

# C L A S S I S

THE BULLETIN of THE  
ASSOCIATION of CLASSICAL & CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

*Sine doctrina vita est quasi mortis imago*

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## What's So Great About Classical Education?

by Steve Wilkins

People usually assume that I'm interested in classical Christian education because of the failure of the public school system and the liberal nature of its curriculum. In fact, it's just the opposite. I'm not interested in Christian and classical education because of the failure of the public school system but because of its stunning success.

Now, you may be wondering, given that statement, why I was invited to write this article! But allow me to explain. The government-controlled school system has been the most successful of all the efforts ever taken up in our country's history. You may think, "How can you say that? The illiteracy rate is the lowest it has ever been! Test scores continue to go down in spite of the efforts of public school to spend the majority of class time preparing students to take their achievement tests! This is ridiculous!"

Oh yes! If I meant by "success" success in educating the children of the country, you would be absolutely right. But that has never been the goal of the government school system. From the outset, in the mid-nineteenth century, the goal has not been education but indoctrination. The original founders of the government system wanted to construct a system that would indoctrinate the children of this country to think as atheistic relativists. It was not education that was their concern, but the undermining of Christianity and the Christian system of laws and ethics upon which this country was founded. This was the goal, and no effort has ever been so successful in attaining its goals as the government school system.

I am giving my energies, my time, my money, and what gifts I have to promote Christian and classical education because of the success which the government schools have had undermining true education. We must reverse this trend.

But we must be clear about what we mean by "Classical Christian Education." "Classical" education has become something of a fad in recent years as many Christians look for ways to "beef up" their Christian Schools and make them more academically challenging. But to hear some people talk about it, classical education means any curriculum that teaches Latin and makes you read Sophocles, Aristotle, and Plutarch's *Lives*. It produces these arrogant, snotty-nosed kids who think they are smart because they can use Latin phrases and actually know what they mean.

We must be clear on this point. Classical *Christian* Education does not have as its goal the promotion of pagan culture or its pretended glories. Classical Greece and Rome were both degraded cultures which honored perversity and despised true virtue. Christians should have nothing to do with promoting this on any level – much less promoting it to our children.

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## What's So Great About Classical Education?

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When we speak about Classical Christian education, we are speaking about equipping our children with the tools of learning and exposing them to the “classic” writings (those works which have had a molding influence upon our culture) and doing all this in the context of a self-conscious submission to the infallible revelation given us in the Bible.

I want to lay out seven characteristics of Classical Christian education as we understand it and in doing this show you why, in my view, nothing is more critical for our children today.

**1. Classical Christian education is liberal education.** This is why I love it so much. I am not opposed to the public schools because their curriculum is too liberal, I’m opposed to them because their curriculum is not liberal enough! I am for consistent and extreme liberalism! Of course, I am using the word “liberal” according to its original meaning – that which has to do with liberty, that which promotes liberty.

The so-called “education” of the government school does nothing to promote liberty. They are promoting a bondage of the worst sort. It is an education which only

prepares the children for meek submission to totalitarianism and fascism. It equips them to give all homage to Caesar but leaves them with nothing but disdain for God. That is not “liberal” education but the education of slaves. I am against slavery and especially when it is imposed upon our children. “Classical education” is education in the *liberal* arts. It is an education which equips students with the *arts* which preserve and promote true, biblical liberty.

In our pragmatic, politics-worshipping age, we tend to think of liberty as something preserved by legislation and political technique. In fact, true liberty is the fruit of believing and following the Son of God – as we are told so bluntly by our Savior Himself (John 8:34, 36 “If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed”). Understanding the world from God’s perspective is the foundation of true liberty. Classical education is a liberal education in the truest sense of the word. Therefore it follows:

**2. Classical Christian Education is a distinctively Biblical education.** It understands that the Bible is God’s Word and that God’s Word is the foundation Word of all history. Since God knows all and is all-holy, His Word is pure wisdom and all truth. It is the only infallible rule of faith and life. All wisdom comes from His mouth. Anything that doesn’t conform to His Word is folly. Thus, when we read Plato and Aristotle and Socrates,

and other high-minded pagans, we never forget that they are foundationally creatures of God, made in His image. When they say something that is true, they are merely thinking God’s thoughts after Him. When

they exalt their own wisdom and depart from God’s word, they are expressing that rebellion which led to their deaths and the deaths of all who follow them.

By “classical” education, we do not mean romanticizing the pagan civilizations of ancient Greece or Rome. Nor do we desire to revive the “neo-paganism” of the Renaissance. Rather, we are seeking to develop in our children a distinctively Christian understanding of the world and life. To do this they must know their Bible thoroughly and that

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means understanding the world in which the ancient Israelites and early Christians lived – and that means understanding the classical paganism that prevailed in the world at the time God gave His Word.

Thus, our students must be familiar with both the theology and thinking of paganism, but they must understand it in the light of God's Word. Classical Christian education is not naive about unbelief and paganism. It understands and recognizes the sight and stench of death and desires that the children

understand this as will. And that is why they must be familiar with the philosophies of the world which work death.

**3. Classical Christian Education is an orthodox education.** That is, it understands that all truth finds its unity in the Triune God Himself. It remembers that all truth is connected and intertwined and cannot be separated out completely into separate subjects. Thus, the various subjects of study are not isolated from one another or set as rivals to one another. Theology and science are brothers, not enemies. Literature and history belong together; they are not in a blood feud with each other. Since all these things are creatures of God and gifts of God, they find their unity in Him. It is only in the high Trinitarianism of Christianity that we can have unity which doesn't destroy legitimate diversity and diversity which doesn't undermine unity.

An "orthodox" education is also one that honors the historic creeds and confessions of the Church and recognizes the boundaries that have been established by the teaching and leading of the Spirit. Though it is not bound to tradition and ~~and~~ "traditionalism" (the worship of tradition), Classical Christian education honors the leading of the Spirit in the

Church and respects His gifts to the Church. Therefore, it respects the boundaries and guidance that the historic creeds and confessions give us.

**4. Classical Christian education is evangelical education.** It understands that salvation only comes by grace through faith. Salvation is not through education. Knowledge is not power. All power belongs to God, and salvation is knowing Him and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. We don't pretend to be

able to save by schooling, but we do believe that a thoroughly Christian education is part of what it means to bring up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and, as we are able to do this, equip them to live out their salvation in the world.

**5. Classical Christian education is reverent education.** That is to say it is an education in the fear of the Lord. It acknowledges Him as the Creator and Redeemer and calls all men to be students and disciples at His feet. It undermines the unbelieving rationalism of secularism and honors faith in the living God. It encourages belief rather than unbelief, faithful inquiry rather than rebellious skepticism.

Christian education understands that wisdom is more than knowledge. Wisdom involves love for the God who created all things. A brilliant intellect, if it is devoid of the fear of the Lord, is the foundation of folly not wisdom. The goal of Christian Classical education is the making of disciples, not highly intelligent fools.

**6. Classical Christian education is foundational.** It is not vocational training (i.e., as it has come to be defined in our day), but *foundational* training. It is a

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He is the author of *Call to Duty: The Sterling Nobility of Robert E. Lee*

(Cumberland House)

and

*Face to Face: Meditations on Friendship and Hospitality*

(Canon Press).

He and his wife, Wendy, have six children:

Matt, Jordan, Caleb,

Charity, Bray

(engaged to Kajsa Garfield)

and Remy, who with his wife Bethany, welcomed the Wilkin's first grandson,

Archie, last fall.

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training which lays a foundation for glorifying God and enjoying Him forever no matter what your particular vocation may be.

The method followed is generally that of the classic *Trivium* (grammar, dialect, and rhetoric). The students learn the *grammar* of the Bible, science, history, literature, mathematics, and language. They are taught *logic* in order to learn how to argue persuasively for the truth and to discern good arguments from bad. Finally, they learn *rhetoric* in order to present the truth beautifully and clearly to the world.

These are the very skills that are necessary no matter what your vocation may be in order to live to the glory of God and advance His kingdom in your family, church, and society. Without these foundational tools, you will be held captive by squint-eyed modernity, imprisoned in the fetid cells of secularized intolerance.

With these you are grounded with the tools to live a lifetime of learning, growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ Jesus. And this leads to the last mark of Classical Christian education.

**7. Classical Christian education is humbling.** We are well aware that in spite

of the fact that our children will read thousand of pages of history, theology, science, and literature and spend hundreds of hours studying logic, rhetoric, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, their education will be nothing more than an *initiation* into the liberal arts and true learning. After all their reading and study, they will have merely scratched the surface of all that there is to read and study – and only know an even smaller percentage of all that there is to know. One of the chief goals of classical

Christian education is to teach them this fact. We want to show them how little they know.

If our students think they have *mastered* anything, we have failed. The goal of truly “classical” education then is to bring our children to a clear understanding of how little they know and at the same time give them a hunger and thirst for

knowledge and righteousness that will drive them to pursue both throughout their lives. Thus, if someone were to ask us our ultimate goal, we would have to say that there is one thing we want our children to master – and that is the grace of humility.

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## *Nota Bene*

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