TODAY'S CLASSICAL EDUCATION IS WORTH PURSUING EVEN IF IT'S NOT PRECISELY RECREATING THE PAST

by David Goodwin, Association of Classical & Christian Schools

Classical education is not at the mercy of our culture.
Instead, it has the potential to shape a new culture that is anchored in reality.

In 1981, David Hicks wrote one of the defining works of the classical Christian education renewal: *Norms and Nobility*. Recently, Hicks made an argument in line with Shawn Barnett's recent article in *The Federalist* (See https://thefederalist.com/2019/08/19/classical-education-almost-impossible-today/) about classical education: Yes, these kinds of schools are better. Yes, it holds great promise. But it's never going to rise again. It cannot be recreated. It's dead because our culture can no longer comprehend it.

Both men take slightly different tacks. Also, respectfully, both Hicks and Barnett miss the point: Classical education is not at the mercy of our culture. Instead, it has the potential to shape a new culture that is anchored in reality.

Barnett cites the Association of Christian Classical Schools' website as promoting a modern form of pseudo-classical education. With website page views and bounce rates measured in fractions of a second, we hope to be forgiven for some simplification on our website.

Barnett makes valid points—Latin and Greek were once studied more. John Milton Gregory and Dorothy Sayers were influenced by modernity. Even C.S. Lewis was a product of nineteenth-century Anglo-classical education.

But if we read one of C.S. Lewis's lesser-known works, *The Discarded Image*, we can find the real source of classical Christian education's strength: the belief that we can only understand our universe with God as the grand unifier. The medievals may not have gotten the solar system right, but they understood better than we do what it means to be human in light of the divine.

> *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15–17).*

The engine of classical education is not Latin or Greek, or even Mortimer Adler's "Great Ideas." It begins with one idea—what the Greeks called "telos," or an ultimate purpose. From this educational purpose flows a river of culture that carves its own path, even through the shifting sands of modernity.

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Our goal at the ACCS is to get this telos right, even if the journey is incremental. As with every journey, two things are needed: a destination, and a path. Our path began with Sayers' observations about the medieval trivium. And we claim the landmarks Gregory put down. We revere Latin and Greek, great literature, mathematics, and natural philosophy. But none of these things are the telos of education—they are simply cairns along the trail.

The purpose of classical education is to cultivate truth, goodness, and beauty in the souls of our students. These have been called "transcendental" because they transcend us. In an age where young people are taught they can be anything they want to be, that they decide what is true for them, good for them, and beautiful for them, reality is illusive. They try to enjoy their freedom while living as prisoners to their insular perspective.

> *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:8).*

The medieval liberal arts, the original name for classical education, liberate the student by bringing him or her closer to reality. This posture toward the divinely ordained world liberates the soul to seek its ultimate purpose. Thus the saying by Epictetus goes, "Only the [classically] educated are free."

As to the amount of Greek we teach, or the right books to read, we at ACCS follow a path marked by a millennia or two of practice. We could follow Barnett's prescribed trail to the Germanic schools, but there we would find influences like Comenius, the seventeenth-century "father of modern education." He had some good ideas, and some bad ones.

We could traverse back to the father of scholastics with Anselm in the eleventh century. But then we might miss out on earlier lessons from the doctor of Christianity—Augustine in the fourth century. In the end, the telos, or destination, defines classical education, not the amount of Latin we teach.

Soon-released research by ACCS shows a big difference in how classically educated alumni think about our world. We may not be doing everything every classical school in the past has ever done, but we invite others to join us in the journey toward an important and timeless destination.