

Classical AND Christian

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Classical and Christian—that's Trinity School. But just what kind of union is this wedding?

Is it simply coincidental, sort of like being a Democrat and a vegetarian, so that the two parts of our identity might just as easily have been different? To the question, "Why classical AND Christian?" we could say little either to justify our identity or to preserve it. There might come a time when we would decide to be one but not the other.

Or does the conjunction run a little deeper—but only a little—with sociological roots, like being southern and Baptist? Or like being Irish and Catholic? In which case we would have to say that there are reasons for our being both classical and Christian, but that the connection is one of personal and group histories and not the deeper connection of ideas. We would be classical and Christian because people like us have often been that way and we learned it from them.

Or is it more substantial still, this union of the classical and the Christian, like being an intellectual and Jewish, or Protestant and industrious? In both of these cases, the connection is certainly more than a coincidence, probably also more than an accident of birth or religious association. There are reasons—even theological reasons—why Jewish men and women have devoted themselves to the life of the mind. There are ideas—even theological ideas—which explain why Protestants have been diligent and frugal. Likewise, there are ideas and reasons why those who are Christians would pursue an education that is classical. And, conversely, there are reasons why truly classical education might gravitate toward a Christian view of the world.

I do not say that a Christian school *must* be classical—there are many which are not and which aspire to be something else. Nor do I say that a school that is classical *must* be Christian—that is patently not true, as we can see from the many secular academies that follow a classical curriculum. But I do say that the connection between these two is tight enough that if you start at either end you will feel the tug toward the other.

Let me try to show what I mean by starting on one side of this union—on the classical side. What does it mean to offer a classical education? A classical education goes back to the Greeks, who conceived of education as a way of perfecting themselves. Education enabled human beings to fulfill their unique purpose as rational and moral beings. The well-educated man or woman became a person of wisdom and virtue.

The Greeks believed that a life of wisdom and virtue did not happen like falling off a log. It took hard work and training—the Greek word for this is *paideia*, from which we get words like *pedagogy* and all its cognates. The purpose of this instruction and

training was to mold a person into the “ideal person,” the person who really lived up to the full potential that human beings have for wisdom and virtue.

Anybody’s list of such “ideal persons” is quite short. The Greeks were particularly demanding in this regard: they looked not only for a person of wisdom, who was a sage; they also wanted someone whose word matched deed, a man or woman of virtue. It was not enough to seek the truth, nor even to discover it; one must live the truth—or die trying. Socrates, Demosthenes, Cicero—all these were destroyed for what they said or did. And others, like Plato and Aristotle, narrowly escaped.

If we broaden our scope and look at the sweep of world history, the list of “ideal persons” doesn’t really get a lot larger. Although there are more contestants, the competition is stiffer, and there really aren’t that many still standing in the final round. Though we could never come up with a definitive, “canonical” list, I would venture to guess that there would be some top vote getters: Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, Moses, Mother Theresa (and others I’m forgetting). And, what is more, I’m betting that there would be one unquestioned favorite: Jesus Christ.

Jesus would get votes not only from his devoted and pious followers, but even from his skeptical admirers and some of his cynical detractors. Why? Because we, like the people who watched him preach and heal, can still be amazed and say, “He has done everything well” (Mark 7:37). One does not have to take him for the Son of God to admit that he preached an astounding wisdom and lived in such a way as to make people think twice. Even if we weren’t a Christian school, but only classical, we would have to talk about Jesus.

But we are a Christian school because in our search for the sages we have found the Sage. In our search for the one who lived well, we have found the One who enables others to live well. In our search for one who was wise and virtuous, we have found One who claimed to give the power for wisdom and virtue.

The Greek philosophers had talked for centuries about becoming an “ideal person.” Then along comes the apostle Paul, who made this astounding claim (if I may paraphrase I Corinthians 1:5): “The first Adam became the ideal person of virtue, but the last Adam, Jesus, became something more: the ideal person who had the spiritual power to make others into ideal persons.” If this is true, then it means that the classical quest for the well-lived life finds its answer and its culmination in the man from Nazareth. It also means that the best education is what Paul called “the *paideia* of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

Jesus’ resurrection was not simply the demonstration that he fulfilled the purpose of being human; it was also the demonstration that he has the power to enable us to do the same. And this, above all else, is the hope of classical Christian education.