Rethinking the Trivium? Part I

reviewed by Matthew Allen and Joe Bray

Every now and again, a book comes along the education circuit that is so intellectually stimulating, so wise, and so significant that every other book on the bedside table must be shoved aside for its reading. Such is the case with *Wisdom and Eloquence*, by Robert Littlejohn and Charles T. Evans, two veteran administrators of Classical Christian schools. In this two-part review, we provide a brief summary of the book, offer words of appreciation for its strengths, and provide some gentle criticism of the areas we perceive to be weaknesses. Part One covers the summary and areas of agreement; Part Two covers the areas of disagreement.

Summary: The authors' thesis is that schools must prepare graduates not primarily to make a living but chiefly to make a profound difference in the world to which we send them. What essential qualities must they possess to impact their future world? The qualities they need are the same qualities advocated centuries earlier by St. Augustine: wisdom and eloquence. What type of education equips

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going to be "pure grammar," and then "pure dialectic," and then "pure rhetoric." *These are not watertight categories*. Nevertheless the Sayers Insight means that we emphasize the grammar of all subjects in the elementary years, the dialectic of all subjects in the junior high years, and the rhetoric of all subjects in the high school years. But of course, each stage will have important elements of the others contained within them. Students in the rhetoric years still have to memorize things, and students in the grammar stage learn to make letters that stay within the lines, thus presenting a more pleasant rhetorical effect. For their part, Littlejohn and Evans retain an understanding of the importance of gradation—they just don't tie it together with the language of the *Trivium* (*e.g.* pp. 130, 164).

These are not new issues to us, issues that somehow passed us by. In the early years of Logos, we worked through these very same issues when one of our founding board members urged us to adopt an approach very similar to the one urged here in *Wisdom and Eloquence*. After deliberation many years ago, the Logos School Board decided against going this route, and we continue to be extremely satisfied with the results we continue see. "Dance with the one what brung ya."

Schools that follow the pattern suggested here will no doubt be superior to many of the typical American schools around them.

Having said all this, I suppose it means that I believe that the Sayers Insight represents a better application of the medieval *Trivium* than was practiced in the medieval period itself. And it would follow from this that I believe schools that follow the Sayers Insight will enjoy richer educational fruit than schools that simply return to the practice of teaching all seven of the liberal arts at every age. But this is just a disagreement, not a collision. I still recommend this book highly—there is much to be gained from it. Schools that follow the pattern suggested here will no doubt be superior to many of the typical American schools around them. At the same time, I do believe that ACCS schools should be encouraged to stay the course on this point. But of course I *would* say that—you don't work for McDonalds in order to sell Wendy's burgers.

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young people with wisdom and eloquence? Only a classical liberal arts and sciences education in a Christian context.

Wisdom, according to the authors (again, following Augustine), consists of two parts. The first part is a thorough understanding of the Scriptures. The second is a general knowledge of everything else, with heavy emphasis on grammar, Greek, Latin and logic. Eloquence is an ability to speak and write well, in short, a mastery of the art of rhetoric. Thus, the authors contend that the modern classical Christian school will be a liberal arts school that emphasizes the liberal arts and sciences as subjects.

In adopting this approach, the authors respectfully disagree with portions of Dorothy Sayers' essay, "The Lost Tools of Learning," which presaged the contemporary resurgence of classical Christian education. Sayers contended in her essay that the medieval scheme of education was divided into two parts: the Trivium and the Quadrivium. The Trivium consisted of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. The Quadrivium consisted of the mathematics, sciences, and music. Sayers argued that only the Trivium should be taught in grammar and secondary schools. Littlejohn and Evans argue that all the subjects of the medieval curriculum should be studied "from day one" (p. 40).

Sayers associated the three stages of the Trivium with three stages of child development: poll-parrot, pert, and poetic. Littlejohn and Evans disagree that dialectic and rhetoric are "not subjects but are merely methods of dealing with subjects" (p. 38). They contend that a "better understanding" is that we "separate the arts from the question of cognitive development altogether." They thus deny that the Trivium is a pedagogical methodology, and assert instead that we "must adopt the liberal arts and sciences as the curriculum of choice" (p. 39).

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by Robert Littlejohn and Charles T. Evans

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The authors then offer practical advice on how to implement a liberal arts curriculum in a classical Christian school. Their basic point here is that the curriculum must be developed from the top down, rather than the usual approach of bottom up. In other words, rather than starting with the kindergarten program and working upward, the better approach to curriculum design is to determine what the wise and eloquent student will look like as a graduating senior and develop the curriculum down from there. The last half of the book develops this approach on a subject-by-subject basis, offering much practical advice based on the experience of the authors in their schools.

Appreciative Agreement: There is much to appreciate in *Wisdom and Eloquence*. Here, we can mention only a few things:

1. The authors provide a needed corrective in pointing out that the "classical" component of the classical Christian school relates to subjects as well as methodology. It is sometimes heard in classical Christian circles that it does not matter whether the school teaches Latin or German or Russian or Spanish as its core foreign language because any one of them could be "grist for the mill" of teaching students how to think more precisely. Here at The Paideia School, we agree with Littlejohn and Evans that the liberal arts should be treated as subjects. It matters that we teach Latin and Greek rather than replace them with contemporary foreign languages. It matters that we teach students Homer, Plato, Virgil, Dante and Milton. We strive to create graduates able to enter into the "Great Conversation "of Western Civilization, and we teach our high school students the subjects of rhetoric, formal logic, Latin, apologetics and

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theology, along with a "great ideas" seminar, to that end. We also teach the subjects of the Quadrivium–mathematics, geometry, science, and music.

2. The authors also do much good in emphasizing eloquence and rhetoric as capstones of the classical Christian curriculum. We agree. Our goal is to create in our graduates the good man or good woman speaking well. Thus, our bylaws contain as purposes of the institution (i) encouraging faithful involvement in the local church, (ii) advancing healthy citizenship in the body politic, (iii) equipping for creative and constructive engagement with the cultural life of the community, and (iv) promoting benevolent service to others in society.

3. The authors have a valuable discussion of the importance of school culture (which, in good classical form, they call the school's "ethos" (pp. 53ff.). They note that "every relationship should be characterized by mutual respect and by recognition on the part of each that the other is an image-bearer of the Creator" (p. 55). They urge students to demonstrate a respectful attitude toward adults as well as each other. They rightly state: "Few things disrupt the harmony of the school environment more than toleration of mistreatment of students by their peers" (p. 56). They advocate use of an honor code that contains the condition that a student who knows that another student has behaved dishonorably or brought shame to the school is obliged to bring that offense to light (p. 56). Here at Paideia, one of the most important strategic goals of the board of directors is to preserve a culture of honor and respect. That is why we expect students to greet adults as they pass them on campus. That is why we have an honor code that encourages students to pursue wisdom and virtue in themselves and their classmates and to avoid foolishness and vice and discourage them in others. That is why we encourage teachers to circulate among the students at lunch and recess–because teaching honor and respect does not stop at the classroom door. Jesus is also Lord of the lunchroom and the locker area, the hallways and the athletic field. The school's "ethos," or culture, extends to every area of the campus and to every minute of the day. "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17).

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4. The authors rightly note that the curriculum objectives are not determined by a textbook or "boxed" or "canned" curriculum designed by publishers. The goal for each subject should be to determine: What are the major skills, knowledge and virtues we want our students to achieve when they leave this grade? Once those things are determined, it is neither necessary nor prudent for a teacher to be tethered to a textbook in order to "get through" the book by the end of the year. We agree. It is far more important that our teachers go "deeper" in terms of the major objectives rather than "broader," simply to reach a goal of finishing a book. Academic rigor focuses on the quality of the learning, not the quantity of work required.

5. We were intrigued by the recommendation that a school group students in the upper school by like skill sets rather than by age. We at Paideia are doing that now, albeit by necessity rather than design. However, we are seeing advantages to breaking away from a strict age-grading approach. In the Great Hall, for instance, our rhetoric school students can model serious study habits in the presence of our grammar school students. In the classroom, more than one teacher has remarked how they have enlisted students to explain difficult concepts to their peers who struggle – in their own common language. This has the additional happy benefit of training students to be concerned for one an-

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