

Biblical Classical as a Model of Education

The Principle Approach[®]

by Carole G. Adams

Among the key words often used to describe the nature of the methodology and curriculum of the Principle Approach, one is *classical*. The term *classical* is useful in defining the timeless, worthy, and proven aspects of both this method of Biblical reasoning and the content of the curriculum that forms its context. However, the term *classical* is widely used today to signify methods and curriculum of a variety of philosophical persuasions and practices. This prompts the question: What is the difference between the Principle Approach and other programs that are designated *classical*? The answer to this question comes by identifying the source and tradition of any classical approach.

Classical, adj. 1. Relating to ancient Greek and Roman authors of the first rank or estimation, which, in modern times, have been and still are studied as the best models of fine writing. . . . 2. Pertaining to writers of the first rank among the moderns; being of the first order; constituting the best model or authority as an author . . . Hence classical denotes pure, chaste, correct, refined; as a classical taste; a classical style.¹

Classical Learning

The definition suggests a primary use of the word *classical* in reference to the Greek and Roman authors. It also suggests the denotation of the use of the word as a reference to “writers of the first rank among the moderns; being of the first order; constituting the best model or authority,” and as a synonym for “pure, chaste, correct, refined; as a classical taste, a classical style.”

While the former definition describes the western tradition of strong Greek and Roman influence in education curricula, the latter suggests a quality of thought and expression that might be identified in a wider range of traditions, including “the moderns.” The word *classical* is not a Biblical word, yet **the Scripture is certainly the prototype of the classical model**. In the approach identified as the Principle Approach, our use of the word *classical* includes the Greek and Roman and later the Medieval tradition that evolved into modern European education on the continent. However, Biblical classical diverges from the European classical model at the Reformation to flower fully in its American colonial and governmental expression. This stream of classical education would identify its source as Biblical primarily in the Hebrew concepts of knowledge and attitudes toward life in contrast to the Greek and Roman concepts of knowledge and attitudes toward life.

Biblical Learning

¹ *The American Dictionary of the English Language*, Noah Webster, 1828. Facsimile edition, FACE, San Francisco, 1966.

The Hebrew view of education is inseparable from the rest of life. Learning constituted the very core of the Hebrew heritage. The Jews are “people of the Book.” The Bible itself demonstrates particular emphases in its pedagogy in keeping with its purpose and nature: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect [complete], thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” (2 Timothy 3:16–17) Aspects of the Biblical pedagogy will be examined more thoroughly later.

The primary purpose of teaching and learning in Bible times was to train the whole person for lifelong, obedient service in the knowledge of God. (Proverbs 1:7) The center of education in Israel’s history was the home, and the father bore the chief responsibility for instructing the children. The teacher was merely a representative of the father, according to Jewish tradition.

“In Bible times the father—not textbooks, audiovisuals, or brightly colored classrooms—was the main instrument in the learning process. As teacher of his children, the father served as a living and dynamic communicator of divine truth. A Bible could not be substituted for him—there were no Bibles. Applying this principle to the challenge of biblical education today, Heschel has observed that “what we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text-people. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text they will never forget.”²

The fundamental goal of Jewish parental instruction was to transmit an historical and ethical heritage. The Hebrew and Greek attitudes toward life oppose each other. The object and aim of the Hebrew system is *da’ath elohim* (the knowledge of God). The object and aim of the Greek system is *gnothi seauton* (know thyself). The Hebrew system begins with God as the only true wisdom—man can never know himself, what he is, and his relation to the world, unless first he learns of God and submits to His will. The Greek system starts from the knowledge of man and seeks to rise to an understanding of the ways and nature of God through the knowledge of what it calls “man’s higher nature.” According to the Bible, man has no higher nature except he be born of the Spirit. The whole Bible is based on the Hebrew attitude and approach.³

In Hebrew teaching and learning, the law was made sweet to the child and described as “honey” in the Scripture. Learning was palatable, nourishing, and wholesome. “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps.119:103) The purpose of instruction was to invite the learner to enjoy the sweetness of studying divine truth.⁴

The Jewish home was concerned with identifying the child’s unique God-given individuality in order to cultivate its full expression. The respect for his individuality and personal calling caused education to conform to his real needs and be made effective to his own unique personhood rather than forcing all children to conform to a single educational

² Wilson, Marvin R. *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989, p. 280.

³ *Ibid*, p. 289.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 291–294.

process as though they were all the same. The parent and teacher must observe each child to insightfully direct him to fulfill his particular providential purpose.

The Hebrew system of learning edified and nourished through teaching while leading the child in critical thinking, teaching through debate and discussion how to evaluate and conclude. The child was not a passive collector of information who regurgitated facts and figures. The child was led by example through mentoring and interaction with adults to think, argue, reason, and relate.

Biblical Methods or Pedagogy

While colonial American education was the repository of the thinking of the Reformers and their mentors in making application of Biblical truth to all of life—including education and government—the curriculum contained the great Western classical tradition as well. However, the Biblical far outweighed the classical in emphasis and in scope—particularly in methodology. The method that formed the minds of the authors of the American state papers and the Constitution that afforded civil liberty to the individual for the first time in the history of the world, was a Biblical pedagogy. One of our founding fathers expressed it this way: “I proceed to inquire what mode of education we shall adapt so as to secure all the advantages that are to be derived from the proper instruction of youth . . . the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in religion. Without this there can be no virtue and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments.”⁵ The work of Donald Lutz included codifying the references made by the founding fathers to various works including the Bible, classical references, and to individual writers. Their tallies show that the Bible is the book most often referenced.⁶

We have seen the Hebrew view of knowledge and attitude towards learning. How does this translate into a concrete methodology that was applied in American classical education and can still be applied today? The Bible demonstrates a number of methods of teaching including:

1. The recurrence of underlying bedrock principles forms a unity of truth in the Bible. In the Principle Approach[®], principles and their leading ideas are the core of every subject and the focus of the mastery of the subject.
2. The use of providential history teaches the love and character of God. The Bible repeats the histories of individuals and nations to demonstrate the relationship between God and man. In the Principle Approach, the chain of Christianity, which shows the hand of God dealing with men and nations from creation to the present, forms the structure of all knowledge in every subject.
3. The use of individual character teaches the Christian idea of man and government. The Bible shows character as the cause of every action and effect. The Principle Approach examines the internal and external qualities of the character of prominent

⁵ Adams, Carole G. and Elizabeth L. Youmans. *The Noah Plan Self-directed Study in the Principle Approach*. p. 52

⁶ Lutz., Donald S. “The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought.” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 78, 1983.

individuals of every subject to illustrate diligence, industry, and productivity in obedience to God.

4. The emphasis in the Bible and particularly in the teachings of Jesus is on reasoning from cause to effect, internal to external, in understanding and applying truth. In the Principle Approach[®], the notebook method employs the 4-R's—research, reason, relate, and record—as a tool of scholarship that fully employs reasoning and rhetoric to produce a permanent and personal record of the subject.
5. The Bible is the source of all learning in the Principle Approach and is treated as a primary source for any research. All Principle Approach learning prefers primary sources rather than secondary texts to identify the purest stream of knowledge in every subject.
6. The Bible demonstrates the emphasis on reasoning from principles. Without this emphasis, information has no base meaning and therefore has no absolute value. The secular method can be contrasted to the Principle Approach in the following way:

Secular Methodology	Principle Approach
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Creates a causative environment to which the student must become responsive 2. Student is conditioned to look to the external environment—social, economic, religious, and political—before he determines how he will act. 3. Results in an individual who can “discern the face of the sky” but cannot “discern the signs of the times.” 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. From the position of God’s Word, the student subdues the environment rather than submits to it. 2. The internal demands of conscience are causative of behavior and action and the external environment as effect. 3. Results in the student learning to subdue the earth for God’s purpose and according to His will.

The American Christian model of education, as it appeared in colonial America as the culmination of the great classical tradition and as a repository of Reformation Christianity, served God’s purpose in establishing liberty in its fullest expression ever experienced by man. This is our legacy. This is the rightful heritage of our children. The question that will be asked of our age is not “What scholars did you produce?” or “What standard of living did you see your children attain?” but “What did you do to secure freedom and proliferate it while it was in your power to do so?” We enjoy today the results of the sacrifice of the lives, wealth, and sacred honor of our forefathers. It is our duty to embrace and further the cause of liberty for those who come after. Principle Approach education is the tool of doing so.