

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A “CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN” SCHOOL?

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Many educators view school as a mechanism that delivers academic content using an educational method. This results in the mistaken belief that “classical Christian education” (CCE) simply means that the content is classical and the methodology is more traditional.

Education is not a subject, and it does not deal in subjects. It is instead the transfer of a way of life. —G.K. Chesterton

CCE has deep footings that are distinct from modern schools, and even different from liberal arts or classical schools founded after the Enlightenment. There is no single recipe or formula for classical Christian education. It is a way of educating children that developed in the Middle Ages as an outworking of classical Greco-Roman thought and Christianity. It flourished in the Reformation and thus has a rich and varied form. It starts with a different purpose and ends with different results than conventional education. This document summarizes the essential elements of CCE. For a more exhaustive explanation, please read the books from our reading list.

With so big a promise, we must be careful to implement the form faithfully.

EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

What is our objective?

Before the mid-eighteenth century, Christian *paideia* was the purpose of nearly all Western education. This was based, in part, on Ephesians 6 that commands fathers to raise their children in “the Παιδεια (*paideia*) of the Lord.” **It seeks an inner transformation of the student. It cultivates the students’ habits of thought and action in order to view the world with certain foundational truths and thereby align their desires with God’s ideal. Classical Christian education’s objective, then, is to shape the virtues and reason so that they will be in line with God’s will. In other words, our objective is to cultivate a Christian *paideia* in students.**

College preparation is not an end in itself, but can often result because most colleges are built on a Western model that reveres language and reasoning. CCE graduates are eager to learn and have excellent faculties in language and reasoning. Thus, college is a natural outworking of CCE. But, the chief end of education is to prepare students to worship and glorify God.

What is our course of study?

We begin with the unity of all truth around one prime truth—the person and sovereign Lordship of Jesus Christ over everything. From this, we study all of history and nature (science) as His workmanship. We interact with the greatest works of His fallen image bearer (man), both good and bad. We study divinely ordered patterns of truth, beauty, and goodness, and apply them in our interactions with the natural world and with human culture, including great literature, music, philosophy, theology, and art.

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We pursue language, both in the study of rhetoric and poetry, and in the study of Hebrew, Greek, or Latin as the classical instruments through which God chose to bring up His church. Words convey truth, chasten goodness, and express beauty; thus language bears fruit for those who are masters of it. And, the mastery of language brings light to God’s revealed and infallible Word, from which all truth emanates, and it links us to each other.

God’s Word is our prime lens used to appraise all things, with a disciplined reason that unifies the faith of students and their worldview. Put together, this universal education cultivates virtue in students, which should be lived out in their lives as their affections are cultivated and disciplined by their immersion in truth, goodness, and beauty so that they may desire God and His ways.

What are our methods?

- **The Trivium:** These three arts—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—are the Western tradition for learning and language study. Dorothy Sayers in her 1948 essay, “The Lost Tools of Learning”, observed that these arts were analogous to the child’s phases of learning. Classical Christian schools take advantage of this observation.
- **Integration of content:** Integration reveals the unity of God’s world, so CCE schools value integration of content like history, literature, science, math, composition, language, etc. Some CCE schools teach multiple subjects in the same class to create a unity of understanding. Others integrate in a more conventional classroom organized by discipline or subject.

We tend to study all our disciplines in unrelated parallel lines. This tends to be true in both Christian and secular education. This is one of the reasons why evangelical Christians have been taken by surprise at the tremendous shift that has come in our generation. —Francis Schaeffer

- **Imitation and practice:** We teach many skills and habits as they form in students during their school years. First we teach habits as a form, then through imitation, and then through repeated practice toward mastery.
- **Recitation:** Memory work such as great oratory, poetry, and virtue sayings are trained through recitation in grammar school and beyond. These advance the student’s vocabulary and aesthetic, and embed virtuous ideas.
- **Socratic discussion:** We train students in the art of reason and argument through dialog (often around a table). We challenge ideas and work from the greatest literary sources. In this, we train students to submit to, internalize, harmonize, align with, and accept God’s truth—not individual, subjective “truths.”

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- **Focus:** Classical Christian education was not dismissed, it was pushed out. When good coursework or methods are substituted, it replaces great coursework and classical methods, and competes for the focus of the students. Classical schools focus students on learning fewer things well.

What is our content?

We study our physical universe, and then reach beyond it into transcendent truth about the Creator through philosophy and theology. Rather than viewing subjects as an end in themselves, we approach all learning with a love of knowledge (philosophy) and the love and study of God (theology), and we live these loves before students.

- **Latin & Greek:** We study Latin as the language of the church and theology, and some schools study Greek as the language of Scripture and early Western texts. Knowledge of these languages is necessary for students to enter the thinking of the classical and early church era. Inflected language, like Latin or Greek, opens the mind to an incomparable way of thinking, thus opening new depth in the student’s paideia. Some also study Hebrew or European languages for the academic study of original texts. Other modern languages, when studied at classical Christian schools, are pursued for other valuable, but secondary purposes.
- **Persuasive writing & thesis:** We base our writing and speaking in the ancient Greek and Roman training in rhetoric. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, not to be confused with speech, debate, composition, or any other subcomponents of it. The defense of at least one rhetorical thesis before graduation typically completes the K–12 classical experience. (Depending on the school, sources may include the progymnasmata, the five canons of rhetoric as described in Cicero’s *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*.)
- **Great children’s books:** Grammar school students read higher, excellent literature, mainly from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. We use the complete, unabridged, and original languages (or the most poetic and accurate translations) of these texts wherever possible.
- **Great Books:** The Western canon from Homer to C.S. Lewis, read as close to the original as possible, is the core of our secondary education. *Ad fontes* (“to the source”) is a principle in CCE that values original sources over knowledge digested from textbooks. We encounter each work of art as an expression of some truth, goodness, and beauty. We evaluate each work in light of Christian truth.
- **Great art, music, literature:** You become what you behold. Consistent exposure to the greatness of Western culture (and some others) has a profound impact on the paideia. Regular exposure to and appreciation of great music and art in the classroom helps develop the student’s aesthetic sensibility. Classical and great church music are emphasized. Other, more recent forms, like jazz, may also be studied.

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- **Logic, science, and math:** The second phase of the Trivium, logic, is also a core subject, typically taught in middle school. It is a bridge between language and subjects like math,

The scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and microphone of his own age. —C.S. Lewis

philosophy, and science. Science is the study of God’s revelation in the natural world. Math reflects the language of God’s order in creation.

- **History:** We immerse students in the whole sweep of Western history, integrated with biblical and Christian history, from a young age. We emphasize human history and culture, not just geopolitical information. Integration with literature helps achieve this goal at some schools.
- **Foundational skills:** Handwriting, grammar, spelling, and math skills are practiced and mastered.
- **Seven virtues:** We begin with the seven virtues (Justice, Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, Faith, Hope, and Love) that should mark a Christian community. To these, we add the many virtues taught in history and the Scriptures. We do this through story, habit, recitation, and community standards.
- **Scripture:** The Bible is not limited to a Bible class, but is integrated into all subjects as a tool to be memorized, studied, and understood. We view the Bible as God-breathed and inerrant. It is also literature, and interpreted as such. What environment do we promote within our schools?

SUGGESTED READING LIST

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Note: We do not concur with every idea in these works, nor do we endorse every author. But, to develop a solid base in classical Christian thought, these works are a good place to start.

These are listed in a suggested order of understanding (the general order in which they are to be read, with no relation to their importance).

- *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning: An Approach to Distinctively Christian Education*, Douglas Wilson
- *The Case for Classical Christian Education*, Douglas Wilson
- *The Lost Tools of Learning*, Dorothy Sayers (included in *Recovering the Lost Tools*)
- *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis
- *The Paideia of God*, Douglas Wilson & others
- *The Seven Laws of Teaching*, John Milton Gregory
- *Norms and Nobility: A Treatise on Education*, David Hicks
- *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to Be an Educated Human Being*, Richard M. Gamble
- *Classical Education: The Movement Sweeping America*, Gene Edward Veith and Andrew Kern
- *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, James K.A. Smith
- *Beauty for Truth's Sake: The Re-enchantment of Education*, Stratford Caldecott
- *Repairing the Ruins: The Classical and Christian Challenge to Modern Education*, Douglas Wilson & others
- *Wisdom and Eloquence: A Christian Paradigm for Classical Learning*, Robert Littlejohn and Charles T. Evans