

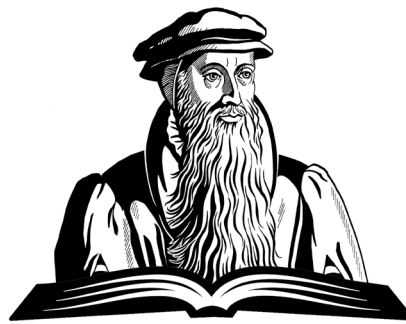
Video Lecture Series

# *Classical Christian Education*

*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

LECTURE #8

## **Historical Overview of 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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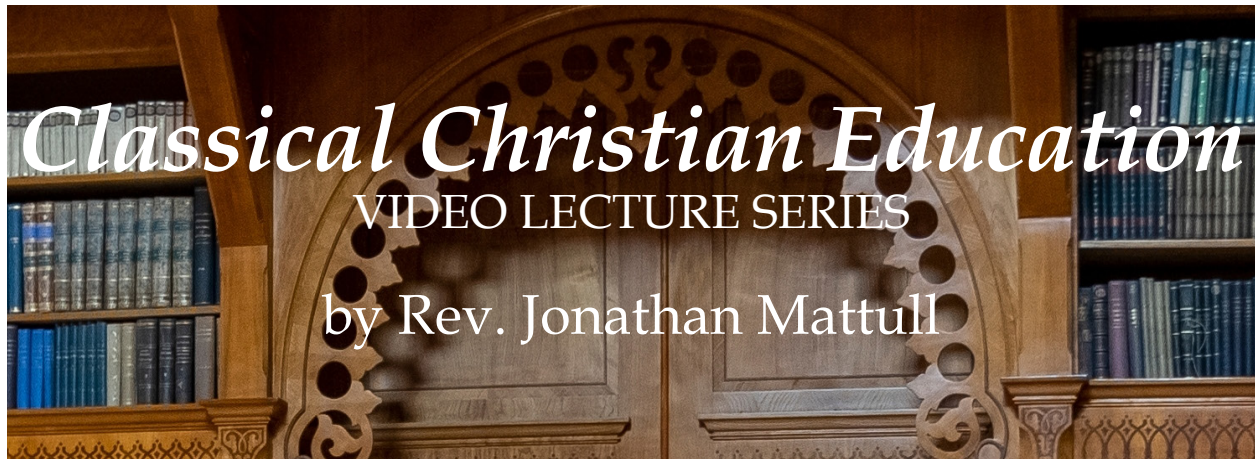
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1. An Introduction to Classical Christian Education
2. Christian Commitments in Education
3. Classical Elements for Education from Antiquity
4. Reading Authors from Antiquity with Discernment and Benefit
5. How Christ Transforms Classical Education
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



- i) Introduction
  - 1. Ancient Greek Education
  - 2. Ancient Roman Adoption
  - 3. Christian Adaptation of this Education

### **Introduction**

As we've seen, Classical Education refers to that education practiced in Classical antiquity. We've noted that it has developed over time, as generations have adapted it for their own particular cultures and their own identified needs. While we've hinted occasionally at the history of Classical Education, in this lesson, we provide a very brief but illustrative historical survey. While we could have placed this historical survey earlier in our series of lessons, we've deferred it until now to emphasize the essence or key commitments of Classical Education. We hope that, having touched on the essence of Classical Education, this historical survey will provide helpful context and illustration of how previous generations practiced Classical Education.

As with any survey, we must refrain from exploring the interesting nuances and detail. I'm giving you an accurate sketch, at best, of the landscape. With this, though, I hope that you'll be encouraged to explore the field more fully. If you wish to look further into this topic, there are standard works to consult by Plato,<sup>1</sup> and Aristotle,<sup>2</sup> Cicero,<sup>3</sup> and Quintillian.<sup>4</sup> One of the best

1 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.

2 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.

3 Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC–43 BC), aka Cicero, was 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.

4 Marcus Fabius Quinilianus, AKA Quintilian, or Quintillian, or Quinctilian (c. 35–c. 100 AD), Roman educator and rhetorician, born in Hispania, he opened a public school of rhetor, surviving under several Roman emperors including Domitian, who made him tutor to his two grand nephews in AD 90.

surveyes of Classical Education from Classical antiquity to the early church is a work titled, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, by an author named Marrou.<sup>5</sup> This lesson has incorporated many of his insights, though with less detail.

The lesson before us provides an overview—a very brief overview, of Classical Education’s practice in history, and this, for the purpose of understanding better how we may continue this tradition today. In our lesson, we provide merely an illustrative survey. First, *Ancient Greek Education*; second, *Ancient Roman Adoption*; and third, *Christian Adaptation* of this Education. So, first,

## 1. Ancient Greek Education

We begin with a general breakdown of schooling in ancient Greece. Well, we’ve mentioned before, we need to remember that Greek education largely centered in the gymnasium. Now, many of us hear the word “gymnasium,” and we think of a place merely to exercise our bodies, and such was the case then. But it became a place of great learning. It was a place, as Plato indicates, where boys and men would be trained in music, physical development, and learning, particularly philosophy, and letters, language. In general, it seems that formal education was reserved for those who were better off in society. And so, sometimes we see that the notion of liberal education, or Liberal Arts education is an education that was reserved for the free man, not for the slave. But whatever that may be, there are indications that some provision was made for boys of various backgrounds, but certainly, the free citizen was the one who most thoroughly received education. Furthermore, while boys received the main focus of education, there were schools for young girls as well. And so, there was a diversity, even in Greece, on these various things.

It may be helpful to remember that ancient Greece had different city-states, so there was not a uniform approach in every detail. For instance, Sparta focused increasingly upon that education which would promote military ability; while Athens, the center of Classical Education, was much broader, and focused on the pursuit of wisdom. Now, while this may be a generalization, it is, nonetheless, an accurate generalization. When we speak of ancient Greece, we refer to the ancient Greece of Classical antiquity, from about 800 BC to 31 BC. Historians will refer to Classical Greece as the span from 800 BC to the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. The Hellenistic period runs from the death of Alexander to the establishing of the Roman Empire in 31 BC. That’s when Rome defeated the stronghold of the Ptolemaic Empire.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, in a span of almost 800 years, there were developments and differences that are observed. Additionally, the land that Alexander conquered embraced many miles. However, as Alexander advanced his borders, he took with him the Greek language and its institutions, including schools. And because of this, we can identify some points of unity generally to be the case throughout ancient Greek education.

Generally, education in ancient Greece took part in the gymnasium. It was divided across three phases, what we may call primary, secondary, and higher education. These three phases corresponded with teachers of those three levels. The *grammatist*, who taught letters, syllables, and spelling; and secondly, the *grammarian*, who taught formal grammar, a careful study of Greek writers and poets. It’s the grammarian who would teach the students the progymnasmata, developing facilitating language, and exposing the students to excellent examples. But it wasn’t

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5 Henri-Irénée Marrou, or, H. I. Marrou (1904–1977), was a French historian, a Christian humanist.

6 Ptolemaic Empire was an ancient Greek polity based in Egypt during the Hellenistic period, founded 305 BC by Ptolemy I Soter, a companion of Alexander the Great, and ruled by the Ptolemaic Dynasty until the death of Cleopatra VII in 30 BC.



until the third stage, *the rhetor*, from which we have the word “rhetoric,” who taught the finer points of formal rhetoric. It’s the third and final stage that was reserved for, in many ways, the best students, and those who could afford such higher education. And so, whereas the larger amount of students would receive the primary and secondary, it was the best of students who would enter into that final phase.

Importantly, what was generally true of schools in Greece, was a focus upon mastering language. Now, it’s true, as we’ve indicated earlier, that the whole of the Liberal Arts were, in various degrees, practiced; but over time, the emphasis upon the Trivium was the primary focus for these levels of schooling. Progressing through the normal stages would lead to great ability with thought and words. This was important on two counts. First, the education would hand down the heritage deemed important. This is an important point. It was primarily a conservative effort. Those wise men, and counsels, and others of societies, determined that certain virtues and certain ideals should be passed on, and so, a heritage was being preserved. But second, this education would prepare the student for life in a democracy, which Greece was. These two things will continue for the whole of Classical Education, even unto this day. There is a very clear emphasis upon conserving a particular kind of heritage, and there is the equipping of its students to live well in a democracy. These things continue today.

Well, we move to consider *Illustrious Teachers in Ancient Greece*. Now, there are many that are well known and lesser known, and all we can do is touch upon those who are best known, so that you have, at least, some sort of context. The foremost teachers of higher learning in ancient Greece were Socrates,<sup>7</sup> Plato, and Aristotle. These were closely related. Socrates taught Plato. Plato taught Aristotle. Others proved their importance as well. Isocrates was another student of Socrates; and Pathagoras,<sup>8</sup> from whom we have the Pythagorean Theorem. However, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have stood the test of time, as the preeminent teachers of ancient Greece. Their works have been reproduced, studied, and taught continuously.

Socrates lived from around 470 to 399 BC. His thoughts are best known to us through his student, Plato, in Plato’s *Dialogues*. However, others of his students also provide insights to Socrates, his method, and his commitments. Socrates himself did not seem to oversee a formal school, so, in some sense, Socrates was not formally engaged in what we consider to be education. However, he instructed others by engaging them in discussions, and debates, and *Dialogues*, for which he is most famous. Additionally, his thoughts contributed to the formation of schools, because his pursuit of wisdom, which was his great quest, caused him to emphasize certain methods and means to weed out error and to discern truth. This, of course, necessarily demanded speaking well, faithfully, logically, speaking clearly, meaningfully, all of which, among many other things he emphasized are important for education.

And Plato lived roughly from 428 to 327 BC. He founded the school in Athens, called *The Academy*. In Athens, it was established around 387 BC. Notably, it continued as a place of learning for almost 300 years. It’s Plato, of course, that records for us, in many ways, the primary material that we have for knowing Socrates. The difficulty is that, at times, it’s hard to know how much of

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<sup>7</sup> Socrates (c. 470–399 BC), famous Greek philosopher from Athens, he is credited as the founder of Western philosophy, one of the first moral philosophers of the ethical tradition of thought. Accused of impiety and corrupting the youth, Socrates was sentenced to death by drinking poison.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

what we read from Plato is Socrates, and his particular meaning, and Plato's particular meaning, if there is a difference between the two. But what is important for us to note is that it's through Plato's writings that we gain a glimpse of what learning was like. And it's through Plato's writings that we get a sense of the goals of education, and how society should function; what a republic should do to ensure that its citizens were educated well, and for what end and purpose. If one wants to understand *Theory of Education*, in its rude and basic ways, one, in many ways, should begin with Plato. Now, there's much more that must be said of Plato on other occasions, but for our survey, we simply note his great influence upon the world of education, even still to this day.

We move to Aristotle, who lived from 384 to 322 BC. He studied with Plato for about twenty years until Plato died. After Plato's death, he was appointed the tutor of Alexander the Great. And here, we see, as we mentioned earlier, the means by which Greek education would envelope the Western world. Aristotle also established his own school, the Lyceum, where he taught. You could pull up a map of ancient Greece, and you can look in Athens, and you'll see places which are thought to be where both Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum met.

Now, while each of these influenced their own generations through their writings studied by subsequent generations, they themselves have left for us, in their writings, great insight into what Classical Education was. Aristotle himself sets forth very clear articulations of what logic and rhetoric is. He testifies to us and gives us examples in himself of what it looks like to pursue wisdom, as does Plato, and as far as we know, Socrates, through Plato's writings, and others, so Socrates.

Schools were set up and modeled after their approaches and their theories. But it's not only their approaches and theories; in fact, their actual content was included in the schools, for, well, we can say it this way—even to this day. their emphases continued to influence education, particularly Classical Education, to this very moment.

Oh, what a woefully short survey of ancient education in Greece, and yet, hopefully, at least a little point for you to consider, as we consider something of the fountainhead of the river of Classical Education.

We move, second, and briefly, to consider,

## **2. The Ancient Roman Adoption**

Fundamentally, Classical Rome embraced Greek education. Education, of course, existed within Rome before it embraced the Greek approach. However, once Rome embraced Greece's approach, it mirrored Greece almost directly. As such, there were many similarities. There were, of course, private tutors, but also schools privately run by independent instructors, roughly corresponding to the same three phases we've identified in ancient Greek schooling. The important point to notice is that the same approach continued.

First, master the letters and sounds. Master the syllables. Master how to spell. Master how to pronounce what these symbols were representing. Then, when that primary, that first level education was attained, move on to the mastering of grammar itself. Similar exercises to the Greek progymnasmata were employed, and they were used, sometimes even using the very same exercises, translated into Latin. Other times, alternates were developed by Roman educators.

But finally, the pinnacle of Roman education, as in ancient Greek, was rhetoric. It is this third stage that we have the masters most clearly in sight. Cicero, said to be the greatest practitioner of rhetoric, and Quintilian,<sup>9</sup> said to be the greatest instructor. Both of these men, in their works,

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<sup>9</sup> Marcus Fabius Quinilianus, aka Quintilian (c. 35–c. 100 AD), was a Roman educator and rhetorician, born in

theorize on every stage of education, and exemplify what an educated man was.

Briefly, Cicero lived from 106 to 43 BC. He was a Roman senator and a well-respected scholar. He never led a school, formally considered, though his writings exemplify Roman education. Additionally, he argues for a thorough education of youth from early ages, on to the mastery of rhetoric in early adulthood. And, as was common, he emphasized the importance of virtue. Now, we can look at some things in Cicero's life, and wonder at his failure to attain and maintain the standards of the highest forms of virtue he himself articulates. But when we look at his articulation itself, we wonder at the clarity with which he set forth the standards that we ought to strive to attain. Moreover, he emphasized the importance of instructing children in virtue, virtuously; that there should be care taken by teachers, to instruct them in what's right, while they themselves, as teachers, are living in accordance to that virtue. He's setting forth something very important for all of Classical Education, gleaned from the Greeks, practiced by himself in his own way, and later, as we'll see, articulated by Quintilian, and onward up to the present day of Classical Christian Education. It was always deemed an education that was virtuous—training, cultivating wisdom and eloquence together.

It's in Quintilian that we see the clearest picture of what ancient Classical Education was. He lived, after Cicero, from 35 AD to 100 AD. And you'll notice that his lifetime, of course, is within the time of the New Testament. He was a Roman from a wealthy family, and he received an excellent education, and he himself taught rhetoric. He is best known by his work, *Institutes of Oratory*, in which he sets forth the ideal education from early youth to adulthood.

Roman education, perhaps even more than Greek, emphasized the importance of handing down the traditional Roman ideals of virtue. It is, in this sense, fundamentally conservative. It was intended to conserve the ideas, the ways, and the approaches of Rome. In that sense, Classical Education was not about innovation. It was about maintaining the truth, and the beauty, and the goodness that has been discerned. And it's here we see something fundamentally important about Classical Education, as practiced in history, and as should be practiced today. If truth, beauty, and goodness change not, then we should have an expectation that the virtues we're pursuing will not change either, because we're trying to discern those things, embrace those things, and practice those things. This is something we glean from a simple survey—brief, brief survey—of how the ancient Greeks and ancient Romans approached education.

It's in Quintilian that we find a very clear breakdown of what ages should study, and how they should learn the masterful writing of the letters, and how the teacher should lovingly correct, and not only, as it were, strike them, but win them to love what is good and beautiful, and to pursue the same. It's Quintilian that sets forth very clearly the progression of lessons, and the progression of focus within the different levels of education. And so, in Quintilian, we get an excellent picture, at least of the ideal of what an early child should begin studying, and what it looks like all the way to the highest level of education. If you wish to dive in to Classical Education, albeit from an unbelieving source, you should read Quintilian's *Institutes*, and you'll do well to glean much from him.

But we move from *Ancient Greek*, and *Roman General*, to our third division, which is,

### 3. The Christian Adaptation

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Hispania, he opened a public school of rhetoric, surviving under several Roman emperors including Domitian, who made him tutor to his two grand nephews in AD 90.



It's important to remember that Christianity arose within Palestinian Judaism, which itself was within the Roman Empire. For hundreds of years, Rome functioned as a republic. However, with the assassination of Julius Caesar<sup>10</sup> in 44 BC, a series of events culminated in the victory of Caesar Augustus<sup>11</sup> over Mark Anthony<sup>12</sup> and Cleopatra,<sup>13</sup> in 31 BC, a year we've already mentioned. This led to the establishment of the Roman Empire and the subsequent Pax Romana, or the 200 years of Roman peace. This means that the New Testament history is a particular history taking place within the Roman Empire. Additionally, as the church expanded within the Book of Acts, it is largely expanding within the Roman Empire. Understandably, this means that, as the church expanded, the church encountered the culture of the Roman Empire and its institutions, not least of which was the school and approach to education.

Now, due to the idolatry and waywardness of many Romans, early Christians struggled with how to approach their Classical culture and their Christianity. Some seemingly pushed against it, emphasizing the importance of Christ over and against all else. Of course, Christ is over all else, and there ought to be no compromise made. We can see this struggle in Tertullian's<sup>14</sup> famous words, "What hath Jerusalem to do with Athens?" However, it's important to read Tertullian in context, because when you do so, you see how thoroughly trained he himself was in the Classical model, and how he himself consciously and deliberately used his Classical Education well. In other words, Tertullian himself was a product of Classical Education and the Christian grace of God in the gospel.

We see various Christians trained within antiquity using their learning to God's glory. Clement of Alexandria, who lived from AD 150 to 215; Tertullian who we already mentioned, AD 155 to 220; Augustine, AD 354 to 430. These three, to will leave out many more, all show the marks of a thorough training in the Classics. They understood and they knew all these ancient sources well. They knew of Homer, and they knew of his works and writing. They knew of the theories of Plato and Aristotle. While they rejected the idolatry and the vices of their Classical culture, they used their learning to promote the cause of Christ. And what a beautiful image that is for us. They gleaned, as it were, the best that Classical Education in their day had to offer, and they devoted it in service to the Lord. Which, by the way, as mentioned in an earlier lesson, is similar to what Moses did. Moses was well trained in all of the learning of Egypt. And yet, instead of using that for himself and his own gain, he used every gift he had in service to the Lord. It's important to note that if you were a Roman citizen, even as a Christian, and you had the ability to send your children to schools, you

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10 Gaius Julius Caesar (100–44 BC), was a Roman general and statesman. As member of the First Triumvirate, Caesar led the Roman armies in the Gallic Wars before defeating his political rival, Pompey, in a civil war. He subsequently became *dictator*, from 49 BC until his assassination in 44 BC. He played a critical role in the events leading to the demise of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Roman Empire.

11 Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus (63 BC–AD 14), aka Octavian, was the founder of the Roman Empire. He reigned as the first Roman emperor from 27 BC until his death. His reign initiated an imperial cult, declaring that the emperors were divinely sanctioned, and the Pax Romana, in which the Roman world was largely free of armed conflict.

12 Marcus Antonius, aka Mark Anthony (83 BC–30 BC), was a Roman politician and general who played a critical role in the transformation of the Roman Republic from a constitutional republic into the autocratic Roman Empire.

13 Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator (70–10 BC), was Queen of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt from 51 to 30 BC, and the last active Hellenistic Pharaoh.

14 Tertullian (c. 155–220 AD) was an early Christian author and apologist, from Carthage in the Roman province of Africa. He was a polemicist against heresy, including Gnosticism, the first Christian author to produce extensive Christian literature in Latin.

did so observing the three stages already indicated. Apart from seasons of persecution, Christian families were sending their children to the primary and secondary schools we've noted earlier. They were learning Aesop and Homer, Virgil and Cicero. They were exposed to ancient fables and myths, poetry and history. They were mastering language. In the home and in the church, they were learning the truths of Christianity, the gospel, and Christ's will. Homeschooling, as we think of it, was not common, apart from exceptional cases in times of persecution. Christians were Classically educated in what we would call Classical schools.

There were developments over time—monasticism, as a movement. Some would leave the pagan cities to form societies in isolation, where all that they did would be focused exclusively upon God's Word. Necessarily, those who went to the monasteries were trained to read and write, so that they could read the Bible, memorize and copy the Psalms, as well as other parts of the Scripture. But soon enough, what was realized was, in order to read the Bible, one had to understand language. Now such centers of monasticism were not Classical in the senses we emphasized. However, over time, many monasteries became centers of preserving learning. Important cities with important ministers would often have schools associated with them. The pastor or bishop would train boys and young men on the basics of the faith, learning the Scriptures, often the entire Psalter by heart. They would often learn the Classics while learning the Bible and theology. Doing so would expose them to excellence in language, understanding how to think clearly and faithfully, and yet, doing so under the authority of Scripture would ensure, by God's blessing, that they were using their learning to the service of God, to discern the truth and meaning of his Word, and to articulate faithfully if called to the ministry.

As the Roman Empire continued, and Constantine<sup>15</sup> legalized Christianity, parochial schools were established. These, in many ways, resembled schools as we know them today. In many nations, there are schools set up in what we might call districts, or neighborhoods, and this, in some ways, resembles what was taking place at that time in Christianity. In these schools, the Classics would be taught in the three-phased way we already mentioned. We don't have time to trace all the ongoing struggle in development, however, what we do know at present is that, in a general approach, early Christians were trained in the Classics, to read, to write, to think, to speak. They were learning the same lessons that were being taught, as represented by Tertullian, in the schools to which they went. Additionally, early Christians adopted that learning when they were forced to establish their own schools. Though there would be seasons of lesser learning that would characterize different errors of Christianity through the ages, when the Renaissance arose, there was a conscious embrace of the Classics that reigned again. Whatever the abuses of some forms of the Renaissance may have been, there was an appeal to go back to the sources, to read the New Testament in Greek, to learn Greek, which of course, was massively recovered at the Reformation.

Prior to the Reformation, you had a movement of "The Brethren of the Common Life," and the Brethren of the Common Life were not a formal order of Roman Catholicism, but it was an effort to train children well. Of course, you had great thinkers that came out of those schools—Thomas à Kempis, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and others as well, all who helped, in one way or another, influence the development of the Reformation, which we'll look at in the next lesson. When the Reformation took root, it did so with a conscious embrace of Classical Education.

Oh, we acknowledge that this survey is even a brief survey at that. But what we hope to have provided is a very high-level, bird's-eye view, we might say, of the landscape of Classical

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<sup>15</sup> Constantine the Great (AD 272–337), was a Roman emperor from 306 to 337, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, declaring it legal in the empire in 313.

Education, traced from its fountainhead in Athens, in Greece, and as it broadened in the Roman Empire, and as it particularly develops under Christians, embracing, as it were, the method and the emphases of Classical Education of antiquity; but likewise, using that for the cause of Christ, and incorporating within their learning the message of the Scriptures.

So as we close, we ought to appreciate how longstanding Classical, and Classical Christian Education is. The term may, in some sense, be rather new, the past hundred years to refer to Classical Christian Education, but the thing goes back to the very beginning. There have been variations of approach and emphasis, but its general focus has ever been upon mastering language and thinking, cultivating virtue, and developing wise men and women to the glory of God. As Christians who embraced this, all of this was seen as only possible through Jesus Christ. Additionally, its purposed handing down of a set of ideal and virtues that were deemed worthy of mankind has remained the mark of Classical Education even to this day.

So this should give us some encouragement. We're actually in the same stream as those forefathers of ours were in. We're drinking from the same water they were drinking from. And by the Lord's blessing, we look to him to provide similar blessings, that his kingdom would expand, both within us, and beyond us unto others. So as we hope to embrace Classical Christian Education, to do so will demand that we exercise like care over the same concerns as our forefathers had; that we give diligent instruction in the basics of learning to read and write; to understand how language works; and to develop the student's ability to communicate beautifully, persuasively, and well; but all under the Lordship of Christ, for his glory; embracing the message of the gospel; thinking through—as Tertullian warns us of—the compromises of the ancient pagans and their idolatry; but likewise, as Augustine reminds us, and as, after him, Calvin would remind us, and many others between, that there is something within these ancients, even unbelieving ancients, in their discerning of language and truth, and their commitment to pursuing those things, that we ought to embrace. As we take up the mantle of our forefathers, by God's blessing, may it be that we likewise witness the increase of wisdom and eloquence in our own day, and likewise by his blessing, that subsequent generations would enjoy such favorable seasons as well.

Well, from here, we'll turn to look briefly at how Classical Education was practiced in the Reformation, in our next lesson. All of this is meant, not to answer every question, but, hopefully, to give you some context and perspective, and whet your own appetite to dive in to the literature of our forefathers and what they've provided us, to glean about education, and to consider how we may adapt it to our own day, for the glory of God now and always.