

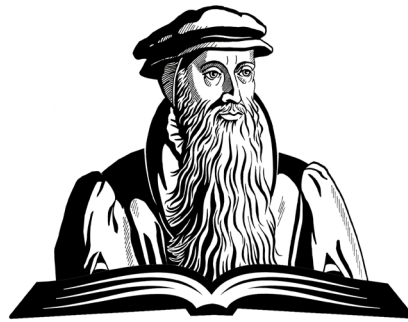
Video Lecture Series

Classical Christian Education

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

LECTURE #5

How Christ Transforms Classical 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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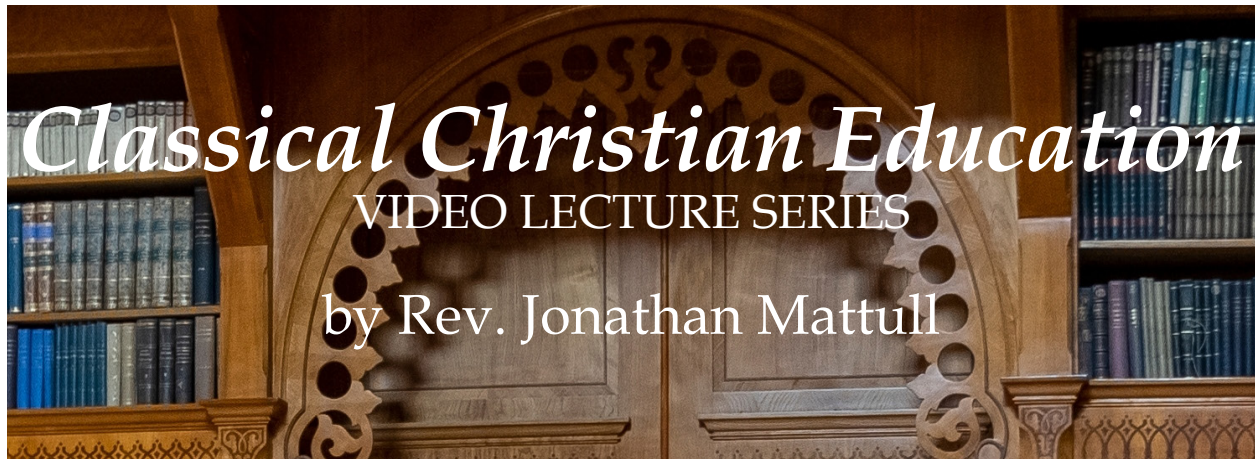
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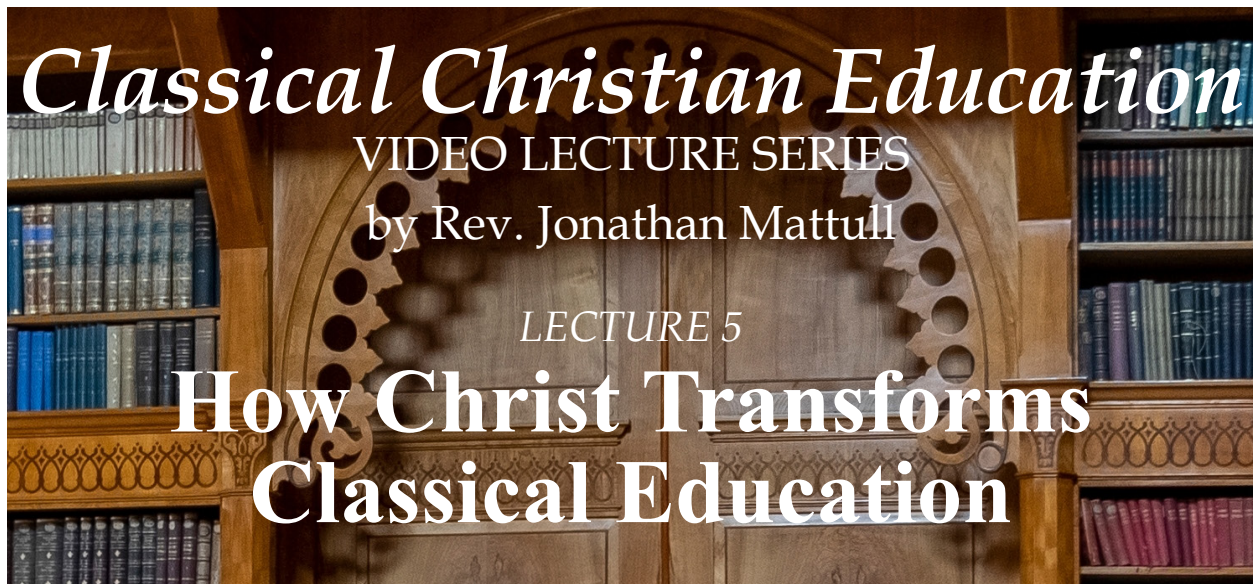
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This lesson concludes the foundational portion of our series. In this, our fifth lesson, we'll consider the important topic of *How Christ Transforms Classical Education*. After this lesson, we'll move forward with our main focus, looking at the Liberal Arts, providing a survey of Classical Christian Education throughout history, and giving practical guidance for implementing this education in our own day, before we finish with our educational goal, and having that set well and clearly before us.

Well, hopefully, we've gleaned enough already to understand the basics of Classical Christian Education already. We may feel that we're ready to enter into a closer look at how to implement this in our home, in our class, or our school, but we need to give consideration to one key part of the foundation more carefully. We've touched on it in various lessons already, and it's something that we'll return to in the future, but its importance warrants our attention now. And the importance is regarding *How Christ Transforms Classical Education*. It's this which makes up the last part of our foundation.

And now you have some sense of an historical focus of Classical Education. At the very least, you know it extends back to the days of the ancient Greeks and Romans. This education contributed to producing some of the most intelligent and wise men in the history of the world—Pythagoras,¹ Euclid,² Plato,³ Marcus Aurelius,⁴ and many more enjoyed the benefits of this education and that in the Classical period. It's no wonder that we would look back to that period to try and glean

1 Pythagoras of Samos (c. 570–495 BC), an ancient Ionian Greek philosopher, polymath, and the eponymous founder of Pythagoreanism. His political and religious teachings were well known in Magna Graecia and influenced the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and through them, Western philosophy.

2 Euclid (fl. 300 BC), was an ancient Greek mathematician, active as a geometer and logician, considered to be the father of geometry, and chiefly known for *The Elements* treatise, which established the foundations of geometry.

3 Plato, *nee* Aristocles (c. 428–348/347 BC), famous ancient Greek philosopher of the Classical period, considered a foundational thinking in Western philosophy, and innovator of written dialogue and dialectic forms. His main studies were Epistemology, Metaphysics, Political philosophy. He was teacher to Aristotle.

4 Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180), was Roman Emperor and a Stoic philosopher, the last of what was later known as the “Five Good Emperors, and the last emperor of the Pax Romana, the age from 27BC to AD180.

lessons as to how we might train our children in our day. We have no doubt but that the education they received was superior in many points, if not superior to all points in most education today. However, in our lessons, we're not arguing for a mere adoption, or even a modernizing of the education that they received. We're not arguing for a mere inclusion of certain aspects of science that has been developed, or certain approaches to mathematics that have been developed since their time. Rather, we're arguing for the education they received, as transformed by Jesus Christ and God's grace. Now, thankfully, this is not something that we have to make up of ourselves. Rather, we have 2,000 years of the Christian church, in various ways wrestling with this matter. They were thinking through, how is it that the Christian church is to approach this Classical Education, and we'll devote a lesson to this very theme, and spend time thinking about how our forefathers in the church approached this topic.

But for this lesson, we'll look specifically at a few ways Christ transforms the education of the Classical period. We touched on some of this already. You'll remember that in a previous lesson, we spoke of how Christ directs us to the source of learning, as well as to the end, or goal, of learning. Well, in this lesson, we want to look at other important aspects that Christ transforms. We summarize our thoughts in three points. First, *Christ Transforms Our Understanding of "the Good"*. Second, *Christ Transforms Our Understanding of the Nature of Man, or, of Man's Great Problem*. And third, *Christ Transforms Our Understanding of the Way of True Virtue*.

So first, *Christ Transforms Our Understanding of "the Good"*. Now, if you've already read the ancients, or you will read the ancients, you'll come across references to "the good". Sometimes this expression is joined with two other ideas, "the true" and "the beautiful." So it has become quite common to find Classical Christian schools speak of *the true, the good, and the beautiful*. And they're using these expressions from the ancient sources. Since Plato and Aristotle⁵ gave attention to this theme, *the good*, we should also remember that they were working within a tradition, the Classical world continued to devote time pondering the meaning of *the good*, and how this *good* relates to leading young people unto maturity—*the good man*. We cannot go into all the details of what was meant in the Classical age, nor can we take up deep consideration of what even one leading thinker meant by it. But we can say the following.

In general, and for Plato especially, the idea of *the good*, was the eternal and perfect idea or form, after which every lesser or particular good is patterned. So, justice, or a just action that is performed by a man, is a particular manifestation and mimicking of *the good*. To be just demands that one knows and mimics the eternal, unchangeable *good*. *The good* directs all human virtue. It informs what it means to be virtuous. It informs what it means to be wise, and courageous, and so on. It's hard to know for certain, but it seems to be the case that Plato regarded this greatest idea or form—*the good*—to be impersonal; that is, it was not, as it were, a god; but rather, the gods or the God, would use *the good* in some sense. It was something greater and more exalted than everything else.

Now, we're merely hinting at thoughts that Plato himself and others set forth, and much more is needed to understand what he or they taught regarding *the good*. But if we understand that *the good* was the ultimate, the perfect, the eternal reality, we can begin to understand a key feature of education in their time, the Classical period, or what we refer to as Classical Education. Everything

⁵ Aristotle (384–322 BC), Ancient Greek philosopher and polymath. His writings cover a broad range of subjects spanning the natural sciences, philosophy, linguistics, economic, politics, psychology, and the arts. He founded the Peripatetic School of philosophy in Athens, and began the Aristotelian tradition which set the groundwork for development of modern science.

we've said thus far in our lessons about education leading a child to become *a good man*, is influenced by this idea. To become a *good man*, one must know *the good*, and good actions are based upon *the good*.

This leads us to an important way Christ transforms Classical Education, or education as practiced in the Classical period. Now, Christ does not direct us to the idea of *the good*. Rather, he directs us to God, who *is good*. In Mark 10, verses 17 and 18, we read the account of one who comes to Christ. The question this man puts to Christ is of the most important thing: "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" Well, notice Mark's account. We read: "When he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" Now, before answering the question, Christ calls the man's attention to a foundational matter. We read: "And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God." Now, Christ will go on to give guidance to this man, but he first asserts this important truth: only God is truly *good*. Now, Christ is not denying that he is God, but he's setting before this man a clarity of understanding, and he's calling this man to consider well the measure of his words. And, perhaps even, Christ is challenging him think that if he's calling Christ good, then we should understand that Christ is God. But whatever the case, what we see is that this transforms our understanding of what is *good*, or *true*, and *beautiful*. As we often ascribe these attributes to many things—that statement is *true*; that action was *good*; that sunset over that field is *beautiful*—well, these words that we use are but lesser expressions than the ultimate. We want our children and students to discern truth, to practice goodness, to delight in beauty. But Christ is helping us see a most important lesson. We cannot do this fully without knowing God himself. If we are going to be lovers of what is good, we ultimately must be lovers of the one true God. This makes us appreciate what Christ says in Matthew 11, verse 27: "All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him." Well, how does this transform our understanding of Classical Education? It makes it clear that to cultivate men and women who will love what is good, and live lives that are good, they must come to know and love God, who is *good*. Christ's teaching, in other words, corrects and transforms the teaching of the unbelieving Greeks and Romans.

Now, we do not mean that he stands as just another teacher in a line of teachers perfecting and correcting what preceded him. Nor do we mean that Christ was, in some way, commenting on the tradition of teaching present at his time. Rather, we mean that his authoritative, his wise, his good, and faithful teaching, as well as his revelation of the truth, agrees with some aspects of what the ancients taught; but it is clearer, it's better, it's fuller. The best of philosophers were but groping in the dark. Christ, who is light, has come and revealed the truth. He's made known the Father. He himself is the eternal Son of God. And by his coming near to us, and instructing us, he's transforming the ancients' teaching. Yes, we must seek to know *the good*, and what *is good*, but it is God who alone *is good*. It is he who has sought us out in the person of his Son. In other words, to know *the good*, we must know the Son.

This helps us realize something. Whereas there is truth to say we are leading our children, leading our students to discern what is true, good, and beautiful, we should start to see that true education is actually God drawing near to us, to teach us. He is good, and he sent his Son to pursue us. And so it gives us a new view of education.

Well, there's much more that could be said, but we move now, second, to consider how *Christ Transforms Our Understanding of the Nature of Man*, or, man's problem. When we study the

ancients, their penetrating insight into the nature of man impresses us. There are few who better understood and articulated the way man's mind works, what emotions are, and how to instruct and motivate and help men, than the ancients. Additionally, they were gifted at differentiating between things that were good and evil. They would analyze things and consider them, not just in the outward expressions, but in the inward motivations. Well, we do not mean that they were perfect. We do not mean that they were always right. But do acknowledge that they were often able to get to the matter of the heart, when they were assessing right from wrong. However, we also see that the ancients understated and underestimated, if not entirely missed a key feature of man's nature. In reading the ancients, we gather the sense that everyone has the capacity to be a *good man*. Sometimes you get the sense that they're already good, it's just a matter of maturing that goodness. It seems to be, in other words, a matter of choice, of wilful resolve—if we can get our young people to choose the *good life*, then all will be well for them. In other words, the thought is that all of them have the ability to do so.

But Christ taught differently. He taught that man's nature, as fallen, is corrupt, it is depraved. Man, since Adam's fall, is fallen. He is a sinner. This is to transform our understanding of man's great problem, which, in turn, transforms our approach to teaching. Man's great problem is not that he is surrounded by bad influences—it is that he is enslaved to sin, and worse, he prefers it that way. Christ, who is the light, has come unto men, but men love darkness rather than the light. Man's great problem is not that he is ignorant about important things; it's that he is wilfully blind, and cannot see the needed truth which is most important. Notice Christ's words in John 8, verse 34, "Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin." Christ teaches that the one who practices sin is enslaved to sin. He's not free to leave off sin. It's not a little matter of new instruction. Rather, he's bound to it because he is a sinner. We see this more fully in Paul's teaching, found in Ephesians 2, verses 1 to 3. Paul writes, "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." Man, as unconverted, whether in the church, in a Christian family, or in a Christian school, or not, is dead in trespasses and sins. Just as a corpse cannot act, neither can a soul dead in sin do any true good.

While, this has important implications for our understanding of the gospel, it should also transform our understanding of what we are doing in education. While we are, as we'll see, seeking to form excellent skills and noble behavior; while we are seeking to cultivate and inform the lives of our students, training, as it were, their hearts, to discern and even desire what is *good*, we realize that this leaves us, ultimately, in the absolute need of God's grace. We don't have the power of ourselves, nor does education, to raise the souls of these students, however well-informed they are. They're dead in their sins. And Classical Christian Education, in their mere passing through its curriculum, their learning all of the lessons, their mastering the lessons, and their good behavior that, perhaps, would follow will not change them from being dead in their sins.

So how does this transform our actual teaching? Well, if, as we contend, one of the purposes of education is to lead boys and girls unto true virtue, we need to see that this demands a radical change. Fallen man is capable of rather impressive acts of self-denial and service to others. If you read the ancients, you'll see this for yourself. However, this is not the highest form of virtue. The highest form of virtue, to which we long for our children to attain, is loving God with all their

heart, and loving their neighbor as themselves. So as soon as we come face to face with this, we realize that our students need far more than the best education can provide. God must give life to their souls by his grace. We can learn about this. We can memorize it. We can recite it. However, in the end, Christ reminds us that sinners, however well educated, however well refined, are still sinners who are in need of salvation.

And to be clear, this does not change or transform our teaching on moral learning and behavior expectations. We remember that clear teaching, on God's law, for instance, is a means that God himself uses to convict sinners to see their need and turn to Christ. We can use all the educational methods, and employ them to train our children to learn God's law well. Additionally, God may use that clear teaching and right behavior to prevent many kinds of sin from outbreking. However, we must remember that the well-behaved sinner, the well-educated sinner, is still a sinner in need of Christ.

I emphasize this because I've seen Christian schools miss this point. They've taught their students to learn their lessons well, their students have become well-behaved and can recite various portions of the Bible; their students are free of various scandals many times. However, many have failed to see that their great problem is their sin. How should this transform our teaching? Well, one way is that we should be sure to trace the actions and displays of sin back to their source. This is what Christ does, for instance, in Matthew 15, verse 19, when he says, "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemes." This isn't all we do, but it is something we must impress upon our students. Sinful actions, however severe, or however minor they may seem, come from a sinful heart.

Another way this should transform our teaching is by emphasizing the need our students have of being under the means of grace in a faithful church. The Lord can use, and has used, Classical Christian Education in mighty ways for many years. In fact, we think one reason the church is currently in a poor state as to its discernment and godly eloquence, is because of its current approach to education, at least in general terms. However, it is the preaching of the gospel by ordained ministers that is the primary way of addressing man's fallen state. We must not allow the Christian school, however well committed to Classical Education, replace the centrality of the gospel and the gospel church for our children and our students. School boards and administrators need to consider this well. Teachers need to consider it. Perhaps most of all, Christian families need to consider it. In the United States, at least, there are families who have contented themselves by sending their children to Christian schools, or by implementing Christian homeschooling curriculum. However, they fail to emphasize the need of the gospel and the centrality of preaching. And so, homeschooling or Classical Christian schooling in the school becomes more important than involvement in the life of the church, the explicit ministry of the church.

Now, we should not look on this as an either/or decision. Rather, we should see that our children preeminently need the preaching of the gospel in the ordinary gathering of the church, because this is the primary way that God addresses man's problem. But they also need faithful Christian and Classical Education to contribute to their overall development. And so, instead of an either/or, we see a both/and. And why? Because it's the preaching of God's Word that the Spirit uses to expose man to his great need.

And this then leads us to the last part of our lesson, third, *Christ Transforms Our Understanding of the Way of Virtue*. We cannot read the ancients and miss their emphasis that we should be striving to live *the good life*. Everything else should be set aside—riches, pleasure, even a long life, is something that is beneath *the good life*. It doesn't mean a life of riches and luxury. Rather, they

were convinced that we ought to pursue a life of wisdom, of courage, of temperance, of justice, which would demand sacrifice, and patience, endurance, kindness, restraint, and love. While some of the ancients were wealthy, what strikes us is that those we know best were opposed to indulging their desires, even if they had access to means. They had something right in this. When we recall that they did not have the gospel, it rebukes us in many ways that pagans could so live lives of self-denial, while we who profess Christ often give ourselves to petty, self-satisfying pleasures. If you have not, you should make it a point to read through the discourses in *The Handbook of Epictetus*,⁶ the Roman slave who was termed a philosopher. And if you do, you'll discover errors in his words and thoughts, but you'll also be challenged at the ability of such an unconverted man to articulate a self-denying life, and a life of contentment.

However, as you read through the works of the great ancients, whether Epictetus, or Plato, Aristotle, Cicero,⁷ or Marcus Aurelius, you cannot fail to miss the sense of ability they ascribe to man. This is not to deny their general appeal to the need for God—or the gods, in their case—to intervene, but it is to acknowledge that they put a high thought upon the ability that man had. Now, compare this with Christ's teaching on virtue and the cause of it. We can see this in John's Gospel, chapter 3, verse 3: "Jesus answered"—of course, he's speaking to Nicodemus—"and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." And similarly, in John 3, verse 5, "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." In this section, Christ is teaching that a sinner must first be given spiritual life by God before he can see and enter into Christ's kingdom. Before he can discern and begin, he must be given life. This is an important truth. When we spoke of the second way Christ transforms our education, by dealing with the nature of man, or man's problem, we were talking about man's greatest problem. Well, this is the great solution. The initial cause of any and all true virtue is God's saving grace. Man first must be born again by that grace, causing him to see and embrace Jesus Christ as the Savior, before he can perform any virtue, of any sort, in any true matter.

Similarly, notice Paul's writing in Ephesians 2, verses 4 through 10. He writes: "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Paul is telling us that it is God who must first give life to the dead sinner. It is by his grace that a sinner is saved. It is not by man's works, however heroic, however informed, and wise, and just, and temperate, and courageous. It is not by our works. We do not attain to the acceptance with God by our works. It is all by God's grace. But notice, it's by his grace, through faith that we are saved, writes Paul. Then he says, "We are

⁶ *The Handbook of Epictetus*, or, *Enchiridion of Epictetus*, a manual of Stoic ethical advice mostly derived from the *Discourses of Epictetus*. Epictetus (c. AD 50–c. 135), was an ancient Greek Stoic philosopher, born into Roman slavery. After his formal emancipation, he began to teach philosophy, but was banished from Rome by Domitian, and founded a school of philosophy in Nicopolis.

⁷ Cicero, aka: Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC–43 BC), a Roman statesman, lawyer, scholar, philosopher, orator, writer, and Academic skeptic, who tried to uphold optimate principles during the political crisis that led to the establishment of the Roman Empire. He's know for treatises on rhetoric, philosophy, and politics, and he served as consul in 63 BC, and was assassinated by Mark Antony's followers.

his”—that is, God’s—“workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.” This is the way of true virtue. It is by God’s grace giving us life, uniting us to Christ, and causing us to commune with him.

I hope what you see is that this must transform our approach to Classical Education as Christians. Again, we do not dispense with the clear lessons on the nature of the virtues—wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice. We are clear in our expressing of what these things are, and in our expectations of how our students are to behave. We do not dim the brightness regarding them. However, we are sure to show that these virtues are only possible by God’s grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. This will lead the Christian Classical school to emphasize Christ, not as some simple answer, or simplistic answer, but rather, as a robust answer to the way of virtue. Students will be taught that true virtue is only truly possible through a vital and saving union with him, who is “the way, the truth, and the life.” Again, the Christian school will emphasize the great importance of its students participating in the life of the gospel church, hearing the gospel regularly. Because a sinner may only be made good, as they are first forgiven their evil deeds, their sins, by the cross of Christ, and as they are enlivened by Christ to walk in those good works, which God has before ordained for them. In other words, Christ transforms our teaching of true education unto virtue, by directing us to Christ himself.

Well, as we close, we can summarize our main point this way. Christ transforms Classical Education by directing us, ultimately, to him for our all. There’s no true knowledge of the good, the true, or the beautiful without a true and saving knowledge of Christ. Man is not a savior of himself; education is not a savior of man. There is no ability of man to attain unto virtue without the saving grace of Jesus Christ and the true knowledge of God. In the end, this should lead us always to cry out to God, for his grace to be given to our students. Without this, we provide them with Classical Education perhaps, but we will not provide them with Christian education. Let us keep Christ ever before us, and always impress him upon our students. And, as we do, may God bless this service to our children, not only for their growth in this life, but for their hope of salvation in the life to come.