

Repairing the Ruins

The Classical and Christian
Challenge to Modern Education

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Introduction

Marlin Detweiler

OUTSIDE OF THE GOSPEL ITSELF, NOTHING, AND I DO MEAN nothing, has affected my life more profoundly than the ramifications of discovering Christian classical education. I will not be surprised to learn that you may now or may soon come to share this same experience. Methodologically solid, biblically accountable Christian classical education is very much the order of the day.

To an historian, the recent resurgence of classical methodology in education is no surprise. When Johnny can't read, rite or do his 'rithmetic but feels good about it, someone is bound to notice and go looking for an alternative. Thankfully, God has graciously provided us with a written historical record of a time-proven method in the Trivium.

Dorothy Sayers, a mid-twentieth-century writer and medieval historian, lamented the fact that this three-fold method of teaching the grammar, dialectic and then rhetoric of any discipline had been virtually abandoned. And no wonder. The scholarly work of the Renaissance and Reformation is quite unmatched in our day. Why? Because we simply do not think well. We have not been taught to think. Today, proponents of the Trivium are once again seeing their children blossom in ways they never thought possible by applying this instructional system to the education of their children.

Who is to blame for where education is today? I am. You are. I had four children before it even occurred to me that my responsibility to educate these gifts from God extended beyond choosing the school they would attend. The education of our children has been entrusted to someone or something else for far too long. Deuteronomy 6 makes quite clear what the parents' role is in educating their children. While I am entrusted with the care of my children, nothing I do is more important than bringing them up in the Lord. One can change careers every ten years, change ministry involvements whenever desirable, move from one location to another, but a parent has just one opportunity to raise his children. Wisdom lives in the cliché that no one ever says on his death bed, "I should have spent more time at the office."

But, some will say, "We have many Christian schools, why do we need more?" A close examination of most Christian schools will lead to the conclusion that not only have we not educated the children well from the world's perspective (using an educational benchmark of at least a hundred years ago), we have not excelled at training young men and women to be godly either. A Christian school is not simply a government school with a Bible class added. It was once understood that Theology was the Queen of the Sciences. As spokes extend from the hub of a wheel so all disciplines tie together in God Himself. When we say Christian school we should mean sound biblical teaching in and for all of life. To love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves is what Christ taught as the greatest commandments. Disciplining our minds, our brains, according to God's Word is not as simple as memorizing Bible verses. Applying Scripture to all of life is no simple task. Rigorous study has always preceded Christian maturity. Jonathan Edwards, arguably the greatest pastor and philosopher to have been born in America, was known to study and pray thirteen hours a day, every day. The neatly packaged, get-it-at-the-convenience-store, add-Christ-to-your-life type of Christianity is not biblical Chris-

tianity. Christian maturity never results from conversion alone.

Thankfully, today, many parents are waking to the responsibility, blessing and opportunity of raising godly children.

This book is an ordered summary of talks given at national conferences of the Association of Classical and Christian Schools. They are moving. I trust you will be changed by having read them. I hope that you will be challenged to consider starting a Christian classical school or finding one for your children to attend. We are fortunate to have the relatively recent experiences of these men as resources to use in developing and applying the Christian classical educational model in our respective settings. It is quite likely that you will have no more timely and important opportunity in your entire life than to assist in the awesome task of “repairing the ruins.”

Section One:
The Scriptural Worldview

1

Introduction to Antithesis in Education

Douglas Wilson

THE PHRASE “WORLDVIEW CHRISTIANITY” IS CAPABLE OF producing quite a comfortable glow, especially when used frequently in conversations with other Christians. But what does it mean?

When we undertake the task of relating the biblical faith to the world around us (which really is what Christian education *is*), we are confronted with at least four different relationships between our faith and the great wide world. Obviously, only one of the four relationships can be that taught by Scripture itself, but the other three have had, over the years, many well-meaning advocates within the Christian faith.

Tertullian asked, “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?” The pattern which produces this reaction is a familiar one. In a compromised age, many find it easy to react to the general compromise by running in what they think is the other direction. Because many of the early church fathers attempted to bring Jerusalem into subjection to Athens, Tertullian reacted by saying they had nothing to do with one another. This reaction has been repeated countless times since. In this, modern fundamentalists show their basic affinity with the monastic movements of early Catholicism. In Scripture, worldliness is an attitude; in all such

mystic pietism, worldliness is in the stuff—gotta stay away from the stuff. This is the pattern followed by all reactionary Christian academies—schools populated by refugees from condoms, knife fights, drug deals, racial tension, overtly atheistic teaching, and all the rest. But a reaction against the world is not the same thing as a positive biblical vision for education.

For the second option, we may add our faith to the body of knowledge we acquired elsewhere—added on as sort of a condiment. Autonomous knowledge is a gray, pasty oatmeal, available to everyone, while each person's religion of choice provides the catsup, mustard, sugar, whatever works for them in their own personal space. This is the view taken by many Christian parents of kids in the government schools. The school is supposed to teach all the "neutral subjects," and the parents add the flavoring at home. But of course, neutrality is impossible. And, as more and more parents have been discovering recently, somebody has been lacking this neutral oatmeal, for a century or so, with the Cocaine of Rank Unbelief. The modern evangelical world has the theological acumen of a pile of wet sponges, but even we are starting to catch on that something is amiss. "Hey!" we argue.

Some Christian schools take this same basic approach by using the same fundamental curriculum as do the government schools, but then adding prayer, a Bible class, or chapel. Christian education is seen as distinct because of the addition of a new planet to the preexistent solar system of knowledge. But true Christian education is a Copernican revolution which comes to see Scripture as the sun, which sees Scripture at the center. And that sun, that light, provides the light in which we see everything else. Without that sun, we do not have objectivity; we have darkness.

Third, we may dilute our biblical convictions, but keep the biblical terminology. The result is that we can detect a pale taste of the faith everywhere. With this approach, the faith and the world certainly interact, but if it were a wrestling match, the world would be sitting on the faith's head. This approach is sometimes difficult to identify, but one helpful rule of thumb would be to suspect

any Christian school where dialogue is used as a verb. In the old days, Christians used to preach to Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, Mormans, et al. Now we are supposed to dialogue with them. Christians who “dialogue” with those of other faiths are using their faith as a branch upon which to perch lightly while they survey and appreciate all the other options. In schools governed by this approach, Christianity is a perspective; it is not the truth. This tendency is seen more often in those Christian schools which were founded more than a generation ago. The school carries on in the tradition of (insert name of denomination), but no one really believes it anymore.

The fourth option, that of the genuine biblical worldview, is to establish Scripture at every point as the foundation on which to build all knowledge. Moreover, Scripture is known to be the final arbiter of whether such knowledge was built in line with the foundation. If Jesus Christ is not the Lord of all, then two added to two does not equal four. If He did not die for the sins of His people, then A and -A cannot be distinguished. If the triune God of Scripture did not speak the universe into existence, then there is no universe to understand. The protest will come—“But you are presupposing the truth of Christianity.” And the answer which must follow is, “Most certainly. This is a Christian school.” Those involved with a genuinely Christian school must understand the *antithesis* between faith and all forms of unbelieving thought at the very start of the process.

The Bible teaches that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7). The fear of the Lord is not the final goal of education; such godly fear is the foundation of education, and as the foundation it is the basis for all subsequent goals. We must remember that the label on the bottle does not dictate the contents of the bottle. A Christian school is not one which calls itself that, or even one in which all the occupants are regenerate people. A Christian school is one in which *the schooling itself* is being conducted in a biblical fashion.

This means that understanding of the biblical antithesis between belief and unbelief must be found throughout the curriculum. We must either think and educate like unbelievers, or we must think and teach like believers. This antithesis affects everything. “Christian teachers know that not a single ‘fact’ can really be known and therefore really be taught unless placed under the light of the revelation of God. Even the laws of arithmetic cannot be known otherwise.”¹

Of all these options, only one recognizes an antithesis between faith and unbelief which necessitates constant war between them. Every other option involves either peace through separation, or peace through compromise. But antithetical education sees that biblical instruction is not really taking place unless every thought is being made captive to the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). We cannot make peace with the world by running away from it, or by capitulating to it. J. Gresham Machen stated it this way: “The Christian cannot be satisfied so long as any human activity is either opposed to Christianity or out of all connection with Christianity. Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but also all of human thought.”²

True education must therefore be unabashedly Christian. The modern opium dream that education can be religiously neutral should be, in our minds, equivalent to the question of whether or not, to use a phrase found in Dabney’s great essay, “schoolrooms should be located under water or in dark caverns.”³ Neutrality about the ultimate questions can be pretended in education, but it cannot be accomplished. Therefore, all schools must confess that Jesus Christ is Lord over all and in all.

¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Foundations of Christian Education* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1988), 4.

² J. Gresham Machen, *Education, Christianity and the State* (Jefferson: The Trinity Foundation, 1987), 50.

³ R.L. Dabney, *On Secular Education* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1993), 12.

Returning to our center, this means an education which is biblically *antithetical*. Without an understanding of this antithesis, we will find ourselves unable to understand anything obediently. The foundation for comprehending this antithesis is found through careful, systematic study of the Word of God. Theology is the integration point for all knowledge, and sound theology is the study of the triune God as He reveals Himself in Scripture. It must be strongly emphasized that classical and Christian schools are necessarily evangelical Christian schools. We must reject both the mind-numbing errors of theological liberalism, and the superficial inanities of a reactionary fundamentalism. It is very important that Christians realize that they do not have to choose between genuine learning and a love for Christ. The greatest commandment includes the requirement that we love the Lord our God with all our *brains*. The truth of God revealed in Christ is something we must *comprehend*.

The antithesis has been with our race from the very beginning. In Genesis, God promised constant hostility between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, and we have had it. From the beginning, God has placed enmity between the two. Sometimes the war is hot, and at other times the war is subdued and harder to recognize. But until the resurrection, God's people are always involved in constant, total war.

If God is good, and He is, and evil exists, and it does, then antithetical thinking on the part of His followers becomes a constant necessity. In a relativistic culture, there will be consistent attempts to destroy the distinctions between white and black. As Isaiah said, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" (Is. 5:20). But all such defiant attempts begin with the blurring of the distinction between white and *off-white*. There are many areas where God's people need a good deal of training—a good deal of *education*—before they can make the distinctions which God wants them to make. "But

solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:14).

Our ethical understanding of the world around us will be a reflection of the character of the God we serve. The God of the Bible is good, and He is unchanging. Therefore, an ethic based upon His revealed character will be good, and constantly good. Moreover, because God is sovereign His goodness applies everywhere; it fills all the various corners of every human endeavor. No human activity escapes His authority. But man is twisted, and he tries to escape this truth. Because man is mutable, he changes constantly. Therefore, a humanistic ethic based upon his character will also be twisted, and twisted into new shapes constantly. We do not need any other explanation for all the fads which sweep through the halls of modern education. Like the foolish women Paul mentions, they are always learning and never coming to a knowledge of the truth.

Education is the process of learning to serve one’s God, and to fight all idols. Ours is the God of truth, so we serve Him in submission to His truth, and by rebelling against all lies. All denials of this antithesis are therefore epistemological camouflage as those on the other side of the line pretend there is no line—for strategic purposes of their own. In a war, what better strategy to use than to convince your enemy that there is no war?

This is not to portray unbelievers as omnicompetent. The disintegrating secular mind is not hard to miss. The good news is that, while we are not winning the war for the mind, the non-Christians are sure losing it. The non-believing mind has come to the end of its tether, and is now starting to leap in any old direction. Relativism now rules the postmodern mind. But this resultant cultural nihilism is an attempt to be consistent—which is inconsistent. Which, of course, is consistent. The opportunities are tremendous for those educators who will proclaim, without apology, the Christian world and life view, at the center of which

is the God who declares this antithesis. Put simply, will it be God's way or man's way? Non-Christians can't think in a straight line, and modern Christians won't. When will Christian educators learn that Christianity goes far beyond saying that there is a right and a wrong *somewhere*? This is moralism, not the biblical antithesis. The antithesis says that there is a right and wrong *everywhere*. For educators, this means each classroom, the hallways, the administration offices, the playground, and the parking lot.

The antithesis divides the biblical worldview from all others, and everyone has a worldview. So the real issue is not whether we acknowledge a worldview, but rather which worldview we will acknowledge. The question is not whether we will have a God, but rather which one? Refusal to acknowledge this does not lead to non-worldview thinking, it leads to confused worldview thinking. And from such confusion, Christians are not exempt. We all certainly know that Christians can do "non-Christian" acts—this is what happens whenever we sin. In the same way, Christians can think "non-Christian" thoughts. A Christian worldview, therefore, is *not* defined as a worldview which happens to be held by Christians, any more than a "Christian act" is to be understood as anything which a Christian does. A Christian act is one which God requires of Christians; a Christian thought is defined the same way. Our dependence upon His revelation of Himself and His creation in Scripture is total and complete.

This clearly relates to education and the life of the mind. The greatest commandment includes the clause that we should love the Lord our God with all our *minds*. Education is a central part of the process of learning to do this, or refusing to learn to do this. And here is the antithesis. As educators, we either will obey Him in this, or we will not.

Is Classicism a Denial of Antithesis?

This strong emphasis on antithesis may cause some readers to wonder about the compatibility of Christian education with clas-

sical education. Are not *classical* and *Christ-centered* themselves on opposite sides of this antithetical divide? So how can a school purport to be pursuing both? Why do we even want to try?

Christianity is not an abstraction. Christ was born in history, in Judea, in the reign of Caesar Augustus. In the providence of God, the Christian faith then spread north and west. The impact of the kingdom of God on the history of our culture has been monumental. While the kingdom of God cannot be *identified* with western culture (and we do not seek even to try), that kingdom nevertheless has had such an impact on the West that the history of either since the time of Christ is incomprehensible without detailed understanding of the history of the other.

This requires that we seek to provide an education grounded in the culture of the West. To resort to a commonplace, when parents teach their children to speak, the language they teach is the language they themselves speak. In other words, the young are always educated by *their* elders. God has placed us in this particular cultural river; our children have no ability to flow in a different stream.

This principle is recognized clearly when we are talking about parents and their children—just one generation. But it applies, just as clearly, when we take our grandparents and ancestors into account—all the way back to the birth of our Lord in the reign of Caesar Augustus, and before that to the covenant made with Abraham, and before that to the fall of our father Adam. Education cannot be successfully detached from our cultural river, and turned into a small private pond. If any such attempt is made, the result will be a poor cultural education, not a culturally neutral education.

This is not xenophobic, or an expression of any desire to react mindlessly to the modern trendiness of multiculturalism. If this duty of cultural education is neglected, the result will not be appreciation for other cultures, but rather a poor training in one's own, and a resultant contempt for one's own. Cultural excellence

in the education of our children is therefore not a side issue. Those best equipped to understand and appreciate another man's culture is the man who understands and appreciates his own.

Of course for Christian educators, the phrase *Christ-centered* must remain a constant. By it is meant the Christian faith and worldview, as it is set forth in the Scriptures, and only there. Those Scriptures teach what the world refers to as evangelical Protestantism, defined best in the historical confessions of the Reformation. Now of course there are competing definitions. Other faiths claim to be "Christ-centered," but a refutation of all such competing claims would take us far beyond the scope of this essay. For our purposes here, the doctrine referred to by *Christ-centered* is that of historic evangelical Christianity.

And this generates our question. Modernity does not have a high view of the intellectual horsepower of evangelicalism. Evangelical faith is thought to be a Bible-beating faith—no thought required. And so when evangelical Christians seek to provide a classical education, the question *What are they doing?* immediately presents itself. In the realm of education, the word *classical* can have three basic meanings. With the first two definitions, the word definitely represents a conflict with the Christian understanding of antithesis. But with the third definition, there is a perfect and necessary harmony.

The first definition of *classical* seeks to by-pass the last two thousand years of history, and return to a study of the golden ages of Greece and Rome—Periclean Athens and Augustan Rome. This return may be very narrow in focus (linguistic studies in a classical studies department), or it may be as broad as a culture-wide attempt to return to the pagan classical world, e.g., certain influential portions of the Renaissance. While this use of *classical* is certainly antithetical to the Christian faith, it also does not today present much of a danger. While there is a great deal of neo-paganism in our culture today, it is not a civilized paganism. The barbarism that threatens to engulf our schools is neo-barbarism, and not

the neo-paganism of an attempted Renaissance. Fifteen minutes watching heavy metal on MTV should remind educated viewers of barbarians at the gates; there is an obvious and vicious delight in tearing civilizations down. We are not confronted with the sophisticated unbelief of Julian the Apostate; the spectacle is rather one of America's postmodern whore Madonna, or the nihilistic destructiveness of a Kurt Cobain. Even though such barbarous activity has been seen for millennia, the word *classical* does not come to mind.

The second definition of *classical* is also rooted in antiquity but also takes the last two thousand years into account. The problem with it is that it is syncretistic, that is, the basic concepts, ideas, and philosophies of the classical world are combined (in various ways) with Christian theology—in a way that does violence to the integrity of Christian theology. Probably the best example of this would be Aristotelian Thomism. Aristotle, of course, was the great Greek philosopher who taught in the fourth century, B.C. Up until the thirteenth century A.D., the efforts of most syncretists were Platonist, i.e., they sought to express “Christian” truths in terms of Plato's philosophy. (There are still some hold-outs here and there—e.g., C.S. Lewis was very much under the influence—“It's all in Plato. Bless me, what do they teach them in these schools?”)

But in the thirteenth century the Catholic scholastic giant Thomas Aquinas took the radical step of resurrecting the philosophy of Aristotle, and expressing it with the vocabulary of a Christian. The resultant philosophy is called *Thomism*, and is very prevalent in the Roman Catholic church today—Thomas Aquinas is considered by that church as one of her “doctors.” In the realm of classical education, we can see this influence today with men such as Mortimer Adler. When it comes to pedagogical philosophy, Mortimer Adler is an unapologetic Aristotelian. The philosophy of Aristotle is pervasive in his writings—at times explicit, and always present.

The central problem with this is that it requires a humanistic and autonomous approach to truth that is totally at odds with the biblical revelation of truth in Christ. For example, it is impossible to imagine a thinking Christian saying, as Adler did say, something like this—“Only the liberal arts can provide the standard for judging excellence in teaching, for measuring the efficiency of educational means, or for inventing others; and the liberal arts are neither pagan nor Christian, but human.”⁴ It is clear that any classicism like this is unacceptable for Christians because Christ is Lord of all.

But the third use of *classical* is thoroughly Christian, and grounded in the great truths of Scripture recovered and articulated at the Reformation. This classicism is an antithetical classicism, best illustrated by the relationship of the apostle Paul to the philosopher Aristotle, and the learning of the classical world.

Paul was not unaware of Aristotelian philosophy. He had been well-educated under Gamaliel, and demonstrated in his writings a thorough knowledge of Greek philosophy and culture. He knew the language (Acts 21:37), he knew their poets (Acts 17:28), he quoted Diogenes the Cynic (1 Tim. 6:10), he knew their current philosophies (Acts 17:17), and he knew the thought of Aristotle. In short, Paul was well-trained in classical culture. But this did not gain him an entry into their circles. The only problem was that he was a classicist who would not play the game of autonomous and humanistic philosophers. He was a classicist who did not fit in well at the philosophy department at the University of Athens (Acts 17:18). They didn't think a lot of him, but then again, he was happy to return fire:

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did

⁴ Mortimer Adler, *Reforming Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1990), 179.

not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:20–21).

But it is in the next chapter that he deals with Aristotle:

But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

When modern Christians read the phrase *natural man*, they tend to think of unregenerate man at his worst—the drug addict, the philanderer, the alcoholic. But Paul is making an entirely different point. He is talking about unregenerate man at his best. The word *natural* here (*psychikos*) was a word that was coined by Aristotle, and was used by him to refer to man at the peak of his form—man the way he would look after he had completed a rigorous and “classical” education. This is the man who, according to Paul, does not know God, cannot know God, and does not receive the things of the Spirit.

So we see in Paul a biblical classicist. He does not run from classical culture, nor is he defeated or compromised by it. Rather, he declares the lordship of Jesus Christ *over* it. He does not run away, and he does not compromise. He takes every thought captive to Jesus Christ. He uses his vast learning in the cause of the gospel (Acts 26:24), but had seen enough secular scholarship to warn the church at Colossae to beware of “philosophy and empty deceit” (Col. 2:8).

Human culture is only to be depised by Christians when it seeks to function autonomously. When human culture seeks to do what only the grace of God can do, then it is to be vigorously opposed by thinking Christians. But when the classical knee is bent to the lordship of Christ (note: not when pagan and Christian terms, categories, etc. are merged and confused), then, and only then, will a classical and Christian approach emerge—Christian because the Scripture is the final authority on all issues, and classi-

cal because the culture that has been redeemed in this submission is our western culture, along with all that made it what it is.

This kind of classical culture and education has been seen before—in the Protestant West from the time of the Reformation down through the middle of the nineteenth century. If God is gracious to us, and grants us repentance for what we have so carelessly thrown away, we may be granted a chance to rebuild. In doing this we are trying to establish an education system that equips Christian leaders. In the daunting task of cultural restoration, which is what we face, it is crucial that we train our children to continue the work we have begun. And this is truly antithetical education.