

Classical Christian Education:

A Look at Some History

By Ben House

The modern public education system has been weighed in many scales and found wanting. Critiques of the system in the form of books, articles, news stories, speeches, sermons, government reports, and test results have catalogued the numerous failings of state schools. Within public education, teachers, administrators, and students offer even more criticisms of the system. Whether one considers the arguments of the right or conservative end of the political spectrum, where the call is for a return to "the basics" and prayer, to the left or liberal wing of the political spectrum, where the call is for more government money, Outcome Based Education, and pluralism, the call is clearly for change.

State schools are expected to do everything: prepare students for college or vocational technical jobs, enable both brighter and slower students to excel at their respective levels, inculcate the "right" values, teach proper sexual behavior, teach students to think critically, raise the self-esteem of students, discipline children, prevent them from turning to drugs, alcohol, or suicide, teach a wide-ranging curriculum, create racial, sexual, and gender understanding and harmony, win ball games, and do all of these things in a manner that is pleasing to the students so they will not be bored or discouraged. In spite of these messianic expectations,¹ public schools are not sure what they are supposed to be doing. In the midst of a host of bugle commands, they are not sure which way to charge. There is no clear philosophy or direction.

In an age of cultural rootlessness, moral relativism, religious pluralism, social disintegration, and future uncertainty, how can we expect anything other than educational chaos?² Unstable times call for a return to theological foundations and historical forms. Many Christians mistakenly think that the cultural and social mores of the 1950s provide the answers. But the families, churches, and schools of the 1950s produced the 1960s. The rediscovery of theological foundations and historical forms must go further back in history.

The theological foundations must be established upon the Scriptures. In education, Christians have too often seen the Bible either as a book to be studied in a separate subject, i.e. Bible class, or as a devotional book. Christian education must teach not only Bible details, but biblical systematic theology. From that theology, Christians must develop a worldview that applies biblical concepts to every area of life. Thankfully, this has been done numerous times in the history of Christianity. The historic forms or examples can be found where Christians produced educated, biblically literate, discerning students. The historic form can be called Classical Christian Education.

Historian Christopher Dawson has described the beginnings of Classical Christian Education:

From the time of Plato the Hellenic paideia [system of instruction] was a humanism in search of a theology, and the religious traditions of Greek culture were neither deep nor wide enough to prepare the answer.....The new Christian culture was therefore built from the beginning on a double foundation. The old classical education in the liberal arts was maintained without any interruption, and since this education was inseparable from the study of classical authors, the old classical education continued to be studied. But alongside of--and above--all this, there was now a specifically Christian learning which was Biblical and theological and which produced its own prolific literature.³

Typically the schools in early American history were Classical Christian schools. The instructors were usually ministers whose training was a combination of classical languages and literature and Protestant theology. In other words, they studied the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek, and they read Homer's Iliad in Greek, Tacitus' histories in Latin, as well as studying John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion. For example, Moses Waddell, a Southern Presbyterian preacher and teacher (1770-1840), began studying Latin at age eight, and after six years of school, he had finished courses in Greek, Latin, and mathematics. After his conversion and entrance into the ministry, Waddell established, in a log building, a school with an enrollment of as many as 180 students a year. In his book *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, Dr. Henry Alexander White made these comments about Waddell's school:

The food furnished to the students in Waddell's log college was plain, for it was usually nothing more than cornbread and bacon. A blast from a ram's horn called them all together from morning and evening prayers. When the weather was mild the students sat or lay beneath the trees to prepare their lessons. The sound of the horn told the class in Homer when to assemble, and all of the members rushed at once to the recitation hall in the main building. Then the horn called up, in regular order, the Cicero, the Horace, and the Virgil classes, as well as those engaged in the study of mathematics and English.⁴

The success of this school obviously did not come from expensive facilities and modern technology or even a good cafeteria. (This shows the fallacy of those who promote higher school taxes to improve education.) Jack Maddex, Jr. said, "Waddell's students mastered the classical curriculum at an exacting pace, interspersing long study periods with recitations."⁵ Many of Waddell's students achieved prominence in academic and civil affairs.

The type of student Classical Christian education produced is astounding to modern readers. The difficulty and rigor of education made it a prized commodity. The compulsory and egalitarian education system of today has debased the value of the commodity. While academic degrees are expected in many fields today, they are rarely seen as indicators of academic or intellectual ability. By contrast, education in the past was equated with book knowledge, and that knowledge was acquired only by hard work.

Young Moses Hoge was noted for fastening a book to his plow as he worked the fields. He would plow a furrow, stop and read a page, and then ponder the contents as he plowed the next furrow.⁶ David Caldwell, as a student, would sit near an open window and study into the late hours of the night. Then he would fold his arms on the table, lay his head down, and sleep until morning.⁷ James Henley Thornwell, who was given to studying fourteen hours a day, commented on his own need to improve his speaking and writing skills:

Language was my great difficulty in early life. I had no natural command of words. I undertook to remedy the defect by committing to memory large portions of the New Testament, the Psalms, and much of the Prophets, also whole dramas of Shakespeare, and a great part of Milton's *Paradise Lost*; so that you might start me at any line in any drama or book, and I would go through to the end.⁸

As a young teacher, Thornwell continued his study habits:

I have commenced regularly with Xenophon's works, and intend to read them carefully. I shall then take up Thucydides, Herodotus, and Demosthenes. After mastering these I shall pass on to the philosophers and poets. In Latin I am going regularly through Cicero's writings. I read them by double translations; that is, I first translate them into English and then retranslate them into Latin. In German I am perusing Goethe's works. My life, you can plainly see, is not a life of idleness.⁹

After Thornwell committed his life to Christ, he entered the ministry and became one of the greatest Presbyterian ministers and theologians ever produced in America.

Professor Clyde Wilson has described the curriculum and its purposes in the University of North Carolina in the middle of the 1800s. He said:

The college curriculum consisted chiefly of Latin, Greek, and pure mathematics, with smaller amounts of modern languages, chemistry, geology, physics, botany, zoology, metaphysics, logic, rhetoric, political economy, and constitutional and international law. More than half of a student's time in four years was spent in languages ancient and modern; three-fifths in the languages and pure mathematics together. The intent of these studies was to develop the powers of reason, analysis, and perspective, and by familiarity with the classical republics to inspire an understanding and love of American institutions. The curriculum also reflected a highly verbal and personalized society in which fixed status and institutional rigidity had not robbed words of their power to persuade and move.¹⁰

This ability to use reason, analysis, and perspective comes from reading. Neil Postman said, "From Erasmus in the sixteenth century to Elizabeth Eisenstein in the twentieth,

almost every scholar who has grappled with the question of what reading does to one's habits of mind has concluded that the process encourages rationality; the sequential, propositional character of the written word fosters what Walter Ong calls the 'analytical management of knowledge.'"11 In Classical Christian education, this intellectual ability is cultivated in order to understand and implement the Scriptures. Susan Alder has stated that education in Colonial America was Christian not only in teaching the doctrines of the Christian faith, but in defining all reality by precepts and principles laid out in the Bible. As historian Clinton Rossiter has said, "The colonial mind was thoroughly Christian in its approach to education, philosophy, and social theory...."12

The importance of the Bible in education can be seen in an ironically prophetic defense of the use of the Bible in public schools given by Benjamin Rush in 1786. Rush said:

I do not mean to exclude books of history, poetry, or even fables from our schools. They may and should be read frequently by our young people, but if the Bible is made to give way to them altogether, I foresee that it will be read in a short time only in churches and in a few years will probably be found only in the offices of magistrates and in courts of justice.13

Many other examples could be given of the nature of Classical Christian education as it existed in America from our colonial beginnings to about the 1900s. Very obviously, the academic standards were high, the worldview was Christian, and the results were amazing. But what is the message for us? Some would object to this discussion and point out that not all Americans received the level of education described above and that not all American students were James Henley Thornwells in inclination and ability. This is true; likewise, not all basketball players today are Michael Jordans, but that should not cause us to lower the basketball goals to five feet high. The example of educated men of the 1700s and 1800s is daunting. How can we teach in such a way to achieve this when the teachers today do not have the Classical Christian training of the past? The answer is that we cannot achieve the same results....in one generation. We must be future oriented, and we must begin with what we have.

We have the Bible, so we can teach theology. We have books--centuries' accumulation of books at affordable prices. While we may begin with language restrictions, since few are trained in Latin and Greek today, we can master the great works of literature, history, and theology either written or translated into English.

Another objection might be: Why this type of education? Why not something more relevant, more modern, more accommodating to a non-literate, non-theological age? Classical Christian education is not designed to fit the student for our times. It is designed to transform the student to God's times (Romans 12:2). It is designed to produce an student with the mental discipline and ability to read an in-depth book (even one with more than one hundred pages), write discerning, thoughtful essays on the book, present lectures or debates on the contents of the book, and evaluate its contents in light of the Christian worldview. "Paces," multiple choice questions, computer games, and entertaining films cannot accomplish these results. Classical Christian education is

"word-oriented." It can and has produced workmen who can rightly divide the Word of God and who do not need to be ashamed to confront and unmask the idols of our age.

FOOTNOTES

*Ben House is a pastor of Grace Covenant Church in Texarkana, AR and the administrator of Veritas School.

1 Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The Messianic Character of American Education*, (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963)

2 See Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994).

3 Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education*, (Steubenville, Ohio: Franciscan University Press, 1989) pp. 8-9.

4 Henry Alexander White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1911) pp. 59-60. [Soon to be reprinted.]

5 Jack P. Maddex, Jr., "Waddell, Moses," *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, edited by Samuel S. Hill (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984) p. 819.

6 White, *Ibid.* p. 193.

7 *Ibid.* p. 96.

8 *Ibid.* pp. 309-310.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Clyd N. Wilson, *Carolina Cavalier: The Life and Times of James Johnson Pettigrew*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 15.

11 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 15.

12 Susan Alder, "Education in America," in *Public Education and Indoctrination* (Irvington-on-Hudson: Foundation for Economic Education, 1993). Alder quoted Rossiter from Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic: The Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), p. 119.

13 Benjamin Rush. "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic" from *American Political Writing during the Founding Era, 1760-1805*, Volume 1, p. 684, edited by Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983)

Certainly, Rush would be shocked at the exclusion of the Scriptures from modern courts of justice!

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