SEMPER REFORMANDA: CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION ACCORDING TO MARTIN LUTHER

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"Arise O Lord, and judge Thy cause,
for a wild bore has invaded Thy vineyard."

So began the famous bull, *Exsurge Domine*, in which Pope Leo announced to the world that Luther had sixty days—and not one more—to disown his books, cease his preaching, and to publically recant of his "pernicious errors." If not, Leo swore to "Secure his damnation, as one whose faith is notoriously suspect, and who can only be regarded as a true heretic."

Luther threw the bull into the flames.

These tales have come to comprise most of what we know about the great Reformer's life. Whether it's burning the bull at Saxony, pounding the shoe at Marburg, nailing the Theses at Wittenberg, or staring down the authorities at Worms—I find that almost all Evangelicals are content with this cinematic portrayal of the father of Protestantism, and that so few will actually hunker down and read the writings of the man who rent Christendom in two, and altered the course of Western civilization. I lament this, for I remember well the day when reading Luther changed the course of my own life.

I was in my second semester at Gordon-Conwell and feeling fairly despondent. Enrolling at thirty-four years of age, I had either forgotten how to write a paper, or I had never properly learned, and the report card I had just wept over could have supported either hypothesis.

Around this time I needed to start some serious research on Luther as yet another paper was coming due. Determined to do better this semester, I was quick to ask my professor for some ideas about a topic and how to best go about my research.

He responded by telling me, "Go to the library; walk past the circulation desk . . . do you know where that bust of Billy Graham is?"

"Yes."

"OK, take a right at that, and three aisles down on the left, look for a red set of books—*The Complete Works of Martin Luther* complied, edited, and translated by the incomparable . . ." (I remember how strangely he stressed the word incomparable) " . . . Jaroslav Pelikan."

He was right; there they were. The extant works of Luther comprising 55 thick volumes—staggering by any standard—and even more so when we consider he really only had 20 years of concentrated labor.

But what do I do with these? I felt like the guy who was invited over to his friend's house for a juicy burger—only to walk in his backyard and be greeted by a dairy cow, mooing. I desperately needed someone to slice this monstrosity up for me, and it was just then, by some kind stroke of Providence, it appeared—the treatise that would forever settle my vocation and calling as a Christian educator:

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"To the Councilman of All Cities in Germany:
That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools"

In my ten years as a classical Christian educator, it still surprises me that I have never once heard Luther's treatise referenced in a conversation, addressed at a conference, or expounded in a paper. I find it even more remarkable that Sayers' justly famous essay, "The Lost Tools of Learning," has birthed, nourished, and sustained the CC movement for over a generation, while the more trenchant, the more biblical, and the more authoritative exposition by Luther is never mentioned at all. My hope, therefore, is that this paper will kindle a fresh interest in the Reformer's legacy as an educator.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOLS

All of Germany's woes, according to Luther, could be attributed to the fact that its educational system was broken. He referred to the schools in his nation as "ass stables" and "devil's houses" that existed only to "fill men's bellies."

For this reason he was compelled to write to the councilmen, that they may be taught to see the connection between the condition of their cities and the quality of their schools. To further assist them in this, he divided human society into three general spheres—church, government, and culture—and explained how the health of each is organically related to the amount of attention and resources they were willing to pour into their institutions of learning.

He begins by constructing a paradigm in which he wants us to view schools, not as mere appendages to human societies, but rather as the very cornerstones of civilization. He tells the councilmen, "We can't do without schools, *for they must rule the world*," and what he means by this, is that after all is said and done, it is our schools that comprise the primary reservoir which

supply our churches with ministers, our governments with magistrates, and our culture with civilians. Therefore, he wants us to view them as the great fountains and tributaries of civilization that must either poison or purify all the constituent branches of society.

THE ENEMIES OF EDUCATION

The next step in Luther's argument was to show the magistrates why their schools had fallen into such disrepair, and to be sure, he lists a slew of second causes. Some reasons Luther gave for this disrepair were: *ambivalent parents*, whom he compares to ostriches, exceptions even in the animal kingdom, as they are content merely to hatch their young, and then leave them for the world to raise; *incompetent teachers*, who are even more dangerous than *corruptores morum virgins*, that is, those who "corrupt the virgins"; *Stingy citizens*, who will "spend great sums for firearms, roads, bridges, and dams, but not one gulden to pay for a few competent men to teach school"; and *terrible books*, which he referred to as the "devil's filth" and lamented that he spent his whole adult life trying to "get himself clean from the trash of those philosophers and sophists" which he was force-fed as a young scholar.

To Luther these were real evils, and he was fearless in railing against them throughout his entire career, but he was also not ignorant that the true actor, and the real prime mover behind Germany's failing schools was none other than Satan himself. He explains that the Evil One inspires carnal and worldly hearts to neglect the children and youths. Who can blame him for it? He is a prince and god of this world. How can he be expected to permit or promote the proper training of the young? He would indeed be a fool to allow men to establish good schools in his kingdom, the very thing by which that kingdom must be most speedily overthrown.

I mention this emphasis of Luther's for two reasons. First, to discourage any person from seeking a position at a Christian school under the false pretense of securing for themselves a life of comfort and ease. Nothing could be further from the truth. Education is war—a subtle, nefarious, insidious war—and one which must be met with real Christian seriousness.

The second reason I bring this up is to serve as a reminder that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood" and that while the ultimate purpose of this essay is demonstrate how Luther views education as a definitive means of reforming the various stratums of society, I am well aware that no pedagogy can slay a fallen angel. Our schools will rise or fall on the wings of our prayers and by the grace of God alone.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Let us start by recognizing that Luther's approach to education was incredibly simple. I hope this comes as a relief, and I hope that every homeschooling mom who thinks she is failing her child miserably will be encouraged by the Reformer's words when he says:

> My idea is to let boys go to such a school for one or two hours a day, and spend the remainder of the time working at home, learning a trade or doing whatever their parents desired; so that both study and work might go hand in hand while they were young and able to do both. In like manner, a girl can surely find time enough to go to school one hour a day and still attend to all her duties at home; she sleeps, dances, and plays away more time than that.

Scientists tell us that if you were to remove all the empty space from our atoms that you could comfortably fit about 100,000 human beings on the head of a pin. I was reminded of this recently when one of the parents at our school searchingly asked me, "How much time do you think students actually spend learning everyday?"

In other words, if we removed all the "empty space" from our schedules, how much time is really spent in trenchant, earnest academics?

This was one of Luther's main issues with the cathedral schools his generation had grown up in. He lamented at how much time they wasted on worthless rubbish. He says, "I regret now that I did not read more poets and historians, and that no one taught me them! Instead I was obliged to read all the ass-dung which the devil had filled our schools with."

Of course the "ass-dung" he was referring to were the countless scholastic treatises which had completely displaced the liberal arts as the preferred curriculum in the High Middle Ages, paving the way for writers like Aquinas to torture students with dialectic musings like this:

> There cannot be two angels in the same place. The reason for this is because it is impossible for two complete causes to be the causes immediately of one and the same thing. This is evident in every class of causes, for there is one proximate form of one thing, and there is one proximate mover, although there may be several remote movers. Hence, since the angel is said to be in one place by the fact that his power touches the place immediately by way of a perfect container, as was said, there can be but one angel in one place.

These days we undoubtedly fall off the other side of the donkey. For example, a friend recently told me that his child, who attends a well-known classical Christian school in the area, has confessed to seeing *Finding Nemo* in her classrooms, for now the seventh time. I imagine if the headmaster ever confronted the teachers on this, they would probably reply that the students were merely trying to discover how many betta fish can dance on the head of a pin. Needless to say, we are wasting a lot of time in our schools.

ESTABLISHING A PROGRAM

The ground we have covered so far represents the basic contours of Luther's understanding of education: (1) schools are very important, (2) their mission is hindered by an array of antagonists, and (3) our programs of study should be kept as simple as possible.

Let's now talk about Luther's program of study. Admittedly, as far as curriculum is concerned, he is not as explicit as we could have wished. I have to imagine this is why Milton's "Of Education" and Sayers' "The Lost Tools of Learning" have risen to places of such prominence within the classical Christian school movement while the Reformer's letter to the councilmen is almost entirely unknown.

Keep in mind, however, that unlike Sayers and Milton, Luther was not addressing his essay to a group of educators, but rather to magistrates dispersed all over Germany, and therefore his goal was not to hand them a syllabus, but rather to lay down the principals upon which their schools should be "established and maintained." And what were those principals? We can sum them up in two propositions: (1) the study of languages, and (2) the study of history.

THE STUDY OF LANGUAGES

In his 1923 Nobel Lecture, Einstein announced that the discovery of a "unified field theory" must now be considered the "holy grail" in the discipline of physics, and the goal towards which all his peers should be striving. This announcement was exciting to say the least, for a theory like this would finally explain what is ultimately responsible for holding the universe together.

This year the American Physics Society reported that the most promising prospect in the quest for a "unified theory" appears to be the "string hypothesis." Interestingly, this theorem requires the discovery of at least ten additional dimensions and it views all the

elementary particles as "vibrating strings," which in turn produce, with their "music," all the other particles in the universe—a "symphony *ex nihilo*," you might say.

For Luther, elaborate theories such as this were not necessary. With the apostles, he was content simply to confess that, "Jesus upholds the universe by the word of his power." And yet to actually drill down into his mind, and see how comprehensively he viewed words as the "upholding principal" of this world, is akin to entering a different dimension altogether.

To the German councilmen, Luther remarked, "God regarded the languages as of so great a value that, He often brought them down with Him from heaven."

This observation makes me think of when St. Paul was "raptured" into the abode of God early on in his ministry. Recall that it was not the *sights* of paradise which enthralled him, nor the *feelings* he experienced, nor the smells—but rather it was the *sounds*. He told the Corinthians, that during his brief sojourn in glory he "heard unspeakable words, which it was not lawful for a man to utter."

To be sure, the degree to which "image-bearer" necessarily implies "word-bearer" is beyond our ability to comprehend, and for the same reason that the beams beneath the floor escape our attention. In order to uphold our every step, they must naturally go unnoticed. We do, however, get a small glimpse into the "deep-magic" through which Divinity spins the heavenly spheres when John introduces *the* Image of God to us as the *Word*, and perhaps no one plumbed the metaphysical consequences of this assertion more deeply than the Reformer.

Because of this "word-entranced" vision of all things, the study of languages represented the absolute bedrock of a liberal arts education in Martin Luther's worldview. Unfortunately, this means that he would disapprovingly frown upon many of our "classical" schools, and perhaps even upon the essay that spawned the movement.

While it is true that Sayers talked about the mastery of "grammar" as the first step in a return to the medieval pedagogy, she employed the term in a different sense than Luther understood it. To Sayers, "grammar" was not primarily a subject, but rather a way of dealing with subjects, and to her, it answered to a particular stage in a child's development, and called forth the "tools" which are best able to deal with that stage. To Luther, grammar simply meant *the mastery of languages* and with this, almost all thoughtful educators of post-Reformation Europe would have agreed. This is certainly what the forefathers of our own country took the term to mean.

For example, when America had reached the impasse with England over taxation, one of the proposed solutions was to create seats in Parliament which representatives from the colonies would fill. This idea terrified Soame Jenyns, the renowned Tory, who wrote one of the most famous pro-British essays of the period. In it he said,

> I have lately seen so many specimens of the literary powers of which these American gentlemen are possessed, that I would be much afraid, that the sudden importation of so much eloquence at once would greatly endanger the safety and government of this country; for although it is apparent that they do not understand our constitution, they could easily overturn it with their soaring rhetoric, than we could defend it with our plain speech.

Jenyns of course was right. The literary prowess of colonial America was justly renowned and therefore Britain was wise not to let those men into their halls of debate—but that does raise the question: *How did a group of Puritan farmers became such potent wordsmiths*? The answer of course was that they viewed the languages as the key which unlocked the storehouses of heaven and therefore they treasured them above all earthly gain.

Consider the requirement for admission into colonial

Harvard: "When any scholar is able to understand Tully, or a similar Latin author, *extempore,* and write and speak true Latin in verse and prose, and decline perfectly the paradigms of nouns and verbs in the Greek tongue: Let him then, and not before, be capable of admission into the college."

Likewise, look at the prerequisites for entry into Yale around the time of the Revolutionary War:

> Such are admitted as students into the College—those that shall, in their examination, be found to be experts in both the Greek and Latin grammar and are also able to grammatically compare both Latin and Greek authors and to compose in Latin. Moreover, no scholar shall use the English tongue at the college with his fellow scholars unless he be called to public exercise in which English tongue is required. Instead, all scholars must speak in Latin whenever they are conversing with each other.

By these historical standards, what percentage of our classical Christian graduates would be able to gain admittance into the infant and *ad hoc* colleges that our forefathers established when this country was little more than a jungle of uncut brush?

Perhaps it is high time to give Luther a fresh read, for unless we gain a clear understanding of why the languages are foundational to the pedagogy we have claimed to recover, I am afraid that they will be pushed further and further into the periphery of our programs, and ultimately relegated to little more than an artifact for our marketing brochures.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

If the languages were the foundation of a "classical" education in Luther's mind, then history was most certainly its central pillar, and this is because

> If children were thoroughly trained in history, then they would hear the happenings and the sayings of all the world, and learn how it fared with various cities, estates, kingdoms, princes, men, and women; thus they could in a short time set before themselves, as in a mirror, the character, life, counsels and purposes, successes, and failures of the whole world from the beginning of time till now. As a result of this knowledge, they could form their own opinions and adapt themselves to the course of this outward life in the fear of God, and draw from history the knowledge and understanding of what is to be sought and what is to be avoided in this outward life, and become able also, by this standard, to assist and direct others.

I think I know what Luther was speaking of. Over winter break my wife took the kids up north to see her parents for ten days. I used the time to brush up on the American Revolution by reading over 10,000 of George Washington's letters. Today I can say with perfect sincerity that it was one of the most transformative experiences of my life—one that I deeply long to share with my students by now exposing them to some of the very same letters. Like when Maxentius fell into the Tiber, I was not expecting such powerful currents, and thus I was soon swept away by the drama of it all.

My blood boiled when I read the General's letter to Jefferson, informing him of Benedict's treachery: "Before this letter arrives, you will have heard of the perfidy of Major General Arnold. Treason of the blackest dye!"

"Judas!" I yelled, to an empty house.

My spirit soared as the master motivator rallied his troops on the eve of Princeton,

> Covet! my fellow soldiers! Covet a share of the glory due to heroic deeds! Will you resign your

> parents, wives, children, and friends to be the wretched vassals of a proud, insulting foe? Then think well how you walk, for conquest or death are the only roads before us. Our dearest rights, our dearest friends, our own lives, honor, glory, and even shame, urge us to the fight. Be firm then! Be brave! Quit yourselves like men! And wrench the victory from the cruel oppressors hand.

My eyes wept, as the greatest military commander who ever trod the earth, bid his soldiers a final adieu in this last, glorious line: "May ample justice be done to you here, and may the choicest of heaven's favors attend you hereafter—you who have secured such innumerable blessings for others. Now your Commander in Chief retires from service. The curtain of separation is drawn, and the military scene is now closed to me forever. Farewell."

The lightning! The thunder! The rainbow!

O dear classical educator! Don't deprive your students this glorious tempest which is human history, for only through its magnificent gusts, can we be blown into a thousand different worlds, and have lifetimes of knowledge, and epochs of experience immediately imparted to our sails.

Alas! Let Luther's cry never fall on the heads of any of our schools, or be laid at the door of any of our teachers, when he lamented: "O how I regret now that I did not learn more history, and O how I wail that not one would teach it to me!"

CONCLUSION

With some help from my professor, I was able to get my paper on Luther finished. I got a B.

Yes B stood for "Bummer," but at that point it really didn't matter. I had spent four months with the great Reformer and what I gained from that exchange will remain with me, long after my transcripts are forgotten.

I remember bumping into my teacher in the halls during the last week before summer break. He asked me, "So what did you think about Luther?"

I paused for a moment—not to gather my thoughts—but rather to calibrate my voice to the perfect inflection: "I believe that with the exception of Paul, he was the most unbelievable human that ever lived."

Whether that is true or not, I am content to let others debate. However, what seems beyond dispute—to me at least—is that his legacy as an educator has been buried under hubris of a thousand lesser men.

Perhaps its time we recovered the "lost tool" of Martin Luther. And how do we do this? Let's give Sayers the final word:

> Let us make a clean sweep of all educational authorities, and furnish ourselves with a nice little school of boys and girls whom we may experimentally equip for the intellectual conflict along lines chosen by ourselves. We will staff our school with teachers who are themselves perfectly familiar with the aims and methods of the Trivium; we will have our building and staff large enough to allow our classes to be small enough for adequate handling; and we will postulate a Board of Examiners willing and qualified to test the products we turn out. Thus prepared, we will attempt to sketch out a syllabus—a modern Trivium "with modifications" and we will see where it all goes.

Amen. I would add only one last thought—hire Luther as your headmaster.

And in the event that he is not available, pick up those red books I mentioned earlier, and dig up everything he wrote on education. You'll be glad you did.