

Seven Distinctives of Christian Classical Education

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adapted from an essay by Dave Hansen, Director of Development at Veritas School in Newberg, Oregon

What do we mean by “classical education?” How can education be “Christian” and “classical” at the same time?

Perhaps you’ve pondered these questions yourself. Although it’s difficult to give a precise answer to these questions in a short article, the following seven distinctives are true of a Christian classical education—and of what we attempt to do each day at Cedar Tree.

Distinctive #1: Christian classical education is “Christian” through and through.

We do not treat education as some sort of neutral endeavor. Rather, we treat ALL subjects (including that of education itself) from a distinctly Christian world view and perspective. 1 Corinthians 10:31 exhorts us in “whatever we do” to do for the glory of God. So, whether we are pondering literary prose or considering the latest scientific discovery, it is done to God’s glory. As the author and creator of all good things, God has domain over all, whether “sacred” or “secular.”

Distinctives #2: Classical education establishes its fundamental structure in the liberal arts’ tradition of the Trivium. This notion stems from the presupposition that the goal of education is essentially the attainment of wisdom not—as the world would tell us—to prepare students for the work force (no doubt a truly wise person will make a better worker). Just as the book of Proverbs states, wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord. From this beginning a Christian classical education is built.

First comes knowledge, then understanding and, finally, wisdom. This three-step process is evident in the unfolding of the classical Trivium which divides learning into three stages: grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. Grammar, like knowledge, encompasses the building blocks of information that must be learned or memorized for any given subject—the ABCs, if you will. Dialectic, like understanding, is the logical relationship between the information blocks mastered in grammar. Then Rhetoric, like wisdom, is the goal. It is learning to apply grammar and dialectic in a beautiful, eloquent and truthful fashion.

These three steps—grammar, logic and rhetoric—are the stages individuals follow when learning any new subject. In short, they are the tools of learning. Yet, while these stages of the Trivium are applied throughout one’s lifetime of learning, classical education capitalizes on their correlation with the natural developmental stages of children.

In their early years children thrive on memorizing facts—a skill that often becomes drudgery to adults. So at Cedar tree, children in grades K-6 will memorize dozens of facts, everything from grammatical rules and math facts to bones of the body. Even at this stage, however, the goal of rhetoric remains in view; thus, we also encourage students to practice speaking in front of their classmates and work on quality penmanship, among other things.

In their “junior high” years most children revel in questioning everything. AS you may have observed, they love to argue; So at Cedar Tree we challenge them to argue well through learning formal logic. We encourage students to question and probe and discover how their grammatical knowledge works together.

Finally, students enter the rhetoric stage (their high school years), eager for self-expression. Classical education capitalizes on this innate desire by teaching them what is beautiful and true in all subjects. They also study formal rhetoric and learn to communicate with grace and polish.

Distinctive #3: Classical education has a language and word bias.

Language is one element that distinguishes us from the animal kingdom; it is also one of the tools we use to reflect God’s image. Consider that God himself has chosen to communicate to us through the written Word; Christians then, by necessity, must understand language. Even Jesus Christ, God’s Son, is described as the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14).

Christian classical education embraces this truth of God as communicator and, thus, His image-bearers as communicators. With all subjects we strive to become masters of the words used to communicate each subject. Such a word bias explains why we study Latin and why English grammar is stressed. Our high value of language also justifies our emphasis on reading and writing skills.

This priority on language, with the underlying conviction that language conveys truth with a capital T, stands in sharp contrast with the world's relativistic mindset. Academicians assert that absolute truth does not exist, claiming language as the ultimate tool of relativism. We uphold Scripture as God's affirmation of the value of language: however flawed, language is the key tool God has chosen to convey His absolute truth. It is His gift to use for His glory.

Distinctive #4: *Classical education has a history bias.*

The Scriptures repeatedly admonish God's people to remember what He has done for them. "To never forget" His great works. Christian classical education embraces this biblical concept and considers all study and subjects in light of history. Consider God's words to king Nebuchadnezzar: "The most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes (Daniel 4:32b)." History is the study of His story. With this in mind, we consider ALL history—not just biblical history—in light of God's providence.

God's word also reminds us that history is recorded for our instruction. The Apostle Paul, when referring to the history of God's people, wrote "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us (i.e., the Church) on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:11)." Our studies in light of history will not only reveal the hand of God to us, they will also provide examples to follow and warnings of mistakes to avoid.

Distinctive #5: *Classical education strives to only use the truly great aspects of our culture as its curriculum.*

Now that we know we want our children to memorize grammar, what sort of stuff constitutes grammar? What is the substance of the curriculum? These questions are especially relevant when one considers the fast-paced, information-laden society in which we live. There is so much out there; how do we sift through it all? Philippians 4:8 supplies us with a key principle that must be considered. IT instructs us to think only on those things which are true, honest, just, pure, lovely (or beautiful), of good report, and praiseworthy. Interestingly, the text does nothing to limit a Christian's thoughts to the Scriptures alone; it merely defines proper and good thought in general.

A classical education, therefore, recognizes that these virtues must characterize its curriculum. Given the Church's overwhelming influence over the development of Western civilization, we have a rich heritage from which to choose. We have a wonderful tradition of literature, art, philosophy, and science that is true, honest, just pure, lovely, of good report, and praiseworthy, so let's immerse our children in it. Choosing the praiseworthy or excellent thing means we lift up Bach over Barney, The Chronicles of Narnia over Goosebumps, Newton's Laws of Thermodynamics over Darwinian evolution.

Distinctive #6: *Good classical education presumes, with the Scriptures, that education itself falls under the jurisdiction of parents—not the state, not the church and not the school itself.*

Consider Deuteronomy 6, among other passages, which specifically commissions parents with the task of rearing and teaching their children. The role of the school is subordinate to mothers and fathers. The school only partners with, or assists, parents in their great task of educating their children.

Therefore, the classical school must always work to diligently limit its role in the lives of children and beware of the dangers of replacing parents rather than assisting them. For example, teachers should not presume to delve into the personal lives of their students beyond that which is immediately relevant to the specific task and goal of the class.

Distinctive #7: *A classical education promotes an orderly environment.* As clearly noted in 1 Corinthians 14:40, "Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way." Order reflects the character of God. We see His order and design in Creation. We see His moral law (i.e., the Ten Commandments) as an example of God imposing order on a fallen human race. Christian classical education mirrors God's work by emphasizing order in the classroom. Children wear uniforms for their work in the classroom and teachers uphold God's standards with discipline, for example.

Although these seven distinctives do not precisely describe the detailed philosophical basis for classical education, they do highlight its biblical and Christian foundations. In fact, we believe it is redundant to say "Christian classical" education; for without Christianity, there would be no true classical education. With it, however, Cedar Tree can aim high, *establishing lives in the God of all Truth.*