Lessons John Amos Comenius Can Teach the Twenty-First-Century Classical Christian Educator

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John Amos Comenius has long been considered a forgotten hero of the Reformation era. Yet we, as classical Christian educators, have more to learn from Comenius than anyone else, for he is one of us. Comenius was above all a *Christian* educator, and he worked for reform in the milieu of the classical Christian schools of his day. As a result, in his life and work, there are a number of important lessons for us to learn as we seek to further his legacy in our own schools.

Comenius's Life

Comenius was born in Moravia (now the Czech Republic) in 1592. Orphaned at age 12, he was educated in the local Latin school, the "classical Christian" school of the day. Comenius later called this setting "the terror of boys and the slaughter-houses of minds; places where a hatred of literature and books is contracted, where ten or more years are spent in learning what might be acquired in one, where what ought to be poured in gently is violently forced in and beaten in."[1]

The outbreak of the Thirty Years' War in 1621 caused Comenius, by this time a school teacher and pastor, to flee his homeland for Poland. He lived the rest of his life a refugee. While in Poland, Comenius wrote his most significant work on education, *The Great Didactic*, which was published in 1632. Throughout his life, he was poor. And yet, he was consulted regularly by the elite of Europe about his educational ideas.

George Grant, who has done as much as any to revitalize the name of Comenius among our own circles, calls him "among the most influential and sought after men of his day." In God's providential plan, it was this poor, destitute refugee who helped to shape the education systems of Holland, Sweden, Prussia, Scotland, and Puritan New England. He even was asked to become president of King's College in Cambridge and Harvard College in America.[2] Comenius died in 1670 at the age of 78.

Comenius was a visionary ahead of his time in the area of Christian education. Here are eight of his proposed reforms. If he were to come to your school, how many of them would he find being put into practice?

1. The ultimate goal of education is not to make better citizens or scholars but to make better disciples.

For all his pedagogical reforms, Comenius never lost sight of the ultimate goal of education. It is not to create better citizens of this world or to create academic scholars. Rather, the ultimate goal is to create disciples of Christ.

In his most famous work, *The Great Didactic,*[3] Comenius wrote that the "final end of man lies beyond this life." Man is made in the image of God, and therefore, "God is the end of [the soul's] striving, and this is the *summum bonum*—a longing not wholly extinguished by the Fall."[4] Thus, the ultimate goals of education are to obtain religion, knowledge, and virtue. Moreover, man must be educated to obtain these things. And man is not truly educated without them. Nor, importantly, is man fully human without them.

Based on these things, Comenius said instruction should be "in those things which make a man wise, good and holy."[5] The end of education is "morality and piety," "virtue and religion."[6] He condemned educational approaches (which would include contemporary public education) that "have sought only knowledge, not morality and religion."[7]

Thus, he rightly considered it "essential to a harmony of the moral nature" that students learn the cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. At a young age, children should be taught to discern the good from the bad. These things are not naturally evident to children. They further must learn temperance in eating and drinking, sleeping and working, labor and play, speaking and keeping quiet. Next, students must learn how to temper their desires to play when it is time to work, to restrain their impatience, grumbling, and anger. Such self-governance is not natural to the child. He must be taught to promptly obey in all things. And he must learn justice, which includes learning to do no harm to others, to avoid lying and deceit, and to be amiable and of service to others.[8]

Comenius said these virtues must begin to be formed in students from tender years. Hence our schools must make these aspects of "socialization" points of emphasis beginning right in kindergarten and continuing up and down each grade level. Learning prudence,

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Lessons John Amos Comenius Can Teach . . .

temperance, fortitude, and justice should never go out of style.

And if students do not obey? Comenius said, "Discipline is necessary for the purpose of withstanding immoral habits." By discipline, he first means verbal reproof, and then, if necessary, "chastisement by stripes." Corporal punishment, he said, should be reserved for "moral offenses."[9] Contemporary classical Christian schools may have different perspectives on corporal punishment in the school setting. Even schools that do not directly administer corporal punishment, however, should consider at least requesting (dare I say requiring?) that parents of rebellious students administer spankings at home, in support of the school's discipline program.

Beyond the cardinal virtues, Comenius recommended that students be taught early on how to express bodily devotion to God in prayer, "by gazing towards heaven, spreading out his palms, bending his knees, and invoking God and Christ, reverencing and adoring the invisible Majesty."[10]

He also advised that students be taught "that we are not here for this life alone, but that eternity is our goal." They should be instructed to walk with God in this life, to fear him, and keep his commandments. "Let the Holy Scriptures be the Alpha and Omega of Christian schools."[11]

Students further should be taught the three graces of faith, hope, and love. Students should learn "to believe all that God has revealed, to do what He commands, and to hope for what He promises." They must be taught the way of the cross as the way of salvation. "Finally, let them be taught that, since, because of the imperfections of their nature, they can do no good thing, they must rely on the perfections of Christ, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world."[12] Teaching students to be disciples of Christ is the most important task a teacher has.

2. Learning requires discipline, but not drudgery.

Comenius next observed that children are uniquely suited to be educated. Education best occurs "while the mind is yet tender and the brain soft."[13] Moreover, God gave humans "certain years of childhood during which he is not fit for active life."[14] By the way, Comenius did not limit education to young males or to the elite of the day. He said that "the whole of the youth of both sexes" should be educated in schools.[15] Of course, Comenius recognized that education does not come easily or automatically to children. He understood that religion, virtue, and knowledge must be "striven for." In other words obtaining them requires discipline.[16]

In our own day, we too need to remember that education requires hard work. Both teachers and parents must understand that children sometimes do not want to do that work. Homework is "too hard." It takes "too long" to complete an assignment. "I can't do it." "I'm tired." The excuses are many. Parents and educators should not shy away from agreeing with our children and students that education indeed is hard work that must be "striven for." But we equally must not give in to students' childish impulses to shirk the work that must be done. In other words, parents and teachers should be united in requiring students to do the hard work that is required for the goals of education to be reached. After all, the results—wisdom and virtue—are worth striving for. Education requires discipline, and as Comenius recognized, a child "cannot truly become a man except through discipline."[17]

This is easy to say and perhaps easy to encourage in the short run. But success or failure is measured by the long run, not the quick sprint. In other words, discipline requires perseverance on the part of student and parents. Comenius recognized this. He said: "He who is handed over to the school should be retained there until he is ready to come forth an instructed, moral, and religious man."[18] Thus, he recognized the temptation to want to quit when the going gets hard. "Let me just go to public school," the middle school boy may whine. "This is too hard," the sixth grade girl may snivel. "I want to go out with my friends," the high schooler preparing for a debate may complain. But as Comenius observed, the educated man is instructed, moral, and religious. Sound instruction, morality, and religion cannot be taught in the public school. We believe they are best taught in the classical Christian school. Real education involves moral and religious training. Real education requires perseverance. When the going gets hard, our parents and students need to be gently and patiently reminded of this.

At the same time, Comenius denounced educational methods that resulted in drudgery. He agreed with Martin Luther that students should "derive no less pleasure from their studies than from their games." He criticized the Latin schools of the sort in which he spent his "wasted boyhood," calling them "a terror to boys and torture chambers of minds."

Lessons John Amos Comenius Can Teach . . .

He denounced tedious learning approaches that spent five, ten, or even more years in teaching what could be taught in one year. He advocated clear pedagogies rather than "obscure, perplexed, and intricate" presentation methods. He condemned violent and coercive methods.[19] In other words, he wanted to create schools where learning was a delight, not drudgery. This includes satisfaction with a job well done, of course, but also pleasure in the process of learning. That should be our goal in our classical Christian schools as well. Our students, in the main, should look forward to coming to school every day. They should love their teachers and understand that their teachers love them, even as they may not enjoy every aspect of the task at hand. Learning should be a delight.

Comenius's suspicion of learning by rote memorization should be viewed in this context. He knew only schools where memorization was purposeless, joyless, and tiresome. He knew nothing of our contemporary classical Christian schools where grammar school students love to chant, sing, and memorize, and do so daily with great delight. Do not let contemporary secular educators remake Comenius in their own image. Comenius was in favor of memorization. "There must . . . in everything be very frequent repetitions and exercises."[20]

What Comenius was really opposed to was *mindless* memorization, or memorization without adequate explanation of what was being memorized. "Let everything which is presented to the pupil, and rightly understood, be fixed in the memory."[21] Even here, his advice should be viewed judiciously, though not discarded. It may be that a young child may not fully understand what is being learned by rote. That fuller understanding may come at a later stage of the Trivium. But even at the pre-polly level, a teacher should always provide, in age-appropriate terms, the context of a verse, poem, or song being memorized to facilitate as much understanding as is possible.

Comenius's overarching point is that learning should be a delight, not drudgery, and that it is a teacher's responsibility (and challenge) to make it so. Practically speaking, he urged teachers to "be kind, paternal, and ready to commend." He urged administrators to make their schools "pleasant," "well-lighted, clean, and adorned with pictures." He argued that the curriculum should be "presented so as to attract." Good advice all. This should be the classical Christian school's pledge to enrolling families. And Comenius suggests, in turn, that parents should show "their respect for schoolmasters and learning."[22]

3. Learning should be staged.

A third lesson from Comenius is that learning should be staged. A current debate in classical Christian education circles revolves around whether Dorothy Sayers was innovative in suggesting that grammar, logic, and rhetoric are stages of learning that correspond roughly with elementary, middle, and high school years and stages of child development, as well as subjects of the medieval curriculum.[23] May I suggest that if Sayers was like Columbus who "discovered" America, Comenius was like the native Indians, who were already here. As Josef Smolik has observed, Comenius had an interest in psychology "at a time when psychological consideration in education had no place at all." He focused on levels of mental development in accord with his desire to make learning easier for students.[24]

Speaking of the method of education in *The Great Didactic,* his first principle was that "nature attends to a fit time." Just as there are seasons for operations of nature, there are seasons for learning. He said, "Nothing should be taught except when it can be comprehended."[25] Or, as put in his third principle, "Whatever study is taken up for treatment, let the minds of the pupils be predisposed towards it (*and prepared for it*)." [26]

In his sixth principle, he added that "every language, science, or art should first be learned in its simplest rudiments."[27] After that, "let all studies be arranged that the subsequent things shall be founded in what has preceded, and be strengthened by them."[28]

Thus, as he put it, "The whole sphere of studies should be distributed carefully among the successive classes of the school in such a manner that the earliest study always prepares the way for what is to follow, and, as it were, lights the path to it."[29] As the seventh principle states, "Let nothing, then, be done against the grain."[30]

How does this work practically? Teachers should start by exercising the senses of students, and then proceeding to memorization, then to intelligence (or logic), and finally to judgment.[31] Hmm. This at least echoes Sayers' description of the pre-polly, polly, dialectic, and rhetoric stages. Even more

Lessons John Amos Comenius Can Teach . . .

aligned is Comenius's division of the four ages of learning a language: (1) infancy, (2) the boy age, (3) the juvenile age, and (4) the virile age.[32] It seems fairly apparent, then, that the principle advocated by Sayers' of "teaching with the grain" is very much in line with ideas taught by Comenius centuries earlier.

4. While learning classical language is important, so are other subjects.

A fourth lesson involves teaching the whole man. In Comenius's day, the Latin schools focused on language learning to the virtual exclusion of other subjects. As Lois Lebar put it, "The schools of Comenius's day furnished pupils with classical Latin verbiage, but did not train them to observe or to think."[33] Comenius advocated reform. To be sure, he was not in favor of entirely eliminating language study. To the contrary, he suggested that all communication in the ideal university (which he called the pansophy) occur solely in Latin. But he equally believed that the best education was a broad one. He said, "If so much time is to be spent on the language alone, when is the boy to know about things—when will he learn philosophy, when religion and so forth? He will consume his life in preparing for life."[34]

5. The learning of all subjects should be integrated.

A fifth lesson involves the integration of subjects. Comenius had a grand vision for education that involved an encyclopedic learning of all subjects. Underlying this vision was an understanding that all learning is integrated because all subjects come from God. Hence, Comenius advised, "Let the studies of the whole life be so arranged that they shall be one encyclopaedia, in which there shall be nothing which does not arise out of a common root, nothing not in its proper place."[35] He was in favor of the integration of subjects. "Let all things be joined together in teaching which are in themselves connected."[36] He considered the fragmentation of topics, too common in his day and in our own, to be an obstruction to learning.[37]

6. The curriculum should focus on key principles, not trivial factoids.

A sixth lesson involves the teaching of key principles, not useless or trivial facts. Comenius said that "fundamental things are to be taught." He added, "A gold coin is of more value than a hundred leaden ones."[38] This means that teachers, particularly in the logic and rhetoric stages, should not focus on hundreds of small facts, but test on the student's understanding of and ability to apply key concepts. As Comenius put it, "the school should neglect whatever is unnecessary, whatever is alien to the pupil or subject of study, and whatever is too detailed."

Obsessing with trivial details is sometimes a temptation to the passionate teacher, who is an expert in and lover of her subject. Comenius understood, however, that too much detail, while interesting to the teacher, serves only "to confuse and overload" the student.[39]

7. Teaching methods should appeal to the whole person.

Comenius also advocated that teachers appeal to all the senses in teaching, not just the ears. In other words, teachers should eschew as much as possible the common lecture format, which appeals only to the ears. Involve as many senses as possible: "Let hearing be joined with vision, and the hand with speech." Comenius said, "It is not enough to tell to the ears, but the teacher must present to the eyes that through them the instruction may reach the imagination. Leave nothing until it has been impressed by means of the ear, the eye, the tongue, the hand."[40] Appealing to multiple senses in preparing lesson plans will require some creativity on the part of the teacher. But it facilitates faster and more sure learning.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, Comenius was not in favor of what we would today call the modern "Montessori" approach, where learning is child-centered and child-directed. He advocated a teacher-centric approach. He declared that the teacher must teach from an elevated place in front of the class. The teacher must introduce the topic and guide the discussion. And Comenius believed in uniformity among classes. He believed all should be taught according to the same method. In other words, he adopted a balanced approach in suggesting that fueling the imagination, not lawlessness, leads to learning.

8. Competition in learning is to be encouraged.

Contrary to our contemporary over-emphasis on cooperation, Comenius had no problem using the rough-and-tumble of competition in the classroom to further learning. He had no problem telling teachers to ask questions of pupils in front of their classmates, and if the first student called upon failed to correctly

Lessons John Amos Comenius Can Teach . . .

answer, to go to the next, and then the next, until the correct answer was given. He understood that peer pressure works. Indeed, for translation work, he advocated having students take turns publicly challenging each other's work, making corrections out loud before the entire class.

Conclusion

Von Raumer called Comenius "a grand and venerable figure of sorrow," who, though "wandering, persecuted, and homeless . . . never despaired," but "with enduring truth, and strong in faith, he labored unweariedly to prepare youth by a better education for a better future."[41] Like the crowd of witnesses mentioned in Hebrews 11–12, he ran his race looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of his faith. There is much we can learn from Comenius, but these eight reforms represent at least a start. Perhaps your school is already doing these things. If so, rejoice and do not grow weary in welldoing. Perhaps your school needs a reminder. If so, this is your opportunity to put Comenius's reforms into practice. Your school has a race to run.

Notes:

1. Quoted in Simon Somerville Laurie, *John Amos Comenius ... His Life and Educational Works* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1884), 23.
2. George Grant, "Heroes of the City of God: Not of This World," *Tabletalk*, March 2004, 58–59.
3. All citations and quotations from *The Great Didactic* are from Laurie, *John Amos Comenius ... His Life and Educational Works*.
4. Ibid., 77–78.
5. Ibid., 82.
6. Ibid., 124.
7. Ibid., 80–81.
8. Ibid., 125–26.
9. Ibid., 128.
10. Ibid., 129.
11. Ibid., 129–30.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 78.
14. Ibid., 79.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 78–79.
17. Ibid., 78.
18. Ibid., 87.
19. Ibid., 80–81.
20. Ibid., 98.
21. Ibid., 97.
22. Ibid., 90.
23. See Robert Littlejohn and Charles Evans, *Wisdom and Eloquence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006); Douglas Wilson, "A Review of Wisdom and Eloquence," *Classis*, vol. XIV, no. 4 (Autumn 2007); Matthew Allen and Joe Bray, "Re-Thinking the Trivium?" *Classis*, vol. XIV, no. 4 (Autumn 2007); Robert Littlejohn and Charles Evans, "Authors Respond to Re-Thinking the Trivium?" *Classis*, vol. XIV, no. 4 (Autumn 2007).
24. Josef Smolik, "Comenius: A Man of Hope in a Time of Turmoil," *Christian History*, issue 13 (1987).
25. Quoted in Laurie, *John Amos Comenius*, 84.
26. Ibid., 85.
27. Ibid., 87.
28. Ibid., 97.
29. Ibid., 87.
30. Ibid., 92.
31. Ibid., 91.
32. Ibid., 123.
33. Lois Lebar, "What Children Owe to Comenius," *Christian History*, issue 13 (1987).
34. Quoted in Laurie, *John Amos Comenius*, 32.
35. Ibid., 97.
36. Ibid., 105.
37. Ibid., 103.
38. Ibid., 110.
39. Ibid., 112–113.
40. Ibid., 93.
41. Ibid., 65.

Head, Heart, and Hand: A Simple yet Powerful Construct for Teaching Homer's *Odyssey*

by Timothy Ponce and Dr. Lee Courtney

Thousands of lines to read, hundreds of names to remember, countless ancient social customs to comprehend: it is easy to understand how our rhetoric and logic school students get lost in a work as massive as Homer's *Odyssey*. However, it is the job of the teacher to help the student see how literature is, in the words of Horace, "*utile dulci*" [useful and agreeable].[1] Although this appears to be a Scylla and Charybdis situation, it need not be. We have developed a construct for teaching Homer's *Odyssey* that is profound, yet simple enough for our students to walk out the door with the power of the poem, thus spurring them on toward virtue.

This construct, or teaching outline, is based upon the declaration of purpose found in the opening lines of the poem. In that declaration of purpose, Homer provides the definition of a hero by using the Greek word *polytropos* to describe the hero Odysseus; Fitzgerald renders this word as "skilled in all ways of contending."[2] Literally