

Insight

The Importance of Classical Christian Education

By: Chuck Colson



Intelligence Plus Character

“Education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. . . . We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.”

You may remember that I quoted these lines, which come from Martin Luther King, Jr., when I was talking about a student’s convocation speech at Dartmouth College. But they are worth pondering, because they raise a very profound question: How, in today’s society, do we provide the kind of “true education” that King was talking about, that develops both character and intelligence?

Never have we needed more urgently to find an answer to this question. The modern secular university cannot cultivate character in a value-free environment, because if there is no truth, there is no standard of ethics by which we can measure character. So the university has simply given up on it.

And not only are our schools and colleges not teaching character, but they’re increasingly abandoning academics as well. The typical student at a great secular university will not learn much about the history of Western civilization. My alma mater, Brown University, an Ivy League school with a great reputation, no longer has a core curriculum. You can go through the school without ever knowing who Plato, Aristotle, Darwin, or Freud were. In fact, you could major in African drum-beating. So from my perspective, the modern secular university has abandoned both the pursuit of classical learning and the development of character. That’s why they’re particularly dangerous places today, and it’s why Christian students must be well grounded before they go there.

And this is also why I so strongly support the Christian classical education movement that is beginning to spread across the country. It combines, you see, the two historic goals of a liberal education: the cultivation of knowledge and the cultivation of character. It shows us the continuum in the intellectual history of the West that goes back to the Greco-Roman era and, therefore, enables us to better understand our own postmodern era. If we cut ourselves off from the past, we can’t understand the present. And it’s particularly critical, in my mind, for Christians to understand the philosophical and cultural currents that have shaped our society.

Let me give you just one good example. Galileo, as everyone knows, was thrown in jail for challenging Aristotle’s philosophical assumptions about an eternal universe. But, as I mentioned in an earlier broadcast, Francis Bacon, sometimes called “the father of modern science,” was influenced by the Protestant Reformation, and he embraced Luther’s idea about abandoning the constraints of tradition and going back to the root: the Bible. He applied this principle to freeing science from philosophical assumptions and instead looking at what God has made—go back to the root of things, as Luther did. This allowed modern science to pursue truth uninhibited by philosophy.

Why is this relevant today? Because we’re dealing with the same issue. Naturalism is the philosophical assumption that binds modern science. And this is at the heart of the intelligent design debate, but you only see this when you know your own history.

I believe that every serious Christian needs to be classically grounded, not only to understand the history of our own civilization, but also to contend for truth in the marketplace. So I hope that you will check for a classical Christian school in your area—as a place for your kids and as a cause to support.

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