

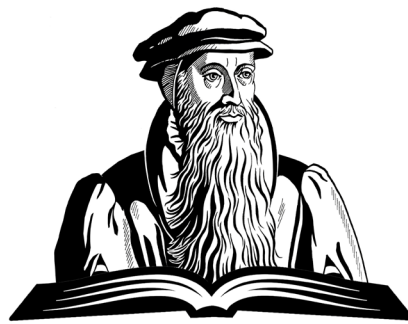
Video Lecture Series

Classical Christian Education

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

LECTURE #10

Potential Dangers in Classical Christian 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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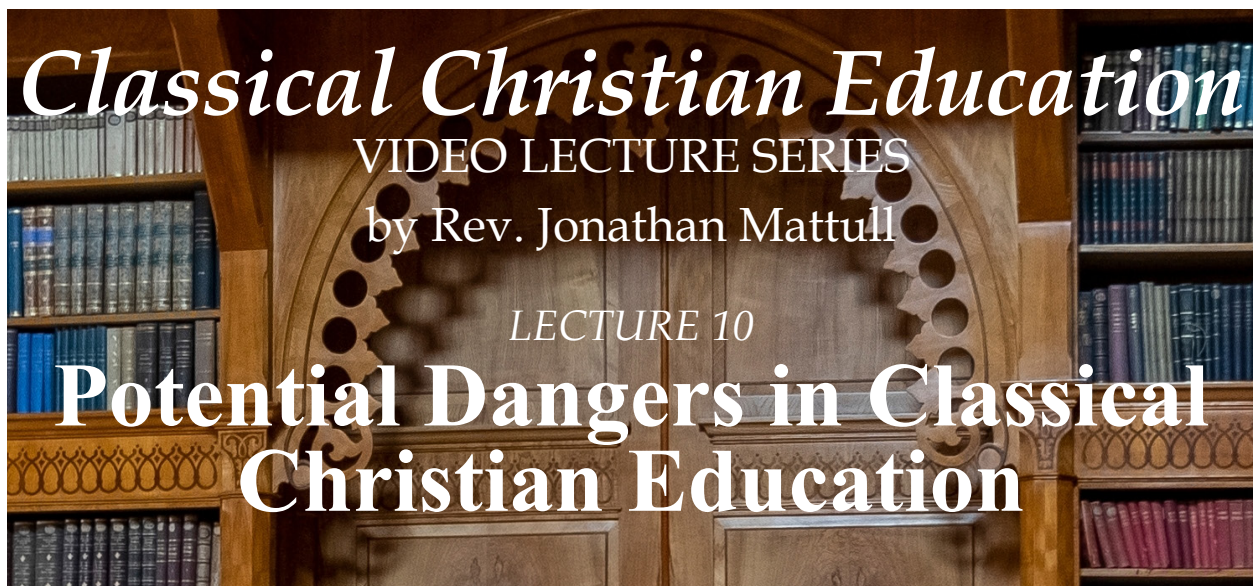
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Introduction

1. Dangers Due to Misunderstanding the Nature of Classical Education.
2. Dangers Due to Misunderstanding the Nature of True Christianity.

Introduction

In our series of lessons, we've already highlighted several benefits of Classical Christian Education. We'll consider these benefits more directly in our next lesson. However, before we handle those benefits, it would be good for us to be made more aware of the dangers of this approach to education. By doing this, we do not mean to imply that the dangers are directly embedded in the actual education itself. Today, in the West, at the very least, there are dangers of secular public schooling, and these dangers are actually embedded in that approach to education. The Progressive public schooling of today actively cultivates godlessness in a variety of forms and degrees. Classical Christian schools, on the other hand, necessarily emphasize the truths of God's Word, and hold forth the need of Jesus Christ as Savior. The dangers are not embedded in Classical Christian Education itself. Instead, the dangers are due to a misunderstanding—a misunderstanding both of the nature of Classical Education, and the nature of true Christianity.

The lesson flows out of experience within Classical Christian Education of twenty years and just a little bit beyond. During those twenty years, I've seen the great beauty of Classical Christian Education and what it produces, all of course, blessed by God. I look forward to speaking of some of those in future lessons. However, I've also witnessed great failures within the Classical Christian world of today. My role as teacher and headmaster has afforded me insight into other teachers, their students, and the families that support such schools. Additionally, I've attended national conferences. I've visited and collaborated with teachers and administrators of other schools. I've had to assess curricula and attend teacher training and workshops. I've worked through the complicated world of contemporary education, and particularly in its Classical manifestation. The lesson before us brings together a number of common pitfalls I've witnessed. In identifying them, I'm calling your attention to the dangers that sit before you. Watch against these, that by God's blessing, you may not only avoid them, but that you may enjoy the great blessings God provides

in a right approach to education.

We divide these dangers into two types. The first type has to do with misunderstanding the nature of Classical Education. And the second type includes those that confuse the nature of true Christianity. So let's begin with the first type.

1. Dangers Due to Misunderstanding the Nature of Classical Education

One way that this happens is by *mislabeling Progressive approaches to education as "Classical"*. Many parents have become concerned about current trends in Progressive education. Most public schools in the West are consciously committed to Progressive principles. Additionally, many schools join these Progressive principles of education with unbiblical ideas of morality. Because of this, many parents have chosen to leave that scene, which is, of course, a good decision. Sometimes this leads a family to teach their children at home. Other times, it leads them to join an existing Christian school. Still other times, it leads them even to begin a school. I've seen all of these approaches work well. However, I've also seen a common error develop in each of these approaches. In identifying the immorality of Progressive schools as a fundamental problem, the only focus, at least the temptation for the only focus, is that they correct the immorality. Let me note, were all schools to remove the immoral features from their teaching and replace them with what accords even with natural law, our society would vastly improve. However, this would not be a transition into Classical Education. And this is one of the dangers—simply removing the immoral from today's schooling, and replacing it with moral. The reason this is a danger—of course, not the ultimate kind, but nonetheless, a real kind—is that in the end, it does not produce the vision and the goals of Classical Education. Classical Education is not merely concerned about content. There is a process and an approach to teaching that characterizes a Liberal Arts Education.

Let me give you an example. One problem in Progressive education today is that it brings in immoral content into its reading and its literature. It does not make an approach "Classical" by simply replacing immoral books with moral books. Classical Education would choose a book cultivating virtue and doing so with well-chosen and beautiful language. Additionally, how the book is used differs from a Progressive school. A Classical school will use the book to evoke wonder and delight, while also cultivating the student's appreciation for the words chosen, causing the student, at appropriate level and skill, to imitate the author, expanding the student's ability to use language well and beautifully. A Progressive Christian school is focused simply on replacing content while continuing the general approach to teaching. A Classical Christian school agrees that the content needs to be true—it must cultivate wisdom and appreciate beauty. The Classical school says that that is only the beginning. The way we use these books is important, indeed, vital.

Some people try to impress others by how many books they have read, or how many books their children are reading. Well, we certainly need, and we want our children to read more books. However, a Classical Education is interested in how well those books have mastered the child. Now, you heard that expression correctly. We expose our children to books, so that the books master them. The ideas that are in those books are presented in such a way, and with deep thought, and exercises chosen, so that the book itself leaves its mark upon the child. Instead of just being concerned with how many books are being read, and where these books fit on the national index of books to read, the Classical school is interested in choosing those books which have noble content, and yet, the teacher will lead the student to appreciate both that noble content, which ennoble the student, but also the beautiful expressions that the author employs. So that the child will also grow in their mastery of language.

Now, this is one example of many others. The key danger here is that of thinking we've turned into a Classical approach simply because we've gotten rid of the immoral. And the reason that's a danger, though not the greatest, is that it actually, in the end, will fail to produce those higher, lofty goals that we've set out to pursue.

A second danger due to confusing the nature of Classical Education is the *neglecting of the ultimate end of Classical Christian Education*. If you begin to read in the world of Classical Education, you'll encounter a recurring idea. Classical Education is an end in itself. What this generally means is that we are not teaching our children Classically in order to get them into college or to gain a career. Instead, there are actual benefits in Classical Education itself.

Let me give you an example. The reason a Classical Christian school teaches their children Latin is not because, or at least not ultimately because, of the way that Latin helps them prepare for college, or for a specific career in the future. Instead, there are reasons in the learning of Latin itself for investing significant time and effort to master the language. So when a parent comes and asks, "How is this going to help my child in his or her career?" We certainly understand the question, and we believe that what we're doing is going to help them in certain ways to prepare them for whatever career or calling the Lord has for them. We, in other words, want to help our children prepare for the future. However, we do not teach Latin, or for that matter, any of the subjects, primarily or even generally for the doors that will open for that child in a college, in further education way, or in career. There is something, in other words, good in Latin itself that makes it worth learning for its own sake. Again, this is true of every single subject. This is primarily what is meant by "It is an end in itself." Progressive Education, on the other hand, justifies its teaching by showing how it prepares for college, or for the job force. Classical Education certainly prepares for further academic instruction and for excellence in earthly vocations, but that is not its ultimate end. However, Classical Education does not *only* teach a subject as an end in itself, or even *primarily*. While, as noted, and by God's blessing, each subject forms the boy or girl into a wiser and more eloquent man or woman, this cultivation of wisdom or eloquence is not the ultimate end of Classical Education. That would be to fall far short of our Christian calling. The ultimate end of Classical Education, as all that we do, is to promote the glory of God, and to enjoy him forever.

Now, many Classical Christian schools acknowledge this; they say it, they repeat it' but it ends up being lost from their deliberate and conscious pursuit. The questions, "Why should we learn Latin?" and, "Why should we study Algebra?" and, "Why should we read *The Aeneid*?" should all be directed to the glory of God. This may risk a trivializing of so great and lofty a goal, but instead of ignoring this lofty and primary goal, we should labor to articulate it with dignity and honor; not falling into an empty catch-phrase about glorifying God. Instead, we should be able to explain how learning these subjects promotes God's glory, and prepares one to enjoy him as the studies are pursued in and through Jesus Christ. Yes, it's true that each subject is worthy of our study, and this is irrespective of how it helps us prepare for college or a career, but it is worthy because, ultimately, it helps us glorify God. It's this which subtly begins to shift as we get into the work of Classical Education, and it's something that will bring our goal down. Why is this a danger?—because if we're only pursuing these things as ends in themselves, or for what they do in us, we have failed to give glory to God. And we are either idolizing subjects in and of themselves, or idolizing ourselves, which of course, is one of the preeminent faults of those pagans that preceded us. If we keep this before us, that our purpose is to glorify God, and the reading of this book and the pursuing of this skill is for the purpose of promoting God's glory, it will help us navigate all manner of questions well.

Now, we've surveyed those dangers in general ways that are due to misunderstanding the nature of Classical Education. So let's move on to the second kind. And these are,

2. Dangers Due to a Misunderstanding of the Nature of True Christianity

And the first aspect of this that we look at is the danger of not acknowledging *the importance of the Means of Grace*. One of the most disappointing errors I've witnessed among well-intending families is getting their children out of Progressive schools and placing them into Classical Christian schools, or schooling them in their own homes, and then failing to prioritize the means of grace. By "means of grace," we mean, the Word of God, especially as preached by an ordained minister; the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper; and prayer. Certainly we should remove our children from Progressive and godless institutions. That should be what we call a "no-brainer." However, we should not think that doing so is sufficient for the child's primary concern, which is the salvation—both justification and sanctification—of his or her soul. God has appointed the Word and the preaching of the Word to be the primary means of communicating his good news to this world. We see this in the book of Romans, in chapter 10: "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (verse 17). This primarily and regularly takes place in the context of public worship, each and every Lord's Day. Too many Christian parents have thought that having their children in a Christian school, or teaching them in their homes in a Christian and Classical way somehow replaces the priority of preaching. You'd be surprised to discover how many parents have their children in Christian school five days a week, but are content to skip the public worship of their congregation on the Lord's Day, due to recreation or rest. The number of those families who make sacrifices to see their children attend a Christian school, but who fail to bring their children consistently to mid-week prayer meetings is even higher. Whatever else this tells us, and it does tell us a lot, it gives concrete and clear evidence that Christian families have failed to understand the importance and priority of the means of grace for their own souls and their children's souls.

We think very highly of Classical Christian Education. But Classical Christian Education, in and of itself, is not the means God has appointed for the conversion of souls—that's the preaching of God's Word. Whatever else we do, and rightly do about our own and our children's education, we must ensure that we make every sacrifice to have ourselves and our children under the faithful preaching of God's Word whenever the doors of the church are open. And this is because it's the gospel preached—the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified, dead, buried, resurrected, ascended, seated, and returning. It's the work of Jesus Christ held forth in preaching that is the preeminent means God uses for the spiritual good of any soul.

Well, another danger in this category, and very well related, is *the necessity of true conversion*. This is very much bound up with what we just stated. Understandably, Christian families are disturbed by the heinous immorality that continues to fester within many settings of our world today. And they do well to remove their children from such settings, and then surround them with noble and excellent literature and examples. They teach them creeds, and confessions, and catechisms, and they see the impact as their children embrace a form of Christian morality. Their children become conversant with excellent Christian ministers and thinkers of the past and the present. All of this has an impact upon their own way of thinking, their own form of speaking, and their own way of living. However, this is where we discover the danger.

The parent who witnesses all of this and thinks that his or her child is converted has erred fundamentally. Conversion is the fruit of God's sovereign and regenerating work. He effectually calls the sinner to himself, convincing the sinner of his sin and misery. He enlightens his mind in the knowledge of Christ and the way of salvation, and he renews the sinner's will. God persuades

that sinner, and enables that sinner, by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, to embrace Jesus Christ who is freely offered to him in the gospel. It's the exercise of saving faith, embracing Jesus Christ, relying upon Jesus Christ, and the evangelical repentance, whereby we turn from our sin unto God through Christ, that makes up conversion. Conversion is not morality. Conversion is not education. Conversion is not abstaining from immorality. Conversion includes the renouncing of the world, sin, and self, and casting oneself entirely upon Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners. Unfortunately, many Christian families have failed to remember this. They're content to see their children well educated and living a life free from moral scandal. After all, that is, of course, far superior to the majority of people in this world. Whereas that may be true, it is not the same as salvation. We have to remember, many respectable and able men and women were well educated to such heights that exceed our own, and yet they themselves never were converted. Let us not fail in this way to equate Classical Christian Education with conversion. Now, noting that danger, let us not ignore the great help that Classical Christian Education faithfully administered and exercised and pursued may prove to be, both to the conversion to the one, and the strengthening of grace in the one converted.

Now, another aspect of this kind of failure, is that *failure to exercise religious discernment in Classical Christian Education*. We've mentioned already the danger of not exercising discernment with reference to the Classical pagans. But by this, we mean, in specific, a way of failing to exercise discernment with those who have expressed faith in Christ, and yet some of whom have embraced a false gospel.

Curriculum in the Classical Christian world has developed notably over the past twenty years. New publishers have come onto the scene, and old publishers have continued to produce revised reversions of their older curricula, and new products by both seem to come out every year. Additionally, as contemporary Christians become aware of the fact, especially within Classical Christian settings, that Christianity is older than the past fifty years, they begin to become aware of earlier generations. They begin to become aware of other traditions. And whereas one may have been Baptist, they become aware of Lutherans and Presbyterians; or one is Presbyterian, they become aware of the others as well. They also become exposed, necessarily, to broader church history. And they become aware of men like Thomas Aquinas,¹ Ignatius of Loyola,² John Henry Newman,³ G. K. Chesterton,⁴ among many others. Now, there are several things common among these men just mentioned. One is that each of them was very well educated, but they were also fully committed Roman Catholics. Now, the other thing that they have in common is that, in one way or another, they're often made use of in Classical Christian Education, in Christian schools, or Christian homes. Now, the danger is not in making use of them. There are many things we can learn from them, and many things that we can learn about them that are useful. The danger is in making use of them without religious discernment.

Impressed by the insight displayed by these men, and many others, some Christians are

1 Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), was an Italian Dominican friar and priest, the foremost Scholastic thinker, as well as one of the most influential philosophers and theologians in Western tradition.

2 Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), was a Basque Spaniard Catholic priest and theologian, who founded the religious order of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), and became its first Superior General in Paris in 1541.

3 John Henry Newman (1801–1890), was an English Catholic theologian, academic, philosopher, historian, writer, and poet. Previously an Anglican priest, he converted to Roman Catholicism and became a cardinal.

4 G. K. Chesterton, or, Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936) was an English author, philosopher, Christian apologist, journalist, magazine editor, and literary and art critic.

tempted to embrace the false gospel of Roman Catholicism. There's much more that needs to be said about the difference between the biblical gospel and the false gospel held forth officially by Roman Catholicism. But that's beyond the scope of this lesson and the series. Of course, you can read John Calvin's⁵ *Institutes*.⁶ You can read other older works as well, and simply while we're thinking about it, one work you should read by Calvin is *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. Doing so will help you gain insight into the fundamental differences between a thoroughly biblical Christianity and the corruption against which the Reformation was fighting. You could also read works by more contemporary authors, like Richard Bennett,⁷ and his book, *Catholicism—East of Eden*; or R. C. Sproul,⁸ *Justified by Faith*. There are many excellent works that demonstrate the difference between the false gospel of Roman Catholicism and the true gospel as held forth by the Bible.

For our purpose, I simply want to identify the danger. As Christians are exposed to excellent-thinking Roman Catholic authors, they risk losing their watchfulness. Their defense is dropped. In doing so, they necessarily risk forgetting the essential difference between true biblical doctrine and worship, and the adulterated version of Roman Catholicism.

Let me give you one example. It's not just doctrinally, but in devotional and worship ways, this starts to happen as well. I once saw a family, who attended a Protestant church, thoroughly Protestant as a congregation. The parents were well educated, and the father even theologically educated in a prominent and highly-esteemed seminary from a Protestant tradition. Now, this family would profess, as well, to be Reformed. One day, all of their children were filing out of the car, and, strange to me, they all had smudges of ash upon their foreheads. At first, I didn't know what to make of that, until it was pointed out to me that it was Ash Wednesday.⁹ Ash Wednesday, of course, historically has no part in a thoroughly Reformed setting. Our Reformed forefathers, and generally, our Protestant forefathers, would have looked upon such a ceremony as smacking of a turning unto Rome. But you see, this illustrates the state of Christianity today among Protestants. But it's a particular danger among those who are digging into the history and the heritage of all the whole breadth of all professing types of Christianity.

Today, we've lost our understanding of the differences between man-instituted devotion *in Christianity*. My purpose in using this point is to illustrate the kind of drift that can and does take place by failing to exercise discernment. True biblical doctrine, devotion, and practice is not discovered from uninspired church history—it's authorized directly by God's Word alone. We must exercise ourselves personally, and oversee our children as we encounter valiant forms and corruptions by well-trained thinkers. Far from this discouraging us to read a broad scope of excellent material, it demands that we read them diligently, with a thorough mastery of the

5 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.

6 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

7 Richard M. Bennett (1938–2019), was an Irish, former Roman Catholic priest who converted to Protestantism. After many years studying biblical truth, he was convicted against and formally left the Roman Catholic Church, and wrote autobiographical accounts of his conversion.

8 R. C. Sproul (1939–2017), was an American Reformed theologian, Christian apologist, and ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America; founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries; author, and host of radio broadcast, *Renewing Your Mind*, was a staunch defender of Protestantism.

9 Ash Wednesday is a holy day of prayer and fasting marking the first day of Lent, instituted by the Roman Catholic Church, and observed by Lutherans, Moravians, Anglicans, and some Protestant churches. It is noted by the priest marking the forehead of worshippers with a smudge of burnt ashes.

Scriptures' teaching, ever-proving to be Bereans, who searched the Scriptures to see if these things are so (Acts 17:11). True devotion is not gleaned from uninspired men, however weighty their arguments prove to be—it is taken from God's Word alone.

This approach represents the Reformation, and its appeal to go back to the sources. And the source of our doctrine and devotion does not go back to the middle ages; it doesn't go back to the 300s, or the 200s, or even the 100s. It goes back to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. It does not matter the man, the council, or the era. What matters is whether God has established a doctrine to believe or a devotion of practice to be observed. And far too many well-intending Christian families have come out of Progressive forms of schooling, to enter into Classical Christian schools, or to do so in their homes, and they start bringing into their practice these invalid, unsound, and unbiblical doctrines and practices, which isn't the fault of Classical Christian Education—it's the failure to exercise a biblically-informed discretion.

Well, fourth, and finally, within this type of danger is *the ignoring of a subtlety of pride*. The nature of true Christianity is that it militates, it fights against pride. Now, we emphasize this because, we see, for instance in the Scriptures that pride is among the things that is considered an abomination to God (Proverbs 16:5). And we find in the Scriptures as well that it's the one who humbles himself that has the encouragement of God's grace. When we fail to consider how subtle pride is, we fail to defend ourselves against pride taking root in our own hearts. Learning will take place; appreciation of truth and beauty will develop; yet, apart from the grace of God, pride will only become refined.

There is a very loose form of pride, an open, shameless form of pride that is in the public center of today. The world flaunts its foolishness; it flaunts its lack of learning; it flaunts its way of living; it's contrary even to nature. But there's also a refined form of pride. And the refined form is often is often refined by excellent education. The refined form learns how to speak well, how to think clearly, how to live in a dignified fashion, and yet, within the heart there is the unmortified idol of self. By God's grace, as we invest ourselves and our children, or if in schools, the whole of the classroom and the whole of the school community, in Classical Christian Education, we must consciously fight against pride, and this by cultivating humility through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. To do so, we need to direct our students toward our only hope, their only hope—Jesus Christ.

We need to be clear and simple in holding forth what the gospel is, of a crucified Savior. And we must acknowledge that it's not by our learning, but it's by his suffering and righteousness that we are accepted with God. We need to instruct our students, and model for them that the use of learning is not only for God's glory, but for the help of others. And so, we have to help our students, and help, by God's grace, classrooms and school communities to cultivate service toward others, reminding students that it's not about how many dollars they end up making, but it's how well they serve Christ, by his grace, and their neighbor as well. We need to remind our students that any attainment reached is reached only by God's blessing, and to be used for his glory.

Well, there are many other particular dangers that you'll witness and encounter, as you go through the process of Classical Education. But these, I hope, provide us at least a general lay of the land. With such dangers before us, we need to exercise watchfulness against them. Let us do so in humble and diligent prayer, casting ourselves upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and ever pleading for his grace to our own souls, and to our children, and to our students. And as we do, may we enjoy his grace, as he blesses us, as we grow, and see others grow, to serve to his glory.