

EXCELSIOR NEWSLETTER

Excelsior Classical Covenantal Community

March 2010

www.excelsiorclassical.org

“A Lifetime of Learning and of Reading” by George Grant

“Books are a delight at home; no hindrance abroad, companions at night, in traveling, in the country. Indeed, no wise man ought ever be found apart from their company. Books are the wise man’s passport to success and greatness. Books are the thresholds to wonder; the gateways to enlightenment; the foundations of virtue; and the pediments of honor. Read at every wait; read at all hours; read within leisure; read about in times of labor; read as one goes in; read as one goes out. The task of the educated mind is simply put: read to lead.” Cicero

The real purpose of a classical Christian education is to launch faithful men and women on a lifetime journey of learning – thus, the entire curriculum is heavily concentrated on reading. The English novelist and etymologist J.R.R. Tolkien once told his students that all true education is actually “a kind of never ending story – a matter of continual beginnings, of habitual fresh starts, of persistent newness.” Similarly, his great friend C.S. Lewis said that education is “like a tantalizingly perpetual verandah – the initiation of unending beginnings.”

That paradoxical perspective was likewise shared by E.M. Bounds, the nineteenth century pastor and theologian renowned for his many fine books on prayer. Shortly after he was captured at the Battle of Franklin, during the late lamentable War Between the States, Bounds asserted that, “All of life is but preparation for what comes after.” Though slightly wounded, ravenously hungry, bitterly cold, and now made servile Bounds understood that the past is but a prelude to the future and that the present is necessarily tutelage in an unending process and thus not to be chaffed at. He went on to say, “The primer of faith is never closed for the child of God. Its lessons never end. No matter what circumstances may bode, we remain under the bar of instruction forever. Every incident builds upon the last and anticipates the next.”

For many, it is sad to say, this uniquely Christian perspective is an entirely foreign worldview – an alien notion, an arcane paradox, an unfathomable mystery. Minds dulled by the smothering conformity of popular culture cannot plumb the depths or explore the breadths of the distinctively Christian virtue of hopeful contentment in the face of perpetual tasks. Thus they rush toward what they think will be the termination of this, that, or another chapter in their lives. They cannot wait to finish school. Thus, for instance, graduation is not a commencement for them, but a conclusion. Afterward they hurry through their lives and careers; they plod impatiently through their work week anxious for the weekend; they bide their time until vacation and plod on toward retirement –

Returning Applications

Please remember to turn in your returning applications
ASAP!

D.C. Trip

Be sure to check your email for information that was
sent out regarding this upcoming trip.

You may contact Sandy Morris with any questions.

Math Tutor

Amy Blessingame has graciously offered her services
to our students in teaching geometry (at no expense).

If your family is interested please let us know what
day of the week would work best for you, as well as
the time of day.

ACCS 2010 “Repairing the Ruins”

Conference

June 17-19, 2010 in Durham, NC

Featured speakers are: Dr. George Grant, Os

Guinness, Matt Whiting, and Doug Wilson

Early registration pricing of \$200 through April 30,
2010.

Visit www.accsedu.org/Annual_Conference.ihtml?id=111716 for more information.

always coming to an end of things until at last things come to an end.

But within the Christian worldview framework, hopeful contentment in the face of never ending responsibilities is a virtue that continually breeds in us anticipation for new beginnings not old resolutions. It is a virtue that provokes us to a fresh confidence in the present as well as in the days yet to come. That is simply because it is a virtue rooted in an understanding of God's good providence and in the covenant fortunes of His grace.

We above all people – we who were brought from death to life, we who were brought from the ends of ourselves to the threshold of eternity – we above all people under this. This is a fact, the very essence of the Gospel. The crucifixion is not the termination of Christ's mediatorial work, rather it is the conjunction of two beginnings; the incarnation and the resurrection. It is the pivot of civilization, demarcating a new creation: "Old things are passed away, behold all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Thus we are now innately an optimistic people, forever starting anew, affirming our faith in full accord with the patriarchs and patristics: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1-2).

As a result, all talk of education is for us a reminder that we have only just begun to learn how to learn. It is an affirmation that though our magnificent heritage has introduced us to the splendid wonders of literature and art and music and history and science and ideas in the past – we have only just been introduced and that a lifetime adventure in these vast and portentous arenas still awaits us.

Indeed, the most valuable lessons that education can convey are invariably the lessons that never end. That is the heart of the Christian philosophy of education.

The prince of preachers, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, once said: "I would have everybody able to read and write and cipher; indeed, I don't think a man can know too much; but mark you, the knowing of these things is not education; and there are millions of your reading and writing people who are as ignorant as neighbor Norton's calf."

Those ignorant masses of whom Spurgeon speaks are not those who failed to finish their lessons. They are indeed those who did finish – or rather those who naively thought that lessons were the sorts of things that could be finished.

Education does not have a terminus, a polar extreme, a finish line, an outcome. Instead it is a deposit, an endowment, a promise and even a small taste of the future. Again, that is the root of the Christian philosophy of education – a philosophy that once provoked the unprecedented culture flowering in Western Civilization and will again if we would but adhere to its principles once again.

Kindly - The Crane

Field Trip: American Village
3727 Highway 119 S Montevallo, AL 35115
(205) 665-9995

Monday, April 19th 9:00am-12:15pm -

They requested that we please arrive promptly. It will take approximately 3 1/2 hours to get to the Village from Tupelo.

If anyone is interested in carpooling, send a group-wide e-mail letting everyone know.

Lunch will follow the program. Each family may choose to bring a packed lunch, or order a boxed lunch from Subway, which will be delivered to the American Village. The cost of the Subway lunch is \$5.00 and includes your choice of sandwich (ham, turkey or veggie), a bag of chips and a cookie. A drink is not included with the Subway lunch. You may bring your own from home, or purchase a drink for \$0.75 at the Village.

I am thinking we should be ready to leave the Village between 1:00 and 1:30, allowing most of us to be home around 5:00. If your family has Monday afternoon/night activities and needs to get home earlier, you will be free to leave following the program, which ends around 12:15. The cost is \$9.00 for everyone over 4 years of age - students and adults. Children 4 and under are free. One adult is admitted free with every twenty students. We will prorate this and spread the savings to each family. It won't be much, but every little bit helps.

If you have not done so, please RSVP to Connie Ramsey - 489-5120 (H) 419-8467 (C).

Here is the link to the American Village website. It contains lots of information about the Village, photos, directions and some educational materials:

<http://www.americanyillage.org/>

The question is, how do we reclaim that glorious heritage? How can we both preserve it and then pass it on to the next generation? How do we go about beginning a lifetime of beginnings?

In his introduction to John Henry Newman's brilliant *The Idea of a University*, the renowned educator Leo Brennan asserts that, "though we don't have much to show for it, we Americans are enthusiasts for education." He's right. Though there is perhaps an underlying "anti-intellectualism" in a few isolated circles, by and large we Americans – and particularly we American Christians – place a heavy emphasis on the education of our children. We demand good teachers. We demand good textbooks. We demand good facilities. We demand good supplemental resources. We demand the best and the latest and the snazziest of everything academia has to offer; which makes our profound lack of true education – even within the Christian community – all the more ironic.

The problem, says Brennan, is that "we engage in the eminently dubious process of what is barbarously known as standardization." As a result, "we lower our ideals and we smear our philosophy" by playing "the sedulous ape" to popular "uniformitarian educational fads and fashions."

The only solution, he argues, is to "restore the basic educational ideals and principles" that provoked "Christendom's great flowering of culture in the first place: a strident emphasis on serious and diverse reading and the use of disciplined classical methodologies."

Sadly, that is not a particularly popular perspective these days. Serious reading and personal discipline are simply not in vogue. They represent archaisms – long since left in the dust of time by the new fangled gadgetry of industrial contemporaneity and progressive modernity.

Long before the bane of television invaded our every waking moment, C.S. Lewis commented that while most people in modern industrial cultures are at least marginally able to read, they just don't. In his wise and wonderful book *An Experiment in Criticism* he said: "The majority, though they are sometimes frequent readers, do not set much store by reading. They turn to it as a last resource. They abandon it with alacrity as soon as any alternative pastime turns up. It is kept for railway journeys, illnesses, odd moments of enforced solitude, or for the process called reading oneself to sleep. They sometimes combine it with desultory conversation; often, with listening to the radio. But literary people are always looking for leisure and silence in which to read and do so with their whole attention. When they are denied such attentive and undisturbed reading even for a few days they feel impoverished."

He goes further, admitting that there is a profound puzzlement on the part of the mass of the citizenry over the tastes and habits of the literate, "It is pretty clear that the majority, if they spoke without passion and were fully

articulate, would not accuse us of liking the wrong books, but of making such a fuss about any books at all. We treat as a main ingredient in our well-being something which to them is marginal. Hence to say simply that they like one thing and we another is to leave out nearly the whole of the facts."

All this is not to imply any hint of moral turpitude on the part of modern bohemianism, rather it is to recognize the simple reality of the gaping chasm that exists between those who read and those who don't, between the popular many and the peculiar few. It is to recognize that education demands the latter while maintaining steadfast incompatibility with the former. And there's the rub. We want to have our cake and eat it too – a prospect as improbable as an Elvis sighting, a Beatles reunion, or a good piece of legislation coming out of Washington.

The problem with serious reading is part and parcel with virtually all the other problems of modernity – serious reading is often laborious work requiring unflinching discipline, and if there is anything that we moderns have an aversion to, it is disciplined work. In this odd to-whom-it-may-concern, instant-everything day of microwavable meals, prefab buildings, drive-through windows, no-wait credit approvals, and predigested formula-entertainment, we tend to want to reduce everything to the level of the least common denominator and the fastest turnaround – which seems to be getting lower and lower and faster and faster with every passing day.

Even the church has fallen prey to this "spirit of the times." If we really had our druthers we wouldn't want worship to be too terribly demanding. We wouldn't want doctrine that challenges our pet notions. We really only want music that we're comfortable with. We only want preaching that reassures us, that reinforces our peculiar preferences, that affords us a sense of serenity – all in record time. We want quick change; cheap grace; inspirational platitudes; bumper sticker theology; easy faith. We want Christianity Lite. We want the Nice News, not necessarily the Good News.

For the same reasons, when we read we would really prefer literary junk food. The predigested factoids of USA Today are much easier to swallow than Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. Face it, John Grisham, Danielle Steele, and Tom Clancy are easier to digest than William Shakespeare, John Milton, and G.K. Chesterton. Reading is a discipline – and all discipline is difficult. But then, that is the way it is with anything worthwhile, really.

In his remarkable book entitled *The Moral Sense*, James Q. Wilson drives home that point with great clarity. He makes the point that "the best things in life" invariably "cost us something." We must sacrifice to attain them, to achieve them, to keep them, even to enjoy them.

That is one of the most important lessons we can learn in life. It is the message that we know we ought to instill in our children: patience, commitment, diligence, constancy, and discipline will ultimately pay off if we are willing to defer gratification long enough for the seeds we have sown to sprout and bear.

A flippant, shallow, and imprecise approach to anything – be it sports or academics or the trades or business or marriage – is ultimately self-defeating. It is not likely to satisfy any appetite – at least, not for long.

Seem obvious? Apparently not obvious enough. Just look at the agenda items on any proposal for educational reform – secular or Christian, day schooling or home schooling. You'll find recommendations on interactive media, computer software technology enhancements, comprehensive correlative curricula, outcome-based objectives, trade affinity matrices, life skills development, and turn-key textual exercises. But nothing – or next to nothing – about Augustine, Chaucer, Melville, Hawthorne, Dickens, Twain, and Faulkner.

Supposing that they know better, educational service providers and textbook publishers at the behest of the National Education Association have dispensed with the centuries-long experience of the West and reduced the educational process to a feeble series of failed social experiments. Thus, not only is an awareness of the classics – in history, literature, art, music, philosophy, economics, and applied sciences – utterly lost to today's students, even the awareness of that lost awareness is lost to them.

The incomparable Dorothy Sayers has thus argued: "Somehow, our whole approach to teaching and learning has gone awry. Do you sometimes have an uneasy suspicion that the product of modern educational methods is less good than

he or she might be at disentangling fact from opinion and the proven from the plausible? Although we often succeed in teaching our pupils subjects, we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think. They learn everything except the art of learning."

The brilliant men and women who wove the fabric of western civilization knew nothing of correlative curricula or programmed outcomes or software enhancements – but they were educated. And they were educated in a way that we can only dream of today despite all our nifty gadgets, gimmicks, and bright ideas. They were steeped in Athanasius, Dante, Plutarch, and Vasari. They were conversant in the ideas of Plato, Cicero, and Luther. The notions of Aquinas, Machiavelli, Calvin, and Knox informed their thinking and shaped their worldview. Thus, they were able to preserve and then to pass on their progeny a heritage of real substance.

They read. They read widely. They read seriously.

Serious reading and disciplined classical methodologies hardly represent the kind of wiz-bang razzle-dazzle doohickeries that excite the educational reformers, social planners, and political prognosticators of the National Education Association these days. But if we are to buck the trend of malignant modernity, if we are going to recover our Christian heritage in education, if we are going to be able to pass that heritage on to our children and grandchildren, if we are to undertake the initiation of unending beginnings, then we must return to the dumb certainties of Christendom's experience. That is the ultimate aim of classical education.

Excerpted from Bannockburn College Application, 1999

Preparing for March...

March Headmasters

March 5th - Larry Ramsey

March 12th - OPEN

March 19th - *Spring Break*

March 26th - Tom Thompson

Lunch:

March 5th - Little Caesar

March 12th - Pepper's

March 19th - *Spring Break*

March 26th - Abner's