A Review of *Wisdom and Eloquence*

reviewed by Douglas Wilson

I really enjoyed reading *Wisdom and Eloquence* by Robert Littlejohn and Charles Evans. They are both experienced educators, and their shrewd experience shines through in many passages. Regardless of how they answer the various questions they pose, the very fact that they raise the right questions means that the kids who are instructed under the pattern of their suggested pedagogical method are getting an education that is head and shoulders above the typical American variety.

This is a well-written book, with certain chapters that should be read and re-read by all educators seeking to provide a classical and Christian education. Chapter eight ("The Rhetoric Curriculum") is an example of this. Another good example would be Appendix B, a brief history of the liberal arts in the public square. These and other extended passages are quite valuable, and there is good information here for everyone involved in the work of recovering a classical and Christian education.

It is important to emphasize these agreements, at least when writing for an ACCS audience, because the book also exhibits a central pedagogical disagreement between the ACCS application of Dorothy Sayers' insight in *The Lost Tools of Learning*, and the approach taken by the Society for Classical Learning (SCL), founded by Robert Littlejohn, one of the authors of this book. In addition to its other strengths, this book provides the valuable service of displaying *exactly* what that disagreement is. But before discussing it, it is important to note that this is a difference of pedagogical opinion and not part of the battle between light and darkness. It would be a sorry business if classical Christian educators, with so much in common, got into a snarl over any of this.

But there remains a difference that has very *practical* ramifications. In order for me to set forth this difference appropriately, it is necessary for me to back up, and give some background history. When I was a young sailor, single and without a thought of educational issues in my head, I read an article in *National Review* (to which magazine I subscribed). That article was *The Lost Tools of Learning*, which made me think something like *huh*, and that was that. A few years later, I was out of the Navy, married, and with a young daughter toddling around our home. My wife Nancy told me that she could not see handing Bekah over to someone we did not know, and saying something like, "Here she is. Teach her about everything." I didn't know much about education (still less about Christian education, and even less than *that* about classical education), but I knew that I agreed with my wife on the subject. So I told her we would have a Christian school started by the time Bekah reached kindergarten age.

Work began on that important project, and when our founding board [at Logos School] began discussing what kind of education we should seek to provide, we knew that we did not want a fundamentalist reactionary academy, and we knew that we did not want a compromised prep school. So we came up with the motto, "a classical and Christ-centered education." We didn't know what that meant—all we knew was what it *excluded*. The word *classical* excluded a truncated fundamentalism, and the *Christ-centered* excluded a compromise with unbelief. Somewhere in this process I remembered that article by Sayers that I had read some years before. We tracked down a copy, and, with the view that this represented considerably more wisdom than *we* knew about, we adopted it, and resolved to give it a try.

Now the heart of Sayers' article is her application of the *Trivium* (grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric) to the natural stages of child

continued on page 2

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by Robert Littlejohn and Charles T. Evans

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A Review of *Wisdom and Eloquence*

continued from page 1

development. Her argument is that the *Trivium* is *foundational*, giving the kids the "tools of learning," after which point they can go on to complete the Seven Liberal Arts in their study of the *Quadrivium*. At the time, we could not have told you anything about the history of the *Trivium* and its relationship to child development issues beyond what we had read in Sayers. But what we *did* know (from Sayers), we put into practice and the results can only be described as a roaring success.

As the years went by, we read up on what we were doing, and learned a great deal more about it. In other words, we started blind, but we didn't stay that way. And so it turns out a lot rides on whether we describe what Sayers was advocating as her historical explication of the medieval practice or, instead of this, describing it as the Sayers' insight—what somebody really ought to try sometime (for the first time). Littlejohn and Evans point out (*rightly*, in my view) that the historical application of the *Trivium* did not do it the Sayers' way. In other words, I don't think that little kids in 1352 were taken through the grammar stage (the way they are at Logos School), and then on to the dialectic stage, and so forth.

In my book, *The Case for Classical Christian Education* (published in 2003), I refer repeatedly to the Sayers' *insight*, and this is the reason why I referred to it this way. I believe that Littlejohn and Evans are quite correct on the historical point. In other words, if we look to Sayers for information on how they were doing it "back in the day," we are going to miss the mark. But if we look to Sayers for a valuable idea on how this approach to the *Trivium* could and should be applied to modern education, we will find ourselves cooking with propane and extremely pleased with the results. And that is exactly what has happened to us at Logos. There are numerous indicators that I could point to here—from stellar test scores to nationally-recognized accomplishments of graduates. We have won the state championship in mock trial nine years (out of twelve years competing), and sent a mock trial team to national competition five times. In short, as the sage once put it, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

"The pedagogy refers to our commitment to Dorothy Sayers' basic *insight*—that children grow naturally through stages that correspond nicely with the three elements of the Trivium" (*CCE*, p. 84, emphasis added).

Sayers offered us a remarkable pedagogical *insight* . . ." (*CCE*, p. 135, emphasis added).

"The Sayers insight for all ages could be summed up this way: *Teach with the grain*" (*CCE*, p. 136, emphasis original).

"The structure I would propose is that of the medieval Trivium, *as developed and applied by* Dorothy Sayers" (*CCE*, p. 209, emphasis added).

A proposed departure from this is a significant part of the argument presented in *Wisdom and Eloquence*, and the point is reiterated a number of times. In short, the central contribution that Sayers has to offer (in my view) is the major thing that Littlejohn and Evans take issue with. This is not the end of the world, and I am sure that both gentlemen remain very fine educators despite disagreeing with Sayers on this. But it *does* represent a significant disagreement within the classical and Christian education world, and every classical Christian school needs to decide what they are going to do on this point. Both are fine dances, but you can't waltz and do the Texas two-step at the same time. For their part, Littlejohn and Evans want to "separate the arts from the question of cognitive development altogether" (*W&E*, p. 39).

"However, the experience we have gained through these efforts, combined with our own research into the historical development of the classical liberal arts and sciences and our close reexamination of her own assertions, have led us to disagree with portions of Ms. Sayers' proposal and with the way her recommendations have been attempted at some schools" (*W&E*, p. 34).

"On the contrary, the tradition handed us by our forebears says little to nothing about pedagogy,

continued on next page

A Review of *Wisdom and Eloquence*

continued from page 2

while saying everything about the curriculum. The *trivium* is not a pedagogical paradigm, but a collection of disciplines" (W&E, p. 74).

"As we have indicated in an earlier chapter, we reject the spurious notion that the *trivium* is foundational to the *quadrivium*" (W&E, p. 115).

Now, as I noted above, there is a significant amount of agreement in this disagreement. I agree that child development was not in view eight centuries ago. But suppose we reject the Sayers' point considered as historical exegesis but go on to accept it considered as a new proposed pedagogical paradigm. The people who tried this in the early eighties in north Idaho didn't know any different, and so we just went after it. The educational results have been astounding, and so if it was all based on a mistake it was therefore a very happy mistake. And further, the mistake would have been ours for assuming that Sayers was talking about how education *used* to be, and not about how it *ought* to be. I am not saying that Sayers shared any of our possible confusion on the point.

We have been delighted with the practical results of the Sayers Insight. But there is also an additional argument against going back to the purist view of the *Trivium*. One of the central reasons why we should not just return to the *Trivium* "as it was in the medieval period" is because it used to be a pretty confusing hodge-podge. The simultaneous inculcation of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric (along with the *Quadrivium*) is something that could get away from you pretty easily, and in the Middle Ages, it certainly did. Reading this book by Littlejohn and Evans makes me think that *they* have it well in hand, but this is more than could be said for some early forms of it. This tangled medieval mess was addressed by the Moravian bishop and educational reformer, John Amos Comenius, when he first introduced the idea of pedagogical gradation.

This is not the end of the world, ... But it does *represent a significant disagreement within the classical and Christian education world, and every classical Christian school needs to decide what they are going to do on this point.*

This is how I addressed it in *The Case for Classical Christian Education*.

"One of the important things we owe to Comenius is the systematic development of a natural gradation in the curriculum. This is of special interest to classical educators who are following Sayers in her application of the Trivium to the stages of child development" (*CCE*, p. 125).

And I then quote Keatinge as he summarizes what we actually owe to Comenius.

"If the reader wishes to realize with any force to what extent the gradation and proper articulation of studies was neglected, or rather unthought of, when Comenius was writing, let him read a few chapters in the *Great Dialectic* and then turn to Milton's tractate *Of Education*. In the one he will find a rigorous distribution of the subject matter of instruction, based on an analysis of the capacity and age of the scholar and on a common-sense estimate of the difficulty of the subject. In the other he meets with breadth of mind, it is true, but with no scheme of gradation whatever" (as quoted in *CCE*, p. 125).

Just two final comments and I am done. The first is to make sure we keep this difference where it ought to be—as a matter of important emphasis, and not as a matter of fundamental substance. In other words, every advocate of a graded approach to the *Trivium* acknowledges that none of these three stages are "pure," free from all contamination from the others. Spelling is taught in the grammar stage, and spelling is a rhetorical matter. It is important for ACCS educators to recognize that it is not

continued on page 4