

An Introduction to Classical Education

*A
Guide for
Parents*



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For more information on Dr. Perrin's speaking
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As the headmaster of a classical school, I often speak with parents who are examining our school, who are both interested in and puzzled about classical education. “How does the classical approach differ from what is offered in public schools?” “Are there any other schools doing what you are doing?” “How do your students perform on standardized tests?” After seven years, the questions are predictable, but wholly justified. Unfortunately for me, even my answers are now predictable, which is one reason I am writing you. If you will read this before you talk to me (or someone like me) you can spare both of us my stock replies. Secondly, if I put my answers down in writing, I am bound to say something new.

If you are like most, you have probably heard about classical education by means of a friend who either has a child enrolled in a classical school, or who is home-schooling classically. You are doing your research, and are interested enough to do some reading about classical education. If you have visited a classical school or co-op, you may have seen a few classes in operation which have raised eyebrows, interest and many more questions. In any case, you have questions—and a good many of you will have put those questions down in writing.

I wish to commend you for your questions, for your thinking. To come with hard-boiled questions is something, as you shall see, that is quite classical. Classical education is a long tradition of asking questions and digging up answers, consulting others, then asking, seeking and finding once more. It is joining, as one writer puts it, the “Great Conversation.” That means reading great books (the *classics*), studying them, mining them, talking to others about the influential ideas they contain. Whatever else classical education is, it is an ongoing series of questions and answers. So you see why I am glad you come asking all manner of things besides the yearly tuition.



Modern Confusion, Ancient Clarity

It is a tumultuous time to be living. Institutions, information, customs, mores and standards are changing rapidly. Choices and options have multiplied; our culture is becoming increasingly kaleidoscopic. Such colorful and rapid change does have its dramatic element and some find it quite entertaining. However, constant change and novelty can themselves grow old, becoming what Thomas Oden calls “the cheap promise of radical newness” which is “the most boring and repetitious of all modern ideas.”¹ Many of us are ready to leave the party, go home and have a cup of tea in a quiet chair. As we contemplate raising and educating our children, many of us have been forced to ask ourselves what we wish to pass on to our children. How do we nurture them in the midst of all the confusion, doubt and conflict of this modern world? Is there any place of rest and refuge—any place of tranquility and strength?

Education is that vast undertaking of passing on the wisdom and knowledge of one generation to another. It involves discovery, but also instruction; it is cultural transmission. With our present culture undergoing so much flux, it is no surprise to find that education is in a state of tumult too. For the parent looking for a school to aid in this task of cultural transmission, it is often a bewildering affair.

Those of us in classical education are taking our cues from a time before the party began. Our experiences are all similar: we have not found the wholesome food we need in the present; we have been entertained but not fed, amused but not instructed.

We have gone, therefore, to another place, not too far off, but still forgotten by most. We have gone back to the well-walked

¹ Thomas Oden, *After Modernity...What? An Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan: 1990), 21.

path of the tried and proven—the classical method of education. It has never really disappeared, it just became quite fragmented and diffused, with parts like ruins in modern schools and colleges. It was eclipsed as the reigning model only about a hundred years ago after reigning for over a thousand. Your grandparents are likely to have received something of a classical education.

G. K. Chesterton said that every revolution is a restoration—the recapturing and re-introduction of something that once guided and inspired people in the past. The word revolution is from the Latin word *re-volvere*—to re-roll or re-turn. A revolution is that thing which going around, comes around—again. In a similar vein, C.S. Lewis says that when we have lost our way, the quickest way forward is usually to go home. So we are returning, we are revolving. To put it strongly, we are revolting, and we are doing it by going home.

A Brief History of Classical Education

Sketch and Overview

I hope you will find it refreshing to discover that the method of classical education is simple yet profound, like so many great ideas from the wheel to the umbrella. Its basic philosophy is to teach children in the ways they naturally want to be taught, despite not always knowing it. Put another way, classical educators teach children what they want to know when they want to know it. When children are astonished with the human tongue, we teach them language and grammar. When children are ready to challenge every assumption, we teach them logic. When students are yearning to express themselves with passion, we teach them rhetoric. To be sure, children did not discover this means of education on their own; rather it appears that it was parents who discovered it and the children merely ratified it.



The phrase “classical” or “classical education” begs for some definition. In history, the *classical period* refers to the civilizations of the Greeks and the Romans (c. 600 B.C. to 476 A.D.), who have bequeathed to us classical myths, art and architecture and the classical languages of Greek and Latin. Certainly the education practiced by the Greeks and Romans can be called *classical* education. *Classical education*, therefore, can mean the educational methods of the Greeks and Romans. However, the word *classical* or *classic* cannot be restricted to the classical period, per se. We also use the term to describe things that are authoritative, traditional and enduring. Classic literature, for example, can be any work (not just Greek or Roman literature) of enduring excellence. Therefore, we can use the phrase *classical education* to refer not just to the educational practices of the Greeks and Romans, but also to authoritative, traditional, enduring and excellent education. I use the phrase with both of these connotations in mind: *Classical education is the authoritative, traditional and enduring form of education, begun by the Greeks and Romans, developed through history and now being renewed and recovered in the 21st century.*

With this general definition in mind, we can now sketch an outline of the history of classical education. After this initial brief sketch, we will come back again and paint in some additional detail.

Classical education is old, which is why it now appears so new. It was new with the Greeks and Romans over 2000 years ago; they are credited with constructing the rudiments of the classical approach to education. We would be misled to think that the Greeks and the Romans educated in simple and consistent ways, for there is a good deal of variety in the curriculum and approach of both the Greeks and the Romans. After all, nearly 1,000 years encompass the period of these two civilizations! Still, there are common themes that run through the educational practices of both groups, including a generally sustained emphasis on the study of grammar, literature, logic and rhetoric. It was later during

