

Classical Education and Leadership

A few weeks ago I received an email from a Veritas graduate who is an engineering student in his final year at his university. He had been approached by his professor to be the project manager for a team of senior design students working on a project. In his email he made a direct connection between his classical education at Veritas and his work as an engineering student (“especially in a field like engineering” were his words): “The training I received at Veritas has prepared me as a worker, as a thinker, and most importantly, as a leader.” The link between leadership and classical education is not accidental. In fact, classical education, as it has been practiced for two thousand years, has at its core the preparation for active leadership and service.

Classical education, since at least the time of Cicero in ancient Rome, has emphasized that the purpose of education is for living a life that is both active and contemplative; that the mastery of the arts of learning are for the benefit of your own soul but also for the good of those around you. The object of this has varied over time, from the community or state, to church and neighbor, but leadership and service in whatever field one was called was always an integral part of classical learning. John Milton wrote in the 17th century about the importance of classical education preparing people for “all the offices of war and peace”, for anything that might be required of them as citizens and as God’s people. This idea of classical education as preparation for leading is an enduring one, even to our own day.

At a recent ‘Leadership Newberg’ meeting I had the opportunity to share about Veritas, classical, Christ-centered education and how we instill leadership skills in our students. I was able to tell the group about how our approach education, which emphasizes the cultivation of wisdom, virtue and godliness and the formation of well-rounded graduates well prepared for anything, is truly the best foundation for leadership in any field. I discussed our *Portrait of a Graduate* that describes the specific traits we are working to instill in our students, including serving others actively in humility, and “honoring Christ by leading in their communities and callings.” Our *Portrait* provides constant direction that informs our specific choices in curriculum, teaching methods, and activities, many of which directly relate to developing the attitudes and skills needed for leadership.

Our curriculum itself builds leadership. For example, our high school humane letters reading list acts almost as a series of case studies in leadership. In my 11th grade Humane Letters class we read and discuss *Paradise Lost*. In the climatic event of the story Eve, having already eaten of the fruit, comes to Adam. He is faced with a monumentally important decision that will impact not only him but all succeeding human generations. Does he obey and trust God and so save all his descendants from pain and death, or does he ‘follow his heart’ (as Disney might have it) and thus follow his wife into sin? This is a question of leadership in its most stark form. He will lead his people one way or the other, and the choices—and their consequences—could not be more clear. As is usually the case, Adam’s failure of leadership was first a moral failure, not

of information or analysis. Here we see the terrible, long-term consequences of bad leadership. Milton, of course, gives us the glorious contrast of the humble, servant leadership of the Son who, for the benefit of his people, offers to die in their place. That is great leadership. Similar lessons are discovered in reading other ancient works, from the *Iliad* to the *Aeneid*. And this is true not just for grand, political or military narratives. In the coming weeks my class will explore the failings of family leadership displayed by Mr. Bennet in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The phrase "all the offices of peace and war" comes back to mind. Reading and discussing, learning to listen carefully as well as to persuade, are preparations for a life of leadership wherever one finds oneself.

But reading must be accompanied by action—remember Cicero's ideal of the contemplative *and* the active. Students at Veritas are given frequent opportunities to exercise leadership in a variety of ways, beginning as early as the elementary grades. Serving as line leaders and having class cleaning duties, for example, prepares students for more challenging leadership roles later on, such as assisting with car line, leading and organizing the Geography or Latin Clubs, and being involved in leadership through athletics and other activities: Concert Choir, drama productions, etc. High school students take significant leadership in our House projects. Our Toy and Joy, FISH, and other activities would not happen but for our student leaders. Secondary students are closely involved in planning and leading in and through our Supper Club and Protocol events.

Classical and Christ-centered education is concerned first and foremost with forming people who understand and practice wisdom, virtue, godliness, and a truthful, faithful eloquence. This is the best and most lasting foundation for future leadership in every sphere of life. Students who learn to love the Lord their God with all their hearts, souls, and minds, their neighbors as themselves, and to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" will find that all other things—including strong leadership skills—will be added, as well.