

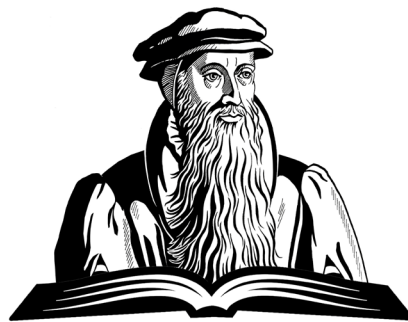
Video Lecture Series

Classical Christian Education

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

LECTURE #12

Navigating the World of Education Today



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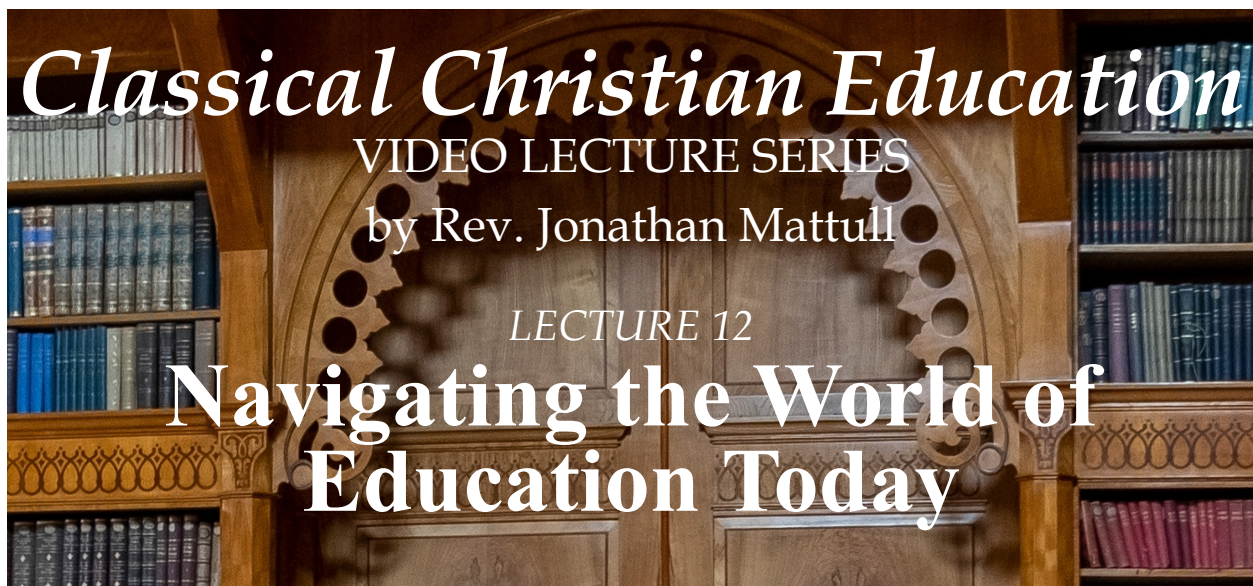
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Rev. Jonathan Mattull is minister of the gospel at Sovereign Grace Presbyterian Church, in St. Louis, Missouri, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States of America.

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i) Introduction

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Introduction

The Lord calls us to train up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). We realize that this is more than giving them a Bible lesson occasionally, or even, though vitally important, bringing them to church to hear the gospel preached. The Lord would have us provide an entire and comprehensive culture for them to discern the truth of God, and the reality of his holy law, and the rich provision of grace in Jesus Christ. When this begins to register in the heart and mind of parents and churches together, they begin to realize that education must be carefully considered. But it's this very care in considering Christian education that can lead parents, and teachers, and schools, and churches together into a state of anxiety. Many questions begin to arise. "How can I be sure that this form of education is the right one?" "Moreover, which curriculum should I use for my child, or for my class, or for our school?" Perhaps in our own day, questions like, "Although longstanding, is Classical Education actually suitable for today's modern needs?" Such things are common. These questions, and many more, can paralyze parents and cause unneeded anxiety.

Well, in our lesson today, I would like to help parents and others who are asking questions like these. Of course, there are many particular questions that parents ask, many more than we have time to cover in one lesson. However, I would like to try and answer some of the primary questions that have been asked to me and to others with regular frequency. In doing so, I hope that these answers will provide you an ability to navigate through other questions. So, I've tried collecting a number of questions under three primary questions, and these are,

First, *The Question of Practicality*—Is Classical Christian Education relevant in today's fast-paced technologically-driven world?

The second question is, *The Question of Elitism*—How so I make sense of the Western origin

of Classical Education, as well as its seeming focus upon the higher classes in society?

And the third question is *The Question of Choice*—How do I begin to navigate the ever-increasing options of curriculum available today?

Well, with these three broad questions, I hope that you'll find guidance for answering other questions. So let's get into our lesson by taking up the first of these broad questions. First,

1. The Question of Practicality—*Is Classical Christian Education relevant in today's fast-paced technologically-driven world?*

With the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the Digital Revolution of the twenty-first century, many have wondered, and still wonder if Classical Education is relevant any longer. After all, an approach to education that emphasizes ideas from an ancient civilization seems out of touch with the needs of our contemporary day. What do the ancient Greeks and Romans know about modern computers? What do the early Christians know about smart phones? Well, at first glance, this seems to be a strong argument against Classical Christian Education. The points that are made are obvious. However, upon closer inspection, these objections miss the mark.

First, remember that Classical Education is aimed at developing mature humans. Nothing about this aim is out of touch with the technological advances of our current day. In fact, it is easier to argue for Classical Education in a digital and technologically-driven age, than against it. So one says, "How so?" Well, fundamentally, the advances of technology expose the great need there is for using all forms of technology in a wise, just, self-controlled, and courageous way. Far from minimizing the need for Classical Education, the advances of our day demand Classical Education.

Another answer to this is that the kind of question, or sometimes challenge, misses the fact that embedded in Classical Education is an appreciation for science and math, and by consequence, technology. If you were to survey the history of science and technology, you would see, at these great moments of advance, many times Christians are involved. And certainly in ancient days, those who were classically trained were the ones who were leading the charge. Moreover, simply looking at the traditional breakdown of the Liberal Arts, four of the seven Liberal Arts touched upon science and math fairly directly. These are referred to, as we touched on, the Quadrivium. They can, of course, be adapted and made more specific, but the point is clear. Historically, Classical Education embraced science and math as necessary parts of developing a wise man or woman. So, even at its roots, there's nothing in Classical Education that is opposed to careful study and development of these various subjects.

Third, the difference is easily exaggerated. It's true, of course, Euclid did not know anything about modern computers. Archimedes did not know about modern artificial intelligence. However, their emphasis laid the foundations for using all forms of technology well; the way of discovering insights into the creative world; the way of developing new technologies based upon prior understanding, and implementing them to the benefit of others. All of that is begun by mastering the basic principles of the Liberal Arts. I might add that with today's emphasis on STEM—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics—there is sometimes the thought that our students need to get into these subjects directly and quickly if they're going to have a competitive chance to thrive in the fields that demand these bases of knowledge and skills. In some schools, we see STEM subjects pushing out the language arts and history. "Why should someone seek to master Latin," people ask, "when they should be learning how to master AI prompting?" "How is Latin

going to help me compete in the digital marketplace of tomorrow?” Well, what we’ve already stated provides much of the answer.

But the other part is that the cutting edge technological developments require far more than the basic introductions that are provided in current day high school classes. When I served as the headmaster of a small Classical Christian school, I spoke with several professors and department heads of colleges and universities that specialized in STEM-based degrees. The regular response from these men and women was that, if a student had an interest in STEM-based degrees, the primary skill they needed was the ability to think clearly, and closely related, to learn quickly. When I would raise the fact that while we did teach our students geometry, algebra, and calculus, we did not go into engineering, computer engineering, or any technical-type class, they universally stated that that would not be a problem. If the students were good students, they would be able to gain all the learning required at the college and university. Several noted that those who had taken STEM-based classes in their high school years actually had a greater difficulty, because they had to unlearn certain points that were now outdated. The point is this—we do not mean to say that there’s no benefit in introducing students to certain STEM-based subjects, or computer engineering even, but we do mean to emphasize this: that those things are not necessary in order to find a job in such a field in the future. What is needed, however, is a clear ability to understand, to learn, to think, to reason. All of which, by the way, is emphasized by Classical Education. Moreover, we would contend that what is needed in such fields is not just the ability to develop, and manipulate, and implement these technologies, but to use them as wise stewards, to the glory of God, and for the good of humanity; which, again, is an emphasis of Classical Christian Education.

Well, from the first broad question, we move to the second,

2. The Question of Elitism—*How so I make sense of the Western origin of Classical Education, and its primary focus upon the higher classes?*

Well, clearly, Classical education began in what we refer to as “the West.” It has most directly influenced the West. This is undeniable, but it raises questions about whether Classical Education is compatible with or contrary to “the East.” And so, it may be that you’re listening to these lessons, and you live in what we refer to as an Eastern country, or as sometimes we refer to as a Far Eastern country—China, or Japan, or Thailand, or wherever else it may be. You may live in India. And so, these kinds of questions arise in our thinking. It’s worth noting, to begin with, that Classical Education began at the very borders of where East and West meet. We ought to remember that while Greece is considered the birthplace of Western civilization, historically, it has also been aligned with the East. In AD 395, the Roman Empire was divided into a Western and an Eastern Empire. So this broad Roman Empire was separated into two. The Western capital was the city of Rome, and it ruled over a land represented by such modern-day countries such as Italy, Spain, France, and England, Algeria, and Libya, among others. The Eastern Empire had as its capital, Constantinople, which is now Istanbul, in modern-day Turkey. And it ruled over modern-day countries, as Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Albania, Egypt, and others. While many things were similar in both of these empires, there were cultural differences. So, at its beginning, Classical Education was taking place among diverse cultures and people. In other words, there’s nothing, even from its beginning, that would prohibit it from being used in different kinds of cultures.

However, some will point out the obvious—“What you’ve just referred to is not the “Far East,” it’s not the Asian nations. For instance, in its origin, it did not take place in those cultures represented by modern-day China, or North or South Korea, or Japan.” Certainly, that’s the case.

However, if we remember key features of Classical Education, we will see that these are able to be adopted fairly easily into all sorts of cultures, and that the essence of Classical Education is already there. Classical Education aimed at cultivating mature men and women—cultivating mature humans. It aimed at developing wise, just, courageous, and self-controlled adults. And then, when Classical Education was embraced by Christians, there was the cultivation of faith, hope, and love.

While not entirely identical, it's interesting to see how ancient Eastern religions emphasize similar virtues. One can read in ancient Buddhist, Confucian, and Hindu texts, and see great overlap regarding those key—what the West calls, “cardinal virtues”—wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. My point is not that these are identical, nor am I making an argument that one can cultivate a Classical Education while dispensing with the “Western texts,” and replacing them with “Eastern texts.” Instead, what I'm point out is a relationship. The relationship exists because identifying the cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance is an exercise of discerning virtues which are commonly to be cultivated in all mankind. In other words, these virtues are not specific to a single culture. They are virtues that have been cultivated throughout all mankind. These are virtues men discern, in other words, by observing humanity. This is why we find similar statements of virtue across all cultures. And what this means is that implementing Classical Education in an Asian country, for instance, is not like trying to make a fish live in a tree with birds. That, of course, would be impossible. Rather, it's like taking a tree native to one land, and transplanting it elsewhere.

For example, where I live, there are many native species of maple trees. However, we also have a Japanese maple in our back yard. The tree is not native to my country, or my state, or my specific region. However, it has been cultivated and transplanted to thrive in our soil. Whereas it's not native to our land, being a maple, it has similarities between the native maple trees, and it has, over time, adapted to this land and climate, and has added a beauty to its non-native habitat. Similarly, Classical Education can be transplanted to other cultures. As someone from an Asian country becomes familiar with Classical Education, he or she will instantly see virtues that are similar to those already appreciated in their native culture. They will be exposed to nuances that may emphasize one thing more than another. They will be able to adapt these things to their own culture as well.

But, let me give encouragement, as well, to anyone from such a country. In addition to the virtues that are emphasized in Classical Education, remember that Christianity grew out of this civilization. We don't mean that it was something that didn't exist before among the Jews, and so on. What we do mean is this: historically and culturally, Christianity was established within this ancient civilization. And what that means is, when you read, for instance, the book of Acts, you're reading a book of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, living and taking place in this Western civilization. Now, we rejoice that, as Christ commissioned his church, they weren't to stay there. They were to go forth to all nations. But Classical Education will help you understand the background and meaning of many things found in the Scriptures. Learning Latin and Greek will help you become familiar with the culture and the way of thinking common to both the church of the apostles in the first generation of the church, but also of the early church that shortly followed thereafter. But do not think that this is meant to make you “Western.” Neither Classical Education nor Christianity is aiming at making you a Westerner. Classical Education is training you to use language well and beautifully, whatever language it is. It's training you to reason soundly, and to speak and argue persuasively. This is useful in the East and in the West. It's useful for any sort of

people, because all people are humans. These are human virtues. Moreover, Christianity is aiming at drawing you to know the one true and Triune God, who has sent his Son to be the Savior of all nations. So though there are things that are in the roots of Classical Education that are Western, the aims of Classical Education transcend West or East, because they're aimed at the human.

Now, before we move into our third question, sometimes the question of Elitism focuses not upon the idea that Classical Education treats that the West as superior to the East, but that Classical Education is solely for the Elite in any society, and not for those who are poorer. One thing we should note is that God has given different gifts and abilities to everyone. This includes not only physical ability—some are faster than others; but intellectual ability. Some have a greater ability to understand things than others. Some have different financial resources—some are richer, some are poorer. Two individuals may be born with the same intellectual ability, but if they're born to two different families, one rich and one poor, the one who is born to the rich family will have certain abilities to pursue education in ways that the one born to a poorer family may not be able to. This establishes, in some sense, two paths. However, we should emphasize, those things are under God's Providence. This isn't something to make us covet, or to become discouraged, or proud, but rather, to submit to the way of the Lord and to serve him in our various circumstances.

We should not mistake this truth, in thinking that, then, Classical Education is only for those who are born into such circumstances of riches and ability. Classical Education is not for the elite, any more than any education is for the elite. It's true that the more advanced pursuit of Classical Education may cater to those who have greater means in this world. It will certainly be pursued by those who show more gifts for academic pursuits. But this is not a fault of education or Classical Education, nor is it something that is, as it were, an embarrassment to those who embrace Classical Education. Rather, we remember that God has made individuals with different earthly gifts and different earthly purposes and pursuits, all to the one chief end, which is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Some may have capacities to advance in mathematics far more than others, and they are to cultivate that to the glory of God. Some may have capacities to work with their hands far better than others, and they are to cultivate that to the glory of God. Some may excel in fine arts. Some may excel in the practical arts. But all, whatever the circumstances, will benefit from having a Liberal Arts foundation.

Historically, there were efforts toward this end in even Greek and Roman antiquity. The church, however, proved to be the great catalyst to move Classical Education to the people more broadly considered. The church was interested in seeing that all within its bounds would receive this foundational education. This should not lead us, however, to an opposite error. Some students should be encouraged to pursue further education along the Liberal Arts after they've received that foundational training. Others should be encouraged to pursue a trade, wherein they're working with their hands, or serving in other ways. Neither one would prove to be a success or a failure, for whichever route is pursued. The purpose of the early stages of a Liberal Arts education is to provide the student with the basic education needed to help them become mature adults, in whatever vocation the Lord should call them to. During the season of their early education, the students will start to show certain aptitudes and abilities. These will help the parent, the teacher, the school, the church, to give guidance as to further training. As they make progress, what gifts, what skills are evident, and those who are mature adults should be helping the student, as they grow, discern where they may put forth their efforts in the future.

It should not be expected that every child goes to college or university. It should not be expected that every student that passes through a well-founded and well-ordered Classical Christian school

is to enter into college or university. It should not be deemed a failure if they pursue a trade. The first goal of Classical Education is to glorify God, and it does so by training the students to love wisdom, to think clearly, to reason clearly, to speak plainly and persuasively, and by the grace of God, to love the Lord Jesus Christ who is their Savior. This will serve them well, whatever their earthly vocation proves to be. Our daughters will benefit if the Lord calls them to be a mother who stays at home. They will benefit from a Classical Christian Education. It will not be a waste for them, if that's where the Lord would have them to be. Instead, they will be better equipped to serve as a wife and mother, having been exposed and influenced by this education.

Well, the third broad question,

3. The Question of Choice—*How do I begin to navigate the ever-increasing options of curriculum available today?*

The options today are a benefit, but they also provide a real difficulty. When I was first exposed to Classical Christian Education, the options for curricula were very limited. For the past twenty or thirty years, there has been an exponential growth in options. Well, first, we should be clear. There is no such thing as “The Perfect Curriculum.” Sometimes parents and schools have it as their quest to determine which is the perfect curriculum that is going to fulfill everything that we want to do. We don't mean that there are better curricula than others, however, we do wish to emphasize that the teacher will make a great difference, both in implementing and adapting, whatever the curriculum is. And so we ought not to think that the curriculum chosen is the “end-all” of what the need is. Let me provide you several principles that will help you work through these options. My purpose is not to say, “Here's the curriculum you should choose,” because you'll have a different context, you'll have different weaknesses, different strengths; you'll have a different culture, perhaps. But what I provide you here to help you navigate will indeed help you navigate these questions.

1. The first thing is so simple, but easily passed by. We feel the weight of this world of options, and we think, “Okay, I'm going to start wading into it.” Well, let me encourage you to do that which we should always be doing, and that is, first, start with prayer. If it is that you're seeking to train, whether your children, or students, or class, or whole school to the glory of God, you and I need the Lord's guidance and help. So we should pray, “Lord, help me to discern what would be useful, beneficial, helpful, for—whatever the context is—my home, my class, my school. And what we start with, we continue with every step of the way. Let's begin with prayer, asking the Lord for his help. And as we do, we should pray confidently that he will assist us, because we're asking him for help that we would train up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). So, be encouraged to pray.

2. Second, be clear in your mind what the end and goal of education is. I would encourage you to review some of these lessons, and write down a very simple statement of what the goal of education is. You'll remember, among other things, one mentioned that it was a goal to have wise and eloquent piety. That's a good goal. That goal will help us navigate various choices. Is this curriculum helping me to cultivate wise and eloquent piety? This will help us think through, you know, here are two, for instance curricula—both are doing sort of the same thing. One is very clearly rooted in the Solas of the Reformation, that man is saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. One is rooted in a Roman Catholic view of the gospel. Well, if I'm trying to cultivate my children unto a wise and eloquent piety, in that case, all things being equal, I will choose the one that is rooted in the biblical faith of the Solas of the Reformation. Why? Because that's helping cultivate true biblical piety.

Moreover, when we start with a goal, we should also start to work backwards. We talked about this before. So when we start with a goal—that’s where we’re going—we should work backwards, and say, “If that’s the goal, at this age, when they graduate—in our culture, high school, or whatever it may be for you—what do they need when they’re entering into the final grade? What do they need when entering into the grade before, and before, and before. And that will help us come back. In other words, start with the goal, and work backwards. Don’t start at the beginning and try to work forward. So when you start with a goal of education, you’ll actually be thinking from the end, and then you’ll be working backward to the beginning. That will help you navigate a lot of curricular choices. Start with the goal. That will prove to be one of your most helpful filters through the process.

3. So, third, then, set a deadline by which you need to have a curriculum in place. If you’re a homeschooling family, you may have certain restraints where you have to start at a certain age. Well, how old is your child now, and when will that time come? That’s your window in order to establish a curriculum. It may be that you’re pulling your children out of a public school, and you have just a handful of months to get the curriculum in place. That’s your window. Set the deadline. And what that helps is, it helps give clarity as to the timeline you have—how much time you have to do the remaining steps. So set the deadline, mark it down, and give yourself reminders.

4. The fourth thing is, research and assess your options. Now, this seems obvious, but let me give you just a couple of words to help you in it. Research by consulting more than just the publisher’s description and videos. Now, there’s no bad motive in this, but publishers have a vested interest to persuade those who would purchase their curriculum that the curriculum they offer is the best. That’s fine—they’re highlighting the strengths. But you should do two things when you’re assessing the various curricula. The first is, you should keep your filter before you, and ask this question, whatever else the publishers say: “Will this curriculum help me to reach the goal that’s been identified?” Perhaps another way to ask it is, “Will it hinder me from reaching that goal?” And so, you have three to seven options, perhaps, for a particular study or subject, and you’ve laid them out, and you’re asking the question, “Which of these will best help me to reach the goal that’s been determined?” And as you assess your options, write down the benefits and the weaknesses, the strengths and the weaknesses of each curriculum. Don’t keep it in your head; write it down. Moreover, write down your questions, and with those questions, reach out, not only to the publisher with your questions—they’ll answer your questions—but you can use the internet in a very beneficial way. You can search online for various forums, and ask your questions there as well.

And so, you’re doing several things. You’re keeping the goal before you; you are surveying your options; you’re noting the strengths and weaknesses; and then you’re reaching out with questions to help clarify:

“How is this going to promote this?”

“I see that your curriculum doesn’t provide that. Am I missing something?”

“How does this work, if we’re starting here?”

All of these kinds of questions are written down. They’re sent off, answers are gotten back, and you’re assessing them.

Another aspect of researching and assessing is assessing the costs. There are costs associated with all of these things. Whether you go as simplistic as possible, and you’re simply choosing certain books to read, that’s still going to have a cost. Or, if you’re purchasing a curriculum, that’s going to have a cost. Or, if you’re making use of the various online courses that are offered through

different schools, that's going to have a cost. A very simple question you have to ask is, does it fit my budget? Does my budget allow me to pursue this? Now, it may be that you have to adjust certain things in your budget. Or maybe, if you're really struggling, you need to approach your church, and say, "I need help in training up these children. Is there anything that you can provide so that I can provide for my children?" The point is, you need to understand the costs, so that you can then manage those expenses.

So, you've researched, and you've assessed. That moves us to the fifth thing.

5. You need to select and implement the curriculum. Choose and implement the curriculum, and in implementing it, implement it as designed. Do not seek to make adjustments your first pass through, your first semester, or even your first year. While each curriculum will have its weaknesses, too many times, the strengths are overlooked, misunderstood, and in the end, injured by premature changes. Instead of making changes, take notes and revisit these things at the natural breaks. So you've gone through a unit, you've made notes with questions, and now you're reaching out to the curriculum publisher, or to the teacher, or whatever else. And then, at the end of the semester, and at the end of the year, ask those questions again, and then start to think about making changes or enhancements. It's far better to go through the curriculum as written, before it is that you start manipulating it. And so, implement it, especially the first time, as the curriculum is written.

6. The sixth thing that I'll say is, pray and adapt. You're praying the whole time, but now you've chosen, and you're implementing the curriculum. We began with prayer, we've continued in prayer, and we continue still with prayer. And so it may be that you've taken your children from five, six years old, and they're now ten, eleven years old. You should be praying with every step along the way. It may be that you've enrolled your children into a Christian school, and you need to be praying for them every day. Because, remember, the best form of Classical Christian Education is insufficient without the Lord's blessing. If you're the one teaching, whether parent or teacher, it's that you adapt over time. You're discussing with fellow teachers; you're discussing with other homeschooling families; you're on web forms and you're asking questions. You're not quick to adapt, but you're looking for the proven adaptations that enhance and improve the overall offering.

Well, in your quest to lead your children, and your students, or even your entire school into the world of Classical Christian Education, if you take these six steps intentionally, it will not lead you to my best curriculum choice for you, but by God's grace, He will lead you to a suitable curriculum to be used for children. You'll enter upon a rich experience of training your children faithfully, while depending upon God for his blessing through Jesus Christ. In the end, our hope is not in our perfect implementation of Classical Christian Education. We strive to implement it faithfully, but we depend upon God entirely. And as we do, may you know his encouragement, as you move forward, depending upon him for his help and his blessing, and that to his glory forever.