

Why Christian Education Must Also be Classical

Nicholas Perrin

It is sometimes said that Christian, classical education is a contradiction in terms. “How,” some well-meaning devout Christians will want to ask, “can the scheme of human learning, the centuries-old conversation we also call the ‘liberal arts’, have any real useful bearing on the Christian mind, which is to be transformed rather than conformed (Rom 12:2)?” When biblical illiteracy is running rampant through church, are not the pagans and their fallen writings simply a distraction which have little do with Christ or his purposes? Or, to put it in the words of Tertullian: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

Such sentiments often make classical, Christian educators feel like they have some explaining to do. But, as I see it, there is no reason to be defensive on this score. After all, it may be argued that the experiment of modern Christian education as a whole, which has been almost entirely built on the above described “Jerusalem *versus* Athens” framework, may be deemed a failure. This may be demonstrated on an empirical level. As I am informed by my colleagues in educational fields, there is solid research to show that children who attend Christian school fare no better in their long-term faithfulness to Christ or his church than children who pass through the public schools. If modern Christian primary and secondary educational institutions were designed to make the next generation in any sense more Christian, they have not succeeded in doing so.

Blame it all on the insidious influence of the surrounding culture if you wish, but perhaps the more fundamental problem is actually just the opposite. Perhaps the broad failure of modern Christian education has more to do with the fact that we in the church have often settled for a model of Christian education that is at bottom closer to an enfeebling Gnosticism, which ignores the full scope of human life, than a robust incarnational theology, which engages it. Whatever tensions are inherent in the theory and practice of Christian classical education, it is preeminently the Christian classical approach that has the strongest claim to be working out the entailments of orthodox Christology.

It all goes back to John chapter 1, where we learn that the Word has become flesh. The fact of the incarnation means that humanity has been validated, at least in principle. This validation applies to culture (not to mention the history of culture) as well, since culture is the medium through which humanity expresses itself and shapes creation. The heresy of docetism teaches that Christ did not actually take on flesh, much less really enter into the stream of history. Proper Christology insists on Christ’s full humanity. This means that Christ was a physical being with a human physiology; it also means that Christ was a social being, located within and necessarily responding to a particular economic, political and cultural context. To be human is to appreciate one’s interconnectedness with all of humanity—past, present, and future. This demands not merely an aloof acknowledgement of the fact of our common humanity, but also some involvement with and indeed reflective immersion in the conversation of humanity.

There are some who suggest that a Christian education is merely propaedeutic for the real work of Christian work, *viz.*, Christian ministry, evangelism or missions. But this is surely as misguided as it is superficial. Truly Christian education, that is education that is consistently committed to the incarnation, is one in which the Christian believer gains some sense of what it has meant to be human throughout history and what it means to be a human now, a person who is engaged culturally, politically, intellectually etc. On one level this may not sound very different from the theory of a secular humanist educator. But on reflection there should be considerable material overlap between what non-Christians consider an important for their *Bildung* and what Christians consider important.

On the other hand, at a more profound level, there must also be differences and these differences must be governed by our location in Christ. Because Christ is the revealed Logos, all our beliefs are founded on and constrained by that revelation. This naturally informs our judgments on countless fronts: metaphysics, ethics, cosmology, to name a few. And it is at these points that Christian education, with its assumptions as to what is true, most noticeably breaks from alternative approaches. The distinctive feature of Christian education is not that it settles certain questions ahead of time (all approaches to education do that, whether they admit to as much or not). Rather, what is unique to a Christian education is that certain questions are settled in a certain way, with a particular framework. This is not close-minded, but freeing. This is not irrational, but the logic of coherency.

And this is I think what Tertullian meant when he asked, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” So much of Christian education unthinkingly retains the framework of non-Christian education, but rejects the corpus and content of the arts and humanities. But isn’t the goal rather to acknowledge that by virtue of our humanity we are co-heirs of this legacy, and that by virtue of “Christ in us” it is ours to render a Christian interpretation? Most pressingly, Christians should welcome – as Tertullian and his protégés Barth and Van Til would have – postmodernism’s debunking the Enlightenment myth of the disembodied rational soul. Because all critical inquiry is self-involving, there is no virtue in eschewing metaphysical, philosophical, or theological pre-commitments; all claims to have done so are in fact spurious. Likewise, there is no intellectual shame in the church telling its children, “This is what we believe. This is the bottom line.” Of course, while different confessional communities define, extend or retract the “bottom line” in different ways, it is impossible to have education that in any meaningful sense “Christian” without agreed-upon and inflexible parameters of right belief.

At the same time, right belief is not one and the same as exhaustive knowledge. The Christian fundamentalist and the thoroughgoing sceptic together tend to share the common (and unbiblical) epistemological assumption that faith stands or falls on a complete grasp of the facts – and vice versa. Standing against the hubris of Enlightenment-style fideism and scepticism, the Christian educator must model a balance between two alternating pedagogical postures: one which effects closure, where the matter under consideration must be resolved with decisive pronouncement; the other is tentative and provisional, where no such closure is appropriate. Educators who make a pretense of having all the answers ahead of time may well have an inadequate appreciation of human finitude and sinfulness, and the degree to which these realities constrain and taint our judgment. Educators who are consistently unwilling to land, much like Socrates was unwilling to land in his dialogues, are denying the efficacy of the Word. The former forget that the complete truth will not be manifest until the end of history when Christ returns; the latter forget that truth has already appeared in Jesus Christ. We live between the “already” and the “not yet,” and we would do well to teach accordingly.

Because Christian Classical education is Christian, it presupposes a base of non-negotiable beliefs that serve as the starting point for serious intellectual inquiry. Because the approach is classical, it is dedicated to considering the whole scope of human cultural history. As such, the project corresponds to the thrust of John 1. The Word become flesh means that God has spoken uniquely in Christ and that Christ is now the lens through which all reality is interpreted. The Word becomes flesh also means that God has chosen to enter into the human conversation in human terms. As followers of Christ, we can afford to do no less. If the church wishes to grant its young a Christian education, the only theologically consistent way of doing so is by establishing the ground of confession and attending – sympathetically but critically – to the voices of humanity.

Defining the specificity of that confession and the voices which may be allowed to speak for humanity – those are other questions.