Rethinking the Trivium? Part II

reviewed by Matthew Allen and Joe Bray

Constructive Criticism: In Part One of this review, we summarized the central message of *Wisdom and Eloquence,* by Robert Littlejohn and Charles Evans, two men who have worked tirelessly in and thought deeply about classical Christian education, and whom we consider to be friends and colleagues. For all of their book's excellent value, we do believe it has some weaknesses–or at least some areas that are open for further discussion. This is to be expected. After all, since the closing of the New Testament canon, the perfect book has not been written. In Part Two of our review, we will now outline some areas over which we have what we believe are principled disagreements.

1. We do not completely agree that the purpose of education can be totally subsumed under the headings of wisdom and eloquence. We certainly appreciate and share the authors' desire to restore the classical ideal to education, as their elevation of eloquence to one of the two main goals of education attests. We have the utmost respect for Augustine, from whom the authors derived the pairing of wisdom and eloquence as descriptive of an educated man. We would even further see a parallel to the two greatest commandments: wisdom equals love for God; eloquence (as they define it as cultural influence) equals love for neighbor. However, we still believe that wisdom and virtue says it better. Wisdom and eloquence may be separated: that is, a man can be wise without being eloquent or eloquent without being wise. Wisdom and virtue, on the other hand, while distinct, are almost inseparable. One cannot imagine a man who is wise without also being virtuous or vice versa.

2. We think the authors overcompensate in their attempt to correct perceived confusion surrounding Sayers' intent. They claim that the Trivium as she applied it could not be said to be a methodology, but that seemed to be the whole point of her essay. As noted above, we do agree that grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric are subjects (or disciplines), but Sayers clearly intended to view them as a methodological framework as well. Indeed, the authors implicitly refute their own thesis by smuggling in the back door the very child development principles they seek to throw out the front door. They cite approvingly Mortimer Adler's framework for types of learning: acquisition of new knowledge, critical interaction, and

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other, to encourage one another, and to serve one another–Biblical virtues, all. Even in the cafeteria, older students often bring books to their tables and hold mature conversations on significant topics. While the younger students may not understand completely what is happening at the older students' tables, they do hold them in awe and aspire to be like them someday.

6. We were encouraged by specific curriculum conclusions that we independently also had reached. For example, Littlejohn and Evans opine that the upper school literature curriculum be organized around the Bible and the five major epics of Western Civilization (Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.) We do that at Paideia. The authors suggested offering statistics as an alternative to calculus in the senior year. We plan to do that next year, based on the recommendation of our own Mrs. Stone. The authors also suggested reversing the standard high school science curriculum, teaching physics before chemistry and chemistry before biology. Our own Mrs. Langner had already reached the same conclusion.

We have found that we have much in common with the thinking of Littlejohn and Evans. In our next installment, we will explore several areas in which Paideia's leadership hold different positions and hope to enter into constructive dialogue with our good brothers and colleagues.

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meaningful expression. These categories are practically indistinguishable from what most modern classical Christian education proponents call the grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric stages of learning a subject.

3. We disagree that classical Christian schools should not distinguish between Christian and non-Christian pupils (p. 46). We believe our schools are too new at this business of repairing the ruins, and too fragile, to admit a critical mass of unsaved students—especially teenagers—a few of whom can do a lot of damage to a school's "ethos" in a very short time. For the same reason, we disagree that our schools should admit significant numbers of supposedly "like-minded" families who do not profess Christian faith (p. 68). A couple of "like-minded" students and families who agree with most of our goals and values but don't share the most important ones—namely, our spirituality—may lower the spiritual temperature of a campus culture over time. (When it comes to Christian faith, 90% agreement is 100% disagreement.) In a worse-case scenario, a couple of less like-minded high schoolers who are resistant to the school's values will inevitably find each other—usually within a day or two—and create a "student underground" that can be fairly imperious to all attempts by teachers and administrators to reach their hearts, and that can inject intellectual, attitudinal, moral, and spiritual poison into the bloodstream of the school's student body. The authors recognize this potential danger, for even while they advocate for a fairly broad admissions gate, they also recognize that "the students we admit are significant contributors to our developing school culture" (p. 69).

On a related topic, Littlejohn and Evans distinguish between schools filled with students who exhibit the fruit of the Spirit and schools which merely model those virtues by teachers (p. 61). Now, merely attending a classical Christian school no more makes a student a Christian than standing in a garage would make him a car. We are well aware that some of our students may have all of the outward trappings of Christianity but do not truly belong to Christ and that there are no guarantees of a 100% success rate with our graduates, but why have a classical Christian school if that is not our ideal? Didn't Jesus claim that every student, when he is fully trained, will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40)? Didn't Socrates conclude that virtue could be taught? Isn't that the whole point of forming schools like ours: to produce students who are at once spiritually wise and culturally eloquent (or virtuous)? If we expect less, we will surely get it.

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We believe that the inclusive admissions policy that Littlejohn and Evans advocate is a recipe for trouble for our schools at this stage in their development. Admitting a critical mass of unsaved students can destroy the culture of the school (p. 68).

4. Some more minor points:

(a) The authors advocate teaching typing and keyboarding as part of the curriculum of a classical Christian school (p. 89). In the ideal world, we would teach these things and many others beside, but there simply is no room in our core curriculum. While there is nothing inherently wrong with these "subjects," and while they might have some utility in a pluralistic, highly technological society like ours, our fledgling schools typically will have neither the personnel nor the equipment to teach them effectively. Could we offer them as a summer course, an after-school club, or a tutorial if we had enough student interest and the necessary assets available to us? Absolutely, but they should not divert our precious scarce resources from the core liberal arts. The good would then be

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the enemy of the best.

(b) At one point, the authors suggest teaching students to use true but invalid arguments (p. 111). This is surprising, to say the least. We should ask ourselves: Do good ends justify illicit means? Should we knowingly commit logical fallacies simply because they work? Can we in good conscience publicly espouse truth, goodness, and beauty, and then privately take the low road of a purely pragmatic pedagogy? Is that what has given "rhetoric" a bad name in the first place? It may be eloquent, but is it wise?

(c) We think that the third chapter on "Worldview and the Liberal Arts" leaves something to be desired. Littlejohn and Evans do a good job of pointing out that "worldview" is better caught than taught because it is not a set of ideas or principles but that underlying thought and life patterns behind them (a way of thinking). But the paradigm that they propose of Creation–Fall–Redemption–Consummation (also adopted by Nancy Pearcey in *Total Truth*) does not go far enough. It stays in the abstract world and thus loses its usefulness at the practical level (the level where "worldview" lives). Unfortunately, Littlejohn and Evans do not carry this concept far enough.

These quibbles do not detract from the immense value in this book, however. *Wisdom and Eloquence* lives up to its billing as an "indispensable contribution to the

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Authors Respond to *Re-Thinking the Trivium?*

Robert Littlejohn and Charles Evans, authors of *Wisdom and Eloquence*, respond to the areas of disagreement contained in the review of their book by Matthew Allen and Joe Bray.

1. **Allen & Bray:** We do not completely agree that the purpose of education can be totally subsumed under the headings of wisdom and eloquence. We certainly appreciate and share the authors' desire to restore the classical ideal to education, as their elevation of eloquence to one of the two main goals of education attests. We have the utmost respect for Augustine, from whom the authors derived the pairing of wisdom and eloquence as descriptive of an educated man.

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literature of classical Christian education" and a "remarkable treatise on education." It is, as R. Albert Mohler called it, "a book for our time, our churches, and our children." We can take Mohler's advice to "read, learn, and be inspired." We also can be encouraged. Already, independently, we are implementing many of the suggestions and advice offered by these wizened school heads. There is much more in the book for us to consider in years ahead. It is true that we have a long way to go to repair the ruins and recover the lost tools of learning, but after reading this book, we are encouraged that we are on the right path.

We would even further see a parallel to the two greatest commandments: wisdom equals love for God; eloquence (as they define it as cultural influence) equals love for neighbor. However, we still believe that wisdom and virtue says it better. Wisdom and eloquence may be separated: that is, a man can be wise without being wise or eloquent without being wise. Wisdom and virtue, on the other hand, while distinct, are almost inseparable: one cannot imagine a man who is wise without also being virtuous or vice versa.

Response: Attempts to reduce the purpose of education to any two or three goals always come up short. The fact is, all of life is an education—the life of faith even more so. And no formal educational system can prepare students adequately for the whole range of life's challenges and responsibilities. We chose wisdom and eloquence as main objectives because they are the achievable outcomes which the liberal arts are designed to produce.

The classical tradition is replete with references to virtue as an educational goal, from the Greeks to our times. In fact, we would agree that wisdom and eloquence are *themselves* virtues. Ancient rhetoricians, such as Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian agreed that virtuous character was an absolute requirement of oratory, and that it should be taught as part and parcel of a student's total educational

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