



The Paideia of God

The Paideia of God

and Other Essays
on Education

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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version of the Bible.

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Contents

The Paideia of God	9
Teaching Disabilities: Why Johnny Doesn't Learn Much Anymore	17
A Brief Statement Against Vouchers.....	33
The Biblical Meaning of School Clothes	39
Does Classical Mean Reformed?	55
The Great Logic Fraud	77
A Brief for Greyfriars Hall.....	105
Why Evangelical Colleges Aren't.....	113
Classical Learning and the Christian College	119
Footnotes.....	145

Chapter One:

The Paideia of God

The work of rebuilding Christian education in our culture is a massive task, but nonetheless it has been undertaken by thousands of parents and teachers in countless homes and classrooms across the country. Those who are involved in this work of restoration are usually familiar with Paul's great words of exhortation on fatherhood (Eph. 6:4), which is good, but we have now come to the place where we must go beyond a mere familiarity. Paul's requirement here is actually one of the most far reaching commands of the New Testament, and we need to understand why this is so.

Paul says in that place that fathers are to take care to bring up their children in "the nurture and admonition of the Lord." While this is taken vaguely by some as an exhortation to "be a Christian dad," others rightly see the words as more pointed than this and assert that Paul is specifically requiring Christian education for the children of Christians. I believe this is correct, but we must also come to see that much *more* is involved in this requirement than simply establishing the scope and sequence of a formal Christian education.

First things first. In our day, we need to make sure we can see the big E on the eye chart right at the start. We may then proceed, in the latter part of this essay, to squint at that troublesome line near the bottom. So this

is why we must always begin with understanding the necessity of a Christian formal education for our children.¹ But this is really just the beginning. The fact that many thousands of Christian parents still have their children in the government schools shows how far we are from even *beginning* what Paul requires of us. And although many have abandoned the practice of allowing secularists to instruct their children, we must never forget that this is just a good start.

In Ephesians 6:4, Paul is in fact requiring Christian fathers to provide their children with a “paideia of the Lord.” Now if we were to describe our process of education to a first century Ephesian and then ask him what Greek word would be used to describe this process, the initial answer would be simple and straightforward—*paideia*. This is not an obscure word or concept; the idea of *paideia* was central to the ancient classical mind, and Paul’s instruction here consequently had profound ramifications. I say the *initial* answer of the Ephesian citizen would be simple because what we call education is more strictly a mere subset of *paideia*. Formal education is essential to the process of *paideia*, of course, but the boundaries of *paideia* are much wider than the boundaries of what we understand as education. So our helpful Ephesian would tell us that *paideia* is certainly the word we are looking for, but he would then think for a moment and go on to tell us that it is not quite that simple. In short, their *paideia* was broader, bigger, deeper, and far more developed than our notions of what constitutes “education.”

So while this means that our verse could appropriately be rendered in a way that required Christian fathers to bring up their children in the “education of the Lord,” we are not done. Far more is involved in this than taking the kids to church or having an occasional time of devotions in the home, as important as such things are. And more to the point, far more is involved than simply providing the kids with a Christian curriculum, 8 to 3.

Werner Jaeger, in his monumental study of *paideia*, shows that the word *paideia* represented, to the ancient Greeks, an enormous ideological task.² They were concerned with nothing less than the shaping of the ideal man, who would be able to take his place in the ideal culture. Further, the point of *paideia* was to bring that culture about. To find a word of comparable importance to them, we would have to hunt around for a word like “philosophy.” To find a word of comparable importance in our culture, we would have to point to something like “democracy.” The word *paideia* was as central to the thinking of the Greeks as the idea of the proletariat is to a Marxist, or cash to a televangelist. It was not a take-it-or-leave-it word like whatever the original Greek word for shoelaces was.

So the word *paideia* goes far beyond the scope and sequence of what we call *formal* education. In the ancient world, the *paideia* was all-encompassing and involved nothing less than the enculturation of the future citizen. He was enculturated when he was instructed in the classroom, but the process was also occurring when he walked along the streets of his city to and from school. It included walking by the temple for the gods of his people. That too was part of the process.

If we bring this down into the present in order to illustrate what it would mean to us, *paideia* would include the books on the bestseller lists, the major newspapers, the most popular sitcoms and networks, the songs on the top forty lists, the motion pictures seen by everyone, the architectural layout of most suburban homes, and, out at the periphery, the fact that all our garden hoses are green. When we look at the current governmental support of our *paideia*, we see that the classroom activities of government schools would certainly have to be included and placed at the center of the process. In those classrooms, the message of “tax-supported anything but Christianity” comes through loud and clear.

But the center of the *paideia* in the classrooms does not complete the relation of *paideia* to the schools. We also see, all over the country, other aspects of our modern *paideia* that are connected to formal education. For example, children by the million stand along the side of the road and then climb on to their yellow school buses—or as the educrats might want to call them, “motorized attendance modules of distinctive coloration.” This common experience is also part of our secular *paideia*, and part of our process of enculturation. Because of it, I, who grew up in Maryland, have something in common with someone who grew up in Oregon. To make the process complete, we were also taught the same kind of foolishness when we got to school. So this process is occurring when secular dogmas are taught, and it is occurring in our practice of having first graders write on wide-lined paper with the bark still in it. So then, *paideia* is not just bounded education, it is enculturation—every aspect of enculturation.

This leads to the next issue, the ramifications of which are enormous. I want to argue here that it is not possible to fully provide “the *paideia* of the Lord” outside the context of a Christian civilization. If this is the case, then Paul’s command to the Ephesians, when they did not live in a Christian culture, just as we do not, means that he saw, at some point in the future, the necessity of establishing a Christian culture. And this also means he saw the provision of Christian education as being closely related to the formation of this culture. The establishment of Christian schooling necessarily entails the establishment of a Christian culture. Culture is not possible apart from a *paideia*, and *paideia* (in the fullest sense) is not possible apart from an established culture. We have ourselves a chicken and egg problem. The fact that Paul commands fathers to begin a Christian process of enculturation means he saw, with the eye of faith, the end result, which would have to be a Christian culture. Outside the context of a

particular kind of culture, the word *paideia*, as it was used in such contexts in the ancient world, makes no sense.

The theoretical and practical problems associated with this are, of course, great. In our day, the idea of Christian culture is suspect, even among Christians, and many within the Church are consequently advocating what they call “principled pluralism.” In their minds, it is good that the broader culture is not Christian. And even among those who see the blessing of Christian culture, there are wide differences of opinion on what exactly that might look like. And so we need to be patient and study the issues as carefully as we can. Unfortunately, we do not have a lot of time.

We have seen in the last generation, with the explosion of Christian academies and the parallel explosion of homeschooling, something which the parents involved thought would be culturally “neutral.” They thought they were doing nothing more than saying, “Not with my kid, you don’t.” They thought they were doing little more than simply exercising a personal choice. But these parents were actually setting in motion a series of events that make it absolutely necessary for the Church to address the question of Christian culture. And they did this by establishing (with many variations between homeschools, tutorial services, and Christian schools) at least the faint outlines of a recognizable Christian *paideia*. And this means the pressure is on. What next?

Because it is impossible to build a successful system of education that does not require a surrounding culture, the rise of Christian education is creating (whether we want it to or not) a demand for Christian culture. If we do not confront this looming reality and prepare ourselves for it, the time will come when we find ourselves in the midst of a Christian culture, but it will be a bad patch job—a Christian culture because Christians are in positions of influence and power but not Christian in the biblical sense. This has happened before, more than once, where the

saints found themselves in possession of a culture for which they were not really prepared. The results have included some unhappy consequences. Every thinking Christian ought to be grateful for the settlement of Constantine and for the influence of the Puritans in England. But we would have to be blind not to notice that a premature arrival of Christian culture can easily set us up for a fall.

The wheels are coming off our postmodern culture, like it was Pharaoh's chariot, and we should not be surprised when we finally see the deliverance of the Lord. To alter the picture somewhat, neither should we be surprised when we find ourselves in possession of vineyards we did not plant and wells we did not dig. This is God's way. But we are supposed to prepare ourselves for that time so that when it arrives we are not astonished—and unprepared.

The *paideia* of a true Christian education is that necessary preparation. This *paideia* prepares for and ushers in a true Christian culture, and once that culture is established, the *paideia* of God is the ordained means for maintaining that culture as it prepares young Christian children to assume their station within Christendom.

But we must know and, more importantly, understand the potency of what we are doing. I am very encouraged by what Christian parents have been doing with the education of their children but very distressed that they have not seen the cultural potency of what they do.

While the *paideia* is not limited to formal education, we certainly see that formal education is right at the heart of *paideia*. It does not constitute the whole of the thing, but it does occupy an influential and controlling position. This is why the government school system has been so important to the secular project in America. As long as the children of Christian households attended the government schools, their distinctive cultural quirks could be tolerated as just that—eccentricities of a subgroup

within a broad and diverse culture. Whenever students share the same formal education, their cultural differences become mere *subcultural* differences. And this is why, until recently, evangelical Christians have operated with a ghetto mentality, maintaining a thriving subculture that was simultaneously ubiquitous and impotent.

We have all sorts of distinctive things to ourselves—our own network of radio stations, our own network of bookstores, our own bumper stickers, and so forth. And yet, the Christianity exhibited has just been another minor flavor in the multicultural casserole. This is because the children of most of those who listen to Christian radio have their kids in the government schools. The children of most of those who frequent our Christian bookstores make sure their kids are taught differently at school. In our postmodern culture, the polytheism inherent in the diverse culture can certainly accommodate one more clown in the circus ring. What they cannot accommodate is a true alternative, which is starting to take shape.

Christians have not presented a true cultural alternative until recently, when they began to provide their own children with an education consistent with what they believe. The reaction of the secularists to all of this shows that the children of this generation are often shrewder than the children of light. They know—far better than we do—what is actually at stake. They fear, rightly, the *paideia* of God.