

# Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning

An Approach to Distinctively Christian  
Education

DOUGLAS WILSON

canonpress   
MOSCOW, IDAHO

# Contents

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** . . . . . 1

*PART ONE:*

*THE FAILURE OF MODERN SECULAR EDUCATION*

**1** The Education Crisis . . . . . 4  
**2** Suggested Secular and Christian Reforms . . . . . 17

*PART TWO:*

*AN APPROACH TO DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN EDUCATION*

**3** The True Ministry of Education . . . . . 47  
**4** The Nature of Knowledge . . . . . 59  
**5** The Student in Adam . . . . . 75

*PART THREE:*

*AN APPROACH TO DISTINCTIVELY CLASSICAL EDUCATION*

**6** The Classical Mind . . . . . 93  
**7** The Trivium and the Christian School . . . . . 103  
**8** The Obstacles of Modernity . . . . . 122

<b>9</b>	The Problem of “Pious” Ignorance. . . . .	135
<b>10</b>	The Home School Alternative . . . . .	144
<i>PART FOUR:</i>		
<i>CONCLUSIONS</i>		
<b>11</b>	The Limits of the State: A Summary . . . . .	157
<b>12</b>	The Need for a Classical and Christian Education: A Summary . . . . .	164
<b>APPENDIX A</b>	The Lost Tools of Learning. . . . .	171
<b>APPENDIX B</b>	Logos School Curriculum Material . . . . .	198
<b>APPENDIX C</b>	A Brief Historical Sketch. . . . .	216
<b>NOTES</b>	. . . . .	225
<b>SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	. . . . .	259
<b>SCRIPTURE INDEX</b>	. . . . .	261
<b>GENERAL INDEX</b>	. . . . .	264

PART ONE

# **The Failure of Modern Secular Education**

## CHAPTER 1

### The Education Crisis

*A YOUNG MAN IS SITTING AT A TABLE, STARING AT THE JOB application in front of him. He is chewing nervously on the pencil, laboriously struggling through the instructions. He gets up slowly, taking the form with him. Someone at home will have to help him with it. He is a high school graduate.*

*Susan is delivering her small child to a birthday party in a part of town unfamiliar to her. She has to take a friend along with her because she can't read the street signs. She dropped out of high school in the tenth grade. If ten years is not good enough, then what difference will two more make?*

*A business executive throws down a pile of papers in frustration. He has just received a report that his company will have to invest in a costly program of remedial instruction for its employees. A high school diploma is no longer a guarantee that an individual is ready to start work. He stares at the ceiling, wondering what has happened to the public school system.*

My oldest daughter Bekah is now in the ninth grade. While she was still a toddler, my wife and I realized that sending her to the public schools was not an option for us. My wife commented that she just could not hand our daughter over to someone we didn't

know and say, “Here she is, educate her.” I agreed wholeheartedly. At that time our community had no adequate alternative to the public school system. I told Nancy that we would have a Christian school by the time Bekah started kindergarten. It is hard to imagine anyone knowing less about education than I did at the time, but God is kind to the ignorant—provided they acknowledge it and are willing to learn.

I joined two other like-minded parents, and we began meeting regularly to pray, investigate, and plan.<sup>1</sup> As I look back, it is amazing to me that Logos School opened in my daughter’s kindergarten year with nineteen students. Today we have over two hundred students, with many exciting prospects for the future. We have learned many lessons. One of the first surprises was discovering that we were part of a national movement toward private education. But at the time we were not trying to join any movement; we were simply trying to be good parents.<sup>2</sup>

That is the key to understanding this book. This is a book about education, but it is not written by a professional educator. I have not one education degree to my name and no current plans to acquire one. Nor is this book written for professional educators, although I believe many of them could profit by it. I am writing this book as a parent—an *involved parent*.<sup>3</sup> I am writing to parents who would like to be involved in the education of their children and to parents who already are involved, but who want to be more effective. What does it take? It takes a lot more than you think and a lot less than you think.

### *HARD WORDS*

When I first got involved in education around 1978, many of my concerns about the public school system were intuitive; I had a general, unresearched awareness that there were serious academic

problems. But as the eighties progressed, study after study continued to reveal the extent of the problems, some of which were the result of previously implemented reforms.<sup>4</sup> Today few would dispute that public education in America has run into hard times, although there is debate over the reasons for it. Surveys concerning our students' lack of basic factual knowledge indicate part of the problem.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) reported that the schooling of the average student is barely adequate and that one out of every seven seventeen-year-olds in the United States is functionally illiterate.<sup>5</sup> Reading ability has not been the only casualty. According to a report by the National Academy of Sciences, three out of four students leave school without mastering enough mathematics for "...on-the-job demands for problem solving or college expectations for mathematical literacy."<sup>6</sup> Not only do problems exist in math classes generally, they extend into advanced mathematics for seniors. When compared with their classmates, such advanced students would of course do well. But when compared internationally, the picture for such students is even more dismal than for the average student.<sup>7</sup>

In a comparison of 24,000 thirteen-year-olds from the United States, Ireland, Spain, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and four Canadian provinces, the United States placed last in mathematics and almost last in science. Korean students were first in math and tied for first in science with Canadian students<sup>8</sup> in British Columbia.<sup>9</sup> In one aspect of math, however, the Americans did just fine. "Despite their poor overall performance, however, two-thirds of U.S. thirteen-year-olds felt that 'they are good at mathematics'; only 23 percent of their Korean counterparts shared that attitude."<sup>10</sup> When it comes to maintaining a high self-image, we can take on the world.<sup>11</sup>

## CHAPTER 2

### Suggested Secular and Christian Reforms

#### *QUO VADIS? WHICH WAY?*

The nation is at an educational impasse but not because no one has any idea of what to do. On the contrary, suggested reforms are legion. While there is general agreement that we have a problem,<sup>1</sup> the consensus breaks down when we come to specific solutions. As the NCEE commented archly, “The Commission was impressed during the course of its activities by the diversity of opinion it received regarding the condition of American education and by conflicting views about what should be done.”<sup>2</sup>

There are three major categories of reformers. Those with a more secular mind-set advocate two types of reforms—structural and curricular. The structural reformers want to adjust pay scales, give schools more autonomy, etc. Curricular reformers believe that we must return to the rigorous academic standards of an earlier era and get “back to the basics.” The third category consists of “moral reformers,” who push for a return to basic Judea/Christian moral traditions; they want to get prayer *back* in the classroom and get values clarification and condoms *out*.

It should be immediately obvious that these divisions are not watertight. There is no reason why a structural reformer would not



support rigorous academic standards, for example; and it certainly would be unfair to suggest that academic reformers are opponents of morality. I have made these divisions simply as a reflection of the emphases found in the writings of the various reformers. At the same time, the secular reformers do have a tendency to support a return to “traditional values” in the classroom because of their utilitarian value. Discipline is necessary for a rigorous education, and morality is necessary to maintain discipline. Those who are serious about moral reform for its own sake are considered in a separate section.

### *STRUCTURAL REFORM*

One approach to reform suggests that the problem is largely in the way our schools are run. Let’s briefly survey four of the leading “structural reform” proposals.<sup>3</sup>

#### *More Money*

One of the few structural reforms that has been supported by the education establishment is the call for more money. When mainstream educators admit problems, they usually argue that our public schools are not funded adequately. If the schools had enough money, *then* the job would get done. Even those who insist on more substantive reforms than this will usually list better funding as one of the reforms to be achieved. For example, the NCEE report said, “We also call upon citizens to provide the financial support necessary to accomplish these purposes. Excellence costs. But in the long run mediocrity costs far more.”<sup>4</sup> This thought is summed up by the bumper sticker which says, “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.” I have been tempted to print a bumper sticker in response that says, “We did try ignorance, and now it wants a raise.”

PART TWO

**An Approach to  
Distinctively Christian  
Education**



## CHAPTER 3

# The True Ministry of Education

### *THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY*

God has instituted various governments among men, and one is the government of the family. It is in the family that fundamental decisions about the education and training of children are made or not made. Most Christian parents provide the children instruction in the faith one day a week at church and at Sunday school. Many families also instruct the children at home during a daily devotional time.<sup>1</sup> This is good, but it is not enough by itself. Unfortunately, some Christian parents feel they have met their obligation to educate their children if they simply send them off to public school, provided they also go to Sunday school. *All* the instruction received by the children should be permeated with God's Word. Consider this passage from Deuteronomy on education:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them

on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

The same mentality about education can be seen in the New Testament: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother,’ which is the first commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1-4).

Christian parents must take into account three things as they consider their obligation to educate their children. The first is the instruction that children should live in an environment dominated by Scripture. We must not dismiss such passages as pertaining only to a simple agrarian culture. If life in the latter half of the twentieth century is more complex, it does not follow that we have *less* need for instruction in the law of God!<sup>2</sup> If God wanted children then to think about everything in the light of His Word, then this practice is certainly as necessary now. In a more complex society, there is more to think about. Obviously, instruction on Sunday only is not enough. A thorough Biblical instruction can only be provided when related to all of life. Teaching must occur when we walk, drive, sit, and lie down. Nothing can be clearer—God wants the children of His people to *live* in an environment conditioned by His Word. Parents who want their children to be equipped to face the world that will exist twenty years from now will need to give this kind of comprehensive instruction in God’s words.

In our family, we have done many things to maintain this kind of environment. Our son has listened to hours of Bible tapes as he has drifted off to sleep. We have sung hymns in the car as we traveled. We have had vigorous dinner table discussions of various

## CHAPTER 4

### The Nature of Knowledge

#### *THE NONALIGNMENT MYTH*

One of the great ironies among modern evangelicals is the fact that many have higher and stricter standards for their children's baby-sitters than they do for their children's teachers. Is a baby-sitter needed? She should be a Christian, and a reliable one. She should be known to the family, or highly recommended by someone who is. And for what task? To keep Johnny safe and dry until bedtime and then to tuck him in.

But five years later, Johnny comes home from his first day of school. He bursts in the front door, full of news. His parents ask all kinds of questions. And one of them is: "Who is your teacher, Johnny?" The parents don't know the teacher's name. They don't know if the teacher is an atheist or a Southern Baptist. They don't know if he is a socialist or a conservative Republican. They don't know if she is lesbian or straight. And what is the teacher's task? Her task is to help them shape the way the child thinks about the world. Does God exist? If He exists, is His existence *relevant* to the classroom? And what is the nature of man? What is the purpose of society? How did man get here? Where should he go? How should he conduct himself on the way? None of these questions can be

## CHAPTER 5

### The Student in Adam

#### *THE FALLEN IMAGE*

Education is not the downloading of information from one computer to another; the human mind is far more than an organic hard drive. Although education does involve the successful transfer of information from one person to another, the student is not a mere receptacle for knowledge. Biblical education goes far beyond transfer of information. To understand the nature of education, we must begin with the Biblical view of the nature of man.

How does the Christian view of man apply to education? We know that the race of Adam is in rebellion against God (Romans 3:9-20; Ephesians 2:1-3). All students in all schools were born into this rebellious race. Their allegiance to Adam continues until they are born by God's grace into another race descended from the second Adam, Christ (1 Corinthians 15:45-49). Any classroom may include descendants of both Adams. Jon and Melodie may be members of Christ, while Billy and Susan are not. Unbelieving students do what is wrong because it is their *nature* to do so (Galatians 5:19-21). They do wrong because they *want* to do so (1 Peter 4:3-4). When Jason torments some younger child on the playground, it may be because this is his idea of fun.

Nevertheless, each child still bears the *imago Dei*, the image of God. That image has been marred and defaced through sin<sup>1</sup> and must be restored in Christ, but it still remains. Although students are sinners, desperately in need of the grace of God, they have true dignity. J.C. Ryle addressed both aspects of man well when he said, “We can acknowledge that man has all the marks of a majestic temple about him—a temple in which God once dwelt, but a temple which is now in utter ruins—a temple in which a shattered window here, and a doorway there, and a column there, still give some faint idea of the magnificence of the original design, but a temple which from end to end has lost its glory and fallen from its high estate.”<sup>2</sup> This Christian perspective of man as a transgressor against the law of God does not destroy the concept of human dignity. Because man is fully responsible in his rebellion, he is treated as a *person*. His personhood and dignity are gifts to him from God and are to be respected.<sup>3</sup> In education, the teacher must maintain, at all times, this respect for the student. For example, humiliating discipline should not be applied in front of the other students. Name calling should not be done at all. The discipline is to be administered privately. The student belongs to a sinful, fallen race, but the teacher came from that same race, and they both bear the image of God.

The fallenness of people is a Biblical given, but should not be mistaken for absolute depravity.<sup>4</sup> Most people are not as bad as they could be, and neither are the students in an average classroom. The teachers understand that the students are sinners. They do not consider students a pack of devils.

Students are restrained from greater evil, not by their own nature, but by the common grace of God. By that grace, the image of God is not totally defaced and is to be respected. Francis Schaeffer made this point in opposition to the modern and mechanistic view



PART THREE

**An Approach to  
Distinctively Classical  
Education**



## CHAPTER 6

### The Classical Mind

#### *DWARVES ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS*

Classical education cannot be defined merely as rigorous learning or even as a course of learning that enables a student to learn on his own. Requiring a student to work hard and equipping a student to learn on his own can be done in a vocational school; but, however necessary he is to modern living, a good TV repairman is not a classicist.

An essential part of the classical mind is awareness of, and gratitude for, the heritage of Western civilization. Russell Kirk, a well known conservative and man of letters states it this way: “Therefore we yield to the seers—the prophet and poet and philosopher of the Great Tradition—as authorities, because without their guidance we would wander hungry in a dark wood. The life of pygmies in the modern world would be poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>1</sup> Kirk puts his case more strongly than I would in that he wants these men from the past as *authorities*; I cannot see how to get Heraclitus, Isaiah, Virgil, and Augustine singing off the same sheet of music.<sup>2</sup> But at the same time, Kirk is right to emphasize the debt we owe to them all. The obligation does not extend to a recognition of authority, but it does require attentiveness and humility in disagreement.

A classicist is not someone who agrees with *anyone* who has been dead two hundred years and whose books are still in print. But a classicist *is* a participant in what Mortimer Adler calls the “great conversation.” We are not required to agree with them all, but we should know wherein we disagree. Ideological relativism is a *modern* development, and it does no honor to the great men of history to impose this relativism on the past as in, “I think we’re all saying the same thing really.” Adler, founder of the Great Books movement put it this way: “Some basic truths are to be found in the great books, but many more errors will also be found there, because a plurality of errors is always to be found for every single truth.”<sup>3</sup> This attitude contrasts with that of the pseudo-classicist who feels that he has entered this great conversation simply because he has obtained a copy of *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* and strings a bunch of them together like wash on the line.<sup>4</sup> But it is not enough simply to cite great names from the past, heedless of the great controversies (and wars) they had with one another.

George Roche, president of Hillsdale College, sees this link with the past as an essential part of education. “Education is precisely the preservation, refinement and transmission of values from one generation to the next. Its tools include reason, tradition, moral concern and introspection....”<sup>5</sup> In other words, if we are not listening to the great minds of the past, we are not being *educated*. Roche argues that true education comes to us out of the past and is to be refined in the present. The modern mentality is that education awaits us in the future, and we must go there and get it. Modernity affirms with Henry Ford that “history is bunk.” But if education requires a conversation with the past, then history is foundational. John Silber, the president of Boston University, makes a similar point when he says, “None of this is now a part

## CHAPTER 7

# The Trivium and the Christian School

### *I'D LIKE AN EDUCATION—TO GO*

In modern America, the fast-food mentality has penetrated the realm of the mind. The modern student has a mind full of McThoughts. Information comes to him processed and prepackaged, and he does his duty as a consumer. This does not mean that intellectual activity has disappeared, but having your mind full of mental “stuff” is not the same thing as thinking. This problem did not just arrive a few years ago; insightful people have seen it coming for some time now. In 1947, Dorothy Sayers, a clear-thinking classicist, lamented lack of true thought: “...do you sometimes have an uneasy suspicion that the product of modern educational methods is less good than he or she might be at disentangling fact from opinion and the proven from the plausible?”<sup>1</sup>

She goes on: “...although we often succeed in teaching our pupils ‘subjects,’ we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think.... They learn everything except the art of learning.”<sup>2</sup> Her suggested solution to this problem was a return to an older educational method—the *Trivium* of the Middle Ages. This *Trivium* consisted of three parts: grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. The three-part program prepared students for the *Quadrivium*—the

study of various subjects. The *Trivium* equipped students with the tools of learning in order to undertake the discipline and specialization of the *Quadrivium*.

Sayers matches the three stages of the *Trivium* to three stages of child development. Grammar, which involves memorizing basic facts, goes nicely with what she calls the “Poll-parrot period.” Younger children love to chant, recite, and memorize. Dialectic, the study of formal logic and argumentation, fits well with what she calls the “Pert” stage. Because children are argumentative at the junior high and early high school level anyway, they might as well be taught to argue properly. The third level, rhetoric, should accompany the child’s “Poetic” phase.

When grammar, dialectic and rhetoric are taught at these ages, the teacher is teaching “with the grain.” Two things are accomplished. The children enjoy what they do, and what they do equips them with the tools of learning. They are then ready for the *Quadrivium*, and beyond that, life. In contrast, modern educational method emphasizes the teaching of various subjects from the beginning. We begin with the *Quadrivium* and never leave it. This has the unfortunate effect of causing students to perceive each subject as a universe of its own with no relationship to other subjects. “... modern education concentrates on teaching subjects, leaving the method of thinking, arguing and expressing one’s conclusions to be picked up by the scholar as he goes along ....”<sup>3</sup>

Although her arguments were cogent, Miss Sayers observed: “It is in the highest degree improbable that the reforms I propose will ever be carried into effect.”<sup>4</sup> She was, happily, entirely wrong in this. She underestimated the power of ideas, or at least the power of this one. From its inception, Logos School has built its curriculum around the basic structure she suggests. Of course, some of our terminology is different, but our basic methodology follows this