Classical or Christian or Not? That Could Be the Question

by Dianne Scouller

Two major issues are addressed in the title—classical and Christian. The questions arise, "What is classical education?" and "What is Christian education?" and then "What relationship is there between the two?"

For decades, concerns about falling academic standards in schools have been expressed in the media and in formal reports, such as Martin Hames' criticism that New Zealand schools are characterised by "the four 'i's'—illiteracy, innumeracy, ignorance and ill-discipline" (2002, 3). Postmodernist ideology seems to have replaced absolutism with relativity and the challenge for excellence with a demand for equality.

Secularisation of state-provided education programs has been the major concern of Christian groups such as the Association of Classical and Christian Schools (Wilson 2003). Such groups believe that the classical approach can both reverse unsatisfactory results in school performance and restore something of the dignity of human beings as intellectual creatures made in the image of God.

A classical approach has also been adopted with varying success by a number of secular organisations in the United States—such as the Paideia school project, the Appleton Classical School, and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)—for the same educational reasons. A focus on children from marginalized groups is a feature of KIPP and of Noel Pearson's work with indigenous children in Australia.

The current trend to turn education into a narrowly utilitarian marketable commodity is seen as a serious menace to true learning because of its opposition to the worldview of the liberal arts tradition, which pursues truth, goodness, and beauty (Hicks 1999; Littlejohn and Evans 2006). By contrast, the classical approach is believed to recalibrate the intellect and affections to love the things worth loving and to be free to fulfil one's potential as a child of God.

Certain characteristics of the classical approach are worthy of serious consideration, notably the desire for genuine academic rigour, an in-depth study of history, a focus on well-established literature, and a variety of pedagogical approaches for different year levels. Some classical curricula, such as that used in ACCS schools, are built around the trivium designations of grammar, logic/dialectic, and rhetoric, which define broad developmental stages as well as subjects for study.

In the grammar (primary) classes, learning is almost exclusively focused on knowledge acquisition, using didactic teaching methods, memorisation, and formal testing. In the preteen and early teen years (the logic stage), pedagogy becomes more dialectic, as children learn the arts of debate and critique along with a continuation of knowledge learning. By senior secondary age (rhetoric), specialisation is possible as the rhetorical arts become a focus.

The trivium's value is seen by Veith and Kern as a universal paradigm for learning, which "accounts for the entire range of what education is supposed to do. The learner must acquire information, grasp it intellectually, and use it purposefully. To master any subject is to learn its language. The trivium integrates the theoretical and the practical, tying together facts, arguments, and real-world applications" (2001, 13).

This academic model mirrors the more general biblical "trivium" of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom: "By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures" (Proverbs 24:3–4; NIV). Both identify the three stages:

- Receiving and gathering information (grammar and knowledge)
- Arranging and connecting knowledge in logical order (dialectic and understanding)
- Putting this gathered, ordered information into practical expression (rhetoric and wisdom)

Foundational to this classical curriculum is the study of Greco-Roman culture and language, which are believed to provide both rich comment on and critique of the concepts of freedom, citizenship, constitutional government, separation of church and state, and a range of other ideas valued by Western society. For Christians, this foundation gives an understanding of Christianity, which began in a Middle Eastern country that was politically Roman and culturally Greek.

Curriculum reform and technological advances in Western countries since the mid-twentieth century have led to considerable debate over what should be taught, what is worth learning, and maybe more critically, what Christian education looks like. Some Christian schools appear to have simply "baptised" a secular program, others hold fast to a particular doctrinal stance, and others aim to live out their faith through relationships of trust and respect between teachers and learners, completely at ease with a government-mandated curriculum.

Individual Christian teachers, whether they work in Christian or secular schools, face the question of what it means to teach Christianly. Is it any different from any other approach? Should it be? My own recent research indicates that, while teachers can say clearly what they believe such teaching means, there is rarely any evidence in their classrooms of anything distinctively Christian.

Two issues are crucial to this discussion. The first is that we are commanded, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and *with all your mind* and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30, emphasis added). Both Old and New Testaments urge appropriate use of the intellect. "Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle" (Psalm 32:9). "Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults" (1 Corinthians 14:20).

Second, Christians do not have a premium on truth. We need to humbly acknowledge that God in His wisdom determines what truth is revealed and to whom. It is worth remembering the classic Christian dictum "all truth is God's truth."

The histories of classical education and of Bible-based education have been closely interconnected for many centuries. The debate over the relationship between faith and reason has raged for centuries and still has serious implications for Christian education. Most early Christians were in fact Jewish, living in a world that was politically Roman and culturally Hellenistic. Formal schooling was established to give basic instruction in Christian doctrine to converts of all ages and to provide the means to evaluate secular culture—to take advantage of its sound aspects while rejecting that which was considered unacceptable.

Because prevailing philosophies involved logic, rhetoric, and philosophy, some people developed an anti-intellectual attitude as a kind of defence mechanism against what they considered inappropriate for Christians to study. This made it difficult for many uneducated converts from underprivileged groups in society to discern between God-honouring intellectual endeavour and absorption of the world's wisdom.

The struggle for balance between educational practices considered pagan and those acceptable to the developing church continued unabated for centuries, although the church continued to hold the respect for learning and tradition that had been a hallmark of Judaism.

During the early Christian era, prominent scholars opposed one another over the place of reason and intellectual endeavour in Christian teaching. Some refuted any compatibility between the gospel and human ideas of any age. Others saw value in secular learning but acknowledged it could never substitute for divine truth. They believed in harmony between faith and reason, and that each enriched the other. They saw faith as the crux of education, but felt that only through careful and critical thought could learners grow beyond mere learning of facts to wisdom, the goal of education.

During the eighteenth century, the evangelical revival known as the Great Awakening brought major changes to the Protestant church in America. Emotional preaching gradually overtook diligent study and precise doctrinal teaching. The consequences have been described thus: "Under the guise of spiritual enthusiasm, some well-meaning Christians led the way from the possible blight of educated apostasy to the certain famine of orthodox ignorance" (Lockerbie 1994, 249). Debate with new ideas presented by philosophers such as Hume and Kant were problematic for many who had not developed a deeply considered understanding of their faith.

Few had any viable answer to the claims of Darwinian evolution as an explanation for the origins of life. Such challenges to the church's interpretation of the Bible and the reasonableness of the Christian faith were largely left unanswered by a church incapable of serious and honest debate. J.P. Moreland identifies a misunderstanding of the relationship of faith to reason, explaining that biblical faith is not a blind act of acceptance, but rather it has its foundations in reason: "*Faith is a power or skill to act in accordance with the nature of the kingdom of God*, a trust in what we have reason to believe is true" (1997, 25; emphasis in original).

Confusion between childlike faith and childish thinking may have been responsible for many dismissing intellectual engagement altogether. So, instead of obeying Peter's injunction to always be able to intelligently justify one's faith (1 Peter 3:15), the church has tended to withdraw from intellectual engagement, creating a discernible anti-intellectualism in its ranks.

Logical positivism has led to a general acceptance that only those claims which can be empirically verified are acceptable as truth. By contrast, Christian scholars assert that only by establishing rational thought in God as its source can a person learn to think biblically and so have knowledge of the objective world (Craig and Gould 2007). Harry Blamires compares secular thinking—bounded by earthly limits—with thinking Christianly, which is "to accept all things with the mind as related, directly or indirectly, to man's eternal destiny as the redeemed and chosen child of God" (1963, 44).

What does this mean for twenty-first-century Christian education? Many notable Christian scholars have addressed both educating the whole person and teaching curriculum subjects as part of the integrated whole of God's truth. Frank E. Gaebelein (1968, 22–23) put it this way: "We do indeed give the primacy to that spiritual truth revealed in the Bible and incarnate in Christ. That does not mean, however, that those aspects of truth discoverable by man in the realm of mathematics, chemistry, or geography, are any whit less God's truth than the truth as it is in Christ. The difference is clearly a question of subject matter.... Whereupon we must conclude that Christian education has a holy obligation to stand for and honor the truth wherever it is found."

Few would argue with Gaebelien's opinion, but how do we actually do that? Should a Christian chemistry or history or physical education class be any different from one in a secular school? If so, how? If not, why not? Are the subjects in our curriculum the answer, or part of the answer, as in a classical approach? What should distinguish a Christian teacher from one who does not have faith in Jesus Christ?

There is no simple, clear-cut answer to these questions. Maybe our life is a journey, a "pilgrim's progress" toward that goal.

Note: The Association of Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS) is one of many groups, both secular and Christian, which have espoused a classical curriculum model in recent decades.

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