



This is a printer friendly version of an article from www.theledger.com
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Published Saturday, October 4, 2003
unifying the spirit and the intellect

Students Receiving Classical Christian Educations at Two Lakeland Schools

By CARY McMULLEN
Ledger Religion Editor

Eric Fullgraf and his three students are discussing a character in C.S. Lewis' novel, "Out of the Silent Planet."

"What position does the scientist take for himself?" he asks.

"The end justifies the means," replies Rob Fowler.

"Priya, what philosophy is that?" Fullgraf asks.

"Pragmatism," answers Priya Thoresen.

"And what does pragmatism say about the relationship of science to the common man?" Fullgraf presses.

"That science is above the common man," Thoresen replies.

Was this an exchange in a graduate school seminar somewhere? A senior-level literature class in a university?

No, it took place recently in a class at Cambridge Study Center in Lakeland -- not a traditional school but a private Christian center that teaches teenagers and adults that rigorous learning and rigorous faith are compatible.

Across town at Geneva Classical Academy, a similar educational philosophy has the 14 firstgraders in Kem Cook's class analyzing the structure of the sentence "The brown bear ran quickly."

In other classrooms in the twostory building Geneva rents from Trinity Christian Center near Highland City, sixth-graders have a lively discussion of "Alice in Wonderland" and seventh-graders are in their third year of studying Latin.

Cambridge Study Center and Geneva Classical Academy are part of a trend: the classical Christian education. It is a threestage approach, based on the classical liberal-arts disciplines of grammar, logic and rhetoric -known as the "trivium" -- combined with a Calvinist, Western worldview. The concept gained visibility in the early 1990s.

In the trivium, grammar refers to mastery of rules and facts, often through memorization; logic means learning how to apply the rules and recognize ordered relationships; and rhetoric means learning how to express verbally or in writing what the student has learned.

At Geneva, which has 101 students in grades kindergarten through 8, students are exposed to the grammar and logic stages as they study the usual subjects of math, history, science and language arts. In addition, they have classes in Bible and fine arts.

Cambridge specializes in the rhetoric part of the trivium, although Geneva is hoping eventually to expand through grade 12 and include the third stage.

At Cambridge, Fullgraf's students are in the third year of a four-year interdisciplinary course called "Thoughts Captive" (as in captive to Christ) that ranges across literature, philosophy, theology, history and cultural apologetics. It would seem too advanced for high-school students, but Rob Fowler and his twin, Scott, 17, are clearly the kind of independent thinkers the center attracts.

"I used to go to Winter Haven High School, but I didn't like it. The classes were a bunch of loopholes to get

grades," says Scott, who is homeschooled.

Priya Thoresen, 16, who is homeschooled but also attends Frostproof High School, says, "It's all been really good. It's a lot of reading, though."

Indeed. Consider just a few of the works in literature and the arts studied by Fullgraf's students: Homer's "Odyssey," Tennyson's "Idylls of the King," the biblical books of 1 and 2 Samuel, Fellini's film "La Dolce Vita," and songs by John Lennon and U2.

Other classes for high school students concentrate on art and leadership, and there are classes for adults and college students, seminars (including "The Christian and Culture" and "The Christian View of Man") and workshops for all ages on photography, theater, art and popular music.

FOLLOWING A TREND

Classical Christian education owes much to an old-school Calvinism that values the intellect and advocates an active engagement with the secular world with the aim of transforming it into a more Christian place.

Bruce Kirby, founder and director of Cambridge, says learning at the center is governed by the principle of "sphere of sovereignty."

"We believe that truth is not fractured into different spheres, as if something might be true in science and false in religion," Kirby says. "We also believe a Christian worldview best comports with reality."

The two schools began about the same time, and its leaders express admiration for each other's school. Geneva was started in 1996 by parents who visited The Geneva School in Orlando, which was based on Wilson's principles, and wanted to start one in Polk County, says Geneva Headmaster Steve Marshall.

Kirby started his center in 1999, but it had its roots in his own efforts to prepare his sons, Dustin and Cannon, for college. In 1996, while Kirby was director of Christian education at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Lakeland, a family brought their 13-year-old son to him for some supplemental instruction.

"He was precocious, and they didn't know how to take him further. I spent four years with him. As I was teaching Ben, word got around," Kirby says.

Soon, Kirby had nearly 20 students, then more than 30. After starting the center, he resigned from Covenant Presbyterian to run it full-time.

The center was based at first in Kirby's home, but when more space was needed, he rented the basement of First Christian Church in Lakeland, and the center now occupies seven spacious rooms there. In addition to a couple of classrooms with comfortable chairs and sofas, there are art and photography labs, a commons and a library.

There are about 50 students enrolled in the nine-month courses, with another 60 attending 30-week seminars and as many as 100 in short-term workshops.

POP CULTURE AND THE CHRISTIAN

The center also sponsors monthly "film Fridays" -- one for students and one for adults -- with discussions following. The films include some that would not usually be associated with the pious. On Friday, adults watched Lars von Trier's powerful but disturbing "Breaking the Waves," a film that includes nudity and strong sexual themes.

Although Kirby concedes he is sometimes uncomfortable with explicit scenes, he says there is a precedent for sexual images in the Bible and in great literature.

"In 'Crime and Punishment,' Dostoevski makes Sonia a type of Christ, and she's a prostitute. It's emphasizing the fact that when Christ came, he came all the way down, not just for some of us," he says.

Films shown to students are edited, if necessary, but Kirby defends the screening of controversial films.

"We do edit explicit sexuality, but they're still going to be confronted with sexual issues and violence. That's the

world we live in, and students need to deal with these things maturely," Kirby says.

Some conservative Christians might be shocked at this, but Kirby says that the tendency of evangelicals to retreat from culture is mistaken.

"Evangelicals try to create an alternative culture -- Christian businesses, Christian literature and music, Christian schools -- a safe place for them and their children. They're walled off, although they make evangelistic bombing runs over secular culture and come back and land in their own space. But business, science, art and government are spheres we ought to enter and change from the inside out," he says. "As a believer, I don't want to create Christian art but better art."

THE COST OF SCHOLARSHIP

Classical Christian education is not cheap. At Geneva, tuition ranges from \$2,500 for a kindergarten through fourth grade student to \$3,700 for students in grades 6 to 8.

At Cambridge, the nine-month classes cost \$2,100 each, seminars cost between \$500 and \$800, and about half the center's \$240,000 budget comes from tuition. Kirby says most students receive some scholarship assistance, and last year, the center gave out \$70,000 in scholarships.

"It's been very difficult raising the money to fund the school. We haven't had the resources other nonprofits have had," he says.

Both the Cambridge Study Center and Geneva Classical Academy are supported by a variety of local churches, say their leaders, although the majority are part of the Reformed, or Calvinist, tradition.

While a classical Christian education may seem to be only for the best and brightest students, Kirby says about half the students at Cambridge are of average ability who respond to the center's methods.

"We have students come to us from classes with 30 students in them with a teacher who is authoritarian in order to maintain discipline. They come to us, and they love it. Parents ask us, 'What have you done to my child? He's reading.' When students get turned on to the life of the mind, they get excited," Kirby says.

In his "Thoughts Captive" class, Eric Fullgraf continues to pepper his students with questions.

"Why does (this character) have the name Ransom?" he asks.

"Because he's a Christ figure," Rob Fowler answers.

Behind Fullgraf on the wall is a plaque that reads, "Imagination is evidence of the Divine."
