



Teaching the Great Books with Josh Gibbs

Lesson 5: How to Teach Great Books – Part I

Outline:

Reductionism: The Great Temptation for Classical Educators

- The temptation is to attribute separate ideological tenets to the text and then judge those detached tenets to see if they align with the Bible's tenets. (This is often referred to as judging the worldview.)
- Worldview:
 - “A lens through which the world is seen and interpreted.”
 - “A set of presuppositions, those ultimate and unprovable beliefs, to which no other belief can come prior but from which all other belief is derived.”
- While it is right to teach worldview, how and why we teach the supremacy of the Christian worldview and how to address other worldviews is up for discussion.
- It is possible to teach the definition of Christian worldview without students even really gaining one.


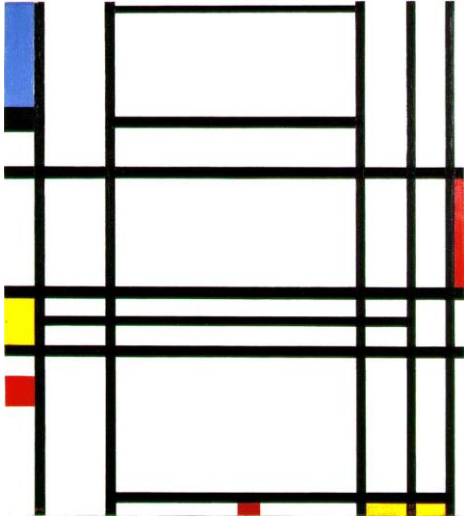
Example: In Charles Dicken's novel “Hard Times” the character Thomas Gradgrind censures a student who has been around horses her whole life because she cannot give a textbook style definition of a horse. He demands definitions but does not require a deeper understanding of concepts. In the same way, many are tempted to teach definitions of a Christian worldview but that does not mean the students will gain one.

“Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them... In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but the Facts!” – Gradgrind



Scientific vs. Poetic Knowledge

- James S. Taylor: There are two types of knowledge Poetic and Scientific:

Poetic Knowledge	Scientific Knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge from the inside out. • Come to know a person by coming to know as person or thing sees it — personally. • The kind of knowledge shared between close friends. • Like the naturalist, birdwatcher, or person at a zoo observing animals, but scientific knowledge dissects the animals. • Looks at the uniqueness of the animal compared to others (ways it cannot be categorized). • How this animal is NOT like that one. • Messy and debatable. • Requiring human judgement rather than mechanical laws. • Concerned with emotions, the spiritual, and humanity. • Like the art of El Grecco: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge from the outside in. • Come to know as other and factual. • Modern (Progressive) Education favors scientific knowledge exclusively (though in reality both are necessary). • Modern Education wants to have people relate to the text like scientists relate to an experiment (objective observer). • Looks at ways things can be categorized by their commonality. • Looks for the similarities. • Very neat and precise. • Mathematically precise and sub-intellectual. • Seeks laws that even a machine could use. • Knowledge like a playlist burned on a CD. • Seeks rules that need not be debated. • Like the art of Piet Mondrian:
	
<p><i>“Dormition of the Virgin” by El Greco</i></p>	<p><i>“Composition No.10” by Piet Mondrian</i></p>



How to Properly Approach Worldview

- Worldview is often taught as if the teacher is burning songs on a blank CD (just inserting facts into a brain).
 - Just compare an ideology with passages of scripture and discuss.
 - Unclear why to read the books if you are only looking at detached ideologies.
 - “Plunder the Egyptians” for parts of the book deemed to be of a proper worldview and throw out the rest.
 - Once the bad parts are deemed so, you can plunder a few worthwhile phrases.
 - This method says you can take what you like — a worldview buffet NOT submission to the great text.
 - The difference between St. Anselm and Walt Whitman’s works is the quantity of stuff worth plundering.
 - Students cannot be students in this environment because they are never encouraged to learn, only to judge.
 - The students only learn to be a sort of “intellectual goalie” NOT to learn from the text.
 - In fact, this way of teaching worldview discourages learning. The goal is only to judge if the text aligns with an idea that the student ought to already hold to be right.
- Creation is prompted by love and a desire to wonder. Good students seek and wonder as a lover.
- Ought to start thinking of a Christian worldview with the triune nature of God and the dual nature of Christ.
 - Truth (God) is relational (as are the three persons of the trinity) and truth (God) is a man (as Christ is incarnate).
- “When teachers leap to the abstraction, they rob the students of the intimacy of understanding the fullness of what the book offers about the ideas in [their] own particular incarnation. Ideas are empty placeholders without the particularities that fill up.”
- When we know the truth (Christ), we know a person. If we are to live in manner wherein we respect and love the means by which God gives us a full knowledge of the truth, we have to know and relate to people.
- James S. Taylor: St. Augustine understood that we are first drawn to a contemplation of reality by a sense of wonder.

- Wonder is painful because we do not yet fully know (our own ignorance disturbs us) and pleasurable because we can glimpse the thing we are wondering about and it is grand.
- People cause a desire to wonder, ideas do not. We do not know mere ideas, we know people because truth has been given to us incarnate.
- The author has written the meaning of a thing, there is no simpler form. The text is the analysis and the analysis is the text.



- If the author is just a way to talk about a particular idea, why read the book?
Just set out the philosophy's tenets.
 - The author is not just a means of demonstrating a philosophy, it is a unique perspective.