprentices of Jesus with a pre-modern mind capable of engaging our postmodern world.

Intellectually and spiritually, Western society has crossed a Great Divide. C.S. Lewis places this divide sometime immediately following the age of Jane Austen and Walter Scott. When we watch Emma Thompson in the film adaptation of Jane Austen’s novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, we realize that we have

stepped
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different ethos. He writes, “Whereas all history was for our ancestors divided into two periods, the pre-Christian and the Christian, and two only, for us it falls into three—the pre-Christian, the Christian, and what may reasonably be called the post-Christian.”

Lewis then makes the most astonishing claim. Pay close attention—for it establishes the rationale for our educational approach.

“Christians and Pagans had much more in common with each other than either has with a post-Christian. The gap between those who worship different gods is not so wide as that between those who worship and those who do not.... A post-Christian man is not a Pagan; you might as well think that a married woman recovers her virginity by divorce. The post-Christian is cut off from the Christian past and therefore doubly from the Pagan past.”

In short, an exposure to the classical mind serves as an antidote to the modern mind and thereby makes possible the growth of a bib-

lical mind. Moderns ask no questions. The Greeks

raised the right questions that are answered by the gospel. “The One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you,” Paul told the Athenians. What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? Everything. One brings the questions. The other brings the answers. The post-Christian has neither questions nor answers. *Quod erat demonstrandum*: the importance of classical Christian education for our time.

John Seel is a writer, educational reformer, and cultural analyst. A former headmaster, he now serves as a consultant to Walden Media, the company behind The Chronicles of Narnia and Amazing Grace. John has authored five books, is a contributing editor of Critique, and speaks widely on the topics of parenting, culture, and education. He and his wife, Kathryn, live in Cohasset, Massachusetts, and are the parents of three grown children.

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