

Why Classical Education?

by Fritz Hinrichs

This talk will attempt to answer three questions; what is classical education, why is it necessary in our day and what are its benefits?

The word "classical" or "classic" is used in many contexts and often without specific meaning: Classic Coke, classical music, classic rock; however, classical usually means something that through time for various reasons has been proven worthy of our respect and interest. In music, the work of certain composers has been recognized as worth saving while that of others, even though perhaps popular in its own time, has been tossed aside to the dust-bin of history. The same is true of books; some books are more worthy of study than others because of the profundity and clarity with which they express the ideas that they contain.

The study of the great books has been the backbone of good education for centuries. If you look at the books read by the intellectual giants of our culture, you find that there are particular books that come up again and again. These books were required of most schoolboys until the rise of Dewey and the democratization of education through the public-school system. The public-school system saw these books as elitist and not easily comprehensible by the masses and therefore not appropriate for public education.

Another influence contributing to the demise of the great books was the demoralization of the Christian intellectual community. Most of the institutions of learning in this country were founded by Christians who saw it as their duty to conquer the intellectual arena for Christ. However, since the rise of secularism and especially since the humiliating defeat that biblical Christians saw at the Scope's Trial, the evangelical community has been in full retreat from the intellectual arena. Before the turn of the century, most institutions of learning were dominated by those who thought from a biblical worldview; however, this consensus quickly began to crumble and in 1925 at the Scope's Trial, through the public humiliation of William Jennings Bryan's creationism, academia as well as the general culture came to hold biblical Christianity as unworthy of intellectual regard. Even though the trial was in no way a rigorous debate of the creation issue, its effect on the Christian intellectual community was nothing short of disastrous. From that point on Christians felt as though the intellectual community had humiliated them and, to return the favor, they abandoned the intellectual community in droves. The intellectual pursuit came to be seen as not only of little value for Christians but also as simply antagonistic to the faith. At this point in history the church saw an unraveling of the Christian intellectual tradition. No longer would Christians apply themselves to the study of the great thinkers; that would be a task left entirely to those with a non-Christian world view.

Christian education has become something of a lost science. Not only have Christians done very little to prepare their children to become godly intellects, but intellectual incompetence has been seen as the true helpmate of vital spirituality. A soft mind has been seen as a vital tool in the pursuit of a soft heart. In our day, mental rigor and a vigorous intellectual pursuit have become equated with doctrinal rigidity and cold spirituality.

However, by God's grace, with the increasing interest in classical education, we are seeing a revival of the Christian intellectual tradition. Classical education differs from most educational philosophies in that it attempts to step back from the parade of educational theories that seem to keep us in a state of continual bewilderment and asks, "What was education like in the past? What books were used? What goals were thought important?"

Dorothy Sayers, in her well-known essay, "The Lost Tools of Learning" attempted to answer these questions and in so doing gave us some very sage advice for education in our own day. She began by investigating the medieval model of education and found that it was composed of two parts; the first was called the Trivium and the second, the Quadrivium.

The Trivium contained three areas: Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric. Each of these three areas were specifically suited to the stages in a child's mental development. During his early years a child studies the Grammar portion of the Trivium. The Grammar period (ages 9-11) includes a great deal of language, preferably an ancient language, such as Latin or Greek, that will require the child to spend a great deal of time learning and memorizing its vocabulary and grammatical structure. During their younger years children possess a great natural ability to memorize large amounts of material even though they may not understand its significance. This is the time to fill

them full of facts, such as the multiplication table, geography, dates, events, plant and animal classifications; anything that lends itself to easy repetition and assimilation by the mind.

During the second period, the Dialectic period (ages 12-14), the child begins to understand that which he has learned and begins to use his reason to ask questions based on the information that he has gathered in the Grammar stage. It is during this stage that the child no longer sees the facts that he learned as merely separate pieces of information but he starts to put them together into logical relationships by asking questions. No longer can the American Revolution merely be a fact in history but it must be understood in the light of the rest of what the child has learned. For example, how do we understand the actions of the American patriots in light of what we know about our responsibility to obey the governing authorities? How can the fact that Washington and Jefferson are both held up as great men be reconciled with the fact that they were slave-holders?

When a child comes to the age when he has the ability to reason, he usually puts his reason to use by making a nuisance of himself back-talking to his parents or trying catch them in some error or fallacy, but during this time the young mind's new abilities should be directed towards profitable mental exercises. Formal logic and the proofs of geometry can be a great aid during this time, so that the student learns the rules that guide sound thinking. There are many areas that can be used to provide good practice material for the young mind. History supplies many events that involve questions of morality which require a good deal of discussion and careful reasoning to work through. Theology also gives many opportunities for debate; even though our discussion must be seasoned with reverence for the subject matter as well as our opponents, fundamentally we can see theological debate as a very healthy and beneficial activity. A less controversial area is that of mathematics; for thousands of years the geometry text written by the ancient Greek mathematician Euclid has provided a beautifully constructed series of geometrical proofs that, with guidance, any perceptive child can work through with great benefit to their thinking skills.

The third period Sayer mentions is that of Rhetoric (ages 14-16). During this period the child moves from merely grasping the logical sequence of arguments to learning how to present them in a persuasive, aesthetically pleasing form. Dorothy Sayers also calls this period the Poetic Age, because during this period the student is to develop the skill of organizing the information he has learned into a well-reasoned format that will be both pleasing as well as logical. During this period the student can begin to specialize in particular areas of interest and is equipped to move on to the Quadrivium, which involves specialization in particular areas of study. At this time, students that are more inclined towards either mathematics and science or literature and the humanities can pursue the area of their natural abilities. The pursuit of particular subjects is appropriate at this point because they have been given the tools of learning that are necessary for the study of any subject. By this stage, a student who had been given a classical education would have the thinking skills and mental discipline that are necessary to tackle the difficulties associated with most any area of study.

Why Classical Christian Education is Necessary Today

In modern education, we have put the proverbial cart before the horse by expecting students to master a great number of subjects before they have mastered the tools of learning. Even though the study of language and logic may seem dull in themselves, they are the tools that one needs to develop to be able to approach the task of mastering any particular subject whether it be Scottish political history or carburetor maintenance. Sayers ends her essay with this line, "The sole true end of education is simply this; to teach men how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain."

"Learning to learn for oneself" certainly well summarizes the pedagogical goal of classical education; however, once one can learn for one's self, where to go from there? Another educational truism is helpful, "Education is merely selling someone on books." To be able to learn for oneself does not mean that you no longer need a teacher, but rather, you are capable of making books your teachers without the aid of an instructor to explain the books to you. In our day and age, we seem to be quite impressed by the number of years one has spent in the academic institutions obtaining degrees. However, the ancients probably would have thought that our institutions must be quite poor since after so many years they had not produced students who were able to learn independently. That a student still needs an instructor to explain the works he is reading shows a sad level of intellectual dependency. We seem to think that intellectual adolescence must be indefinitely prolonged before granting a young scholar the right to stand on his own two feet. The fact that you leave the academic institution

should not be a sign that your education has come to an end, rather it should show that you are ready for it to begin.

To this end we must ask, "Which books are worthy teachers?" The answer to this question usually lies in what we are attempting to learn; however, if we are merely to ask in general "Which are the *truly* great books?" we find there is actually fairly broad agreement on the answer to this question. There are books that through history have shown enduring value. With the Bible we have a canon which comprises those books that God has directed the Church through His Spirit to acknowledge as authoritative; so also, with the great books there is a canon of sorts. Through time certain books have generally come to be viewed as central to the development of western culture and have had an unusually large impact due to the profundity and eloquence with which they have expressed their ideas. These books form the core of the western intellectual tradition; it is the ideas contained in them that has formed the saga that we know as western history.

Anyone who has grown up in the West and desires to understand the cultural milieu in which he has been raised should read these books. In order to come to a self-conscious understanding of the ideas that have shaped the culture around us, we need to face the ideas at the source from which they came. Francis Schaeffer had an excellent sense for the top-down flow of ideas. He was fond of explaining how ideas began with the philosophers, worked down through the universities, into the popular media and finally onto the dinner table. Because ideas progress in this manner, it behooves us to become acquainted with ideas at their fount so that we may understand their manifestations in our present culture. Thus, the reading of the great books serves an important apologetic function for Christians; the books allow us to grapple with the ideas that have shaped the thinking of those around us who we are called to minister to as evangelists.

Often when I describe the study of the great books as a tool in apologetics, people visualize their study as somewhat of a brutal secular gauntlet the Christian must run in order to gain intellectual credibility. This is a mistaken understanding. Certainly, there is much in the western intellectual tradition that must be consciously rejected and put under biblical criticism; however, it is the non-believer and not the Christian who must fear the reading of the great books. Those who through the promotion of political correctness would return us to polytheistic paganism have come to realize that they must entirely throw out the study of western culture if they are going to reshape the thinking of our students. Western thought has been permeated with Christian monotheism and thus a persistent concept of objective and universal truth. It will always be dangerous territory for the mental slugs that political correctness would raise up on its diet of insipid relativism.

Certainly, the study of the great books should not be taken lightly. There are serious hazards to one's faith that lurk; however, studying through the great books often is like the trouble-filled journey of Christian in Pilgrim's Progress; just about the time it appears all is lost and that the darkness is certainly coming in, an author who is a friend of the faith comes to your side and helps guide you back to the path of truth. For every Aristotle, there is an Augustine; when you are in the throes of a skeptical Descartes, the brilliant faith of Pascal comes to your aid; when under attack by Hume, you have a friend in Calvin; when besieged by Kant, you fight back with Lewis. God in his providential care has given us a bountiful number of voices who have stood in the gap at crucial periods of our history and spoken for His truth. The men God has raised up to speak His truth to our culture are a testimony to the tremendous care with which He has guided the West.

We live in the continuum of western history. In order to evaluate this stream of which we are part, we must step back from it and discern the ideas that have shaped it. To attempt to ignore the ideas that have shaped our cultural history is to guarantee ourselves not only cultural irrelevance but also entrenchment in the Christian ghetto. This position will not only lead to our own intellectual poverty but will also disgrace the Sovereign God who needs not be mocked by the cowardice of His children. The King's children do not hide in the alleys but walk confidently knowing that the sun that shines belongs to their Father.

The Benefits of a Classical Christian Education

I would like to present to you the benefits of a classical Christian education. I thought I understood this topic, but as I continue in its path, it continues to reveal riches to me that I did not foresee. My initial interest in classical Christian education was the desire to help young Christian minds to understand the flow of history, its effects on our own day and how we should speak an effective word back to the critics of our faith in society- an effective apologia. However, as time passes, I have seen that a classical education not only allows you to understand the

past, but it also gives you great aid in understanding and living in the present. I used to think that the common themes focused on in the great works of literature were melodramatic and distant from our daily experience. The young may ask, "How often do we experience, war, marriage, death, familial strife, grief, the mishandling of justice, the confusion of truth and falsehood? Are not such themes unfamiliar and too heavy a burden for our young minds?" Yet, if we unweave the tapestry of life, we find the warp and woof made of just such material. It has not taken many years for me to see that in life we must face death. We must endure disappointment even from those to whom we looked for security and sound guidance.

Our media generation would like to hide from us the realities of life or at least convince us that the totality of life's meaning can be found in a sequence of images flashed before us in high-resolution color on a flat-screen. We have a generation that wants learning to come through fun- yet the voice of Aeschylus rebukes us when he says we must "suffer into truth" We entertain our minds to death and then find ourselves confused when our young people discover truth to be a superfluous nuisance impeding their pursuit of the blithe and happy life.

Yet, what will sustain us when we hold our first-born lifeless in our arms? Does the picture of a doting God vainly attempting to arrange for us a pleasant life really comfort? When it comes, will we be so shocked by tragedy that we must retreat from life and fear such a loss ever coming on us again? Have we been told that tragedy and grief are to be unexpected and when found, best hidden away in order to keep the illusion that life does not contain such burdens?

Why is it that we moderns have such difficulty seeing that life comes with a veil of tears? The last hundred years have seen more war and cruelty than most any century and yet, one might think we have forbidden the memory of the past. Does an event not exist unless we are watching it on the six o'clock news? If it hasn't happened to me, do I think it never will? Jesus Himself wept in grief over the loss of His friend Lazarus. Over and over again, God exhorted the Israelites to remember. They were quick to forget the great works of God's hand and the mighty deeds that brought them out of their torment in the wilderness. When we do not remember, we do not see the whole of life, but create a worldview that is solely the product of our own fancy.

A classical education makes us face that which is not our immediate experience. It forces us to look at life in all its complexity. Though a classical education gives a student the tools of learning that are foundation to logical thinking, a classical education is not just about developing clear thinkers. A classical education also gives a student the opportunity to develop the depth of understanding and broadness of experience that are foundational to true wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but this does not mean that piety narrowly defined is the sum total of wisdom. Often, we tell ourselves that wisdom is the application of moral principles to daily experience. This notion reduces wisdom to a type of applied morality; however, we must understand the fullness of the Biblical concept of wisdom. The biblical concept of wisdom is much broader than our usual understanding of what wisdom contains. Consider Isaiah 28:27-29 "Caraway is not threshed with a sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cumin; caraway is beaten out with a rod, and cumin with a stick. Grain must be ground to make bread; so, one does not go on threshing it forever. Though he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it, his horses do not grind it. All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom." Now, why does the prophet Isaiah think that detailed bread making instructions are such a wonderful testimony to depths of the Lord's wisdom? Isn't bread making just "worldly knowledge"- necessary, but not really that important? If these are the questions that naturally come to your mind when hearing such a passage, listen again and take a spiritual mind. Proverbs 6:6-8, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food in harvest." We might think that being wise means being so spiritually-minded that we might let such details as when to plant our seed receive only minor attention. Proverbs exhorts us otherwise. Godly wisdom requires we apply ourselves to an understanding of the world and its ways. Consider Ecclesiastes 8:1, "Who is like the wise man? Who know the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance." Does it seem an odd notion to you to think of a young man who has just understood a geometric proof as making an important advance in his acquisition of wisdom? If so, I would challenge you that your division between worldly and spiritual knowledge is actually quite unspiritual.

If we truly believe that the world we live in was made by the hand of God, then experiencing and understanding that world must be seen as a vital aspect of our gaining *God's* wisdom. Even grief itself must be seen as one of the ways God teaches us. Ecclesiastes 7:3-4, "Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure." All of

life must be seen as the book from which we learn the mind of God. God has been merciful to give us the scriptures as a guide in this process to keep our minds from being overcome by the vastness of what they must learn.

How does this broad understanding of wisdom tie into the need for a classical education? It has been wisely said that **reading** is accelerated life experience. We could learn entirely from our own experience, but this path is slow and full of many painful lessons. Reading allows us to learn from the experience of others. If we are to see reading as so important, we must ask, which books should we read. We should find those books that have looked most intently at human life and will guide us towards asking the important questions about it.

Before saying more about what books help us develop life experience, I would like to address a common question regarding the reading of the great books. Many ask why we need a classical education when we could exclusively study the scriptures. The question is understandable for if we forsake the study of the scriptures, we run the dangerous risk of developing thoughts that are uninformed by God's truth. On the other hand, if we do not study the world, both past and present, we will read the scriptures without the context that God chose to speak them into. The more we study both the world and the Bible, the more we will understand both. Let us not confuse the Bible, which is the norm of knowledge, and the world, which is the stage whereon we accomplish the pursuit of knowledge.

In contrast to Christianity, many religions are based on books that are simply collections of moralisms that demand no historical context or understanding. In His sovereignty, the God of the Bible chose to reveal Himself in the context of the fullness of time. Because God chose to break into time and space, He produced a complex and involved relationship with secular history. A moralistic religion might have us think that the study of history, though an interesting hobby, is not truly essential to the religious life. In the Bible we find a very different situation. To fully comprehend the biblical books Daniel and Esther, you will need to read the Greek historian Herodotus. The Apostle Paul himself quotes ancient Greek poets and Peter quotes from Jewish apocryphal writings. These few examples show that the Bible cannot be read without seeing its ties to the history into which it was revealed. The Bible points us towards itself as our final authority, but it also assumes that when we come to read it, we know the context from which it speaks. If we do not study history, we risk turning the Bible into a mere collection of moralisms from which we derive daily guidance for our lives.

God is not a distant moralist who has simply given us a list of precepts to follow and then sent us on our way hoping we will follow them. He is the sovereign Lord who is intimately involved in the entire flow of history. If our very steps are according to His plan, are not the twists and turns of history also His design? When authors create a story, they put their thoughts to pen and paper, when our God chose to write His story, He chose as his medium, time and space. Our temptation is to view the expanse of history as a realm within which God's hand is only dimly seen. There is sin in the world and much we see that goes against God's law, but this should not make us think for a moment that His will is not being accomplished or His providence does not attend. In our day and age, we tend to have a healthy appreciation of the fact that when we study math, geology, chemistry, physics- the various natural sciences, that we are studying the work of God's hands. Yet, we must also understand, when we read Herodotus, Thucydides, Gibbon, Shakespeare, Plato or even Spinoza, we are studying what the work of God's hand has brought about.

C.S. Lewis noted that the greatest difficulty he faced in convincing moderns of the truth of Christ's historical resurrection was not intellectual arguments against it, but the sense many moderns have that besides idle curiosity, all of history has no significant relation to them. It is almost as if we think it is only the present that exists and history is just an ambiguous mirage. In contrast, Augustine, the early church theologian, wrote his Confessions as an exercise in sanctified memory- recalling his life in order to see the hand of God bringing him to salvation. He held memory to be so crucial to the Christian life, he spent an entire chapter at the end of the Confessions discussing its nature.

If we desire to raise a generation of young Christians who hold firmly to the truth of their faith, we must not forget to exhort them to study and remember what the Lord has done. The works of those authors who have looked most closely at human life and attempted to give expression to its profoundest mysteries provide our best opportunity to develop the experience in which wisdom can slowly take root.