# CLASSIS

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*Sine doctrina vita est quasi mortis imago*

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# Credo Ut Intelligam

## (I believe that I might understand)

### *St. Anselm, Proslogium, Chapter 1*

*by Dr. William Price*

Dr. R. C. Sproul tells of the traumatic experience of sending his daughter to a kindergarten in the Boston Public School system.[1] Early in the school year the parents received an invitation to a parents' meeting in which the principal of the school would explain the school's philosophy of education and the design of the curriculum.

The principal began by stating that every single thing done in the course of the school day had been carefully thought out and scientifically designed *for a purpose.* "For example," he said, "between 9:00 and 9:17 the children play with puzzles designed by the neurosurgeons of Boston General Hospital intended to develop the muscles of the last three fingers of the hand." And throughout the evening, he explained in excruciating detail how each activity had a purpose in the child's development.

At the end of the presentation the principal asked if there were any questions. That was met by the parents' laughter as if to say, "What question could one possibly ask after that explanation?"

*"Sir, I thank you for your honesty, but frankly, your answer terrifies me!"*

But Dr. Sproul raised his hand and said, "Sir, I have a question: There is theoretically an infinite number of activities and purposes among which you have chosen some for this curriculum. What is the over-arching purpose of this school? Just what kind of child are you trying to produce and why?" The principal was silent. His face turned beet-red then ashen-white. Finally he replied, "I don't know. No one has ever asked me that question."

Dr. Sproul replied, "Sir, I thank you for your honesty, but frankly, your answer terrifies me!"

Dr. Sproul knew that the purpose of education is as critical as the how and what of education. We believe that the contrast between classical education and its modern counterpart is most readily seen when their respective purposes are compared.

The following is a (too) short survey of the history of purpose in Western education. It will necessarily leave out much that deserves to be mentioned and suffer from oversimplification at points. But it will serve to highlight the contrast of purpose between classical and modern education.

**Purpose in Classical Education**

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* defined happiness as an "activity of the soul that expresses virtue." Aristotle taught that all things in the universe have a function or a proper end (*telos*[2]). This is what gives

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CLASSIS Newsletter
ACCS
*P.O. Box 9741*
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***or submitted to:***
admin@accsedu.org

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ACCS
*P.O. Box 9741*
*Moscow, Idaho 83843*

phone: (208) 882-6101
fax: (208) 882-9097

web: www.accsedu.org

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expression to the highest nature or calling of the thing. In his famous example, the noble end of an acorn is to become a thriving oak tree. For the person, Aristotle said man's proper end is happiness—*not* in the modern sense of the word. In an excellent essay, "From the Happiness of Virtue to the Virtue of Happiness," Darrin M. McMahon says:

"But can we say there is a function specific to human beings in general? Aristotle believes that we can, and he identifies it as reason. Reason is what distinguishes us from plants, nonhuman animals and nonliving things, and so our purpose must involve its fruitful cultivation. Living a life according to reason is for Aristotle the human function, and living an excellent life—reasoning well throughout its course and acting accordingly—is for him a virtuous life. Achieving such a life will bring us happiness, which thus represents our highest calling, our ultimate purpose, the final end to which all others are necessarily subordinate. Happiness for Aristotle is not a fleeting feeling or ephemeral passion. It is, rather, the product of a life well lived, the summation of a full, flourishing existence, sustained to the end of one's days, "a complete life."[3]

*Augustine extended the classical concepts of purpose and happiness in a uniquely Christian direction.*

Classical Christian education from late antiquity through the modern era was built on two foundations: the patrimony of classical Greek culture and the treasure of the Christian faith. It was Augustine who accomplished the great synthesis.[4] Historian Christopher Dawson notes:

"From the time of Plato, the Hellenic *paideia* [system of instruction] was a humanism in search of a theology, and the religious traditions of Greek culture were neither deep nor wide enough to prepare the answer…The new Christian culture was therefore built from the beginning on a double foundation. The old classical education in the liberal arts was maintained without any interruption, and since this education was inseparable from the study of classical authors, the old classical education continued to be studied. But alongside of—and above—all this, there was now a specifically Christian learning which was Biblical and theological and which produced its own prolific literature."[5]

Augustine extended the classical concepts of purpose and happiness in a uniquely Christian direction. Perhaps his most familiar aphorism says it best: "…you [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[6] Man is God's creation, endowed with mind and with heart. Man's highest good is to know God and love Him and so education should shape both heart and mind to that end.

The development of education in the West through the medieval and early modern periods built upon the Augustinian synthesis of classical and Christian learning. But though the Renaissance renewed an interest in classical learning, the Enlightenment that followed replaced the Christian heritage with a secular humanist worldview.

**Purpose in Modern, Secular Education**

In early 20th century America, pre-war optimism combined with that unique American philosophy, pragmatism, gave birth to the Instrumentalist school of education, seen nowhere more clearly than in the work of John Dewey. In his *Democracy and Education*, Dewey proposed "educating for democracy:" stating "…a government resting on popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and obey their governors are educated."[7]

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The Instrumentalist school was also to introduce the idea of vocational education, whose purpose was to render students fit to support the nation's burgeoning economy. While Dewey may have opposed vocational education *per se*, his followers understood him to be a proponent.[8]

Behind Dewey's proposals was a radical shift of purpose in education, its object being less the individual than the state. Lives well-lived, lives of virtue, were displaced by a robust economy and a functional democracy as goals of the new educational enterprise. Students became means to political and economic ends.

A symptom of the change in education purpose was the near-wholesale abandonment of the classical curriculum and its methods. In their place came modern novels and poetry and some rather experimental methods of education. In high schools and colleges, core curricula were dropped while elective courses flourished. Required coursework in scientific and professional schools encroached on the liberal arts, rendering those schools, though highly academic, almost purely vocational. T.S Eliot surveyed these trends in England and lamented that:

"…we are lowering our standards, and more and more abandoning the study of those subjects by which the essentials of our culture—of that part of it which is transmissible by education—are transmitted; destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanical caravans."[9]

*Behind Dewey's proposals was a radical shift of purpose in education...*

**Christian Education Today**

A revival in Christian education began about thirty years ago as many parents sensed and witnessed the deterioration of public education and the antipathy of public institutions toward faith. Looking back, there appeared two distinct species of Christian schools roughly corresponding to the existing models of education, classical and modern. The majority of new Christian schools appeared little different from their public school counterparts with the exception that God was admitted. The first motivation of many parents was to shelter their children from the corrosive culture of the public educational system. A secondary purpose for some was to improve, if possible, the effectiveness of their children's education. There was little thought given, perhaps, to the deeper purpose of education. In many of these schools, the curriculum and classroom differed little from those of the public schools. Students were consciously prepared for work and citizenship and sometimes for the university. But the education they received and its aim was little different from the public system but with a veneer of Christianity precariously attached.

A minority of Christian schools consciously patterned themselves after the classical model and worked hard to build on the common ground that Christianity and the best of our classical inheritance had shared for a thousand years. They thought deeply about their philosophy of education and rummaged about the roots of philosophy itself and wove a Christian worldview into their epistemology and pedagogy. Though most of the species of school offered a curriculum more academically challenging than most schools around them and could rightly be called preparatory schools, their singular purpose was to nurture students on the true, the good, and the beautiful[10] in order that they might achieve their highest end: "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."[11]

**Footnotes**

[1] R.C. Sproul, The Consequences of Ideas, audio lecture 32.

[2] Greek (ôåëïò): purpose or end

[3] Darrin M. McMahon, "From the happiness of virtue to the virtue of happiness: 400 BC-AD 1780" Daedalus, Spring 2004, pp. 5-17

[4] See Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, II.40, and *On Order*

[5] Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* (Steubenville, Ohio: Franciscan University Press, 1989) pp. 8-9

[6] Augustine, *Confessions*, I.i(1).

[7] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), pg. 87

[8] Robert Maynard Hutchins, in his introductory essay to the *Great Books of the Western World*, deplores the miserable state of modern education while attempting to defend Dewey from charges of complicity. He is not entirely successful.

[9] T.S Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1976), p. 185

[10] Plato, *The Republic*

[11] *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q.1

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