

Christian Education in the Negative World

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What time is it? The importance of such a simple question should not be underestimated. Jesus, after all, castigated his opponents for failing to rightly “interpret the signs of the times” (Matt 16:3), which led them to miss the coming of the Messiah. Much better, then, for us to be like the men of the tribe of Issachar, who rallied to David because they “had understanding of the times” (1 Chr 12:32). How we as Christian educators read the present cultural moment will have clear ramifications for our schools and their long-term prospects. This article, then, will explore how classical Christian education has a unique opportunity vis-à-vis the Christian college-preparatory model to rightly discern the times and, by making the hard choices now, to build institutions that will endure in potentially difficult decades to come.

In seeking to discern the signs of our times, Aaron Renn’s “Three Worlds of Evangelicalism” is a most helpful heuristic for tracing patterns of how Christians have engaged and been received in the public square as the process of secularization has proceeded in America. Most notably, Renn identifies a shift that took place around 2014 from what he calls the “Neutral World” to what he terms the “Negative World.” Whereas the former was characterized by a lingering receptivity to Christian beliefs and morality, the remnants of a “Positive World” that saw Christian morality as normative for society and linked Christian faith with good citizenship, the latter is strikingly hostile to traditional Christianity, imposing a genuine cost, social and otherwise, to those who would seek to follow Christ.¹

Without needing to delineate, much less defend every aspect of Renn’s paradigm, Renn’s analysis nevertheless sheds light on what appears to be increasing and potentially existential challenges confronting Christian education in this country, particularly those Christian schools that place college admissions at the center of their mission. After all, it would appear that the Christian college-preparatory school exemplifies a fundamentally neutral-world approach to Christian education, generally aiming to prepare graduates to engage culture on its own terms, including on the most elite secular college campuses and in the most prestigious professions. This aspiration is captured in mission statements regarding graduating students who will “transform their world for Christ” or something of that nature.

A fundamental problem with this perspective, however, is that it assumes the surrounding culture is malleable and open to being transformed for Christ. In the “Neutral World” it may have been possible to find missional success through a strategy of downplaying controversial issues and seeking to find common ground with culture at large. Even then, however, this strategy may have been less successful than its advocates claimed; those Christians who rose to positions of power and influence often found themselves more transformed by the institutions in which they served than vice versa.² In any event, in the “Negative World” it appears far less likely that a “winsome” Christian witness will win over society, much less be able to resist those de-formative pressures increasingly demanding full capitulation to progressive views of race, marriage, gender, and sexuality.

1. See further Aaron Renn, “The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism,” *First Things*, February 2022: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/02/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism>.

2. To take just one example, consider the disappointing tenure of evangelical Francis Collins at the National Institutes of Health; see further Carl R. Trueman, “The Failure of Evangelical Elites,” *Classis* 29.2 (2022): 3-9.



And therein lies the rub for the Christian college-preparatory school model: to the extent that its telos is bound up in prestigious college admissions and career success, it is vulnerable to the pressures of society more broadly and college admissions offices more specifically. The pressure in the “Negative World” will always be to compromise away from traditional Christian orthodoxy, and to the extent that a school’s parent community is more invested in worldly “success” than Christian formation, the actual gap between such a “Christian” school and a non-Christian one will only further shrink.

All Gussied Up in Christian Trappings

Indeed, this process of secularization has already played out at many Christian college-preparatory schools even in the time of the “Neutral World,” with cultural compromise already baked into institutional DNA. Thus, such a Christian school might hold a Prom but play only the “clean” versions of the otherwise explicit tracks. It celebrates Black History Month, but does not observe Lent. It gives scholarship money to athletes who can fill out sports teams but not to pastors’ families who have a single income because the mom has chosen to stay home with her kids. It employs several college counselors, but not a single chaplain. Its board is full of successful business executives, but no ministers. Its curriculum is heavy on Advanced Placement (AP) courses that are ever more explicit in their obeisance to the newest fads of progressive ideology, but light on goodness, truth, and beauty. Its classrooms are filled with the newest and most “important” technologies, while its disciplinary meetings are consumed by issues related to the ill use of those very same technologies.

In other words, too often in the Christian college-preparatory school world the underlying assumptions of modern education are neatly dressed up in Christian trappings; a Christian vocabulary is applied to the various aspects of the

school’s work without any actual transformation of what the school is doing or how it is operating. While this tension may have been present in the college-preparatory model from the beginning, the shift to the “Negative World” will only further destabilize this approach to Christian education as it imposes ever greater costs in pursuit of its stated aim.

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In particular, those Christian schools that continue to affirm traditional Christian teaching regarding marriage, gender, and sexuality should expect to face intense pressures to compromise or abandon the faith once delivered for all. In the wake of the Supreme Court’s 2020 decision in *Bostock* and President Biden’s signing of the 2022 Respect for Marriage Act, we should not be surprised by advancing efforts to strip orthodox Christian schools of their Title IX exemptions.³ Nor is it difficult to imagine a world in which private colleges and universities refuse to accept students from “hate schools,” as would follow the logic of an Arizona school district that recently ended its student-teaching partnership with a nearby Christian university on account of Christian wrongthink.⁴ To the extent that institutions of higher education are ever more increasingly the vanguard implementing the new, illiberal “successor ideology,” with its creed of diversity, equity, and inclusion and its ever-expanding rainbow flag before which we all must bow, the

3. See, e.g., Sarah Posner, “Andrew Hartzler Wasn’t Allowed To Be Gay on Campus. So He’s Suing,” *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/05/20/religious-universities-lgbtq-students-title-ix-lawsuit-00033373>.

4. See “Arizona School Board Ousts Christian Student Teachers,” *Alliance Defending Freedom*, <https://adfflegal.org/article/arizona-school-board-ousts-christian-student-teachers>.



traditional college-preparatory model for Christian schooling looks ever more naïve and incoherent.

As ACCS schools have demonstrated, it is possible to avoid the de-formative pressures of the college-preparatory model without slipping into a fundamentalist, anti-intellectual, world-denying posture.

In this “Negative World,” classical Christian education provides a durable alternative to the model of Christian college-preparatory schooling. As ACCS schools have demonstrated, it is possible to avoid the de-formative pressures of the college-preparatory model without slipping into a fundamentalist, anti-intellectual, world-denying posture. The *telos* of cultivating goodness, truth, and beauty by preserving and transmitting the Great Tradition that is our common heritage anchors such schools amidst the tides of liquid modernity. It will, we hope, be precisely graduates of these schools that will be best poised to rebuild our colleges, workplaces, and communities when our national collective fever breaks and the work of rebuilding begins anew.

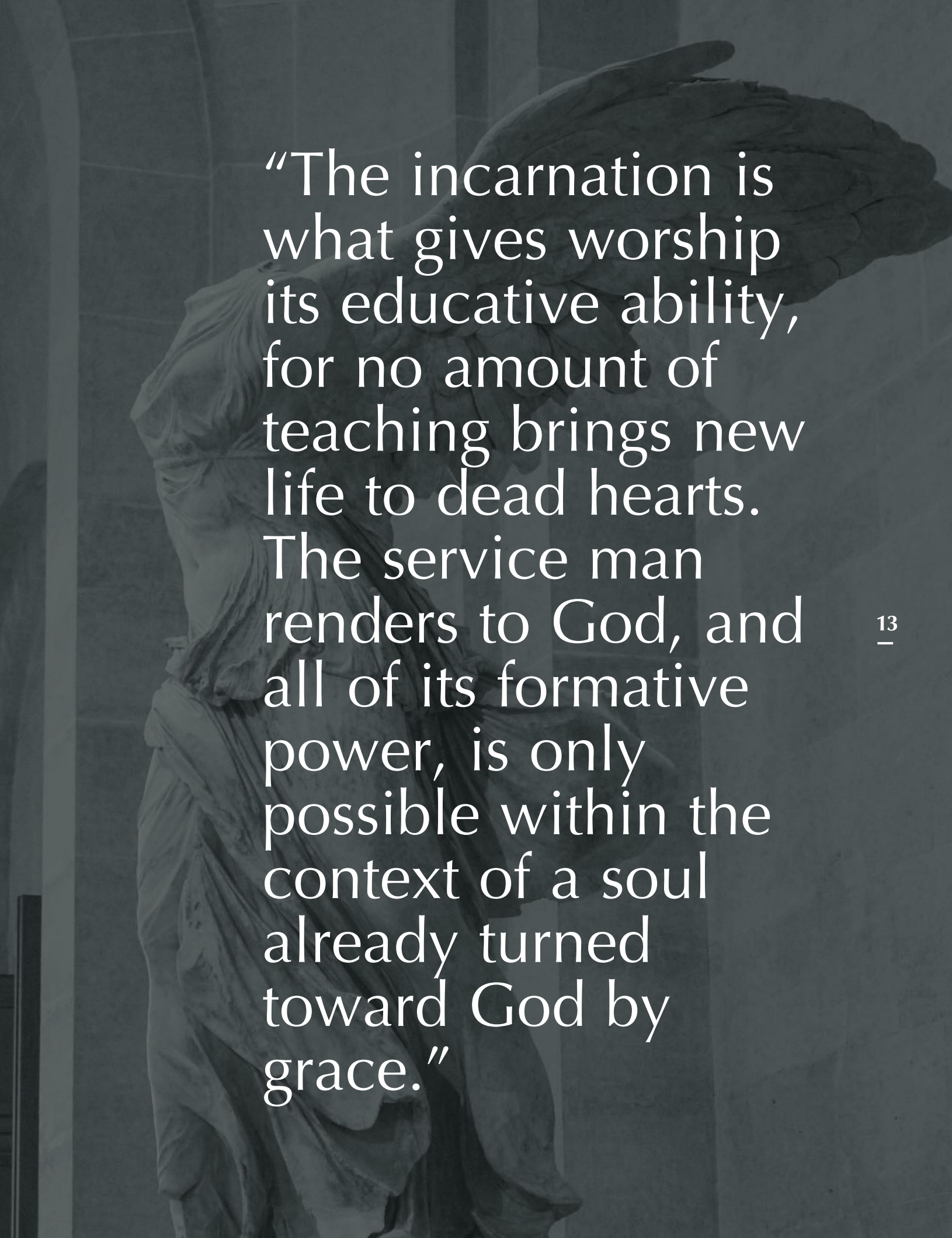
And yet, the booming growth of classical Christian schools in the last few years offers a particular challenge to our movement. As leaders of classical Christian schools, we need to ask the hard questions of whether this new wave of growth stems from a genuine desire by parents to see their children formed into Christ’s likeness, or whether it simply reflects families who are tired of critical race

theory and the “genderbread man” in other schools but who are still hoping for iPads in kindergarten and who judge a school’s success by its number of Ivy League admissions. It may be tempting to maximize this present season and fill as many seats as possible, but to the extent that we fail to partner with families who truly understand the “Negative World” and its consequences for our schools’ mission, we open ourselves up to the same vulnerabilities to which Christian college-preparatory schools are currently exposed.

What is needed, then, is clarity: in our admissions materials, our websites, our marketing, our open houses, and more. Time and again, we must emphasize that our *telos* is not elite college admissions or career preparation (though we certainly think our students will be well-prepared for whatever God may call them to!) but rather the spiritual, moral, and virtue formation of our children’s souls. Ongoing programming to catechize parents in the distinctive mission of our schools, and continual training on how to navigate the challenges posed by our present cultural moment, will also serve to strengthen our parent communities around our mission.

Undoubtedly, there are many Christian college-preparatory schools staffed with teachers and administrators of true conviction, who may still have the ability to discern the signs of the times, catechize their communities, and prepare for more difficult days ahead. How much more, then, should we in the classical Christian education movement lead the way in creating the kinds of Christian schools that will not only survive but thrive in the “Negative World,” and whatever else may lie ahead. Let us, then, in this year of celebrating the life and legacy of St. Athanasius, be prepared to stand *contra mundum* for the sake of Christ our King.

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“The incarnation is what gives worship its educative ability, for no amount of teaching brings new life to dead hearts. The service man renders to God, and all of its formative power, is only possible within the context of a soul already turned toward God by grace.”