

Insight

Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Book?

By RC Sproul, Jr.

Classical education has at least two distinctive features. First, it operates out of an ancient [teaching method], one that shaped the western world. The trivium is how our ancestors learned, memorizing first, synthesizing second, and then putting it all together in beauty. But the classical model is not only classical in its method, it is classical in its content. That which we study through the trivium are the great works of the western world. That frightens some people, for perhaps two reasons. First, many of these great works are difficult to read. They are big books. When my dear wife went shopping for my birthday a few years ago she happened into one of those ubiquitous, and perhaps iniquitous, mega-stores where they have both every book in print, and every flavor of coffee ever invented. There she asked the clerk for help in finding *The Scottish Chiefs*, a 700-page tome on the life of William Wallace. They had trouble finding it, because it was listed under juvenile literature. That's what it had been, when it was written hundreds of years ago. Today it is a challenge for a grown man to read. No parent likes to listen to his children grumble. We want them to be happy, and they want ease. The great books that have shaped western culture were designed to shape the culture, not to be entertaining diversions, the equivalent of comic books. They often dealt with difficult concepts, and always used difficult words.

The solution here is a common one. Our children, and we parents, need to buck up. Bucking up is a complicated, obtuse concept that means something akin to "Stop your sniveling and get to work." No

pain, no gain. There are, of course, fruitful books that are a delight to read. If, however, we only study at the feet of those giants of the past who were most dexterous with a pen, we will miss out on a great deal of wisdom. The second cause for concern is a bit less embarrassing, a bit more understandable. Western civilization has been profoundly influenced by the Christian faith. It has also been profoundly influenced by those who would attack the Christian faith. And it was profoundly influenced by those who made wise use of God's common grace, but who did not receive His redeeming grace. Milton has rightly found his way into the western canon, but so has Virgil. Augustine makes the grade, but so does Swift. When we read we must sift though both wheats and tares, often in the same book. I taught Homer's *Odyssey* to a group of high school-aged homeschoolers. Our class consisted essentially of the sifting process. See here how Homer highlights for us the glory of heroism. See here how Homer distorts the glory of heroism by presenting it as the accumulation of glory. Here Homer affirms that the future is not in our hands. Here Homer asserts that our future is in the hands of a capricious set of competing gods. We, in reading Homer, not only better understand the Greeks, but better understand ourselves, and the temptations that beset us.

So why bother? The Bible is all wheat, no chaff. Shouldn't we just teach our children the Bible? We must teach our children the Bible. We must see our calling as parents to teach our children the very oracles of God. We must steep them in that one

Reading is no different from the rest of our lives.
You get what you pay for. To think deep
thoughts you must read deep books. To
accumulate wisdom, you must study wisdom.

book which stands above all others, which is sui generis-self generated. Only in this book has God spoken directly, and inerrantly. But as we read our Bible, as we shape ourselves and our children with its wisdom, we discover something confusing. We discover that God sends His rain on the just and the unjust. We discover that all men bear the image of God. We discover that God speaks through His creation. And we discover that the great heroes of the Bible had the courage and knew enough of the cultures around them, to fight them. We find Paul quoting the Greek poets, and John alluding to the Greek philosophers. We find our calling to know to whom we are proclaiming the good news.

I'm not suggesting that we wallow in the muck of contemporary pop culture. This is but the fruit of an older, higher culture, the culture that shines through the great books. We don't need to be hip to reach the lost. Neither am I suggesting we toss our children into the deep water in the hopes that

they will learn to swim. My goal is not that as my children age they will read the great books, but rather that as they age I will teach them to listen in, with their parents and their Bibles beside them, on the great conversation, and respond with the authoritative voice of God. Our goal is not to raise highbrow pagans, but soldiers who not only know their enemies, but know where their weaknesses and strengths lie.

My daughter Darby is reading two books at present. She is reading Elsie Dinsmore and Gulliver's Travels. The former has a bit of chaff, but is a fine example of what a godly young lady looks like. The latter gives us not only a view into the mind of Swift, but through his genius, a view into the minds and follies of his contemporaries. We get to watch one heathen highlight the foolishness of other heathens, and thus know better the culture in which we live.