

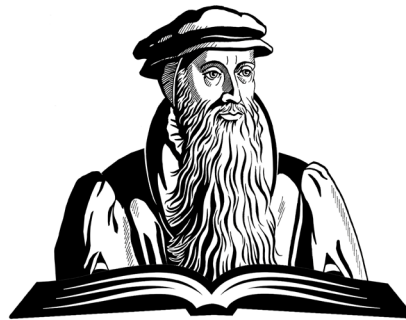
Video Lecture Series

Classical Christian Education

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

LECTURE #2

Christian Commitments in Education



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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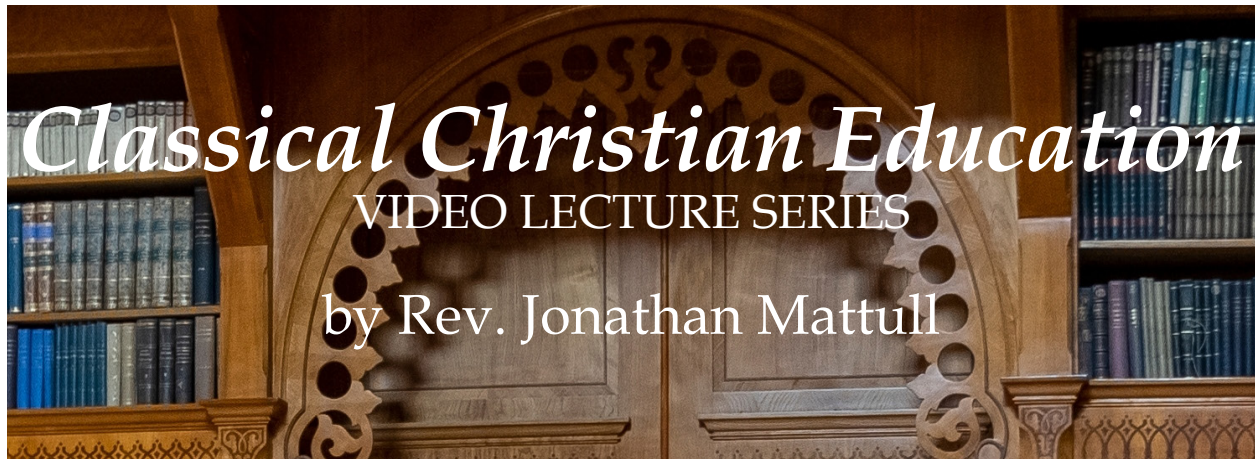
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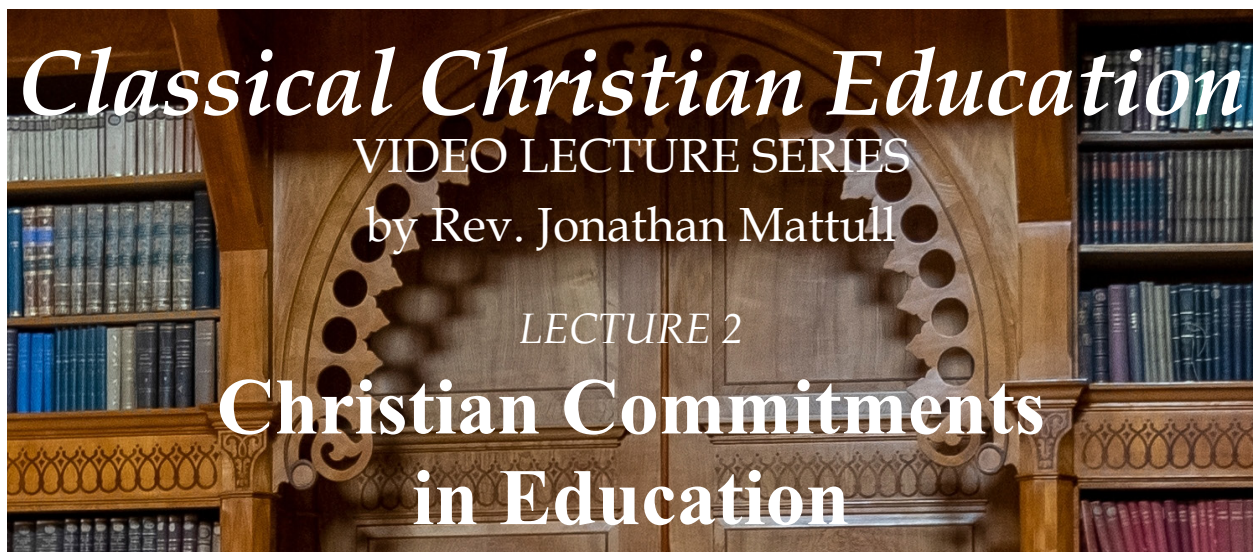
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Welcome to our second lesson in this series on education. In our previous lesson, we broadly surveyed what we mean by *Classical Christian Education*. In doing so, we planted ideas that we hope to nurture along the way, and throughout this series. Beyond our general introduction, we also considered some basic reasons there is a need for such an approach to education today. In this lesson, we will look particularly at our *Christian Commitments in Education*.

In general, whatever else we pursue in education, as Christians, we must do so with full commitment to the Lord, and particularly, as he has revealed himself in the Bible. We ultimately direct students to believe and rely upon Jesus Christ, and this, by God's grace. To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. In following Christ, a Christian is to submit all that he is, all that he believes, and all that he does, to the Lord. Christ himself articulates this, when, in Matthew 16, verses 24 and 25, he says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." The whole of one's life is to be one of continual following of Christ. All that a Christian does is to be consciously and deliberately for God's glory.

In the epistle of Romans, Paul establishes the doctrine of God's grace, in chapters 1 through 11. In chapter 12, he transitions to begin applying this doctrine unto the life of the Christian. And he does so by stating the following, in Romans 12, verses 1 and 2: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Notice that the life of the Christian is to be one that is entirely devoted to God. His mind and body are to be set apart unto God, in all that he thinks and all that he does. Now, this doesn't mean that every Christian is to become a minister of the gospel, or to serve as a missionary overseas, or something other of that sort. We'll see that there are many lawful callings, and particular callings to which each individual is gifted and particularly called. But it does mean this, that whatever a Christian does, whatever vocation a Christian fulfills, whatever job the Christian performs, the Christian is to serve God consciously, and this, by his grace, to his glory. Now this applies to many things, indeed, it applies to everything. However, I hope that you can see how this sets a foundation for us and for our approach to education.

Education, for the Christian, is not to be separated from the Lord. It is certainly not to be in opposition to the Lord either. The path of education is to be a path devoted to the Lord. In other words, a Christian education is not just the current trends of education with a Bible study included. Now, we would rejoice were there faithful Bible studies taking place in every school of the world. However, there is more to Christian education than this. Nor is Christian education simply the provision of Bible instruction in the home and/or the church. Certainly there must be Bible instruction—catechesis, and doctrinal instruction in the home and church are needed things. However, when we speak of Christian education, we’re speaking of a Christian approach to all of education. We do not mean that all the students are Christians in the fullest sense of the word. Nor do we mean that everyone involved is converted. We mean that the truths, and lessons, the teaching, the aims, and the approach are all brought under Christ’s lordship, and dependent upon his grace.

In our previous lesson, we referred to education as *the deliberate process of leading others along a path of learning to a particular end or goal*. Well, this path of learning includes history, and grammar, language, ethics, literature, mathematics, and science. Thus, a Christian Education approaches all of learning in a way that is faithful to Jesus Christ; that is dependent upon his grace; and that seeks his glory. Christian education, in this sense, is not to replace the ministry of the Christian church. The Christian student needs the regular assembling together with other Christians. He needs to hear the preaching of the gospel, and receive training in righteousness from the gospel ministry. He needs to engage in the corporate worship of God, Lord’s Day by Lord’s Day. He needs the faithful oversight of ministers and elders. He needs the fellowship of other Christians. The Christian school does not replace the church. However, it does, and should flow out of a vibrant commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether that education is in the home, or in a more traditional school setting, it is to flow out of one’s commitment to Christ.

Now, what we have stated so far should give rise to the question, “In what ways should our commitment to Christ impact and transform our approach to education?” And we could spend hours discussing this, and in some sense, the rest of this series will unfold various aspects of it. But for the purpose our lesson just now, we’ll look at two fundamental ways that our devotion, or our commitment to Christ, transforms our approach to education. The first of these is that Christ directs us to the source of learning. And secondly, Christ identifies the goal of learning.

So let’s begin with the first of these ways that our commitment to Christ transforms our approach to education, namely, *Christ Directs Us to the Source for Learning*. In order for us to learn, we must have something to learn, and something from which to learn. We find the source of learning identified for us by the Lord. The first identified source for our learning is as large as creation itself. Indeed, all of creation is for us to study. There are many places we could turn in the Scriptures to see this, but one such place is Psalm 19. In verses 1 through 6, David testifies of the truth taught to us by creation. We might note that from verse 7 onward, there is a turning of attention to God’s Word, and the things we learn there. But in verses 1 through 6, there is this consideration of the creation.

Notice just the first two verses, verses 1 and 2: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.” All of creation is teaching us something about God. It’s teaching us something that’s true, something that we should acknowledge, something we should believe. The more we rightly consider creation, the more we learn about God. Paul acknowledges this truth as well, in the epistle of Romans. Having stated that God’s wrath is against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of

men, in verse 18 of chapter 1, he then opens that truth more fully in verses 19 and 20. He writes: “Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.” Notice, the creation of the world teaches truths about God’s divinity, his eternity, his power, his creation, the earth, the planets, the sun, the moon, and the stars, the animals and the fish, the birds, man himself—all of these things teach us truth worthy of our learning, and which lead us to know God better.

Most people who have read the Bible are familiar with King Solomon. Indeed, children learn from early days, and remember that Solomon was the wisest man. His wise handling of different cases are memorable. However, we ought also to remember that his wisdom was extensive. Notice 1 Kings chapter 4, verses 29 through 34. We read: “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore. And Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about. And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five. And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes. And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom.”

When we think of Solomon, we ought to think of one who studied, and by God’s grace, was blessed to learn the truths of God’s creation. Well we do not mean to imply that everyone must aspire to have the wisdom of Solomon, but we do mean to illustrate that the whole of creation is provided for us to study. We’re to learn from it, and doing so is a feature of Christian education. Historically, this was understood to apply to the learning that we gained from other men, other men who had observed the world and its ways. In other words, it’s not just personal observation of God’s world, but it’s learning from the observation that others have had of God’s world. Thus, Augustine¹ wrote: “All good and true Christians should understand that truth, wherever they may find it, belongs to their Lord. Then, after weighing it up and acknowledging it also in the sacred books, they should repudiate all superstitious fictions.” What Augustine is saying is this: wherever they discover truth, in their own observations or from other men, even pagans, they’re to understand this—that truth belongs to their Lord. And often, coming from ancient pagans, as we’ll see, it’s mixed up with superstitious things. And Augustine says we have to be diligent to separate the superstitions from the truth. But the truth, nonetheless, ought to be received. If something is true, it is God’s truth.

And we see also, for the Christian, a second identified source of learning. It’s not just creation, but also the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures are the inerrant and infallible revelation of God’s will. In 2 Timothy 3, verse 16, we are told that: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” These words, “inspiration of God” mean, breathed out by God. Just as you and I must breathe to speak, so, the words we have in the Bible are the very words spoken by God. This is important for us. Just as God is true and faithful, his Word is true and faithful. Everything it asserts, it asserts truly—it’s

¹ Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) Christian theologian of Berber origin, was the bishop of Hippo in Numidia, Roman North Africa. His prolific writings influenced the development of Western Christianity, and is viewed as one of the most important church fathers in the patristic period.

history, it's counsel, it's commands, it's promises, indeed everything it records is true. Well, this provides us a tremendous source for our learning. The Scriptures are not a history or science textbook, but whatever they say about history, and whatever they set forth about science, is true. It's infallible. It's unchanging. What the Bible says about the origin of the universe, what it says about the nature of man, what it says about the history of the nations—all of these things are true. This is not implying that we should avoid engaging in scientific observation, or the diligent study of the history of civilizations. Quite the contrary, we're to engage in these, and all other learning with diligence, but also with submission to the Lord's Word. The Scripture do not destroy our observations of the world around us. Rather, the Bible confirms our accurate observations, and it corrects our inaccuracies. Whether this is about history, about science, about the nature of man, or any other thing. John Calvin² writes of this in his *Institutes*.³ He wrote: "Just as old or bleary-eyed men, or those with weak vision be thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words; but with the aid of spectacles, will begin to read distinctly, so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having disbursed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God."

This is an important and broad foundation impacting all of our learning. It touches on science, and history, and ethics. We don't have the time to draw out the implications to each of these subjects and all the others, but still, let me illustrate the way Scripture serves as a source for our learning in two ways.

The first way we can see how the Bible serves as a source for our learning is by considering history. The Holy Scriptures provide us historical truth. They don't give us the whole history of the various empires of the world or their activities. It doesn't give us the whole history of the Jews. But all that the Scriptures say about these civilizations, about history, is true. So, when we read, for instance, in Exodus, and how Moses was raised up in Pharaoh's court, that's an historically true thing. When it speaks of the thousands that were led out of Egypt, into the wilderness, and then ultimately into the land of Canaan, that's an historically true thing. The empires of Egypt and Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome are all touched on in Scripture, both by way of historical record, and by way of prophetic testimony. Moreover, the individual books of the Bible were written in specific times and historical cultures. When we consider these things, we see both how the Bible helps us understand history, and a few reasons we ought to study history. The Bible helps us understand history, because it records history for us. But we also have reasons to study history, because the Bible both records it for us, and it makes claims about history. It be written in certain historical settings, leads us to understand that we'll better understand the Bible, if we better understand history.

Another way we see the Bible serves as a source of our learning is by considering the nature of man. This is of great importance when we are thinking about education. Questions like, "What is man?" and "What is man's chief end?" are questions the unconverted ancients considered, and considered deeply. We'll see that they had many insights regarding these things. However, they were without the most necessary understanding to answer these questions thoroughly and completely. They lacked Scripture. Scripture tells us about man's origin. Scripture tells us about man's nature—his body and his soul. It speaks of his fall, and his consequent guilt, and depravity, and his misery. Scripture tells us of the true way of redemption, by God's grace alone, through

2 John Calvin, or, Jean Calvin, (1509–1564) – well-known French theologian, pastor, writer, and well-known Reformer in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation, after whom many Reformers patterned their teachings.

3 *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, by John Calvin.

faith in Jesus Christ alone. Scripture tells us the way of true growth and maturity, by union and communion with Christ, that his image would be more fully formed in us. Scripture tells us of man's ultimate end, and the pathway to pursue it. It tells us that we are to seek the glory of God, and to enjoy him forever, that we are to look forward to that blessed vision of God in Christ, as the ultimate privilege and delight that one could have. All of these things come to us exclusively through the Scriptures. It's true, there's much that we can reason, and there's much that we can observe. We can see that mankind is fallen. We can observe his sinful works. We can see the ruined image of something glorious, and yet nonetheless impacted by the miserable and present state of sin. But it's Scripture, which, remember Calvin noted, that clarifies and allows us to see these things clearly. Moreover, it's Scripture which fills in the gaps, and gives us an infallible testimony of these things.

Let me highlight a particular source within the Scriptures that instructs in all truth. It's the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And there's no true knowledge of Jesus Christ apart from the Scriptures. Indeed, everything we know of him, we know because of the Scriptures. It is the Scriptures' revelation of Christ himself that provides us a source of particular instruction. Christ is the eternal Son of God. In the fulness of time, he was born of a woman, and thus, we speak of the incarnation of the Son of God. If we simply think about this one truth related to us in the Scriptures, we have, as it were, a source that informs our understanding and helps us to grow in our education. He took on a real human body and a reasonable soul. Moreover, he lived in such a way that he reveals to us the Father. He teaches us by his words, and also teaches us by his actions. His incarnation teaches us that the body is good. Though our bodies are fallen and used for wickedness, the body and the embodied state is good for humans. And Christ shows us that in his own incarnation. His ministry teaches us to love God and others, which we will return to later in this lesson. Additionally, his life shows us how to do these things. His lessons and parables often present to us great insight into the true use of learning and right rhetoric. His familiarity with the world and creation was employed to clarify, illustrate, and apply the spiritual truths of God's kingdom to our edification. His death and resurrection instruct us about the evil of sin, and its just deserving of judgment. It also tells us of the wonder of God's grace, and the immeasurable truth of God's great love, that would send forth his Son to suffer that we might be forgiven. Indeed, to meditate upon the life and ministry of Christ is to take an excellent source of understanding from the source of the Scriptures. To say these things simply, Christ integrates all truth. To be without the revelation of Jesus Christ, and his will by the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is to be without the whole truth.

If you've understood this, then we should realize that there are two sources that must be part of a fully-developed approach to education—indeed, our Christian commitment demands it—namely, the world—creation; and the Scriptures—the Bible. These sources are sources for our learning. To neglect either is to guarantee imbalance and error. It would be like trying to row a boat by only paddling on one side of the boat. If you've ever been in a boat and have paddled, you realize you have to paddle on both sides. If you paddle only on one side, well, you'll move, but you'll ultimately be moving in a circle. A *Christian Commitment to Education* studies both God's world and God's Word. Together, the student is able to progress in a straight line toward the goal.

Well, this leads us to move to the second way that Christ transforms our approach to education. Our commitment to Christ leads us to understand the purpose for our learning. So Christ affects the purpose, the goal of our education. We'll see that even the pagans thought that the purpose of learning was for more than gaining prestige or wealth, or enjoying pleasure, or power over others.

Today, however, we often see these as the great motives for education. Many teachers have been faced with the question, “Why should I study this? It won’t help me get a job; it won’t help me get into college; it won’t help me make money.” Worse still, as when the question comes from a parent, “Why should my child study that? It won’t help him get ahead.” We understand the reason that these questions come, but we think that they miss the fundamental purpose of education, and a Christian education particularly. In fact, God’s Word defines for us the purpose of learning, indeed, of all things.

Let’s begin by considering the main reason we should learn, the main reason for education. The primary purpose for education is God’s glory. Children familiar with the *Shorter Catechism*,⁴ will have learned the first question and answer: “What is man’s chief end?”—“Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” But how is learning the laws of grammar, or for that matter, the laws of science, help us to glorify God? There are many ways that we could discuss, but perhaps a simple quotation from the seventeenth-century astronomer and mathematician, Johannes Kepler,⁵ will assist us. Kepler is credited with discovering the Three Laws of Planetary Motion, and influencing advances in scientific understanding. In one letter, he wrote about the laws governing the natural world, and he stated that “These laws are within the grasp of the human mind. God wanted us to recognize them by creating us after his own image, so that we could share in his own thoughts, and if piety allows us to say so, our understanding is in this respect of the same kind as the divine, at least as far as we are able to grasp something of it in our moral life.” These are insightful words. They’re the words that gave rise to the more popular summary of it, when that’s often attributed to Kepler, “I was merely thinking God’s thoughts after him.” When it is we study the truths of God’s world—creation, mathematics, virtue, language, and so on, we are, in a sense, uncovering the work of God; we’re thinking his thoughts after him. Perhaps this is one sense of what is meant by Proverbs 25, and verse 2: “It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the honour of kings is to search out a matter.” To use our minds to study God’s world is a way in which we glorify him. We discover the truths he has established. When done rightly, this elicits wonder and delight, ultimately issuing forth in praise and thanksgiving to God, the Maker of all things. It is one way we glorify him, loving him with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind—indeed, the first and greatest commandment. We learn to take captive each thought to the obedience of Christ. And so, all education is for the purpose of glorifying God.

A second reason for education is that we may be better equipped to love and serve our neighbor. The first and greatest commandment is that we love the Lord our God with all that we are. In Matthew 22, and verse 39, we read of the Second Commandment: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” In other words, the Christian exists to love God and to love one’s neighbor. But how does this apply to education? Well, it transforms the reason we study. Or, if the teacher, it transforms why we’re teaching the student. By God’s grace, we study, or we teach; we learn and shepherd; and we mature overall, ultimately for God’s glory. However, we also do these things that we may better serve our neighbor. Our learning is not for ourselves. It is that we may serve our neighbor to his or her good. You could think of it this way. A student passes through the course of education, and along the way, the student learns the language arts, and the mathematical arts, and perhaps from there, it doesn’t matter what particular vocation he enters, he enters into further study—specialized education in a university. He may become a teacher, a doctor, an engineer,

4 *Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

5 Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), a Protestant German astronomer, mathematician, natural philosopher, and author, he was a key figure in the 17th-century Scientific Revolution, best known for his Laws of Planetary Motion.

perhaps even a minister of the gospel. The student may, instead, enter the workforce immediately from the initial education. Or, that student may become an apprentice, and develop a particular skill, an excellence in a trade. All of that is for God to decide and to direct.

But whatever the case, all of the education that student receives is learned in order to serve his neighbor more skillfully and beneficially. If he becomes a doctor, the particular medical training is to be used to the benefit of those in need. If he becomes an attorney, his legal knowledge and skill is to be exercised for the cause of justice and truth, for the benefit of the individual, and for the benefit of society. If he becomes a mechanic, he is to use his skills and his ability to assist those in need. While every lawful vocation is meant to honor the Lord, it is likewise meant to do so in such a way that serves others for their good. If we're following Christ in our course of education, if our education is deriving its understanding from Christ, we should not simply be thinking, "What do I want to do?" We should not simply be asking the student, "What do you think you want to be?" Rather, we're thinking, "What does God want me to do? And how do I do it well to serve others?" Christ transforms our education this way. He directs our knowledge in the way of loving and serving our neighbor.

In other words, our education is not so that we can make a lot of money. It's not so that we can climb the corporate ladder. It's not so that we can enjoy a better retirement. It's not so that we can get out of one level of society into another. Now, there's nothing wrong, in and of itself, with making more money. There's nothing wrong with improving our social standing in and of itself. But the point is, these are not the goals of education, properly considered. The goal, ultimately, is to honor the Lord, but likewise, to serve our neighbor. Existing schools would do well to impress this upon their students, especially those who are nearing graduation, perhaps thinking about entering the workforce, or a trade school, or further education in college or university. The question they should be presenting is this: "How are you going to honor the Lord by serving your neighbor? What are you pursuing that will put you in a position to love and serve your neighbor?" By the way, the whole course of our education, the education we provide to our students and to our children, should be shaping them in such a way that they would be, with maturity, able to serve their neighbor.

Well, a final reason for education is this: it helps us to mature as God intended. When we come to understand in the fuller sense of what the ancients meant, and ultimately what God intends, we'll see that true education is meant to develop and mature the student. As we've noted, the primary reason for this is to glorify God, and closely related, is to love and serve our neighbor. However, to do these things, we must be taken from a state of immaturity, and be brought through a course that would lead toward maturity. It develops the person. Christians are not meant to be content with immaturity. We see this in principle, in Hebrews 5, verse 12: "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat." Likewise do we see this when we observe the development of infants to children; to young adults; to older adults. The simple truth is this: the Lord would have us grow. He would have us mature. Well, true education, then, as we derive our understanding from the Scriptures, is purposely arranged so as to assist, to direct, to cultivate this maturing process. God made us in his image, and yet, the fall has ruined that image. A Christian education will address the whole man, and seek, by God's grace, to restore that image. Not as if education itself—the learning of language and math—is what restores it, but it does understand, Christian education, that the person's body needs to be developed; his soul needs to be developed; his knowledge needs to be developed; his heart needs to be directed to love what

is true, and good, and beautiful. And the whole course of one's education is a process whereby he is experiencing a way forward toward maturity.

This is why certain trends today are both antichristian and even antihuman. Trends in education that are aimless, or, in the hyper-sense of the phrase "child-centered," are neither Christian nor humane. It's true that education will lovingly instruct the child, and will do so in a way that is according to their level and ability, with love, and kindness, and tenderness. And yet, this education will be bringing a child along an established path that ends in maturity—maturity in wisdom and virtue.

Now, all of this demands God's grace, we acknowledge, but it's something that even the ancient pagans acknowledged. The unique impact of Christ is that the goal of maturity ultimately is that we understand Christ Jesus, that we reflect him. Notice Ephesians 4, verse 24: "And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." We're to be pursuing this, yes, by God's grace. It reminds us that the ultimate goal of education is to see God's image more fully in us. And this demands, not only the Liberal Arts, as we'll see, but it demands the sovereign grace of God to transform us, that we would be saved. Yes, we must be diligent and deliberate, but most necessarily, we must look to God in his grace through Jesus Christ. This is what the ancient pagans missed; this is what the Christian is taught; and this is what we most desperately need. If we would have an education that will teach us to understand ourselves and the world around us; if we would have an education that would instruct us faithfully in all truth; if we would have an education that would lead us to grow and serve our neighbors and glorify God, then we must have a Christian education, an education that submits all things to Christ, depends upon Christ, and delights in Christ. We must have a Christian education.