WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TEACH "CLASSICALLY"?

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As Herman Bavinck has aptly demonstrated in his article "Classical Education," the term classical as applied to education is a relatively recent designation.[1] When we think about what it means to teach "classically," we should distinguish what the term once meant—related to the highest class of Roman society—from what it means by those who use it in twenty-first-century America. Although the term might be new as it is used in the contemporary moment, the combination of aims, methods, texts, and languages have been relatively stable. What it means to teach classically means to look backwards first, before trying to establish how to move forward. In that way, teaching classically involves considering the ancient tradition of liberal education which since the time of the Golden Age of Greece has meant to read the great poets, historians, and philosophers who provide the starting point for pursuing a life of virtue. To teach classically means drawing inspiration from this long line of people who represent the best of human thought, character, and creativity.

The modern movement of classical teaching has looked to Dorothy Sayers as a kind of sage of the classical movement. She identified the import of the trivium and quadrivium, which kept pace with the developmental questions and preoccupations of children at their various ages. Thus, the grammar school matches the young child's ability to memorize and collect facts. The logic school gives a place for slightly older children to ask why and to work on logical puzzles. Finally, adolescent children polish their speech drawing on facts from their childhood and logic from their middle youth. All the while, children learn and refine their abilities in the Latin language and often Greek. Why would they do this? Might they not miss out on much of the scientific and technological learning of the age? Certainly, science and math would be included in this form of education, but Sayers knew well that the greatest obstacle to learning these disciplines was not their absence from the center of a curriculum, but rather because children do not know how to learn. Teaching classically means following the trivium and quadrivium which not only teaches important philosophical concepts, historical facts, and enriches through time-honored narratives, it teaches children how to learn, and in the process, forming them to practice virtue. This is what is missing from much non-classical education. Children are not raised to learn and love the process of learning or the practice of virtue.

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More than even retaining facts, children learn to imitate virtue where they see it in the lives of their teachers, as well as in the lives of the historical and literary figures of the Western tradition. Especially for the classical Christian school, the virtues combine the cardinal virtues with the Christian virtues, which, as St. Augustine reminds us, are all grounded in humility as demonstrated and infused by the Word made Flesh.

To teach Christianly means pursuing the Word made Flesh, principally known through the revelation found in the Scriptures. This has always been the foundation of the classical Christian education. As the writer of the medieval syllabus, Cassiodorus, argues in his *Divine and Secular Learning* all education in the trivium and quadrivium ultimately serves the purpose of reading and understanding Holy Scripture well. He wrote, "[I] have not decreed that the study of secular letters should be rejected either since to a considerable degree it is by this that our minds are equipped to understand the Scriptures." A student learns all that is contained in secular learning—be it logic, history, music, and even the movement of the stars—because they were all created by God. The person eager for a true knowledge of God must move beyond secular learning to Scripture. The insights learned along the way in pursuits outside of the revelation of Scripture enhance one's knowledge of Scripture itself.. The two are mutually reinforcing. As Christians adapted secular learning for their own ends, their main goal was to subsume all study into a path to be a better of reader of Scripture, God's revelation to us.

Although Sayers has been a modern version of this, she would no doubt agree that she was drawing on a tradition followed for millennia. Likewise, Christians have played a critical role in shaping Western "classical" education, tweaking the liberal education of their pagan forebears for the purposes of shaping Christians. This can be seen in the writings of Christians like St. Augustine who "plundered the Egyptians" or Hugh of St. Victor in his *Didascalicon*. So, while teaching classically might have meant something different in the golden age of rhetors like Demonsthenes and later Cicero, contemporary revivals of classical teaching need not only find their inspiration from education that existed primarily in Athens and Rome before the time of Christ. One reason this is the case is that a person truly classically educated will be able to read, understand, and learn from the wisdom of the past, primarily through one language, Latin. Every moment of revival of education has seen a return to the prominence of Latin. Like Augustine, Alcuin, and Melancthon, our contemporary form of classical teaching has seen a renewed interest in the language that binds the collective Western wisdom into a whole in a republic of Latin letters.

As far as my practice of teaching classically, I have found a renewed joy in my own love of Latin and Greek by following the Renaissance humanist practice of teaching classical languages as living languages. The freedom of being a classical teacher means not restricting myself to the 200-year-old German philological approach to teaching grammar-translation, but reaching further back to the texts and methods of thinkers like Erasmus, Johannes Comenius, as well as Quintilian and Augustine to reinvigorate my language classrooms. My students learn to speak a language and bring to life the mighty dead by thinking, speaking, writing, and singing in the language of Western education. There is no greater means of seeing the past come alive, than entering into the mindset of a Latin speaker. Having taught eight- to twenty-two-year olds Latin, I know that this method works for all age ranges and can bring joy to a difficult task. Latin is at the heart of teaching classically because it asks of the parents and the students to resist popular opinion and give a "dead language" prominence in the curriculum. This is contrary to many current fads in education that seek to be "modern," literally focused on the "now," (*modo*). If you are willing to learn Latin, you are willing to trust that not everything worth knowing has been learned in the last 100 years and does not have an obvious "usefulness" for financial or technological gain (it is not antithetical

to such things, but it is not primarily in service of them). As a Christian, this learning of Latin provides a means of communication with theologians throughout the Western tradition. Moreover, it is also a great means to prepare the mind for the study of Greek and Hebrew in order to read Scripture in its original languages..

The fact of the matter is many ancients would not have thought about their education as "classical" and neither would medievals. Why? Because there was no other alternative. Contemporary classical education and teaching exists in a marketplace of educational perspectives—to the extent that the political will permits non-state enforced education to exist. Classical teaching is marked simply by the fact that Latin is taught, the mighty dead are given special consideration, and the end goal is not simply "jobs" or "money," but clear-thinking, virtuous humans who love Scripture. John Dewey and many others have made education an assembly line for people to be turned into jobs to make more money for a government and an economy. The end is not, as it would be in classical Christian teaching, to enjoy God and glorify him forever, but to be "occupied." The mark of the educated child in most prominent contemporary schools is the ability to read technical language and do basic math, culminating in a decent paying job. The mark of an educated child in a classical Christian school is the pursuit of truth in all things, the love of the beautiful, and the loveliness of virtue. This classical teaching, though it may have been called by other names, is recognizable throughout the ages. It is seen in the movement of the soul of the student and the soul of society towards the chief end of all humanity, the glory of God.

ENDNOTES:

Herman Bavinck, "Classical Education," *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

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