WHY INTEGRATION IS AN INDISPENSABLE PART OF CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

by David Goodwin, ACCS

We're all familiar with the trivium. And, the great books. And Latin. But one practice that needs more attention in some classical Christian schools is integration. By this, I mean the combined historical, literary, aesthetic, cultural, philosophical, and theological areas of study, joined into one university of understanding. These may not need to be all in one classroom at one time, but often, this is the best way to ensure that integration happens. I believe integration to be one of the most important aspects of classical Christian education. The reason is simple: God created a universe, not a hodgepodge of study areas. It took countless professors in universities (named in the Middle Ages, today they would be called "multiversities"), to do that. In our age, we all think in "subjects," so we need to take extra measures to undo this thinking—structurally and otherwise within our schools. I realize that breaking down anything into smaller parts makes it easier to understand the pieces. And that specialization often helps students grow better at their craft. But these "goods" often give us a pragmatic reason to do damage to the "greater" university of knowledge taught in our schools.

In *From Dawn to Decadence*, Jacques Barzun points to our subject-based education as the forerunner of modern error. Modern academia, he says, has become decadent through specialization, abstraction, analysis, and scientism. "In essence the human mind remains one, not 2 or 60 different organs."

Francis Schaeffer in *The God Who Is There* lamented specialization into subjects:

> In our modern forms of specialized education there is a tendency to lose the whole in parts, and in this sense we can say that our generation produces few truly educated people. True education means thinking by associating across the various disciplines, and not just being highly qualified in one field, as a technician might be.

In *The Great Conversation Revisited*, Mortimer Adler also saw a crisis in our subject-specialization education:

> Unless the barbarism of specialization is somehow transcended, it is unlikely that, in philosophy, the natural and social sciences, and history, truly great books will have been written in the closing decades of this [twentieth] century or will be written in the century to follow.

Dorothy Sayers is often quoted: "Is it not the great defect of our education to-day . . . that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils 'subjects,' we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to

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think?" But what is her prescription? She clarifies:

> Modern education concentrates on teaching subjects, leaving the method of thinking, arguing, and expressing one's conclusions to be picked up by the scholar as he goes along; medieval education concentrated on first forging and learning to handle the tools of learning, using whatever subject came handy as a piece of material on which to doodle until the use of the tool became second nature. . . . Now the first thing we notice is that two "subjects" [phases of the trivium] are not what we should call "subjects" at all: they are only methods of dealing with subjects.

The argument against integrating subjects is often practical. One common argument is that "one teacher just doesn't have that much expertise." Ironically, by this argument, classical Christian education would never have been restored. Few knew Latin, few knew Homer, few knew medieval history back in the day, or sometimes even now. And, do we seek to pass on expertise (knowledge and skills)? Or do we seek Wisdom? Some argue from the second of Gregory's seven laws that the teacher needs to know the material to be taught. But by "know" is Gregory referring to "content"? Possibly—after all, he regrettably calls teaching a science. Or as Dorothy Sayers says, the end of education is teaching the tools of learning, not the material itself.

> The "subjects" supply material; but they are all to be regarded as mere grist for the mental mill to work upon. The pupils should be encouraged to go and forage for their own information, and so guided towards the proper use of libraries and books of reference, and shown how to tell which sources are authoritative and which are not.

Thus the teacher's "knowledge" should be FIRST deeply seated in a love of learning, and of the tools of learning, and then in the subject they are called upon to teach. A wise teacher who is familiar with literature should jump at the chance to study history, philosophy, and theology to round out the integrated humanities course. I would further ask, can wisdom be attained through specialization? Or is wisdom viewing and ordering all things together, rightly, as Augustine suggests? Again, quoting Dorothy Sayers:

> Do you often come across people for whom, all their lives, a "subject" remains a "subject," divided by water-tight bulkheads from all other "subjects," so that they experience very great difficulty in making an immediate mental connection between [them].

Progressives tell us that education is based in two questions: What will the student learn (facts, data, content) and what will they be able to do (skill). The defense of subject-specialization is most often anchored in this duo. Expertise is valued over understanding at the systematic level. Skills are valued over the tools of learning—the intellectual virtues and rhetorical learning. Mrs. Jones is an expert in English history and Mr. Carter in English literature. So, clearly, Mrs. Jones should leave the literature to Mr. Carter and vice versa. But this argument encapsulates the great error afflicting our age—that education is mostly about information. Yes, there is stuff to know ("grist for the mill"— Sayers). The cultivation of Wisdom and Virtue, often intellectual virtue, is the true object of our schools. With this as an object, what if Mrs. Wilson has a love of learning and a fair interest in (and some knowledge of) English history and literature? Would she not be able to guide students through the learning and evaluation of the material using the tools of the trivium? Is she then teaching students how to learn? Would this not be her expertise? Gregory anticipates this. First, he intermingles the word

"fact" with "knowledge" to make clear that "a fact which is only partly known never reveals its thousand beautiful analogies to other facts." In any event, if given a choice, we would want a master of learning and a master of history, literature, art, music, theology, and philosophy teaching our students. But when we must compromise, my argument is that we should compromise on subject knowledge, not the tools of learning.

As a headmaster, I hired "learning" types of teachers from a variety of backgrounds—theology, a few from language or classical college backgrounds, even one who was trained as a social worker and one as a early reading specialist. None of these had initial subject-matter expertise in what they taught, formally. The one ingredient I looked for was a fascination in history, literature, books, philosophy, and theology. What had they read? What were they reading now? How did they think about postmodernism? Dispensationalism? Rationalism? These types of interview questions made some applicants squirm. And, I wasn't looking for their orthodoxy or a specific position. I wanted to see if they lit up when I asked, and were they thoughtful in their answers. All these hires were exceptional classical Christian teachers. As an aside, these teachers were never ignorant of general history or literature—how could they be if they loved learning? All were self-learners who became excellent across all the so-called subject areas. At times, I also hired PhD's in literature and other humanities areas. These rarely worked out as well. They biased their subject in the class, had a narrow field of knowledge, and typically used tools of learning that were not classical. Their training included hidden foundational ethics of modernity like higher criticism or deconstructionism. They were slow to venture an opinion outside of certain narrow confines. They did not think systematically, but more particularly. And, their tools of learning were narrowly cast and not rhetorical.

As Christian educators, we have but one purpose: to educate worshipers. We do this when we train children to see the universal nature of everything. God didn't give us a book abstracted from history or literature. The Bible is the only holy book that is soundly placed into history. It tells stories. It offers proverbial wisdom. It gives us history, and song, and poetry. And, it engages cultures that have philosophies and literature that interplay with God's holy Scripture. This is the cherished treasure of Christianity—it makes sense from creation, to fall, to redemption because we see God's creation as one. Everything ties to it—all human art, literature, actions through history, thought, and theological understanding are enveloped in God's universal Truth. So why does this mean that history, literature, art, philosophy, and theology should be taught as one? Because, together, they provide us wisdom that only integration can provide. Do we sacrifice some knowledge of, say, the English Civil War? Or do we simply ask students to learn along with the teacher by reading the right books? In the end, they will understand the facts in the context of the whole. Why does Shakespeare write what he writes? Maybe it has something to do with Cromwell? or Plutarch? or Homer? Our understanding depends on this sweeping view that brings all things under the sovereign will of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Whether you're looking through the Hubble telescope, or at St. Paul's words, you are looking at our Lord's integrated handiwork.