

What is “Classical” about Classical Christian Education?

This talk will explore what educators mean when they use the term “classical” in the context of Classical Christian Education (CCE). According to the Association of Classical Christian Schools, an accreditation agency created by Classical Christian educators and purposely unaffiliated with any other accreditation organizations, their member schools are “committed to a classical approach in the light of a Christian worldview.” The agency claims to represent around three-hundred schools and the agencies founders and associates have further influence in the homeschooling movement. According to their website, ACCS schools attempted to fill more than ninety positions in the last three months. The growth of the movement is undeniable, and there are also large numbers of homeschool families who pursue classical curriculum for use at home. Many homeschoolers are now using the curriculum promoted by Classical Conversations, which contains a weekly practicum element that brings students together. There are currently 301 such communities in Texas and 113 in Georgia, for example. It is hard to know how many students that represents but it is an undeniable fact that there are tens of thousands of students currently being educated in CCE schools and homeschools.

The movement’s curriculum is largely based on the medieval educational model of the trivium and the quadrivium, as filtered through an essay by Dorothy Sayers titled “The Lost Tools of Learning.” (Wilson 1991). The ACCS is explicitly doctrinally Protestant and Evangelical, and their membership requirements reflect those beliefs. This presentation will explore how the Classical Christian Education movement receives and wields the term “classical”. I will also explore the use of classical texts and authors (e.g., Homer, Quintilian, Cicero, and Livy) by figures associated with CCE. I believe this material to be of urgent importance to the academic community. The dearth of academic jobs often leads Classics

graduate students to seek employment at schools affiliated with the ACCS unwittingly. Further, the students emerging from these schools and homeschools will have a vision of the classical that they may bring into universities that their professors will not understand. In explaining the origins, theology, and motivations for CCE, this talk will help educators to understand the mindset of CCE movement graduates.

Finally, the influence of figures like Douglas Wilson and Susan Wise Bauer have begun to extend into the public education realm as well, through institutions like Hillsdale College and their Barney Charter School Initiative and countless other charter schools. These institutions, with connections to Washington D.C. and access to public education funding, are bringing classical education to the public sphere. The definition of the term “classical” across these various organizations is a slippery one. This talk will begin the work to clarify what “classical” means in the context of Classical Christian Education. The protean term can be used to connect the movement with the Founding Fathers, with the Ancient Greeks and Romans, or with medieval Christians, depending on the advertising goals of the school, author, educator or institution promoting classical education to parents. The stakes of this discussion could not be higher, as generations of children are educated in schools that use the term identified and closely associated with our academic field as a marketing tactic to entice parents while disguising or glossing over their ties to proponents of Reconstruction theology.

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