

### CHRISTIAN SCHOOL: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

*Part 2 of a series by John Heaton, Headmaster.*

In our last *QUID NOVI* I discussed the rise of Christian schools in the last half of the 20th century. (If you missed it you can read it at the link below.) I pointed out that many of those schools were born out of segregationist tendencies, while nearly all of them were reacting to the social ferment that bloomed in the 1960's. Consequently, they often imported public school curriculum wholesale into the classroom, while offering chapel or religious instruction, giving them a veneer of religion. The "Christian" side of such a school was an additive not thoroughly thought through.

In the late 1980's a new generation of leadership began to re-think the idea of the Christian school. The noble goal of merely preserving religious piety in the young was having mixed results. The greater concern, however, was that neither students nor educators were thinking very "Christianly" at all about the disciplines they undertook. Christianity had been restricted to the sphere of behaviors or particular practices – "Do this, but not that" – but for many had not been recognized as having implications for thought itself.

It was an epistemic crisis, an awakening to the fact that faith commitments (or denials) of any kind have far reaching implications for how we view the world, and the subject matter of classroom studies. Christian practices are important, but discovering and harnessing the implications of Christian presuppositions was another project altogether. Ironically, this shift was

already taking place in American universities with the 1962 publication of Thomas Kuhn's, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn showed how thought paradigms determined certain outcomes, especially in science, and that exploding such paradigms gave rise to advances in science. When his principles were applied outside of science in sociology, biology, history, etc., the implications were dramatic.

Thus, unless Christians school advocates came to terms with the implications of their own Christian presuppositions, schools would be increasingly viewed as irrelevant, and even as silly as such things as "Christian" sewing, baseball leagues, cooking, "Christian" rock concerts, and so on. Of course, much of American Evangelical culture did exactly this – it moved to create a sort of parallel universe of human activity in which Christian young people had access to "Christian" versions of all sorts of things. Disney World might be fine, but a Christian theme park would be better.

Christian schools had to do better. They had to return to a distinctly Christian presupposition that the world was created by a rational God, and the created order has a kind of givenness about it. It is first a gift that we receive with gratitude, a world that is good, and true and beautiful. Because it is created by God – not just a god – but the One who is revealed in the Old and New Testaments, it takes on a particular shape, a particular meaning, and a particular goal, the large contours of which are revealed in the Scriptures themselves.

Thus, from the Christian point of view, there are no brute facts. There are no neutral facts. All facts have god-assigned

meaning because they exist and are sustained by the word of his power. After all, it's his world, and he made it. Science therefore, is truly possible because the world is observable, stable, predictable, and can be subjected to investigative experimentation. It is not the result of random, unguided and impersonal forces. If that were the case, true science would be impossible.

History is not a collection of unrelated and atomized data points. Rather, history itself must be approached within the framework of an interpretive field in which cause and effect, meaning and purpose, may be evaluated - if not completely understood - in light the divine purposes the Creator intends for it.

"Christian" literature is not a tale set in a religious context. Rather, great literature is that which honestly observes human nature, the human condition, real goodness and beauty, and faithfully sets the narration in a context which amplifies and makes sense of the human experience. This is why classical literature endures. Homer's *Odyssey* is not the product of Christian influences, but it is nevertheless great because it deals honestly with the real human questions of identity and purpose, home and hearth. It explores the human virtues of fidelity, love, and friendship, and the vices of greed, lust, and reckless foolishness. It is so "true" that we have kept it in the curriculum for 2,500 years.

Ultimately, Christian schools have begun to find better footing the classical, Christian tradition, a topic we'll explore in the next edition of *QUID NOVI*.