

A Brief Introduction to Christian Classical Education

A Christian education is about cultivating and shaping a young person to mirror the virtue and character of Christ. True education is not about training for a career. A school that emphasizes skills without character, or talent without virtue does not educate the whole person, nor prepare them for an eternal calling. Christian classical education is distinct because it believes the ordained and God given curriculum for life is the good, true and beautiful. A classically trained student is therefore prepared to adore and love these things in all aspects, making them the next generation of the Church at large.

What is Classical Education?

Classical education can be divided into two main categories: Philosophy and Pedagogy.

Philosophy

1. Classical Christian Education is about shaping the soul by creating a culture of virtue and character. The ancient Greeks and Romans believed that such virtue and character came from forming good citizens. But a Christian approach means that education is about creating disciples of Christ. The sum total of this philosophy is a school where **every action is about guiding a student to who they were called to be in Christ.**
2. The philosophy of classical Christian education is the identity that shapes the culture of learning. The ancients called such learning “paideia.” The word literally derives from “walking together.” In other words, education is a journey where the students walk with a master towards an ideal goal. **The paideia is the spirit or nature of a school.**
3. In Christian classical schools, the philosophy and paideia come together to create a comprehensive and cohesive atmosphere. All subjects and all knowledge are a form of revelation. Therefore, **every classroom is co-equal as a way to know more about God** and therefore become a better disciple. Furthermore, everything has a didactic purpose. From learning math, to gym class, to discipline, to walking down the hall, etc. – it is all structured in a way that points to virtue and character.
4. Creating the paideia is itself a form of teaching. **All virtue is centered around what is true, what is beautiful and what is good.** Therefore, in the simplest of terms, all education is about helping a young disciple appreciate what God has given to the world through His goodness, truth and beauty. But, accomplishing

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this task requires a concerted effort to surround students with truth, goodness and beauty. This places an emphasis on the arts (music, art, spoken word, narratives, etc), traditions (the beauty of community, family, nation, etc.) and liturgy (themes and beliefs that hold the culture together as a matter of routine and practice).

5. For thousands of years, education accomplished these goals by structuring learning around the 7 liberal arts. **The phrase “liberal arts” means “freeing work.”** While discipline and routine are a mainstay, they are a form of discipline that unlocks the creative mind – a mind aimed at the good, true and beautiful.

Pedagogy

Preface: **Underlying all of the following methods is the premise of Biblical truth.**

The Christian worldview is paramount in all these areas. There is a lot of discussion and mention of western civilization, the Greeks, Romans, philosophy, theology etc., but these subjects follow the truth of scripture. Thus, it should be assumed that there is a strong Biblical curriculum throughout the school and at every level.

1. The 7 liberal arts were traditionally divided into two parts, the trivium and quadrivium. The trivium are the subjects of grammar, logic and rhetoric. The quadrivium includes arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. In the simplest of terms the first three are foundational areas where the basics of all subjects and the “how” to think not “what” to think are instilled in a child. The second set is an emphasis on the natural sciences. Naturally there are many subjects and classes that are not included in these seven categories. However, they are intentionally vague and reflect more of a philosophy than a prescriptive approach to education. **Most classical schools are built around the trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric**, while the quadrivium is covered in the many science and math classes at the junior high and high school levels.
2. The trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric is the curricular framework of a classical school. They are defined or described as:

Grammar: is the basic language of every subject. In other words, grammar is not just about language. In the Grammar stages (K-5th or 6th grades) students are provided the foundations of all subjects and presented with the “facts” or building blocks necessary

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for each area of study. **It is about mastery of content.** This works well for this stage of development because children are able to retain and absorb information.

Logic: is the process of thinking through the questions of life. Correct and well ordered logic believes that truth is the final answer to all questions. Good logic asks the right questions and seeks the truth in all areas of study. In a classical school, logic is taught as a formal study beginning in the junior high years. Again, this works well with the natural development of the human being. Children at that age suddenly become more curious. They ask even more questions and are seeking deeper answers to their questions. **A classical school aims at helping them order their questions and provides Biblical truth as the foundation to all answers.**

Rhetoric: is the art of articulating ideas. Rhetoric naturally follows logic because once truth is found, it needs to be revealed in every way possible. **Rhetoric is not just about speech, it is about communicating truth to others.** Learning the skills of rhetoric is reserved for High School. If done well, then the Rhetoric stage is where the freedom of creativity starts to shine. Students are able to express themselves in winsome ways and in all areas of study. This is not about any particular individual, but individuals are able to share and glorify the truth, which is ultimately about sharing and glorifying Christ. God has made us all unique, but with a singular purpose.

3. Perhaps the easiest way to think of the trivium is the scientific method, observation, hypothesis, testing, conclusion. It is ironic that science is sometimes separated from religion, because the scientific method was born out of religious universities that taught grammar (observation of things or facts), Logic (an idea tested with questioning with ideas) and rhetoric (theories and/ or conclusion). **This method and these areas are the tools of all learning and the path to knowledge for all of life.**
4. The methods of teaching the trivium are memetic and then socratic.

Memetic is an emphasis on content through repeated practice, routine, memorization and repetition. This is much more than rote memory, it is surrounding the student with song, exercises that become instinct and comprehensive lessons that draw on all subjects throughout the day, month and year.

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Socratic is the use of questioning and the exploration of ideas. This starts at the grammar level but is emphasized heavily at the logic and rhetoric stages of development. Again, questions just for the sake of questions is not the point. Rather, these questions are probing and seeking truth.

5. The content of Christian Classical education starts with “Classical” subjects and builds from it. “Classical” is not reserved for just ancient societies and things that are “old.” **Rather, the word classical means an emphasis on what built civilization.** History, literature, philosophy, art, music... are all cultural elements that represent common ideas. Classical education explores these ideas and continues to engage with great ideas.
6. These great ideas are most commonly expressed in the “great books” of western civilization. This includes ancient Greek and Roman poets, early Christian authors, medieval writers and modern novelists. By the time a child graduates a classical school they have been exposed to such works as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Bede, Dante, Chaucer, Milton, Bunyan, Byron, Keats, Bronte, Emmerson, Dickens, Twain, Hemingway, Frost, and much more. Modern education has underestimated the ability of students to absorb the great corpus of western ideas. **More importantly, such exposure creates knowledge that unites individuals in their quest for the “good” life.**
7. The goal of classical pedagogy is to not balkanize subjects. All areas of study are considered coequal and they are taught to correlate to one another. A math class can draw on the history of ideas, and a history class makes note of how philosophers changed math, etc. **Most significantly, Bible classes inform the content areas.** In other words as students study certain portions of scripture it will be directly related to what they are studying in all the subject areas.
8. A common component of classical education is an introduction to Latin, and sometimes Greek, although the latter is less common. Latin was a prerequisite for almost all education until about seventy years ago. It seems shockingly archaic and sometimes unnecessary. But, all language study is about culture and a framework of thinking. **Western Civilization was built on the logic of the Latin language, including the theology of the Christian church.** Its value as a subject is immense. It produces better grammar, logic and rhetoric.