

# ACCS Distinctive Schools Series

## Decor, Decorum, Manners, Ethos, and Uniforms.

*The modern habit of doing ceremonial things unceremoniously is no proof of humility; rather it proves the offender's inability to forget himself in the rite... —C.S. Lewis*

---

*Like solemn it implies the opposite of what is familiar, free and easy, or ordinary. But unlike solemn it does not suggest gloom, oppression, or austerity. The ball in the first act of Romeo and Juliet was a 'solemnity'. The feast at the beginning of Gawain and the Green Knight is very much a solemnity. A great mass by Mozart or Beethoven is as much a solemnity in its hilarious gloria as in its poignant crucifixus est. Feasts are, in this sense, more solemn than fasts. Easter is solempne, Good Friday is not. The Solempne is the festal which is also the stately and the ceremonial, the proper occasion for a pomp—and the very fact that pompous is now used only in a bad sense measures the degree to which we have lost the old idea of a 'solemnity'. To recover it you must think of a court ball, or a coronation, or a victory march, as these things appear to people to enjoy them; in an age when every one puts on his oldest clothes to be happy in, you must re-awake the simpler state of mind in which people put on gold and scarlet to be happy in. Above all, you must be rid of the hideous idea, fruit of a widespread inferiority complex, that pomp, on the proper occasions, has any connexion with vanity or self-conceit. A celebrant approaching the altar, a princess led out by a king to dance a minuet, a general officer on a ceremonial parade, a major-domo preceding the boar's head at a Christmas feast—all these wear unusual clothes and move with calculated dignity. This does not mean that they are vain, but that they are obedient; they are obeying the hoc age which presides over every solemnity. The modern habit of doing ceremonial things unceremoniously is no proof of humility; rather it proves the offender's inability to forget himself in the rite, and his readiness to spoil for every one else the proper pleasure of ritual... You are to expect pomp. You are to 'assist', as the French say, at a great festal action. —C.S. Lewis*

“Christian schools don’t need pretense or fancy buildings, we just need good teachers and the Bible.” This sentiment was expressed by a Christian school administrator on the radio, but reflects a sentiment common to many Christians. In fact, it reflects a misunderstanding of who we are in Christ, and a misunderstanding of our very nature, the nature of our world, and the nature of the Kingdom of Christ. In the hellenistic era during which Christ was born, the philosophy of Gnosticism taught that the world we live in is unimportant and unreal, and that the real import is in the heavens. During the 1800’s, neo-Gnosticism rose again under the banner of materialism, but was oddly inverted. This time, the heavens didn’t exist, so anything that points to the heavens on earth is folly. Since ideas have consequences, materialism led to pragmatism (Dewey, James). There’s nothing more “Deweyan” in modern education than the concrete block school. One only needs to look at the clothing or buildings in the former European communist block to see that Marxists (the ultimate philosophical materialists) brought this in spades.

Evangelical Christianity in America absorbed the materialistic view and stopped building church buildings of beauty, morphed into casual worship, distanced itself from high art and music, and began to despise formality, high-art, solemnity, and ceremony. For some, these reflected the Roman Catholic church which American evangelicals disliked. For others, these worked against egalitarian values of democracy, which Americans like. In both cases,

American ideals entered the evangelical church and resulted in a disintegrated and errant worldview.

Part of returning to the Medieval model of education (classical Christian education) means that we must return to an integrated, universal view of Christianity. Namely, that God created this world and called it good, we fell into sin, but he redeemed it for his Kingdom. Now, we live in a kingdom that should reflect not just this fact, but this reality. In other words, the reality should reflect the heavenly ‘spheres’. Like Heaven is greater than Earth<sup>1</sup>, God’s kingdom is higher than our earthly kingdoms. Thus, when we educate citizens of His kingdom, we should bring in imagery, beauty, and formality that reflects the hierarchy of His kingdom.

## Vision

Caitlyn pushes hard through the glass doors to enter the bustling hallway of her school. The only furnishing of note is the aluminum framed trophy case and a few plastic chairs. Noise echoes off the hard concrete walls and mixes with intermittent ringing of fire bells-turned class bells. Large plastic signs say “checkin at the office.” The walls are stark white with a bright blue stripe down the center. Large- lettered bible verses are painted on the walls. Large paper banners for the week’s basketball game are prominently placed above the stairs and the bright blue lockers are plastered with messages and notes— just a smidgen crooked. The vinyl tile floor has mixed blue and gold tiles to sport school spirit. The mascot is painted over the door to the gym. Windows and walls are covered with hastily placed finger painting—seasonal of course. Students flood the halls in basic blue pants and t-shirts (it’s casual day). On regular days, they wear polos. Before Caitlyn gets to class, she has loudly engaged her friends to compete with the noise, adding to the atmosphere. The ‘aroma’ of the school is frenetic, active, casual, and low.

This vision plays itself out in schools, Christian and otherwise, across the country. This particular story reflects

a conventional Christian school I visited. Classical Christian schools should stand in contrast with the commonly accepted vision of what school should be.

If we start with classical vision instead of the common vision of a school, schools should be communities. They should feel like home. But at the same time, they should be formal. Informality is fine in certain places and for certain things. Gyms can be informal. But schools need ceremony and solemnity out of respect for the work being done. Schools should be beautiful in a form suitable for an academic setting. They should be a place of order and excellence. The orderly display of student work done *poorly* or the raw stapling of *good* student work into sheetrock, unadorned—both fail to meet the standard. Bright primary colors that wouldn’t be used to adorn your living room at home should not adorn the walls at school. Things displayed in the environment should reflect the values of the school— reproductions of pre-1900’s art, wood furniture, etc. When possible, sound reduction should be a priority (carpet, higher ceilings, acoustic tiling, etc.) Students in formal environments will tend to be quieter, more careful, and conduct themselves with better decorum. In the long run, this leads to happier students who appreciate higher things.

## Architecture, decor, and art

Most classical Christian schools began in church basements. Many continue in difficult physical environments functionally, let alone aesthetically. God honors a work in progress. And, for some, there may never be an opportunity to build a facility that reflects the aesthetic standards of classical Christian education. But, when possible, we should try. Classical educators, of all people should appreciate the difference between an ideal vision, and the reality of our situation. Wherever possible, we should pursue the ideal, but take joy in what God has given us.

<sup>1</sup> Herein, “Greater” is not a measure of excellence, but rather one of station. We may say “Great job” to someone, meaning they did something very well. This is not the precise meaning used in this piece. Greatness is a measure of height, or ordained order relative to other created things. For example, a king’s throne is greater than a kitchen chair. Similarly, “high” when used in art (High art) refers to its purpose— folk art is lower, suitable for use in everyday homes. Art in the Sistine Chapel is high art— intended to elevate the space. High is not necessarily better than low, it’s just about alignment with the purpose.

## Buildings

If possible, when building a new facility, ACCS schools should call upon architecture that reflects the traditional Western value of design, in a way that fits into the geography in which it is presented. Since modern design trends are influenced by ideas that are generally contrary to Christian tradition (pragmatism, abstraction, and some environmentalism), it's best to use a style that was prevalent in historical academic architecture: Federal, Greek Revival, Academic Gothic, Academic Tudor, Romanesque, or Georgian are good options. For classical educators, this appeal to beauty in architecture should be natural. But, if you're unconvinced by the value of traditional architecture in beauty, then consider marketing.

We struggle to communicate with prospective parents just how different classical Christian education is. When they drive up to a building that 'looks' classical, you begin to tell your story. Some argue that a classical 'look' is not compatible with the community around us. To a degree, you want to stand out. Conforming to the community means you won't stand out. You want to stand out. You want to make a statement with your architecture. And, that statement should reflect the values of your school — we value old, beautiful style. Old — not because old is better, but because most older architectural styles had an underlying philosophy that made it more beautiful.

But, there's a more important reason to promote beautiful, classic architectural design at your school. Churchill famously said *"We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us."* This is especially true of young children. The beauty of their educational environment will help form their love of beauty. And, it will calm them and prepare them to enjoy a close, family-like community of learning.

Inside, the school should be warm and inviting, but not overly 'flourished.' A trip to Hobby Lobby's decor section can result in something overdone, though some decor like this is appropriate. Do you ever wonder why we use giant paper signs painted with tempera about this week's game in schools, but we would never put them in our living rooms? Even our churches rarely have this much clutter on the walls.

Classrooms should be decluttered, with the walls adorned with great art and a few beautiful aids to education (letters, numbers, history cards, etc.). Here are some things to watch for and avoid:

- Teachers post every subject on the wall, from letters to big calendars to cute posters. Walls filled with information say that's what school is about. But, we want to cultivate a love of the beautiful. Try to keep the educational clutter to a minimum.
- Primary, bright colors immediately impact children with a festive feeling, so we decorate this way. But a sense of subtlety and beauty are important. The classroom, again, should remind us more of a living room and less of a carnival.
- Posters and images of cute animals or catchy slogans seem appropriate. But they tend to 'talk down' to students. We want our students to reach to a higher aesthetic. Try using great art with children as subjects.
- Halls adorned with poor student art— coloring pages that were filled in without discipline and training, drawings that are unimpressive, or art projects that are deliberately abstract (this is also a curricular problem). Holding up everyone's art as "Good" is a bad idea. Talent should be on display. Occasionally, a full class might be displayed, but the assignment must be one where everyone did an impressive job.
- Entryways with excessive messaging and signage promoting things like games, the school, etc. Photos of students in action make better choices. If your school must have locked entry's, try and make them as inviting as possible.
- Gyms can be more casual, but the tendency to cover them with mascot paintings, bright colors, and advertising should be avoided. If you must put mascot paintings in the gym, do so discretely, and attempt to use higher art. For example, use oak and iron shields with an iron relief of an archer rather than a painted mascot of an archer on the wall in bright blue.

# What's on your walls?

The primary mistake educators make is to try and educate everywhere—even on the walls. We behave as though the purpose of everything in a school building is to teach. By ‘teach’ we mean convey information. But, we know that classical Christian education means that we are cultivating a love of truth, goodness, and beauty. Part of cultivating beauty is immersing students in an environment rich with beauty.

Case and point: Often, classrooms that teach a topic related to modern art will hang modern art on the walls. We should always ask “what is this saying, and is it true?” And then, is it beautiful? Nearly all modern art reflects despair (Schaeffer). It's not just depicting someone in despair, like a Greek tragedy would. Rather, the aesthetic itself makes you feel despair, even if the subject is good—like Warhol's Campbell's soup can—Displaying that type of art lowers the space into despair rather than lifting up the student.

For another example consider Picasso's The Old Guitarist vs. Rembrandt's Storm on the Sea of Galilee. Both convey despair, but Rembrandt's cultural Christian worldview (not to say he was a Christian) depicts the emotion in a beautiful way. Modern art is birthed from a place of despair. Some reading this will react “that's your view, but Picasso was a great artist. His work is important to me and the world.” This statement may be true, but does Picasso's work reflect the truth, goodness, and beauty of Christ? Why should we expose students to it daily? As this is not the appropriate place to debate the point, I would point you to Prager University's “Why is Modern Art so Bad?” on Youtube.

Francis Schaeffer wrote extensively about the ugly result of the despair in modern art in his ‘Trilogy.’

*The consensus about us is almost monolithic, whether you review the arts, literature or just simply read the newspapers and magazines.... On every side you can feel the stranglehold of this new methodology—and by ‘methodology’ we mean the way we approach truth and knowing ... And just as fog cannot be kept out by walls or doors, so this consensus comes in around us, till*

*the room we live in is no longer distinct, and yet we hardly realize what has happened....*

*Young people from Christian homes are brought up in the old framework of truth. Then they are subjected to the modern framework. In time they become confused because they do not understand the alternatives with which they are being presented. Confusion becomes bewilderment, and before long they are overwhelmed. This is unhappily true not only of young people, but of many pastors, Christian educators, evangelists and missionaries as well. So this change in the concept of the way we come to knowledge and truth is the most crucial problem, as I understand it, facing Christianity today. —Francis Schaeffer, The God Who is There.*

*We should realize that if something untrue or immoral is stated in great art, it can be far more devastating than if it is expressed in poor art. The greater the artistic expression, the more important it is to consciously bring it and it's worldview under the judgment of Christ and the Bible. The common reaction among many however, is just the opposite. Ordinarily, many seem to feel that the greater the art, the less we ought to be critical of its worldview. This we must reverse. —Francis A. Schaeffer*

While it is appropriate to show modern art so that students can learn about it, it's not a beautiful thing to hang in the classroom as adornment. Go ahead and show a slide of The Old Guitarist, but don't hang a print in the room. Because we've been told that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’, this may be disagreeable with some. Who's to say? This paper is not intended to make that argument in the space allotted. If you're not convinced, read Francis Schaeffer's trilogy, Gene Edward Veith's “State of the Arts” and Stratford Caldecott's “Beauty for Truth's Sake.” And, watch the Prager University video mentioned earlier.

Display great art from the pre-modern era. But do so with care to find pieces that are appropriate for the classwork being done. Generally, modern art began with impressionism. The defining characteristic of modern vs. classical art is the philosophy: Does it prioritize individual expression or does it reflect God's world in a way that is consistent with God's way of design. An abstract shape can be great art, if it shares more in common with a closeup of a snail shell's pattern than the cubism of Picasso. Picasso's creative abstract form reflects his own creative vision, not



God's. So, art forms that emphasize "art for art's sake" (sounds good, but shouldn't we do everything for God's sake) or personal creativity are generally out. Thus, classical educators should generally exclude most Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art, among other modern forms as decor. There is always room for instructional use of such pieces.

Then we have the "tweener" art that fits between classical and modern. Van Gogh is early enough in the decay that we can see through his impressionism, the beauty of sunflowers or stars. These can be appropriate, if not over used, for some younger classrooms where the broad abstract brush strokes combine to create beauty in an unfocused form. Some pointillism, like Seurat's Sunday on LaGrande Jatte also depict God's world in a unique way that may be appropriate in a classical context—it was painted in the 1880's. And, early 20th century art Nouveau also has beauty and virtue.

Classical schools should put a particular emphasis on the Medieval view of the cosmos. See C.S. Lewis's "The Discarded Image." Thus medieval art is good, but the late medieval period also gave us Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassical and Rococo art. These are clearly good choices—if they're appropriate and masterpieces. Much of this work is church-art or has Christian themes. Beginning with the enlightenment, we see a mixed bag. The neoclassical era (late 18th and early 19th century) gave us Romanticism, Realism, and even what's been called transcendentalist art (a subgroup of Romanticism) are particularly good because they are interesting, striking, and yet reflect an idealized realism.

## Uniforms

We often think of uniforms as a functional way to keep dress codes simple. They help us keep away the latest fads and simplify the whole "what's wrong with this?" discussion. Uniforms do all of this. But, they do much more in a classical Christian school. The uniforms are part of the whole aesthetic of the school. One difficult thing about uniforms is the supply. It may seem easy to select a supplier, or just order on the internet, or from a nearby store. But, uniforms must be available year after year,

reliably, in a wide array of sizes, and be quick to ship. This narrows options to a handful of uniform suppliers.

With this restriction, and the limited suppliers, schools should still attempt to find beauty in the uniforms — particularly for girls. Girls, being the fairer sex, are naturally more concerned about how their clothes look. Guys may go in for style, which uniforms should not have — at least not in the popular sense. But, beauty through attire is not as natural of an inclination for boys. Here are some rules of thumb for uniforms:

- Pay attention to the girl's uniform. Boys do well in Khaki or Navy pants with a button down shirt, with the point of style primarily in the tie. Consequently, schools often put girls, in plain Khaki skirts and girls versions of the button down shirt. This can result in a look that's a bit "mid-century eastern communist block". Or, some schools use pleated skirts that don't hang well. Or, they use jumpers on girls who are too old for jumpers. Gals will, as a rule, desire beauty, even in a uniform that is not stylish. The sexes are different, so we should treat them so. Uniforms should highlight and celebrate these differences. Just as boys in plaid pants would send the wrong message, girls in comely solid-colored skirts can send a similarly poor message about how we think of girls and boys. In this day and age, we need to do everything possible to ensure girls look like girls and boys like boys. Skirts on girls should be the norm, with pants for girls a rare and specially selected option. It's best to avoid pants options, even over objections about climate or sexism. Do what it takes to make the girls uniform look beautiful and sharp. Embrace the biblical call to differentiate the sexes, don't hedge. (Deuteronomy 22:5)
- Use formal and informal uniforms. Or, just formal. But, do not take the low road of requiring polos and tan pants for everything. As Lewis says in his "solemnity" piece, there are certain events that need a higher look. The cost is really not that comparatively great for one outfit.
- Don't bend to the style of the day. If you can imagine that the uniform could go "out of style" it is too contemporary. Uniforms should never look like they are partaking in a stylish fad. That's not to say

they shouldn't be beautiful. Fads like flat front pants vs. pleats, tight fitting shirts vs loose, these will all change. Pick the most timeless design and stick with traditional cuts. A jacket, tie, and slacks for formal day and polos or button downs for every day is a winning combination for boys. Some schools use logo'd T's and/or jeans or shorts. This is too low. As with the building and the decor, the uniforms should elevate the learning environment.

- Limit casual days. Some schools do casual Fridays. We recommend against this frequent of non-uniform days. It opens too many doors and creates too much opportunity for "look at me" days. "Look at me" is the primary sentiment we're trying to stem with uniforms. Rare casual days are OK (they tend to sneak up on kids, so teens are less likely to buy clothes just for that purpose).

- Enforce hair and grooming standards. "look at me" is the enemy of Christian community. Kids naturally try to establish their identity in outward appearance, particularly in the secondary grades. In any public high school, you'll find a potpourri of identities (goths, preps, rappers, jocks, etc.— now trans, furry's, etc.) Enter any fortune 500 company and you won't find this identity race (at least you didn't used to). So, when students say "what's wrong with... a mullet, etc." the answer is we're saving you from foolishness. The only true and good identity is that of conforming to Christ's people and His community. (1 Corinthians 11) Now, protests will erupt "Where in the bible does it say that I can't have long hair, etc..." Putting aside 1 Corinthians 11: 14-15, and other sources, one thing we know from scripture is every outward appearance is purposeful and powerful. The Nazarite vow came with a pledge not to cut your hair. Tattoos are forbidden in Leviticus (19:28) because the wider culture had unholy purposes for this practice. Temple prostitutes and wealthy worldly women had adornment practices that were rejected by both Peter (1 Peter 3:3-5) and Paul (1 Tim. 2:9), because of what they associated one with and what they represented. By these standards, teaching children to dress, adorn, and groom in accordance with your school community's standard is a theme deeply set in scripture. Worship of the individual drives the opposite purpose.

- Sports uniforms can become a modesty problem, as well as a beauty problem. It's interesting to note that, at the time of this writing, apparently girls can only play basketball in long baggy shorts, but volleyball can only be played with bikini shorts. Of course, the argument made is that these are "comfortable" for the associated sport. Or that they are necessary. Of course, watching a volleyball or basketball game will tell you that neither sport is benefited by either fad. Volleyball gets its cues from beach ball, basketball from the NBA. Styles are not necessarily bad, but style is no reason to allow for immodesty.

- A word about modesty: Our culture tells us that you can wear what you want and if someone else is tempted by it, that's their problem. This is often equated to the practice of blaming a rape on the victim's behavior or clothing, using hyperbole to drive the argument. Once again, our culture's views are not those of our Savior. In scripture, we see a consistent message: do everything with deference to the other person (1 Cor. 8). And, dress modestly (1 Tim 2, 1 Cor. 12). Schools should instruct students in the distinction between the worldly value of individual freedom and the Christian value of deference.

- The graphic design of sports jerseys, etc., should reflect classical beauty— this means elegance and tastefulness, but with telos in mind. Telos, or the end purpose, requires that the design comport enough with community expectations (style) in the sports league so as not to stand out as "weird." All aesthetics must meet this test.

- Think of style as an ordered affection. As long as your choice meets higher standards of beauty and classical form, the lower affection for style can be rightly considered. Disordered affections place style above beauty and modesty.

- Require that teachers wear more formal attire— ties for men, no jeans, etc. While not a uniform, this reflects respect and order in the institution. Some may ask why students wear uniforms and teachers do not? Teachers, as adults, have the maturity to meet community expectations. Students are less mature and, as a group, will not meet expectations consistently.

## Parting thought

As our world has accelerated away from Christianity and toward a new “indi-paganism,” beauty has gone from absence to ugliness, particularly in personal grooming. Increasingly, we will need to make the tough decision to stand apart in appearance from the world. Christ’s church started out in its early years taking this posture. Fortunately, scripture instructs us accordingly. But, after nearly two millennia of Christian standards driving our aesthetic standards, we may find it hard to break away. Classical Christian schools should lead the way. What once would have been seen as “escapist” might just be appealing to those who we want to attract.