The Case for Classical Christian Education

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PREFACE

John Milton, in his great essay on education, said that the task of the educator is to "repair the ruins" created by our first parents Adam and Eve. This phrase has provided the name for our national conferences on educational reform—sponsored by the Association of Classical and Christian Schools—and leads us in turn to a second allusion, which is to the work of Nehemiah, in whose day the Lord gave the people a mind to work. The Israelites had a great wall to rebuild, as do we. We stand in the midst of the rubble of a once-great civilization, and unless God gives us a mind to work, we will all be overwhelmed. We want to build a wall with living stones built into the temple of God.

Over the course of the last twenty years or so, we have addressed many pedagogical issues in many different settings. And we have discovered along the way that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Consequently, I have taken the liberty of quoting in numerous places from other books on education that I have written during the course of our educational pilgrimage. And, as a prophet, one of our own, once put it—"what a long, strange trip it's been."

These citations were included in an attempt to tie various strands of this work together, and not because I really wanted to increase my footnote appearance batting average. Because this is a book that seeks to present a broad overview of the classical Christian model of education, a number of the points made here have already been made elsewhere, scattered around in various books put out by different publishing houses. I thought it better to simply cite those places rather than try to say the same thing again in almost identical words.

When we come to the end of our lives and we consider the work that God gave us to do, it is my hope that the education of our children and grandchildren will occupy a central place in our prayers of gratitude. This book is offered with that end in view.

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Another Brick
in the Wall

CHAPTER 1

A Mess That Just Won't Quit

In one sense, a good book on education ought to be timeless. God's Word applies equally in all generations, the parents of every age face the same basic task, and children always have the same basic needs. But we live in an era that has been captured by a mind-set that glorifies perpetual revolution—ongoing change merely for the sake of change. Being a progressive is good, even though no one knows what we are progressing *to.* So advocates of classical and Christian education must not only defend their traveling of the old paths, but they must also regularly modify their critique of modern education. Nothing is stranger than a thirty-year-old education fad. Revolutionary education is protean, constantly shifting its external form. But despite the shape-shifting, underneath the surface are the same errors. However, the changes do have the effect of causing the critic's footnotes to become outdated.

When *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning* was published in 1991, the government school system was in crisis. Some thought that it could not get any worse, but in the time since then, the unthinkable (even for then) has become commonplace. Still many Christians have not yet come to grips with the foundational nature of this crisis. They shake their heads in dismay when they read the newspapers, just as they did in 1991 and 1981 and 1971, but they have not yet realized that the fruit we are seeing is directly related to the nature of the tree. Christian reformers of the government school system labor on, trying to get this crabapple tree to grow oranges. But despite all our advances in genetic engineering, our Lord's words remain—a tree is still known by its fruit. As I said in my book *The Paideia of God*:

> A great deal of energy could be preserved if in our reforms we would spend more time trying to identify the genuine point of departure. In the '60s, prayer was banished from the government school system, and the Beatles came to America. Traditional conservatives proved themselves masters of the *post hoc* fallacy and have spent a considerable amount of time, money, and energy trying to get back to the way we were before all that.[1]

We have not yet gotten back to the *status quo ante,* and so it is still necessary to point to the fruit recently produced even though the footnotes on that fruit will be outdated quickly enough. The statistics on education presented here will grow old, but the battle they represent is still part of the perpetual conflict between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. All of this extends back to Eden, and all of it points forward to the future. It is our responsibility as Christian parents and educators to take note of the contemporary details but always to see them in the light of eternity. We live in the present, but are not to be bound to it. We obey (or not) in the present, but our understanding should be captive to the Scriptures, which means that our understanding extends far beyond the immediate crisis. A battle is more than just one sword stroke.

CHAPTER 2

The Rise and Fall of Secular Education in America

Government education in America cannot be understood apart from democracy. And the rise and fall of secular education in this nation cannot be comprehended without understanding the rise and fall of democracy.

Because we always tend to heal the wound lightly, we want to think that everything was all right until the 1950s, but then everything fell apart suddenly and mysteriously. But our problem goes down to the bone. As I stated in my book *Repairing the Ruins*: "Some of us wistfully look back to the government schools of our childhood, back before prayer was banned. *If only* . . . This nostalgic approach neglects one thing—the government schools were a rebellious idea from the start."[1] The nature of this rebellion was democracy—the rule of *demos*, the people. The people *en masse* were thought of as having final authority—over traditions, kings, customs, historic loyalties, and churches. We have grown accustomed to thinking of our democracy as a good thing, and it surprises us to learn that the founding fathers of our nation were deeply suspicious of democracy and tried to place whatever restraints on it they could. They established a constitutional republic, not a democracy, and it is a sign of our current ignorance that we do not even know the difference between the two.

This democratic impulse exploded into full revolt near the beginning of the nineteenth century, and three significant columns began to march on the older established order of Christendom. The political revolution was accomplished in the election of Andrew Jackson to the presidency in 1829. The ecclesiastical revolution was ushered in during the Second Great Awakening, beginning on the Kentucky frontier in 1799 and spreading through ardent revivalist preachers such as Charles Finney in the early decades of that century. The educational revolution was led by Horace Mann, who was dedicated to bringing this democratic "gospel" to the children in order to perpetuate that democratic order to future generations. All three movements were related to one another and were manifestations of this newly-minted faith in man, the democratic *zeitgeist.* At the beginning, this faith was full of robust enthusiasm and was not at all shy or reluctant about imposing democratic standards, relying on the abundant capital inherited from the older Christian order. The prodigal son did not run out of money on his first day away from home. The democratic institutions established at that time were rigorous, and those who were content to look at short-term results could readily be impressed. For a time, when the prodigal was buying drinks for the house, he looked like a wealthy man.

Today some are called educational reformers simply because they want to go back to that earlier rigor. A good example is Mortimer Adler, who was responsible for the establishment of the well-respected Great Books curriculum and who could hardly be accused of supporting low standards in education. But Adler understood and acknowledged his basic intellectual commitments: "The first and most important distinguishing characteristic of The *Paideia Proposal* is that it takes democracy seriously."[2]

CHAPTER 3

Healing the Wound Lightly

For many Americans, some system of tax-supported education is simply a given. As unquestioned assumptions go, this one ranks near the top. The power of this idea can be seen in the responses to the increasingly obvious failure of the government school system. The first response, a religious one, is always to call for reform. There are differences, however. The reformers are divided as to whether the impetus to such reform should come from within the school system or without.

Those who press for the reinstitution of prayer in schools or the elimination of offensive textbooks, or other similar issues, want to bring the government schools back to a more traditional center. Those who argue for vouchers, or to a lesser extent charter schools, are trying to reform the government schools from the outside. They want to bring the pressure of honest competition to bear, and then in the light of that external competition, let the government schools themselves decide what they should do.

But in both cases, the desire is for reform to take hold in order to save the schools. This goal is related to the deep commitment to democracy mentioned earlier. We have not yet learned that democracy is the problem. In his discussion of education, Mortimer Adler provides a good example of this fundamental religious commitment: "I assume, without any argument at all, that we are committed to a democratic society, a democratic government, and democratic institutions. And I assume that this means the acceptance of the basic truth of human equality, which expresses itself in the political principle of universal suffrage."[1]

With this commitment as a starting assumption, the only question concerns how our "public schools" should be managed and not whether we should have them in the first place. For Adler, the question of abolishing government-supported education is as unthinkable as firing all the policemen.

> These general truths of political philosophy determine the proper role of public education as a political institution. Along with law enforcement agencies, public health services, military forces, the educational system is one of the instrumentalities of government, and in a sense the most important because it is entirely positive and constructive in its operation. All of these implements of government are well employed only if they are directed to the ends which government itself must serve, in order to be just, namely, the common good immediately and the happiness of men ultimately.[2]

The advocates of internal reform in the government schools have accepted this fundamental assumption, and as participants in this vast democracy, they want to use their presence to *influence* events in a particular direction. They want stricter discipline, higher academic standards, uniforms, school prayer, and so forth. The issue here is a specific kind of worldview problem.

The Christian faith is not a condiment to be used to flavor the neutral substance of secular knowledge. Paul tells us that

CHAPTER 4

The Nature of Man

One of the oldest questions confronting thinkers and philosophers concerns the nature and origin of evil. For all humanistic thinkers, it is axiomatic that man must be understood as basically good, because *demos*, man, is god. But if mankind is good, we have a problem with the empirical data. Why do people keep behaving the way they do? To appeal to a list much shorter than it *could* be, where do racism, theft, murder, covetousness, lying, and rape come from?

The answer given to this dilemma goes back at least to Socrates. If man is basically good, then he must do evil things because of ignorance. Therefore, the savior for ignorant man must be education. The antidote to ignorance is teaching. But the contrast of Socratic thinking to the Christian faith is striking. In Christian teaching, man is a sinner and rebel, and he must be saved by Jesus Christ. In the humanistic faith, man does evil because he is untaught, and if he were taught more effectively, or with better-funded programs, or more progressive curricula, then the great savior—education—would straighten out all his internal kinks. This assumption about education as savior is pervasive in the modern world. Philosopher David Stove points out that the assumption occurs in a phrase as apparently benign as "racial prejudice." He says we really ought to refer to it as racial antagonism.

> Accordingly, when we call racial antagonism “racial prejudice,” we imply that the antagonism depends on some false or irrational belief about the other race. Now this is a distinctly *cheering* thing to imply. For we all know that it is possible for false or irrational beliefs to be corrected. That, after all, is one of the very things that *education* exists for, and which it often achieves. Here, then, is the secret attraction of the phrase “racial prejudice”: it cheers us all up, by suggesting—as “racial antagonism,” for example, does *not* suggest—that it is within the power of education to remove racial antagonism.[1]

But modern society does not want to recognize the existence of any problem that does not admit of a human-engineered solution. This solution invariably comes down to some form of education.

The belief in the inherent goodness of man accompanied the beginning of government education in America. Horace Mann, the father of American government education, put the sentiment this way:

> Again I would say, that, whenever a human soul is born into the world, God stands over it, and pronounces the same sublime fiat, ‘Let there be light;’ and may the time soon come when all human governments shall cooperate with the divine government in carrying this benediction and baptism into fulfillment![2]

In other words, God sees the infant child as “light,” and we experience darkness simply because human governments have not been cooperating with the divine government—we have not agreed with this assessment. When we do come to agree with it—by supplying free, universal education—the fulfillment of inherent human

CHAPTER 5

The Case Against Government Schools

Despite our dire educational circumstances, many Christians still believe there is hope for the government school system. Their efforts in trying to restrain the moral corruption of the government schools today have been heroic. While I want to argue for the moral necessity of removing Christian children from these schools, I want to do so with the recognition that Scripture does not list a sin called "sending one's children to public school." These Christians often understand many of the more objectionable aspects of the school system, and they are courageous and diligent in their fight against them.

> Schools still face formidable foes: postmodern secular teaching and liberal agendas, policies that need to change, overly large classes, problems with discipline and the need for higher academic standards. But if, like Nehemiah, we mix prayer with works, if parents are actively and prayerfully involved in their children's education, the evidence shows that public schools can change.[1]

While it is true that faith is an assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, I am afraid this confidence that we can "turn things around" remains unduly optimistic. The more glaring symptoms of our disease *can* be ameliorated—but this is not the same thing as a cure. Christian parents who have abdicated responsibility for their children to the government school *are* guilty of sinful negligence. And I am afraid that those godly parents there who are refusing to abdicate, who are fighting the good fight, are expending their energy in a way that I believe could be employed elsewhere with much greater fruitfulness. I have no desire to be unnecessarily divisive, but I would urge all Christian reformers in the public schools to reconsider their strategic position.

Americans like to get to the bottom line quickly. And so here it is: Given what we have seen to this point, there is no good reason for Christian parents to entrust their children to the government school system. As I wrote in *Standing on the Promises*, "Christian education is not a luxury or an option. It is part of Christian discipleship for those who have been blessed with children."[2] I want to argue that Christian education is a necessity.

The government schools are a central and essential part of the American civil religion, and the remaining commitment to it is largely a matter of "religious" allegiance. If one were to attack waste in a minor part of the Department of Agriculture, and go so far as to argue for the elimination of the entire program, the cheers would be loud in many quarters. But while criticism of the government schools is standard, that criticism does not go so far as to urge the elimination of the schools. In the ancient pagan world, belief in the gods usually died long before a willingness to dispense with the forms of worship. It is the same here. We no longer believe in the gods of education, but our commitment to their temples is still religious and deep. And this is why Christians, who serve another God, must leave *for the right reasons.* They must leave, understanding the antithesis between true religion and idolatry.

Ten Years After

CHAPTER 9

What Is Classical Education?

The resurgence of classical education over the last decade has been heartening in many respects, but some aspects of it are a bit confusing. No one holds the copyright on the word *classical*, and given the nature of the word, there has been something of a scramble in the various manifestations of classical education. This is not surprising, especially in a time when *classical* can refer to a '57 Chevy, an original cola formula, the early Beach Boys, or a classic rock radio station.

Within the field of education, the word *classical* has a number of legitimate applications and a few spurious ones. There is the democratic classicism promoted by Mortimer Adler. There is the elite classicism of the well-established wealthy prep schools. We also see the classical approach advocated by David Hicks, which has been called "moral classicism." And then there is the classicism argued for in these pages and practiced in the Association of Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS) schools. Among these contenders for the term, the one thing necessary is care in definition. These various schools of thought should not fight for the glory of sole possession, but rather argue in such a way that what everyone means is clear. Put another way, every form of classicism should be able to agree on the importance of early definition of terms in any discussion or debate.

But, unfortunately, because the world is the messy kind of place it is and because America is the kind of place *it* is, we should also expect to find various knock-offs and counterfeits. One common practice is simply to take whatever the school was already doing and simply call it *classical.* Another less-than-adequate approach introduces just enough of a classical touch (one elective, say, on Latin word origins) to persuade inquiring parents that a classical education is being provided. In the long run, it is not necessary to engage such practices in debate, for, as Cicero would have said (had he thought of it), the proof is in the pudding.

In their survey of the classical school resurgence, Gene Veith and Andrew Kern provide the valuable service of identifying differences and similarities in the various legitimate classical approaches. For example, they compare the classical Christian approach with the democratic classicism advocated by Adler.

> There are significant differences between the ACCS and the Paideia schools. ACCS questions the validity of state schooling; by contrast, the Paideia proposal is specifically geared to the reform of public schools. Religion is foundational to the ACCS curriculum, and Christianity is the point of integration through which all knowledge is made complete. Paideia does not dismiss the importance of religion, but its approach is more secular, and its foundational value is democracy. If the approach of ACCS can be described as Christian classicism, Paideia's can best be described as democratic classicism.[1]

Various aspects of this proposal have already been discussed in earlier chapters. Here it is only important to point out that the *Paideia* proposal, as a great books program, is a legitimately *classical*

CHAPTER 10

Logos School, ACCS, and New St. Andrews

Twenty years after its founding, Logos School continues to flourish. Moscow, Idaho, is not a large town, and the fact that a private school the size of Logos (around three hundred students now) can operate successfully here is a testimony to the quality of the work that is being done.

We founded Logos in the early eighties because we wanted our children to receive a better education than we had received. God has blessed these efforts, and my wife and I are now contemplating the prospect of our grandchildren beginning their course of study there in just a few years.

When the school was founded, we adopted the motto, "A Classical and Christ-centered Education." We were not sure of all the ramifications, but we took on the motto because we did not want the school to be a reactionary fundamentalist academy (hence, *classical*). At the same time we did not want the school to be disconnected from the historic Christian faith (hence, *Christ-centered*).

In the course of our early research on what our founding pedagogical vision would be, I remembered having read Dorothy Sayers's essay entitled "The Lost Tools of Learning," which had been reprinted in *National Review.* A faithful subscriber, I had read it first during my time in the navy—although I was a bachelor at the time, without any thoughts of Christian education to trouble me. I hunted down the article again later, and it seemed to be just what we needed. Dorothy Sayers said in the essay that she did not believe there was anyone crazy enough to actually try what she was suggesting, but we were not so easily put off.

A worldview is like a cheap sweater (or a good sweater too, for that matter). If you pull on a loose strand found on your left arm, it is not long before your right arm begins to unravel. Everything is connected. Pedagogy is connected to theology, which is connected to worship, which is connected to politics, and so on. In the complacent era of American evangelicalism that had followed the Second World War, it was possible for Christians to gather together for one morning a week, with one of their number selected to speak for a small portion of that time. This was a workable proposition, and we all thought that we had the whole counsel of God.

But in the seventies and eighties, Christian parents began taking the task of education seriously. And what happens when you establish a school? One of the first things you discover is that the kids show up five days a week, eight hours a day, for nine months out of the year, for twelve years. *You have to have something to say.* A weekly homily won't cut it.

This means either one of two things. The first option is just to copy what the world is saying down the street at their free school. But dissatisfaction with that course of study is what brought about the establishment of this school in the first place. And, moreover, if we are going to say all the same things, why pay the extra tuition to do it?

The other option is to give yourself to the acquisition of a thoroughgoing biblical life—and worldview. And this is what happened at Logos. The more we studied and learned, the more we realized how far we had to go. And the process is still continuing—from the raising of cultural standards within the school to refinements in the

Antithesis

CHAPTER 11

The Christian Heart and Mind

Mark Twain once had an exchange with his longsuffering wife, who had finally had enough of his swearing and cursing. So one day she walked up to him and calmly repeated back to him every such word she had ever heard him use. When she was done, he looked at her and said, "My dear, you know the words, but you don't know the tune." In like manner, many Christians have gotten into the business of worldview education, and judging from the publications, books, conferences, organizations, and general verbal activity, we *have* learned a lot of the *words—worldview, paradigm, epistemology, Trivium,* and so on. But in some key respects we still have not learned the tune.

What is a Christian worldview? To answer the question, we have to begin with what it is not. And in some of the subtle cases, we have to consider what a Christian worldview *almost* is. In the first place, a Christian worldview is not the same thing as Christian worldview jargon. The oldest trick in the world is to attach oneself to some promising movement or other by simply putting on the uniform and leaving the gun at home. Talking imitatively, without understanding, is not all that difficult.

Secondly, and this is crucial, a Christian worldview is not a condiment added to a plate full of neutral food in order to flavor it.

The faith of our fathers is not an educational afterthought. The "potatoes" always come from *somebody's* kitchen. Sometimes Hindus, Muslims, and atheists can be induced to eat Christian potatoes (because the Christian education provided at the school is outstanding), but far more common is the practice of Christians eating unbelieving agnostic potatoes with lots of gravy slathered on to cover the smell.

Third, a Christian worldview does not somehow automatically "sanitize" the world so that we can all go watch any R-rated movie we want now, for any reason we want, because "we have a Christian worldview." Put bluntly, a Christian worldview is not an excuse for compromised sinning. A Christian worldview is not an all-purpose disinfectant.

Positively, having a Christian worldview means living as an obedient Christian in all of life—heart, mind, fingers, and toes. A worldview is not a set of rationalistic spectacles we put on that enables us to see the world rightly despite the fuzzy vision caused by disobedience. Our worldview is related to our eyes, obviously, but these eyes are intimately connected with hands, heart, and mind. The Scriptures speak of God as the One who tries the "heart and reins" of men. Our metaphor for this would be God testing the "head and heart," the reason and emotions. But in the ancient Hebrew metaphor, the heart was the seat of the intellect, and the reins—the kidneys—were the seat of the affections. So while Scripture does distinguish reason and emotion, it does not separate them the way we tend to do. They are both located in what C. S. Lewis, in his great book on education entitled *The Abolition of Man*, called "the chest." Our thoughts do not float on the surface of our lives, like leaves that fall on a pond.

When we are walking in obedience to the Gospel, worshiping and living as God requires us to do—hearing His Word, singing

His psalms, eating at His table, honoring our parents, loving our wives, respecting our husbands, teaching our children because we cherish them, mowing the lawn when we should, and *also* reading and teaching our history, science, literature, and so on—then we have a Christian worldview. At that point, and not before, our children are safe under our instruction. At that point, the schools we build will be fit for the presence of covenant children.

Considered from another angle, education should not be understood as merely a cerebral affair. This pitfall cannot be avoided merely by adding physical education (although that is important). The well-trained mind is certainly involved in classical Christian education—necessarily so. But certain questions should always arise in our hearts—the mind is trained along with what else, trained in accordance with what, by what standard? Unless faithful worship of the living God is at the center of our lives and our communities, and therefore at the center of our children's education, "Christian worldview education" will simply be one more hollow, intellectualistic experiment. The living God knows that our troubled and flailing generation does not need any more of those. We do not need any more born-again Christian souls thinking pagan thoughts, locked away inside pagan bodies, jobs, hands, clothes, cars, and houses. The Word of God is not chained. The Gospel transforms everything it touches, and the fact that so little in our modern evangelical circles is transformed means simply that the Gospel hasn't touched those circles yet.

Our approach to classical Christian education should be motivated by obedience to Paul's requirement to establish in our midst the *paideia* of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). The end result of this kind of education, properly conceived and implemented, is nothing less than Christian civilization. Christian worship leads to Christian dining rooms, Christian schools, Christian communities, Christian nations. Incidentally, in the Great Commission, this is what Jesus said to do—disciple the nations. When proponents of a Christian worldview settle for anything less, it is not fully a Christian worldview, and in some cases it is not a Christian worldview at all. With this contextual introduction, I draw on a definition of a Christian worldview from my book *The Paideia of God*: "the framework of assumptions about reality, all of which are in submission to Christ."[1] In *Repairing the Ruins* I elaborate further:

> The truth is that there is no secular/sacred distinction. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof" (1 Cor. 10:26). Consequently, we cannot protect and preserve any truth by isolating it from the rest of God's world. To do so kills it. The division is not between the secular and the sacred, between theology and literature. The antithesis is between seeing the entire world the way God says to see it, or refusing to see the entire world the way God says to see it.[2]

The Christian heart and mind are dedicated to the antithesis that God (by definition) has placed in the world He made. The concept of antithesis should be a central organizing feature of every Christian curriculum. How does this work? God is by definition a given. God could not "not be." He is what philosophers would call a necessary being, in no way a contingent being. Their language is not our language of choice, but we should still get the point. God does not depend upon us for His existence. We, and everything else, depend upon Him. But once God decided to create a contingent universe, we find ourselves with what we call the Creator/creature divide. This is a fundamental ontological division. God is not a larger version of us, only bigger and smarter.

The Christian faith does not point to God as a Homeric deity like Zeus—an overgrown celebrity.

Once the triune God created a world that would come to contain evil, He established what we call the *antithesis.* The biblical language describing this divide is found in Genesis 3:15: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." The language is not limited to one passage or one period in history but is pervasive throughout Scripture. Jesus calls His enemies a brood of vipers (Matt. 23:33); Paul says the God of peace will soon crush Satan beneath the Romans' feet (Rom. 16:20); the Bible ends with a climactic battle with that "ancient serpent" (Rev. 20:2). The entire Bible is about this curse, and we are told in Scripture that the rest of post-biblical history is dominated by the same curse. We see then that the antithesis is not a study in morally neutral contrasts, and so it teaches us to expect antipathy.

So the antithesis is a given. But because it is, some will always try to misplace the antithesis. In other words, they affirm it in principle but misapply it in practice. Misplacing it is really the first of two basic ways to try to get away from this antithesis between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, between faith and unbelief, between covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers. People misplace the antithesis by affirming the fundamental divide between good and evil but then misdrawing the lines of that divide. The lines are thought to be tribal or racial or political. Misplacing the antithesis is the besetting sin of secular conservatives.

But the liberal method is to deny that there is an antithesis. "We are all saying the same *thing* really! C'mon, people, now smile on your brother, etc." This tendency is very popular in these days, and it explains the common treatment of Christians. If there is no antithesis in the world, then the one intolerable thing is to insist that there is. The default divide therefore comes between one group that says there is no antithesis and the "wicked others" who maintain that there is. Two groups: One says that it is true that there is no truth, and the other group says that that's not true.

Another (common) conservative sin in this regard is that of thinking that the antithesis can be expressed in a wooden, simplistic, jargon-ridden approach to right and wrong—the paradise of legalists. But a belief that truth is absolute is not the same thing as saying that truth is simple. Because God knows all things exhaustively, He knows (for any given situation) the right thing to do. He knows which course of action is *ultimately* wise. I need not know everything, but the fact that God knows everything enables me to know *something.* In the same way, the fact that God knows the fault lines of antithesis in everything enables me to make progress.

Now we come to the curriculum. When we set ourselves to teach the biblical worldview in the classroom, we will often be taunted by those who know that we do not know everything. We sometimes let the shaft go home because we know that is true. It is worse than this: We *actually* do not even know everything about the dung beetle. If we do not know everything about a lowly bug, then how can we claim to be operating on the basis of a knowledge of ultimate good and evil—on the basis of the antithesis? But the problem with this question is that a Christian worldview is confused with a "God's-eye view."

Here we see the importance of Scripture. We don't have to figure out the fundamentals for ourselves. God has given us His Word, and it was *tailored* for our circumstances. This is why remembering the antithesis is so important in our understanding of the doctrines of Scripture. First, Satan questioned the reliability and veracity of God's Word: "Yea, hath God said?" (Gen. 3:1). The liberal does this. He blurs the antithesis between the binding Word of God and the nonbinding words of men. But the other escape route is the conservative one (again): God's Word is affirmed in theory but ignored in practice.

Every Christian school must adopt an implicit, absolute, childlike wonder at the glory of the Scriptures. We must be people of the Book, knowing it top to bottom, front to back. And we must resolve, before the fact, to have absolutely no problem with any passage of Scripture once the meaning of that passage has been ascertained through honest exegesis. This means, among other things, that Christians must be prepared to condemn sodomy, embrace the doctrine of creation, say that husbands are the heads of their wives, believe in giants and dragons, and believe in Noah's ark right down to, if necessary, the giraffe's head sticking out the window.

God's Word is pure. But the idea of the purity of the "ultimate word" is actually inescapable. All creatures must locate the ultimate some where. Why not in God's Word? The alternative is man's word. This "take no prisoners" approach is really the only one open to us.

> Our Savior has also declared that there is no moral neutrality—he that is not with Him is against Him. Combined with this, consider that every man is born in a state of alienation from God. Practical enmity and atheism are the natural outgrowth of this disposition. The only remedy for this natural disease of a man's spirit is gospel truth. The comparison of these truths will make it perfectly plain that a non-Christian training must be literally an anti-Christian training.[3]

Such a view can come across as biblicist fire-breathing, but really it is just a matter of stone-cold reason. The claims of the Christian faith are total. If those total claims are erroneous, then the faith is false. We can illustrate by pointing to what it sounds like when we state the opposite out loud. Not surprisingly, Adler provides a good example. He said, "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] This statement amounts to saying that we should let Cicero talk, and Socrates, and Augustine, and so on. We should hear them all out. But we cannot at the end of the day, on the basis of our discussion, make a decision about how to live.

The Christian heart and mind, in short, finds this approach incoherent.

> Every line of true knowledge must find its completeness as it converges on God, just as every beam of daylight leads the eye to the sun. If religion is excluded from our study, every process of thought will be arrested before it reaches its proper goal. The structure of thought must remain a truncated cone, with its proper apex lacking.[5]

CHAPTER 12

The PEERS Problem

It would be nice indeed if worldview problems could be solved by just crossing the street and opening up a new school, one that is all fresh and clean. But the difficulty is that we track stuff in with us. Wherever we go, there we are.

The antithesis that exists between light and darkness extends to every area of life. Since we are not withdrawing to the wilderness to establish Hermitage Christian School, we must continue to deal with the world around us as we seek to establish biblical education. And because the world around us resembles a particularly persistent and thick fog, some of it gets *in.* Some of the ways this infiltration takes place will be discussed further in subsequent chapters, but the subject of this chapter is the fact of infiltration. Despite the best efforts of parents, educators, and administrators, worldliness seeps into our schools. In a significant number of cases, worldly thinking floods into our schools.

One organization, the Nehemiah Institute, is dedicated to monitoring this problem, and they have developed the PEERS test as their main instrument for this purpose. PEERS testing "categorizes beliefs in Politics, Economics, Education, Religion, and Social Issues (PEERS) into one of four worldview classifications: Biblical Theism, Moderate Christian, Secular Humanism, or Socialism."[1]

Our discussion of this test should begin with at least two significant caveats. The first is that even though modernity likes to categorize all data through quantification, not everything fits neatly into such categories. Christians should always beware of overconfident quantified assertions. For example, some readers might be wondering if a worldview can have a number assigned to it. Isn't this a bit like saying a student has ten pounds of poetic ability or five yards of charm? The answer is to acknowledge that this is a very real problem, and we have to guard against being overly precise in areas that do not permit such an approach. Yet, as children of modernity, we are accustomed to this process in everything else we do, and wise men and women know how to supply the necessary discount. (Some of the other more detailed issues with regard to this qualification in grading and evaluation will be discussed in a later chapter.)

The second qualification has to do with anticipated disagreements about the answer to this or that question. In other words, suppose the folks grading the test mark an answer "wrong." They are in effect saying that the answer was wrong *and* unbiblical. This is fine, the objector might be saying, if we are talking about the deity of Christ. But suppose the question was on economics? "Are these people saying I am less of a Christian if I disagree with their particular objections to wage and price controls?" This criticism also has a legitimate point. Sometimes the questions on the PEERS test reflect more of a conservative political flavor than a thoroughly biblical worldview.

But even with such criticisms acknowledged, the test can still be used with great profit by administrators and teachers who use it wisely. Suppose an entire teaching staff of committed Christians takes the test, and their average score is 85. This means that on average these good Christians disagree with the good Christians at the Nehemiah Institute 15 percent of the time. But this is no reason for everyone to throw down their number 2 pencils and walk off in disgust. The test is still *very* informative. Let us say that the *students* in that same school averaged at about 45. This tells us (if it tells us nothing else) that the worldview of the teachers is not getting passed on to the students very well. The disparity between the views the teachers and the views of the students means that someone is not communicating.

With all this said, the questions on the whole *do* represent basic Christian convictions. Here are some sample questions taken at random from the test. The questions are simple indicative statements, and the students have to register the extent of their agreement or disagreement.

- "Human life as a real and unique person begins at conception" (p. 5).
- "Premarital sex is always wrong and should not be condoned by society" (p. 6).
- "Centralized government is inefficient and is counterproductive for society as a whole" (p. 4).
- "The major obstacles to social progress are ignorance and faulty social institutions" (p. 4).
- "The most effective way of curbing inflation is for the government to impose wage and price controls" (p. 5).[2]

Confronted with statements like this, the student has five options for each question. First, he can "strongly agree," which means "this is the truth. [He has] a conviction that the statement is correct in all ways; [he] would defend it without compromise."

Or he might want to qualify his response and "tend to agree." This means basically "[he agrees] with the statement. [He] may not completely understand the subject, and [he] may not want to debate it, but it seems more right than wrong."

Or he might want to say the equivalent of *max nix.* He is "neutral." "[He does] not understand the statement; [he has] no opinion about the issue; [he thinks] the issue is irrelevant to daily life."

Moving into the opposition column, he might "tend to disagree." "The statement does not sound right to [him] but [he is] not sure [he] could prove it wrong."

Or we might put him in the ranks of the strongly opposed. This answer is "strongly disagree." "[He is] firmly convinced the statement is false. [He has] a conviction, not just a preference, that the statement is in total error and that [he] could defend the opposite viewpoint."[3]

Now given the nature of such questions and this range of possible answers, it would be difficult to miss a student's basic worldview orientation. If any are still unsure, perhaps if we stopped thinking of it as a test and simply considered it more as a thorough, probing *interview*, we would be able to see how valuable such information actually is. Think again of the questions: If the majority of students in a Christian academy "tended to disagree" with the sentiment that sex before marriage was wrong, then it is clear that these students are getting their convictions about right and wrong from a source other than the Bible. If they are from Christian homes, and they attend a Christian school, where are they getting it?

To their credit, the Nehemiah Institute handles the data they get from these tests carefully, which is to say that they are not gnat-stranglers. The poor fellow who disagreed with them about wage and price controls is not written off as a flaming atheist. According to their scale, 70 and above ranks as biblical theism. A score of 30 to 69 is considered moderately Christian. But 0 to 29 is secular humanist. There is no reason to assume that a difference of opinion about this particular question or that one is the watershed between atheism and Christianity.

But now for the bad news. How do the kids from Christian schools do, compared to Christian students in government schools? The testing began in the mid-eighties. And since that time, all the indicators are that Christian students in the government schools have lost the battle, and that students in traditional Christian schools are right behind them. For example, in 1988 the composite score for Christians in the government schools was 36.1. In the year 2001, it was 7.5. Christian students in Christian schools in 1988 scored at 47.2. But in 2001 they were at 22.4. *Both of these categories* have students go from a moderate Christian perspective to a secular humanist perspective. If that is what is going to happen anyway, then why pay tuition to go to a Christian school? If someone is resolved to drive over a cliff, shouldn't the person want the car to go faster, not slower?

What the Nehemiah Institute calls "worldview schools" are the exception to this unhappy pattern. In 1988 the composite score in such a school was 61.2. In 2001 it was 70.1, now ranking these schools, on average, in the biblical theism category. This is still not as good as it could be, but it is not a rout. These schools are holding their own.[4] Christian students in government schools come to share the worldview of their teachers—not the worldview of their families or their churches. Christian students in the average, generic Christian school fare little better.

> However, with nearly each subsequent year of testing, we found the understanding of the Christian worldview by students to be lower than the year before. This trend has continued through year 2001. The only exceptions to the decline were Christian schools that had adopted specific worldview materials in their curriculum. These are primarily schools known as Principle Approach or Classical

> Christian, and homeschools. I believe students from these schools represent the true remnant and hope for the future, but they represent less than 5% of total students tested.[5]

G. K. Chesterton once commented that a man must stand for something, or he will fall for anything. We see the truth of that statement here. Educators with a *defined* worldview commitment that serves as a structuring point for their curriculum are successful in passing that worldview on to their students. Classical Christian schools do this. Principle Approach schools do this. Many homeschools do it. But this result does not come about automatically because someone has pulled out of the government school system.

Another possible objection to the PEERS test is that it may not be representative enough. But the Nehemiah Institute has been doing testing for some time, and the information they have collected is of enormous significance. Their testing has involved approximately 15,000 students from all fifty states, and the results show that most Christian schools do *not* successfully inculcate a Christian view of life and culture.

> I will add here that results of PEERS testing over the past decade show that a wide difference in Biblical worldview understanding exists even among Christian schools. For a host of reasons, the humanist worldview has found its way into Christian education. We cannot just move our students to a different school setting, add prayer and a chapel service, and expect the problem of humanism to disappear.[6]

The determining factor is not how conservative the teachers and administrators are. In one special study of *sixty* very conservative schools, the results were dismaying. A total of 67.2 percent of the students tested at secular humanist levels, while 32.8 percent were moderate Christian—at the lower end of moderate Christian. Just a few more years, and they will be joining their friends who have gone over to the adversary.[7] A conservative institution can fail to pass on its values, and this appears to be what is occurring. Chesterton's statement should come back to haunt us. We will fall for anything.

CHAPTER 13

The Paideia of God

Not all words are created equal. All cultures have certain words in which they invest all their collective cultural capital. In our time, an ordinary word would be something like *shoelace* or *doorknob.* But other words carry a lot more freight for modern people—words such as *democracy.* The fact that some of us are more than a little suspicious of democracy does not alter the fact that our culture is democratic and has entrusted its heart and soul to the concept.

The same thing was true in the ancient world. Certain words were quite pedestrian—they had shoelaces too—while others were an embodiment of all their cultural values. One of the great words for them was *paideia.* "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 citizens."[1] The *paideia* extends well past the simple limits of an established curriculum; it describes an entire way of life. In short, the ancients understood that education was religious and that religious claims are total.

The ideal education for the sophisticated pagan was one in which the student was prepared to take his place in the city/state and to discharge his obligations there. This process of enculturation was all-encompassing, including every aspect of a student's life.

The Roman rhetor Quintilian even went so far as to say that parents should take care to hire a nursemaid who pronounced words properly. Words heard by a toddler were an important part of that child's education. A child learned lessons in school certainly, but he was also being assimilated into the culture of his city when he worshiped the gods at their festivals, walked to school past their temples, and learned to put on a toga a certain way.

Looking ahead to our conclusion, we should note that the apostle Paul required the fathers of Ephesus to provide a peculiarly Christian *paideia* for their children (Eph. 6:4). But before considering the ramifications in greater detail, we have to learn more about what the *paideia* meant in the ancient pagan world. Werner Jaeger points to the comprehensiveness of the word.

> Ever since the age of the sophists, all the leaders of Greek *paideia*, and above all Plato and Isocrates, agreed in deciding that *paideia* should not be limited to school-teaching. To them it was culture, the formation of the human soul. That is what differentiates Greek *paideia* from the educational system of other nations. It was an absolute ideal.[2]

They set their sights high. Aristotle employed the word *psychikos* to describe men and women at their best, the end product of the process of *paideia.* This was a person entirely equipped to assume his or her station of service to the *polis.* The antithesis between this pagan notion and the biblical approach can be seen in the apostle Paul's diatribe against pagan philosophy in the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians. In my view, this entire section should be understood as Paul's critique of Aristotle—and anyone else like him. Paul uses the same word *psychikos* to describe a person who is spiritually clueless. What for Aristotle was the highest compliment he could offer was for Paul the description of a person blind to the things of God. He says, "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Modern Christians think of a "natural man" as a drug addict or libertine. But Paul was not describing the Corinthian skid row; he was attacking the philosophy department at the University of Athens. "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" (1 Cor. 1:20).

Paul was not opposed to the idea of the *paideia.* He was opposed to a *paideia* built on the foundations of autonomous human wisdom. He did not, as many anti-intellectual Christians have done, reject the life of the mind. What he did was reject the idea that the life of the mind can in any way be sustained apart from salvation in Christ and a sure word from God.

By the first century, the inadequacy of the autonomous *paideia* also had begun to dawn on the pagans themselves. This is one of the reasons that the Christian faith was preached with such success. The autonomous *paideia* was for the ancients an idol that had failed them. Or, to use a different analogy, it was a house built on sand. The idolatrous assumptions of paganism could not support the weight placed upon them. Christopher Dawson comments: "From the time of Plato the Hellenic *paideia* was a humanism in search of a theology, and the religious traditions of Greek culture were neither deep nor wide enough to provide the answer."[3]

Dawson goes on to show the result of the failure of this *paideia*: "The new Christian culture was therefore built from the beginning on a double foundation."[4] But I would argue that the *ancient paideia* was not foundational (in principle) to the developing Christian culture, but rather a teaching in need of a foundation, as Dawson pointed out a page earlier. To the extent that a true foundational blending did occur, the Christians faced a problem of compromise that became increasingly obvious in the subsequent centuries. We should never tire of repeating that religious claims are total, and as the Christian faith conquered the ancient world, the Christians understood the essential principle that Christ is the foundation of all of life and thought. At the same time, these Christians had to deal with those aspects of the education curriculum taken over from the pagans that were undeniably true. At any rate, the changes brought to the *paideia* were comprehensive and convulsive: "The religious needs of the ancient world were satisfied not by philosophy but by the new religion which had emerged so suddenly and unpredictably from beneath the surface of dominant culture. The coming of Christianity involved great cultural changes both socially and int ellectually."[5]

Earlier we noted that the apostle Paul commanded Ephesian fathers to provide their children with a *paideia* of the Lord. This is not a command limited to enrollment in a Christian school. What Paul is requiring is nothing less than the establishment of a Christian civilization or culture. *Paideia* means enculturation, and you cannot have Christian enculturation without a Christian culture. Werner Jaeger makes a pertinent comment here and is worth quoting at length. He is discussing the use made of the term *paideia* by Clement of Rome in his letter to the Corinthians. Clement was a friend of the apostle Paul (Phil. 4:3), and the way he employs the term builds on Hebrew usage (which meant simply *admonition* or *chastisement*).

> But in 62.3 Clement uses the phrase "paideia of God" for the sum total of all the Logia of the written tradition, a use corresponding to the Greek sense of the term. It is used in the same sense in 2 Timothy 3:14-16. It is obvious that

> under the influence of the existence of the much-admired "Greek paideia," which was common knowledge for all men, a new concept of Christian paideia was being evolved, the further development of which we are going to trace through the following centuries. The remarkable thing is that this process starts in a group of Christian writings that consists of the Epistles to the Ephesians (6:4) and to the Hebrews (12:5), II Timothy (3:14-16), and Clement's letter to the Corinthians. Among them the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Hebrews mark the first steps in this direction, whereas Clement's epistle to the Corinthians shows a large expansion of this idea and of its application in Christian life and thought History does not proceed by starting with a definition of what it takes over from the past, but by taking possession of it and adapting it to its new purposes.[6]

The passages cited from the New Testament by Jaeger are as follows:

> And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. (Eph. 6:4)

> And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him. (Heb. 12:5)

> But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of knowing of whom thou has learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto sal-

> vation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. (2 Tim. 3:14-16)

In Ephesians Paul commands fathers to provide their children with the "paideia of the Lord." In Hebrews the children of God are told not to despise the difficulties of being trained by the Lord in His *paideia.* This course of instruction certainly includes the notion of admonition or chastisement, but according to 2 Timothy, all of Scripture is to be employed in this training process because it is profitable for establishing a *paideia* in righteousness (v. 16). These verses show why classical Christian academies teach all subjects as an integrated whole with the Scriptures at the center. Paul says the Scriptures are profitable as the foundation of our Christian *paideia.* So all these requirements were nothing short of a requirement for a Christian *paideia*, one that brought up Christian girls and boys to maturity in the faith, a maturity that presupposes the need for a Christian culture.

Consequently, many Christians involved in modern Christian education need to adopt a more *comprehensive* vision for education. A Christian education is not a process that dabbles around the edges or tries to improve something in need of radical reformation through a simple rearrangement. We may have seen a student who has a basic problem—he needs to study more. He knows he has a problem, and he resolves to do better. He then spends quite a bit of time and energy on reorganizing his notebook—better grades through putting in notebook dividers! This task, as his mother might point out, is easier than studying.

The above problem lends itself to too many metaphors. Rearranging the furniture is not the same as deep-cleaning the carpet.

Too many suggested reforms of education in America are precisely this—a rearranging of the existing furniture. But much more than minor reform is necessary—minor reform is healing the wound lightly. Improving grades through notebook reorganization. Picking up instead of cleaning. We can speak of it in so many ways because it is such a common phenomenon. But true educational reform is nothing less than an insistence on the *paideia* of God. When this *paideia* starts to be established, what will be its general characteristics?

First, education reform cannot be sustained apart from a deep and passionate commitment to the historic Christian faith, lived out in faithful worshiping communities, as was discussed earlier. The Christian school is not at the center of the Christian world—that space is taken by the worship of God on the Lord's Day.

Secondly, education reform cannot occur apart from a love of particular things—children, towns, books, subjects, music, and on and on, to the end of one's life and into the next. Why? God has given us salvation through Christ, who took on His incarnate form during the reign of Caesar Augustus. He grew up in a particular town and suffered under Pontius Pilate. This particularity is central to a right understanding of the Christian faith. The transcendent God is not irrelevant to this particular classroom. Individuals matter, particular subjects matter.

Third, education reform is not possible apart from faith. This is the spiritual way of putting it, but in the vernacular, education reform cannot happen without a sufficient number of crazy people—those who serve a God who calls things that are not as though they are. God commands Christian education, and He promises to bless our obedience in this area.

Given these principles, what are the possible obstacles to true reform? These things mentioned above could hardly generate any opposition at all—until we seek to implement them. It all sounds wonderful on paper, but when we come to particular application, the story can change quite rapidly. So what will the basis of the opposition be? Among other things, we might note a love of ignorance. Ignorance has many problems attendant to it, but one of its advantages is that ignorance is *comfortable.* Another obstacle is loyalty to a set of contemporary beliefs that conflict with this historic Christian vision. One common example would be the current dependence of many modern evangelicals on the categories and teachings of contemporary psychology. Another obstacle could be the conservative suspicion of anything "new." This suspicion can be admirable, but the mistake here is in thinking that the classical approach is new. It is anything but new.

Some other obstacles are more pedestrian. Starting a school takes money. We might like the idea of opening a school but are too cowardly to face the opposition and controversy we know it will generate—perhaps in our families or churches. One of the reasons for controversy is that classical Christian education cannot happen without discipline (see Heb. 12:5 again!), and discipline in our day is controversial. Controversy seems especially certain when we know that the first recipients of any such discipline would be the pastor's son or the most influential board member's daughter. But again the problem is cowardice.

Simple laziness is another problem, observable in many men who stand aside to watch their wives try to shoulder the responsibility for establishing a suitable education for their children. After a time, the wives burn out because they were not built to shoulder that load. Men were built for it, but unfortunately the men are lazy.

Our coming generation is looking to us expectantly. Are we prepared to love them enough to teach them as though the Christian heart and mind matters in the classroom? God tells us that our covenant children are to be established in the *paideia* of God.

Unlike the Ephesian fathers to whom this command was first given, we have a heritage, two thousand years old, in which much of the spade work has already been done. We have something to recover; we have an advantage over them. There is much to learn and a lot that can be recovered. Dawson comments: "I believe the study of Christian culture is the missing link which is essential to supply if the tradition of Western education and Western culture is to survive, for it is only through this study that we can understand how Western culture came to exist and what are the essential values for which it stands."[7]

In seeking to provide our children with a Christian *paideia*, we are not starting from scratch. But if we ignore our heritage, we might as well be.

The Classical Christian Answer

CHAPTER 14

The Seven Liberal Arts

The scope of this chapter is extensive, and so perhaps a summary of its direction will be necessary at the very beginning. I am attempting here within a small compass a history of classical Christian education, and we will have to fly at treetop level. Also I draw on many sources—important to demonstrate that classical Christian education for confessing believers is far from a newfangled notion; the Christian commitment to this kind of education has not been intermittent but rather sustained over millennia.

Inspired by the words of the apostle Paul, the early Christians began to think and operate in terms of the *paideia* of God. Clement of Rome was notable in this respect. Some elements of the ancient *paideia* were gathered together by these Christians and arranged in a manner suitable to them. Two of the most influential church fathers who sorted through these issues were Augustine and Cassiodorus. The latter was responsible for organizing elements of the *paideia* into what are now called the seven liberal arts, which he equated with the seven pillars in the house of wisdom (Prov. 9:1).

Some important educational reforms were established in the late medieval period, most notably those undertaken by the Brethren of the Common Life. The pattern of classical education they developed remained through the Reformation, although the early Protestants gave new energy to the concept of the antithesis between unbelieving and believing thought. At the same time, historic confessional Protestants played an important role in continuing and extending the classical tradition of education.

The history of classical education is messy. Because many Greek elements were taken up into the process of education (including the language), it has been too easy for many to assume that the civilizing impetus for our culture has been entirely from the pagan world. For example, Cardinal Newman even goes so far as to credit Homer with being the first great apostle of civilization:

> In the country which has been the fountainhead of intellectual gifts, in the age which preceded or introduced the first formations of human society, in an era scarcely historical, we may dimly discern an almost mythical personage, who, putting out of consideration the actors in Old Testament history, may be called the first Apostle of Civilization . . . . "Seven famous towns contend for Homer dead, Through which the living Homer begged his bread."[1]

But Newman's assessment is too facile, although I differ with such a great man with some trepidation. Many great minds have seen Greek civilization as the ancestor of our own. Dawson appears to agree with Newman when he says that the "classical tradition is, in fact, nothing else than Hellenism."[2] But we have to remember the apostle Paul's analogy of the olive tree. Jewish branches were cut out of the olive tree because of their unbelief, and Gentile branches were grafted in. This engrafting of Greeks altered the taste of the olives, but the root remained—an ancient covenant with Abraham, the root being the Lord Jesus Himself. If we have been following Paul's