

## *Classical Studies and Christian Education<sup>1</sup>*

In certain circles these days one finds the phrase “classical Christian education” tossed about rather freely, as if its meaning were self-evident or were the name of a political party with a well-defined platform or manifesto. Yet in fact it is neither. It’s not always clear what a given person means by it: some seem to have a clear notion for their own part, but while they all seem to agree that what they call “classical” and “Christian” is desirable, it soon becomes clear that they aren’t all talking about the same thing. While it’s probably impossible to get rid of the ambiguities entirely, perhaps a bit of historical review and a few pointed questions will help bring some perspective to the discussion.

The history is a history of rejection, followed by some degree of acceptance, while today our culture and society is poised between the two.

### *Classical Studies vs. Christian Education*

For generations “classics” has referred to the study of the ancients, and particularly of Greek and Roman culture, language, literature, philosophy, and religion. Through the middle of the twentieth century, it was in some important respects normative for those of a certain class: it was liberal education, which is to say, the education of a free person. This was according to the Roman distinction between free men and servile.

At the outset, however, to speak of “classical Christian education” would have been considered oxymoronic. In the first place, it’s apparently at odds with Christian social teaching: Paul argues in Galatians for the radical egalitarianism of the Kingdom of God:

...There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28, NIV).

Is an education that is for the free but not the slave really valid? People have continued to disagree on this question to this day. I would argue that it is: but this is because, in the first place, it’s a matter of labeling more than substance nowadays, and because, in the second place, if all are in fact free, then it should be universally available.

Liberal education was suspect to the early church for another reason too, and it remained an issue even after Christianity became more closely identified with socially dominant orders: “classical Christian education” was typically taken as more or less equivalent to “pagan Christian education”. Some of the early Christian thinkers who were well-schooled in classical literature were not, therefore, proud of the fact. It was a source of embarrassment to at least some of them, if not outright shame: they tended to dismiss it as part of their pre-conversion life. A Christian deliberately setting out to acquire such an education nowadays must take a somewhat different point of view if the whole project is not merely to be an exercise in vanity.

Most of the elements of the early dialogue can be found in Scripture. The Lord called the nation of Israel to be a people apart — cut off, separate from the rest of the world. The ways of the gentiles were not their ways; the distinction was to be visible and deep:

You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own. (Lev. 20:26, NIV)

And yet at the same time, the gentiles are implicit in the promise from the beginning:

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” (Gen. 22:15-18, NIV)

To ensure their continuing separation, the Lord had the people of the Exodus slaughter every creature they found in the Holy Land, and to keep from marrying outside the Hebrew nation; at the same time, the harlot Rahab was spared, and Ruth, a Moabite woman, is taken into the people so significantly as to become an ancestor of David and hence of Jesus himself.

St. Paul, the only New Testament author to address very thoroughly the issues that we would now call “cultural”, talks in his first epistle to the Corinthians about a similar separation inherent in the new order:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not

know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. (1 Cor. 1:20-25, NIV)

In his next letter to them, he goes further:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord." (2 Cor. 6:14-17, NIV)

At the same time, however, he sounds the curious countervailing note at the beginning of Romans:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (Rom. 1:20, NIV)

At the beginning, though — especially when the Christians are being widely persecuted — there is a strong sense that any quarter given to secular culture is at least suspect. Tertullian, whose relentless zeal for Christian purity eventually led him into heresy, argues:

What is there in common between the philosopher and the Christian, the pupil of Hellas and the pupil of Heaven, the worker for reputation and for salvation, the manufacturer of words and of deeds, the builder and the destroyer, the interpolator of error and the artificer of truth, the thief of truth and its custodian? (*Apol.*, 46, *tr.* Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, p. 223.)

Elsewhere he writes:

It is not to thee that I address myself, the soul which, formed in the

schools, trained in the libraries, belches forth a fund of academic wisdom, but thee, the simple and uncultivated soul, such as they have who have nothing else, whose whole experience has been gleaned on street-corners and cross-roads and in the industrial plant. I need thine inexperience since in thy little store of experience nobody believes....It is the "secret deposit of congenital and inborn knowledge" which contains the truth, and this is not a product of secular discipline. The soul comes before letters, words before books, and man himself before the philosopher and the poet. (*De Testimonio Animae*, 1, 5, tr. Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, p. 223)

But Tertullian's early puritanism did not hold forever. It did not go away, but it became part of a dichotomy of thought with which later writers struggled. Jerome, whose work translating the Bible into Latin (at that time the vernacular) was an essential part of establishing Christianity as a broadly accessible religion, tells the nun Eustochium to avoid having too much to do with classical literature, concluding with the famous story of his dream:

Do not try to appear too learned, or to toy with lyric songs...  
"What does the light have to do with the darkness? What does Christ have to do with Belial?" What does Horace have to do with the Psalter, or Vergil with the Gospels, or Cicero with Paul? Isn't your brother tripped up if he sees you lying at an idol's table?

...Many years ago...having given up my home, my parents, my sister, my friends, and the food I was used to having (that was hard!), but I was not able to abandon the library that I'd put together at Rome. And so, wretch that I was, I would fast but then read Cicero; after intense nightly vigils, after tears drawn from my very innards by the memory of my past sins, I would find myself holding Plautus again.

If ever I returned to myself and began to read the prophet, I found his speech barbarous, and because I didn't see with the eyes of the soul, I blamed not my eyes, but the sun. So while the old serpent was toying with me this way, in about the middle of Lent a fever invaded my weary body, right to the marrow, and (I realize this sounds extreme) it so consumed my unhappy limbs that I scarcely remained attached to my bones.

And so my funeral was prepared, and my body grew cold, losing all its natural warmth, and my heart barely beat in my breast, when suddenly I was snatched up in the spirit to the Judge's bench, where the light was so brilliant and the clarity of everything around was so intense, that I threw myself prostrate, not daring to look up. Being

asked my state, I answered that I was a Christian. But he who sat there responded, “You lie. You are a Ciceronian, not a Christian. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Mat. 6.21).” (*Ep. XXII ad Eustochium*, tr. my own)

So Jerome goes on to detail his rejection of all sorts of classical learning. The story is memorable and widely known. Somewhat more problematic, though, is the fact that he nevertheless continues to employ all those tricks of classical rhetoric in his sermons and letters, to make references to classical authors, and to rely, in both form and substance, on the classical education he has rejected. One must question his sincerity a bit.

In the next generation, Augustine addresses the problem not merely practically but in theory as well. He laments his early attraction to classical literature, and admits with some shame his response to Vergil’s *Aeneid*:

In the other subjects, however, I was compelled to learn about the wanderings of a certain Aeneas, oblivious of my own wanderings, and to weep for Dido dead, who slew herself for love. And all this while I bore with dry eyes my own wretched self dying to thee, O God, my life, in the midst of these things.

For what can be more wretched than the wretch who has no pity upon himself, who sheds tears over Dido, dead for the love of Aeneas, but who sheds no tears for his own death in not loving thee, O God, light of my heart, and bread of the inner mouth of my soul, O power that links together my mind with my inmost thoughts? (*Confessions* 1.13, tr. Albert C. Outler)

We find in Augustine’s writings, though, the same rhetorical finesse one finds in Jerome (though less ostentatious). He still continues to exhibit a telling (and useful) familiarity with classical literature. Eventually, too, he brings forth a justification: in the process of withdrawing from the world, he argues, we should take from worldly culture whatever we can use in the service of God:

But if those so-called philosophers (especially the Platonists) have said anything true and consonant with our faith, those things should not only not be rejected, but appropriated for our own use from those who have it wrongly. For just as the Egyptians had not only idols and the burdens which the people of Israel hated and were fleeing, but also containers and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the Hebrews appropriated on their way out of Egypt — ordaining them for a better use — and not doing this on their own, but at God’s command, while the Egyptians themselves unwittingly provided them

with what they themselves were misusing; even so the various pagan disciplines have not only lies and superstitions and pointless heavy burdens, which we should despise and reject as we leave their company for the leadership of Christ; but they also contain learning that is well adapted to serve the cause of truth, and even some excellent moral principles, and even some truths respecting the worship of a single God can be found there. We might say that these are like gold and silver which they did not create themselves, but which were mined from divine providence as it lies scattered about everywhere, and which have been lawlessly and wickedly and are perversely and unlawfully made to serve diabolical purposes. In the same way, a Christian, in spiritually separating himself from their wretched company, should take such things with him in the interest of preaching the Gospel. (*On Christian Doctrine* 2.40, tr.my own.)

Augustine's response seems satisfactory, though it perhaps begins to lay bare a yet simpler underlying version of the question: should a Christian be concerned with learning that is in any sense "of the world"? It matters little whether it be pagan in origin, or modern secularist, or even the pragmatic wisdom of a Christian who just doesn't happen to be talking about matters of faith (say, in a cookbook). If all learning is either of God or is not, surely there is no reason for pursuing or promoting that which is not.

The problem is that no matter which answer one gives, the question immediately turns into a question of boundaries. If we say no, then we are left with the task of differentiating the wisdom of God from the wisdom of the world. In Paul's rhapsodic and sweeping phrases, it may be charmingly easy: but in real life from day to day, we have to make the determination about individual things that don't come with labels defining them as "godly" or "ungodly". If we limit God's truth to scripture only, can we use a cookbook, eat an avocado, drive automobiles, or even write out Bible verses with a plastic ball-point pen, when the Bible is silent on all these things?

If we say yes, though, we are left with almost the same question, since it forces us to determine what of the world's wisdom is appropriate for us to study. If some of it is inappropriate, and some of it is appropriate, we need to have some principle of differentiation, or we will surely follow our universally human capacity for going astray.

### *Classical Studies as Christian Education*

The Church (taken as the Church Universal — the whole body of Christ's faithful) has never wholly resolved the issue, and that is why, perhaps, we still have

to wrestle with it. But there were various attempts to bring a kind of classical learning under the heading of Christian education, and they achieved a measure of real success. The late ancient philosopher-poet Martianus Capella describes for the first time, in a fairly tedious allegorical form (*De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercuriae*), the seven liberal arts, which are made up of the *trivium*, which primarily encompasses the language arts (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric), and the *quadrivium*, which takes in the mathematical arts (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). The *trivium* and *quadrivium* form a paradigm for the separation of tools and subject matter in education, which retained force for the ensuing millennium. We will return to this.

At some times, a Christian severity led to the rejection of all pagan and antique knowledge; at others (often counted as “renaissances” of one sort or another) culture seemed to awaken to what was worthwhile in ancient culture. At times the sacred and secular traditions seemed to merge; in the court of Charlemagne (ca. 800) the chief members of the palace school had playful names for each other drawn from both Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman antiquity, and saw no inconsistency in mixing them up, referring to each other with names like “David” (for Charlemagne himself) and “Flaccus” (*i.e.*, Horace, for Alcuin, who was in charge of the palace school).

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the nun Hroswitha von Gandersheim was distressed to find her sisters reading the comedies of Terence, but saw fit to remedy that by writing more suitable comedies for them along the same lines. She rejects Terence (and some of his bawdier content), but at the same time embraces and validates, by emulation, much of what he’s doing.

The twelfth century saw another significant revival in the liberal arts. During this period the great European universities were founded, with curricula for the formal study of theology, philosophy, law, and medicine. There was a renewed sense of connection with the language and literature of ancient Greece, especially in the re-introduction of Aristotle to the mainstream of western thought. The contrary impulses we have already identified are still active: Aristotle’s works are alternatively praised and condemned by various sources; Aquinas (*ob.* 1274) built colossal structures with them, and harmonized them Christian thinking; at almost the same time, though, many of them are banned at Paris by Etienne Tempier (1277). Within a generation, though, they have become the common currency of university discourse throughout Europe, and required for the Master of Arts, which was the foundation of all the professional curricula.

Through this is a slowly increasing articulation of the sense that even the things of the world, if seen with eyes informed by faith, can still disclose divine truth. In this respect, mediaeval thinkers were perhaps exploring the implications of the passage from Romans. Alanus ab Insulis (Alain de Lille), who probably taught at

Paris a few generations before Aquinas, had written:

Every created thing in the world, like a book and a picture, serves as a mirror for us. (*PL* 210:579, tr. my own).

Alanus' point here is not particularly novel: he is in many ways merely articulating the common currency of mediaeval thought, attempting to fuse, or at least harmonize, rationalism and mystical thought. He is remarkable in articulating it so clearly, but is chiefly popularizing the idea that the whole of the world — all created life, all history, everything present to our senses — is capable of functioning as an image, if we but read it correctly.

In this suggestion, Alanus takes the positive approach (as opposed to the more typical negative approach held by most mystics since Plato) to the old problem of images, which is merely that *every image, of whatever sort, both reveals and obscures its referent*. The tension is well formulated in Charles Williams: "This also is Thou; neither is this 'Thou.'" All images serve their referents, but they do so imperfectly; all images betray their referents, but they do so incompletely. No word, no language, no picture, and no expression, in all the long history of the human race, has ever sufficed to express the wholeness of God or God's relationship with the world; but by the same token, it is largely through images that we know anything, and even an imperfect image must serve that goal at least somewhat. We can't get by with simply rejecting them or simply accepting them. We must do both.

If this is so, then it probably follows that among the things we see in the world's mirror are the cultural phenomena — its history, its people, their beliefs, and their culture. This makes all knowledge and all wisdom at some level "fair game" for the Christian to study, though of course as with all such things, one needs to approach it with caution and with a respect for the divine truth that hides behind all of reality.

Other ages have been better than our own at supporting and grasping this tension; few were as good at it as the later Latin Middle Ages. On the eve of the Italian Renaissance in about 1300, as the social, political, and intellectual achievement of the Middle Ages had perhaps reached its fullest flower, Dante Alighieri wove into his *Divine Comedy* references to Apollo and the other gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon without any apparent discomfort at the idea, and without finding it inconsistent with his allegorical Christian purpose. He builds one of the most elaborate allegorical structures in the history of literature, and yet it is also one that ultimately announces its own failure: his three-part picture of the afterlife, for all its grandeur and sublimity, eventually has to admit its inadequacy to encompass what it's describing.

And so Christianity came cautiously to accept some of the world's learning as

valuable, and to incorporate it into a model of Christian learning. Of course the Italian Renaissance itself, which extended roughly from the first appearance of the Black Death in 1348 for about two centuries afterward, was largely preoccupied with a wholesale “rebirth” — a rediscovery and reassessment, really — of ancient learning. This rebirth was largely enabled by an understanding of the possibility of “despoiling the Egyptians”; from there it seized upon two historical occasions to come to fruition.

The first of these was the passionate classicizing of Francesco Petrarca, whose zeal for Cicero reawakened in Italy a love for clean classical Latin; the second was the broad flood of ancient Greek writing that poured into Italy following the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Greek scholars fleeing the Turks brought everything they could carry with them to Venice, the Western city they knew best. From Venice, the second century of the Renaissance cemented in place the fruits of the first.

The Renaissance was at the outset primarily an Italian phenomenon, however, and it was accepted slowly and selectively in the rest of Europe. The northern response was deeply colored by the events of the Reformation. Thinkers on both sides of the religious divide drew on a now prodigious stock of both theological and secular learning. Catholic thinkers like More and Erasmus wrote highly refined Latin based on classical models, and despised those who were mired in the Latinity of the thirteenth century, which they considered crabbed and retrograde. Protestants like Luther and Calvin, and even Elizabeth I of England were equally familiar with Latin in a fairly classical form. But this is not merely a matter of grammatical proficiency: both sides used not only the language but the range of metaphor and mythological allusion that often went with classical learning: erudition was a package, not to be divided trivially. The poetry of the period was steeped in classical poetry as well. Anyone reading the sonnets of Philip Sidney without knowing something of Ovid and Horace (at least) will miss a good deal.

Knowledge of classical Latin and Greek language and letters became the hallmark of the learned gentleman. Ben Jonson dismissed Shakespeare as effectively a lightweight for having “little Latin and less Greek”. It may well be that Shakespeare was not, in a formal sense, as learned as Jonson: but by modern standards he was still prodigiously familiar with classical sources. Without their classical content, his plays would be radically impoverished: nine of them (five of the ten tragedies and four of the seventeen comedies) are set in classical antiquity; the rest are infused with a classical sensibility and vocabulary. No one unfamiliar with classical literature can appreciate the import of the player’s speech in *Hamlet*, for example — alluding as it does directly to ancient models of sons avenging their fathers. It may reflect a gap in modern education, as much as anything else, that this scene is routinely cut in modern stage and film versions of the play.

The Protestants and Catholics of the next generations, too, were imbued with classical learning. Milton is primarily known for his magisterial English verse, but his style is molded on a Latin block, and his own Latin compositions form a considerable body of material. Dryden and Pope similarly brought to their own poetic endeavors minds schooled in classics and honed in the discipline of translating them.

And so the tension continues down to our own day. Quasi-romantic voices in every generation call for setting aside classical models and appealing directly to experience, be that the experience of love, or social outrage, or of God. At the same time other voices call us back to older models, to hear what has gone before. In the church this manifests itself in the twin impulses of immediate experience and tradition. The business of education is constantly torn between the two as well.

Tracy Lee Simmons finds both in the infancy of the American republic. Benjamin Rush wanted a utilitarian national university, dedicated to practical knowledge, from which the ancients would be banished; Adams and Jefferson insisted that a good writer must become intimately acquainted with the ancient authors in their own language. (Simmons himself presents an eloquent defense of classical education here, and in his book *Climbing Parnassus*.)

### *The Twentieth Century*

This tension has not abated in the twentieth century, and now, at the beginning of the twenty-first, there are still voices everywhere calling for practical schooling that will produce workers but not persons, and others calling for liberal education to produce persons, but not addressing their skills as workers. The situation is complicated by the appropriation of the term “liberal” by the left-wing political interests, many of whom are purely secular or even anti-Christian in their outlook. What are we as Christians to make of the dichotomy?

A good deal of contemporary Christian thought in the English-speaking world at least has been formed by the work of the so-called “Oxford Christians” of the first part of the twentieth century — in particular C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams. These three and the people around them were deeply educated in what we would consider the classical tradition, and their interaction has caught the imagination of many twentieth-century Christians. Lewis in particular was for a long time an atheist who resisted the Gospel; among the things that troubled him was the fact that he encountered what he considered truth in the learning of classical (and other non-Christian) mythological systems.

Humphrey Carpenter relates the story of how Lewis confronted Tolkien with this conundrum, and Tolkien’s response:

...As he [Lewis] expressed it to Tolkien, myths are “lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver”.

*No*, said Tolkien. *They are not lies...*

He goes on to explain:

..man is not ultimately a liar. He may pervert his thoughts into lies, but he comes from God, and it is from God that he draws his ultimate ideals. Lewis agreed, he had, indeed, accepted something like this notion for many years. Therefore, Tolkien continued, not merely the abstract thoughts of man but also his imaginative inventions must originate with god, and must inconsequence reflect something of eternal truth. In making a myth, in practising “mythopoeia” and peopling the world with elves and dragons and goblins, a storyteller, or “sub-creator” as Tolkien liked to call such a person, is actually fulfilling God’s purpose, and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light. Pagan myths are therefore never just “lies”: there is always something of the truth in them.

Tolkien later cast this in the form of a poem:

“Dear Sir,” I said — “Although now long estranged,  
Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.  
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,  
And keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:  
Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light  
Through whom is splintered from a single White  
To many hues, and endlessly combined  
In living shapes that move from mind to mind.  
Though all the crannies of the world we filled  
With Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build  
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,  
And sowed the seed of dragons — ’twas our right  
(Used or misused). That right has not decayed:  
we make still by the law in which we’re made.”

Lewis also wrote a sermon in the dark days of 1939 called “Learning in Wartime”, which ought to be required reading for any Christian who wants to tackle classical learning (or wants to eschew it):

...I think it is important to try to see the present calamity in a true perspective. The war creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer

ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself. If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun. We are mistaken when we compare war with “normal life”. Life has never been normal. Even those periods which we think most tranquil, like the nineteenth century, turn out, on closer inspection, to be full of crises, alarms, difficulties, emergencies. Plausible reasons have never been lacking for putting off all merely cultural activities until some imminent danger has been averted or some crying injustice put right. But humanity long ago chose to neglect those plausible reasons. They wanted knowledge and beauty now, and would not wait for the suitable moment that never comes. Periclean Athens leaves us not only the Parthenon but, significantly, the Funeral Oration. The insects have chosen a different line: they have sought first the material welfare and security of the hive, and presumably they have their reward. Men are different. They propound mathematical theorems in beleaguered cities, conduct metaphysical arguments in condemned cells, make jokes on scaffolds, discuss the last new poem while advancing to the walls of Quebec, and comb their hair at Thermopylae. This is not *panache*: it is our nature.

Tolkien is sounding something like the note we heard from Alanus ab Insulis, but he goes on to provide a cause: we create in the image of the God who made us precisely because — even through in our fallenness we are bound to fail — still, as God’s creatures, we cannot do otherwise. Lewis continues along this road, and effectively provides a defense of adapting secular learning to a Christian context.

Over the course of the twentieth century, both in the surrounding secular culture and in the Church, classical learning has waned. It has been seen as the undemocratic province of a bygone aristocratic order, and because it was seen as less and less relevant to modern life. Utilitarian learning has largely supplanted a concern for character and faith formation. This emphasis has persisted in the English-speaking nations, despite the evidence of where such thinking can lead us: Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, and Maoist China are all societies in which an overriding preoccupation with the material welfare of the group has eclipsed a concern for truth for its own sake. During the 1960s, Latin was one of the most visible casualties in the onslaught of utilitarian education, but it was not the only one. Disciplined study of literature, history, and almost every other field (except perhaps mathematics and some of the sciences) were attacked on grounds of “relevance”, though nobody ever really offered an answer to the question,

“relevance to what”?

### *Reintegrating Classical Learning and Christian Education*

What emerges from this long historical roll-call, I would argue, is something that is not easily reduced to a single position. As I have argued, we confront a bipolar tension, and unless we at least acknowledge the validity of both, the field between them (very like a magnetic field) will collapse.

This dichotomy between the classical and the more romantic point of view is not a mere accident of culture: it's an essential tension of people interacting in groups. In a way, it is a dichotomy between the self and the other. The romantic sensibility — whether we find it in Wordsworth's autobiographical “The Prelude”, or Whitman's “Song of Myself”, or any of a range of other more or less romantic works, is essentially about the elevation of subjective experience over objective, communal, or traditional standards of reality (or morality). The classicizing impulse, on the other hand, calls for an acknowledgment of what is objectively true, and, in some important sense, marks the common heritage of mankind and civilization as worth our attention if for no other reason than because it *is* our common heritage. Yet without the engagement of the self in that relationship, we draw no actual nourishment from the objectively true.

Nevertheless, today we find students so steeped in their own immediate experience of everything, and so concerned with material acquisition, that they cannot write a sentence comprehensible to anyone else, or speak to each other without vulgarity and a creeping erosion of the language in every direction. The irony is that, through ignorance of what has come before, their thoughts and opinions have become so thoroughly conventional (whether liberal or conservative) that public discourse is the braying of separate self-involved parties across an abyss, and literature becomes a private disclosure of the existentially random. In both cases, the only ones apparently listening are those who already believe.

The polarity persists in the narrower field of classical Christian education as well. Some stumble into it because they are fed up with something else, and then they are outraged by what they find there. I have had Christian students who asked, “What can this pagan stuff have to say to me as a Christian?” Perhaps they don't know that they are reiterating the arguments of Tertullian and Augustine without having gained anything from their insight. Others profess to value classical learning, but chiefly take it as an occasion for mockery and ridicule. That this is not particularly useful I have argued elsewhere; that it is a disingenuous engagement with classical learning should be self-evident.

There are, though, those who genuinely do seem to want to pursue classical

education in a Christian framework. The point of departure for many of them has been an essay written by Dorothy L. Sayers, entitled “The Lost Tools of Learning”. It’s a brilliant little essay (originally a talk, really, given in Oxford in 1947) and full of insight and the author’s typically dry wit.

Sayers returns broadly to the mediaeval model of the liberal arts in order to lay out a general plan for giving students the *tools* of learning — to enable learning to continue, in other words — rather than as a matter of mere utilitarian training. Her comments are based on a close familiarity with the material she proposed to study, and a less precise grasp of the child mind. (I think she would have been delighted to find out that more people are reading her words today than ever before, but mortified to find her comments enshrined as a kind of formulary for a whole school of education, falling just short of the status of holy writ.)

Her basic points are sound, and her grasp of one fundamental truth is very significant: we should be teaching not merely to impart quantities of knowledge, but to exercise and develop in the student a *capacity* that can be applied to anything. School is less like a factory than like a gymnasium. It’s a place for developing intellectual strength. One doesn’t lift weights to achieve a net movement of weight. One lifts weights to grow strong. One runs around a track not to get to the end of the course (usually back to where one started), but to develop the stamina to run there or anywhere else.

On the long view this method has a good deal to commend it, even in utilitarian terms. My wife has noted that since leaving college, almost every job she has held was a job that was neither defined nor really imagined at the time she began college. Her advantage in getting those jobs and her success in performing them has been largely a function of the fact that she had learned *how* to learn almost anything.

As Christians, though, we must especially value the fact that such education pays dividends in terms of character formation, personal morality, and discipline, in ways that most other forms of education we have tried do not.

So what is it that sets classical education apart, defines its essence, and empowers the learning student to learn further? Many people have now written a good deal about it, and a lot of what they’ve said is useful. Many of them commend the teaching of Greek and Latin in particular — a point which I, as a teacher of Greek and Latin, am bound to celebrate. But I think there are some more central issues than these, and I’d like to look at those, based on my years as a student and as a teacher, and on my faith as a Christian.

I’d like to address three apparently incommensurate things I have noticed about classical education, and things that are perhaps not commonly discussed in quite these terms. I hope they will strike a resonant chord in at least some readers.

- *Classical education is, in the broadest sense, language education.* Language has two

equally important aspects: it's a tool of expression and a tool of thought. Every language allows us to talk about particular things in particular ways; it also allows us to see and comprehend things in a unique way. Some things are best expressed in particular languages. Some languages are enormously subtle and powerful; some are more or less incapable of saying anything very important, and bad language (by which I mean not merely crude but slovenly language generally) is more or less coterminous with bad thought. One need only listen to contemporary teen dialects to realize how true this is in the spoken realm, but that is only one symptom of a more pervasive rot. It invades every other form of symbolic expression we have and know. This is because the language we use shapes the thoughts we think as well as what we convey to others.

Edward Tufte's "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint" offers an amusing yet discouraging look at how our contemporary business and political culture has been in large part hijacked by a kind of discourse that is increasingly defined by three bullet-points of three words each. Only trivial problems can be addressed this way. A similar line of reasoning underlies Neil Postman's tendentious but largely correct *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which discusses how a political culture increasingly dominated by the emotive language of images unsupported by analysis will almost definitionally be a tool of demagoguery in the hands of those who make those images and force them upon us at their own pace. His predictions have been increasingly fulfilled in the years since he wrote the book. He has since taken up the somewhat shakier cause against information ("Informing Ourselves to Death"), but even there he deserves a hearing.

Real language, used with discipline and precision, can support and convey real analysis; it extends the reach and leverage of our thought. It does that in two ways: it constrains us and keeps us from making sloppy mistakes in our thinking by imposing its own forms of grammar; it also allows us to extend our thought through community and enhance its power many times over. There are many real languages, and the more different languages we know, the better we become at the rest: each new language we learn enhances our capacity to think beyond the already-worn grooves of a language.

For this reason, and because they come from cultures substantially removed from ours in time and space and cultural outlook, Latin and Greek are excellent tools for building up our linguistic capacities. We insisted upon them for our own children, and I think the emphasis was not misplaced. But they are not the only things capable of doing the job, nor do they complete the job. Learning Chinese would be at least as challenging for most of us, and would similarly open different doors of perception and expression. Nor are we limited to normal spoken language. The specialized languages of various disciplines function in the same way. I would

argue that a truly educated person would be able to read not only Greek and Latin, but also (among others) a chemical formula, a topographical map, the transcript of a chess game, a mathematical equation, an orchestral score, a star chart, a sonnet, a computer program, a film, a Cartesian graph, and a painting. Each of these is in a different kind of language, and each offers, through its own disciplined internal structure, its own patterns of thought and expression. I suggest them not in order that the student might become a chemist, a geographer, a chess master, or any of the other things for its own sake, but because each unique type of expression enlarges our thinking. The musician who can read a chemical formula will be a better musician, and the astronomer who can grasp a sonnet will be a better astronomer for it.

For the Christian, too, I think it means something further still, because, in the view of eternity, each true language made by the mind of creature man will be itself an image of the divine Logos. Every language is more than just a means to an end: it is also an echo of the Incarnation — incomplete, to be sure, but an echo nonetheless. We owe it to ourselves, and yet more to each other, and supremely to the Incarnate Word through Whom all things were created, to value these things, and accordingly to keep our use of language at its best: rigorous, precise, and true.

• *Any real sort of education is a kind of game.* This may seem almost banal after what has just been said, but I believe it is not. The legendary “playing-fields of Eton” are not just a metaphor, or a reference to the English public schools broadly. They are, in a way, a microcosm of what education is about. The matters we deal with in school are often useful to us outside school, in life generally, but they’re handled in a special way. They are something set apart, like the sacred precincts of play Johan Huizinga refers to in *Homo Ludens*. In a game, as in a gymnasium, one is free to strive and fail or succeed, without the cost being intolerable. One competes on the track not simply to achieve a certain speed and then forget it, but in order to keep testing oneself, to keep pushing oneself, to keep achieving something higher, stronger, and faster.

We study classical culture and literature, therefore, at least partly *because* they are not immediately relevant to our daily lives. This is not to say that they are ultimately unconnected: ultimately everything is connected. It’s merely the case that they are sufficiently removed from us that we can safely deal with them without violating our own religious or moral beliefs, at a certain level of abstraction, and with the honesty that is generally thought to come from detachment. In that respect, the educational process is much like a game. Later the game-like shell falls away, and we are able to see how the pieces align with the other things that are part of our everyday lives.

Again, I think there is a special view to these matters that is available to the

Christian. The pattern that runs through all of God's creation — what Thomas Aquinas called the *analogia entis* — is something like what Charles Williams called “coinherence”. When we see what we recognize in the faraway thing, we are doubly or trebly confirmed in our belief.

- *Classical education is bound to be hard.* I mean this in the strongest possible sense. We might casually say something like, “Painting is messy,” but there is nothing *essentially* messy about painting. If we were to find a tidy way of painting rooms or pictures in which not a drop was spilt, it would still be painting. But education is hard because it *has* to be hard — if it's not, it isn't education.

Parents (more often than students, curiously) occasionally complain to me that my classes are too hard. I have had very few students actually fail them other than by gross neglect, but I admit that passing and failing is a rather vague distinction, precisely because it *does* require a fusion of objective measurement and subjective evaluation. I sense, however, that the real core of their objection isn't about grades at all, but about expectations. I do expect a good deal. Some are shocked that I ask a student to read the *Iliad* in three weeks. Others are mortified that I find so much to mark up on a student's writing assignment. To them I don't really know what to say, other than, “Yes, it's hard. Wasn't that what you were looking for?”

Those who know me know that I'm not a great admirer of John F. Kennedy; but he was a brilliant man in some ways, and at least one of his speeches contains a gem that many of us can remember:

"We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills..."

Things that are worthwhile are hard, and people are at their best when working at their limits. The hunter-gatherer may be a nice person, but he will never build a city. People who constantly stretch their capacities are the only ones whose capacities grow. This is so obvious as to barely qualify even as a truism — and yet it seems to be overlooked by those who believe that if it's only done *right*, education will become easy for everyone. Not only is that unlikely to be true, but it's also profoundly to be hoped that it is not. The winners in the long race are not just those with the natively swift feet: they're the ones who *embrace* the fact that it's hard, and are willing to face that price and pay it unstintingly. They aren't necessarily the brightest, or the richest, or the best prepared. They are the most tenacious, and in the process they usually *become* brighter and richer, and invariably better prepared.

I'm not suggesting that we should make materials gratuitously hard, nor am I lamenting that some people seem to have remarkable natural aptitudes for different things. There are Mozarts in the world. We rejoice in them. But most of us aren't

Mozarts, and we still have to account for the talents God has given us. So if Latin comes hard to you, accept it. Work hard and learn Latin. If it comes to you easily, great. Learn Latin — but then go tackle quadratic equations, or ferret out the troublesome nuances of Shakespeare’s poetry, or master an intractable list of names and dates. Do it *because it’s hard*.

Some kinds of training can be easy. If you have a natural aptitude for it, you may not have to struggle to learn what you need to know to become a competent driver, an assembly-line worker, a medical technician, or a clerk in the post office. But that’s *training*. Training is about acquiring skills for a finite task. It’s useful, and I’m not deprecating it. We all need some training to make us useful participants in society. We all need some training even to play a game — including the education game.

Real education, however, is something else. Education is about personal formation and growth. It’s about enlarging the self for the sake of a better self, rather than for the sake of a task to be accomplished. From a Christian point of view, I would argue that it’s ultimately about engaging in a lifelong struggle with and for the truth.

As such, education can never be easy. If it is, it’s not the genuine article. What doesn’t cause you some pain will not cause you to grow. In studying something that’s hard for you, you will learn two kinds of things enduring value that transcend the immediate material:

First, you will also discover something about the way you yourself learn — which is probably the most valuable leverage you can get against all other kinds of learning. And it’s a large part of what Sayers was talking about in her “The Lost Tools of Learning,” as well as her less familiar “What’s Right with Oxford”.

Second, you will discover that you can do more than you thought you could. You can pit yourself against something that appears impossible, and, with sufficient effort, you can force it to submit. Yes, it can be unpleasant and frustrating. But it’s liberating in the end, and it will give you the confidence to go places you would not have gone otherwise. In those rarer cases where you simply cannot conquer something (and some of those are bound to come along too), you find out that you can survive defeat and keep on going.

An individual or a society that doesn’t prize real effort (which is what doing the hard task is about) doesn’t ultimately value much of anything, and expects virtually nothing from anyone. Arguably we’ve gone a long way down that road already. We don’t expect chastity of teenagers or fidelity of spouses, because it’s hard. We don’t expect honesty of our politicians, because that’s hard. And we don’t expect excellence of our students because that is hard. Catastrophically, we’re getting what we expect. Pitting ourselves against what is hard is the truest and best measure of

who we are. Learning to cope with what is hard in school — genuinely hard, not some simulacrum of difficulty — is near to the heart of what classical education is about. The higher goal, beyond merely accumulating Latin verb forms and the subtle constructions of the Greek participle (sublime though they are), is in changing our expectations, and striving to find something better in ourselves, whether we do so through the study of Greek, or Chinese, or the language of higher mathematics. The engagement with staring difficulty down enlarges us.

I think it also prevents us from becoming glib, and as such it is a signal benefit for Christians. Confronting the great minds of the past — confronting them honestly, whether we agree with them or not — is a powerfully incentive to humility, and will evoke a more fundamental human respect for one another.

That is one of the real fruits of education, and it's also where the dichotomy that Paul announced is closed, and the rift it implies can in part be healed: when the wisdom of the world is humbled to know itself, and to realize its limitations and submit unflinchingly to truth, it begins to converge with the wisdom of God. On that path, we also become more the people God made us to be.

<sup>1</sup> © Copyright 2006, by Bruce A. McMenemy