

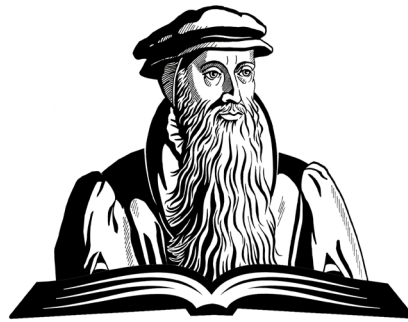
Video Lecture Series

Classical Christian Education

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

LECTURE #1

An Introduction to Classical Christian Education



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

© 2025 by John Knox Institute of Higher Education

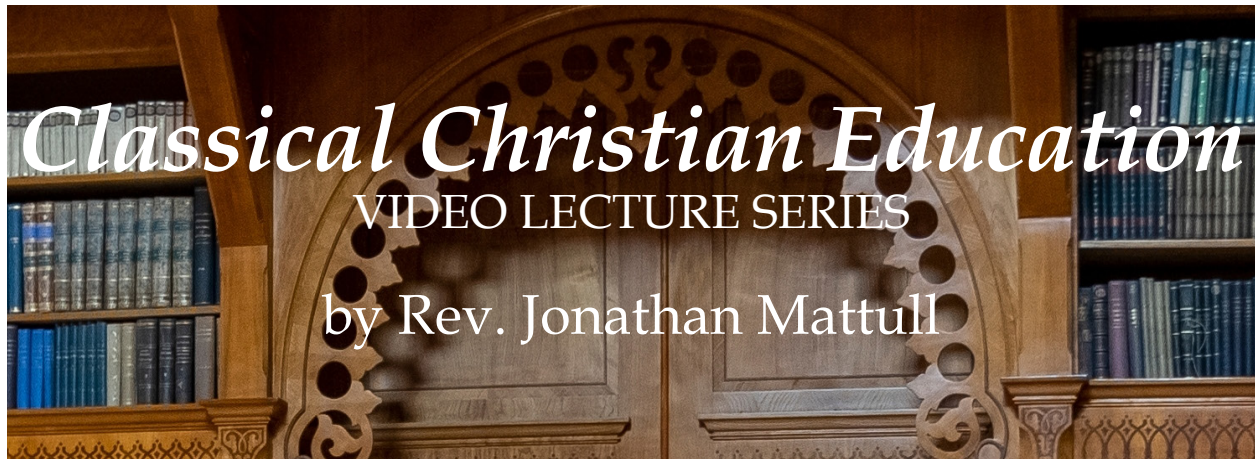
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, John Knox Institute, P.O. Box 19398, Kalamazoo, MI 49019-19398, USA.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Authorized King James Version.

Visit our website: www.johnknoxinstitute.org

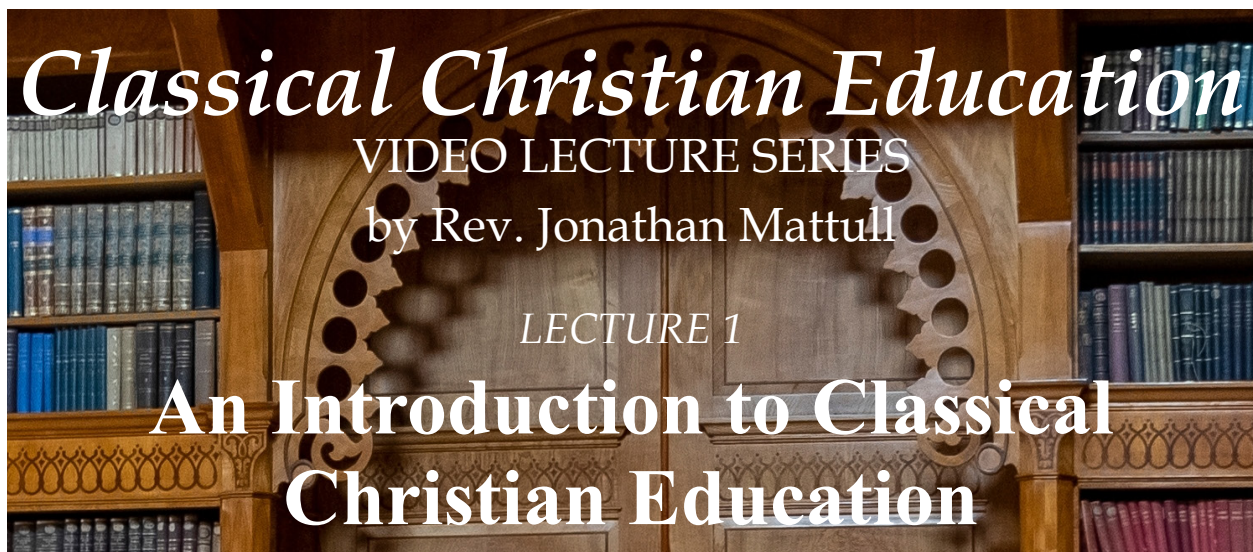
Rev. Jonathan Mattull is minister of the gospel at Sovereign Grace Presbyterian Church, in St. Louis, Missouri, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States of America.

stlpresbyterian.org



1. An Introduction to Classical Christian Education

2. Christian Commitments in Education
3. Classical Elements for Education from Antiquity
4. Reading Authors from Antiquity with Discernment and Benefit
5. How Christ transforms Classical Education
6. The Liberal Arts in Christian Education
7. The Importance of Language in Classical Education
8. Historical Overview of Classical Education
9. Learning from Our Heritage: Education from the Protestant Reformation
10. Potential Dangers in Classical Christian Education
11. Benefits of Classical Christian Education
12. Navigating the World of Education Today
13. Getting Started with Classical Christian Education in the Home or School
14. Continuing the Quest: Life-long Learning
15. Remembering the End: Serving the Lord to God's Glory



“We have proposed that the goal of studies is a wise and eloquent piety”—so wrote Johannes Sturm,¹ an educator from the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. We begin a course of lessons on *Classical Christian Education*, and I hope that you’ll be moved through this course of lessons to seek a wise and eloquent piety. I hope, moreover, if you have influence, that you would invest in the cultivation of that wise and eloquent piety in our children.

Well, throughout recorded history, we see that mankind has given attention to the education of their children. This should come as no surprise to us, since every relational structure—the family, the church, and the state—have a calling and an interest in seeing children develop and mature. There have been varied emphases and approaches, as well as goals for education throughout history, and our particular generation is no different.

This series is intended to help parents, to help schools, and to help churches understand and implement an education that is faithful to the Holy Scriptures and proven throughout history. Now, this is not meant to be a step-by-step tutorial as to what we should do in the classroom particularly, or for that matter, in the school. It is intended to provide guidance as to the fundamental elements of faithful and wise education.

From the onset, let me state that these lessons argue for an approach to education known today as *Classical Christian Education*. And we admit that there are different nuances as to what some mean by that. And yet, we also acknowledge that there are common elements which I hope to emphasize through this course of lessons. You may already be very familiar with this approach, or you may find this entirely new. For those of you who are familiar with Classical Christian Education, my hope is that these lessons will strengthen and encourage you in your commitment. For those of you who find this new, my hope is that you’ll not only gain insight into the meaning, but you’ll be encouraged in your own way to put these things into action, and invest in the rising generation. Do not think of these lessons as the final word on education. Instead, consider them as an introduction and overview of this Classical and Christian Education, such an overview as may stimulate your own study and growth, as well as your educating of others.

¹ Johannes Sturm, AKA Jean Sturm, (1507–1589), a German educator and Protestant Reformer who was influential in the design of the gymnasium system of secondary education. Sturm was generally regarded as the greatest educator connected with the Reformed Church. He implemented a gradation of the course of study, and novel methods of instruction, and his work shaped the practice of secondary education in Germany, England, and France.

Let me take a moment to introduce this course of lessons specifically. These lessons explain the meaning and purpose of Classical Christian Education. They're meant to inform and assist parents, schools, and churches in their important calling to train up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Beginning with the foundational meaning of Christian and Classical Education, the lessons then proceed to focus upon key distinctives and aims, while also providing an overview of Classical Christian Education throughout history. Answering common questions and objections along the way, this series concludes with warnings, encouragements, and practical guidance, with a needed reminder for those who undertake this noble calling to the glory of God. We have several lessons before us, and yet, at the end of each lesson, we'll feel as if we've only scratched the surface. And yet, we trust that at the end of this, we'll have a greater foundation from which to build something beautiful to the glory of God by his grace.

Let me acknowledge a few limitations to these lessons. I speak to you as one who has been involved in Classical Christian Education for roughly twenty years. I began as a teacher, and eventually was privileged to serve as a headmaster for a small Classical Christian school. Additionally, as a father and pastor, I'm continually interested in the instruction of children. However, I was not classically trained. I imagine this will show itself on occasions throughout our lessons together. And this certainly marks a significant limitation to these lessons. I do not have the benefit of a deliberately classical education, or, for that matter, a deliberately Christian education. I was publically educated in a secular school. This, potentially, is my greatest limitation with reference to these lessons. I do not speak to you as one who had the privilege of a robust Classical Christian Education. It was not until I was converted as a young adult, and began reading the lives and works of Christians who walked before us that I realized that their education was different than ours. While I've grown in my understanding, I'll be the first to admit that I have need to continue growing in that understanding. Well, this is a limitation I hope will provide some encouragement to you for whom this may be new. We stand in a unique period of time in some ways. The foundations of our civilization and the way of Christians in generations before us have, to some extent, been forgotten. However, we have the opportunity to labor, by the grace of God, for the recovery and refinement of these forgotten treasures. This is my hope through these lessons.

Let me mention a second limitation. While I pray that the Lord would use these lessons to encourage and direct families, and churches, and schools around the world, I'm from the United States. My perspective is, therefore, limited to my own experience and my own culture. I'm simply not familiar with all the particular customs, and approaches, and difficulties that face others in different cultures and contexts. There are details, for instance, in Canada and Europe more closely related to my own nation that are unique to them, and of which I am unaware. Moreover, though I am from the United States, I'm not aware of all the unique nuances that face others in my own nation. I confess, there's a lot that I do not know. But by the Lord's mercy, these lessons will emphasize universal and essential elements that I'm confident are able to be translated to whatever culture, whatever context, and that whatever unique features they may face. No doubt, there will be some particulars that will need to be adjusted. However, by focusing on the foundational elements, my hope is that you will be able to take and apply them then into your own context.

I've already hinted at a third limitation. While these lessons will provide practical guidance, they are not intended to provide detailed instruction as to the day-to-day work of education. These lessons will not tell you what curriculum to use, or how to set up a school in general, they'll not give you a reading list for each class or each age. While we'll touch on some of these things, they're beyond our focus. Our focus is the general foundations from which you may be able to

construct all of those details.

A final limitation for our lessons regards time. In spite of the fact that we have multiple lessons ahead of us, we must content ourselves with the broad brushstrokes of generalizing. While this risks oversimplification, as the Lord gives help, my hope is that it will be like a faithful map that shows you the main features of the land, and allows you to visit these features with greater detail in the future. As the Lord gives help, and we make it through our lessons together, my prayer is that you will be able to discern the unique benefits of a Classical Christian Education. Additionally, I pray that you'll be able to encourage others along the same lines, and this all to the glory of God.

Well, let us give the rest of our time to answering a basic question: "What is the need for Classical Christian Education today?" After all, we live in a far different civilization than did the ancients, or even the Protestant Reformers, or at least we think we do. It may be useful to have a little understanding of what we mean by Classical Christian Education first. While the lessons ahead of us will do much to fill out the details, we can at least begin with some basic definitions for our understanding.

Education refers to the deliberate process of leading others along a path of learning to a particular end or goal. Generally, we understand education to be associated with academics and learning. This can take place in a family setting, as in a homeschool situation, or a traditional school of multiple grades. It can be in a small group, or even with an arrangement with a private tutor. Though there are differences between these settings, they would all be following a deliberate process of leading others along a path of learning toward a particular goal.

The term *Classical* derives from the so-called term "Classical Age" of ancient Greece and Rome, and this age spanned roughly from the eighth century BC, to the fifth century AD. These dates correspond generally to the Greek poet, Homer, and the fall of Rome in the West in the year 476 AD. Thus, a Classical Education is one that derives its approach from this Classical Age and its educational insights. It also focuses upon and cultivates the ideals of that civilization. In general terms, those societies with a Western heritage have approached education in terms of a Classical Education, at least historically. It is from Classical Education that we have the seven Liberal Arts, which we'll discuss in greater detail in a later lesson. The fact that Classical Education derives from the West does not mean that it should be thought of as something that cannot be taken up in other cultures. As we'll see, the foundations of Classical Education are upon essential elements of truth, beauty, and goodness.

The term *Christian* refers to the commitment to educate our youth in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ. A Christian Education submits its purpose and approach to the teachings of Jesus, as revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Additionally, it realizes that the fullest pursuit of education requires the grace of God in Jesus Christ. One can be well educated and not converted. One can be converted and not well educated. However, we're considering how Christians should their children. While we contend earnestly for families and churches to instruct their children in the truths of Scripture directly, as in Bible classes, by Christian Education, we refer to an approach that is larger than the subject of the Bible itself, or of religion generally. Christian Education addresses all of learning—Reading, Mathematics, History, and so on. All of it is to be pursued under the lordship of Jesus Christ, and by his grace.

When we combine these three terms, we end up with Classical Christian Education. Again, we'll spend greater time considering what this means, but for now, it's sufficient to understand that this refers to an approach to education that acknowledges the supremacy of Christ in all things, and derives insights and goals from the Classical Age.

But what is the need for this? is the question. We can see the need for this in several ways. The first is *the Christian's Calling*. The Christian is not permitted to divorce his life into a part that is consciously for the Lord, and a part that is not consciously for the Lord. In other words, Christian parents and Christian teachers are to ensure that what they expose their children to, what they teach their students, is true and agrees with the principles and teachings of God's Word. For far too long, large numbers of Christians have sent their children to schools that stand explicitly opposed to the claims of Christ. While we rejoice that God is able to preserve individuals, we also acknowledge that there have been many children who have been overcome by these teachings. We read, for instance, in Ephesians chapter 6, and verse 4, that parents are to provoke not their children to wrath, "but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Certainly, this extends to far more than academic education. But when you look at the word "nurture," we find a term that touches on the overall culture that a family provides its children. The parents are to provide the child a culture that is enriched with the knowledge of Christ. It is to be that which nurtures the children in the Lord. At the very least, a thoroughly Christian education is required.

A second reason for Classical Christian Education has to do with *The Nature of Man*. Man is an image-bearer of God. We see this in Genesis 1 and 2, as well as many other places. He is given particular gifts that other creatures simply do not have. He is able to think in a particular way that is unique and different from other creatures in this world. He's able to speak in a far more expressive, developed, and intricate way than other animals. All of this is to be done to the glory of God, who has made man. Man is accountable to and dependent on the Lord, and all of this is inherent in his nature. Well, this means that we must educate our children in such a way that develops their abilities God has given them—abilities to think clearly, to speak well, and to do it all to the glory of God. Moreover, mankind is fallen. He's not a blank slate. While naturally curious, mankind is also naturally corrupt since the fall. This means that our children need wise and able teachers to guide and direct them in the paths that are good. Children are not simply to be left to themselves. They need guidance—guidance that comes from those in authority over them; guidance from those who have gone before them, who have learned and know the ways that they should walk in. And they need guidance in order that they may be led in the proven paths of wisdom and virtue, and ultimately, by the grace of God.

Well, the third and final reason for Classical Christian Education has to do with *The Prevailing Errors of Our Day*. Of course, there are many. We could look at the morals, the academic standards. We could look at the constantly changing approaches, each successive approach promising to fix the previous. We could look at matters related to teacher training, school funding, political agendas, and the like. However, if we were to focus on the fundamental error that gives rise to all the others, it is that of the goal of education and its necessary pathway. The goal of something largely determines the pathway to take and the means to use. For instance, if you want to go across the street, you would likely simply stand up and walk. However, if you want to go across the ocean, you'll either need to get on a ship or board a plane. Where I live, you must drive most places you desire to go. The destination determines, however, which roads you take, as well as which roads you avoid. Similarly, the goal of education largely determines the way of education. In many places today, the goal of education is to prepare students for a job, or to help them express themselves.

We'll see Classical Christian Education is not opposed to preparing students for a job, moreover, we contend the most effective way to teach children to express themselves is by means of Classical Christian Education. However, job readiness and self-expression have largely become *the* goal of education today. Speaking generally, this development came prominently into view in the era

following the First World War, and the age of industrialization. These combined to lead people to think that the great need was to learn how to perform certain skills for certain jobs, as in the new factories, and the developing economies. In addition, we need to note the influence of Progressive Educational Theories that were made popular through the work of John Dewey.² Dewey lived from 1859 to 1952, roughly corresponding to this same period. We do not mean that he began the movement of Progressive Education. In many ways, it developed from the Age of Enlightenment,³ as well as Romanticism. Nor do we mean that Dewey was alone in promoting Progressive Education. Nonetheless, he was among the influential in doing so. The growing industrialization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led many to think that the Classical Education of the past was no longer needed. What was needed was to teach children how to be good tradesmen and businessmen.

This approach hasn't stopped today. While industries have changed, the current development of technology has led many, if not most, schools today to set aside the mastering of language—spelling, and grammar, and understanding the way that words relate—and this of one's own language. Greek and Latin have largely been buried in oblivion. What our children need, say many, is an education that will prepare them to be computer programmers; we need more science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—these are the relevant subjects; these are what will prepare the rising generation for the world before them. Well, we need to emphasize, Classical Christian Education is not opposed to science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. However, it places these in a particular place, and for a particular use toward a higher end, not the end itself; not even the means to job-readiness and making money, and so on. It's something far superior, as we'll see.

Additionally, the influence of Progressive Educational Theories led schools to do away with the established standards and ordered learning that had prevailed for many generations. Instead, it contended that education should be student-focused. Progressive Education has purposely placed students in the position of directing their own learning. Teachers are no longer masters of their subjects, who are imparting wisdom and shepherding the students, directing them along a prescribed pathway to a particular goal. Instead, they have largely become facilitators, allowing the students to do as they're interested, so long as they don't injure others. We see the impact of these influences today in many ways. Much education today is focused on simply preparing students for college. College exists to prepare students for the workplace. The workplace is, of course, a place and a way we make money. Additionally, it's increasingly unimportant what children read, so long as they are reading. Similarly, there are few agreed-upon standards of what makes something right or wrong. What matters is what the student desires. This leads many today to think that all that matters is following one's own heart. We've become accustomed to this message in the world's entertainment, however, in our schools, the place of instructing our children and future generations, following one's heart is among the most emphasized virtues being taught today. While it does not explain everything, it does go far to explain the current state of the declining morals and ethics in our society.

2 John Dewey (1859–1952), was an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, one of the most prominent American scholars in the first half of the twentieth century.

3 The Age of Enlightenment (AKA the Age of Reason), roughly between the last 17th century to the early 19th century, preceded by the Protestant Reformation in Europe, which produced many philosophers, scholars, and scientists, with an emphasis on logic and the scientific method. Central doctrines were individual liberty, representative government, the rule of law, and religious freedom.

Now, contrast this with the goals of Classical Christian Education. In ancient days, the goal was to cultivate “the good man.” The good man was one who manifested what we refer to as the four cardinal virtues of *courage, moderation, wisdom, and justice*. As Christianity encountered the ancient world, it added three more virtues derived from the Scriptures. These are known as the theological virtues of *faith, hope, and love*. Thus, the good man, from a Classical Christian point of view, would be one who manifests *faith, hope, love, courage, moderation, wisdom, and justice*. You can catch something of this if you remember what Johannes Sturm stated. When he was speaking of the goal of education, he said, “We have proposed that the goal of studies is a wise and eloquent piety.” Well, the goal determined the pathway one should take. In fact, the idea of “pathway” is embedded in the historical terms associated with education.

Many of us are familiar with the idea of a “Liberal Arts Education.” Historically, the Liberal Arts referred to seven particular arts one was to master, in order to make progress toward becoming a well-educated person. Briefly, an “art” is a developed skill, something that is to be done. “Liberal” refers to the idea of freedom. In other words, these Liberal Arts are the skills needed for a free man and for a free society. These seven Liberal Arts were divided into two groups—the first group being the three arts of language; the second group being the four arts of quantity. The first three arts were known as the Trivium, a word referring to a place where three roads met. And you can notice the idea of pathway—these three ways. The Trivium consists of the language arts of Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric. The Trivium led the students along a pathway toward mastering thinking and speaking. This should make sense, because man is unique to the rest of this world’s creation, in that he thinks and communicates in a higher and more developed way than the rest of the world’s inhabitants. Moreover, if he is to be a free man and a good man, he must know how to think rightly and speak truly. The remaining group of four arts was referred to as the Quadrivium. Quadrivium refers to a place where four roads meet. The Quadrivium consisted of Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astronomy. Sometimes they’re referred to as “the mathematical arts.” These look at the physical world of space and time, and they help students understand the order and harmony of the created world. Generally, one would first study the Trivium before taking up the Quadrivium at a later stage.

Well, Christians throughout history have adopted these seven arts, sometimes expanding or enhancing them, but agreeing that these were necessary for the education of the good man. They are pathways that must meet, in order to reach the end of a well-educated, free man. Again, we’ll look at these particularly, but for now, we at least have a basic understanding of the goal and pathway of Classical Christian Education.

And when you look at these ideas that we’ve just set forth, you see then the need there is for a Classical Christian Education. To the question, “What is the need for it today?” we simply point out the unique goal. We want wise and eloquent men and women. We want wise and eloquent Christians. We want our children to grow into adults who are “good,” in a thorough sense of the word; who know, love, and serve the Lord, and who give themselves faithfully in service to others. The goal determines the pathway. Ultimately, we need the Lord to bless this pathway, if ever our children should possess what’s been referred to as a wise and eloquent piety. It’s ultimately to God that we appeal and ask, “Let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it” (Psalm 90:17).

In our next lesson, we’ll look more particularly at our highest calling in the educating of our children, relying upon, submitting to, and leading unto Jesus Christ, the one in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. We’ll do this by considering our Christian commitments in

education. As we conclude, we hope that this first introductory lesson has at least given us a basic sense of ideas, regarding the terms and meaning of Classical Christian Education. And it is our hope that the Lord will bless, not only this lesson, but all subsequent lessons, to his glory.