

# **DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE SENIOR THESIS PROGRAM**

**Patrick Halbrook, Rhetoric & Humanities Teacher, Cary Christian School**

**2024 ACCS Conference**

*Visit [patrickhalbrook.com/thesis](http://patrickhalbrook.com/thesis) to view teacher resources (sample schedule, grading rubrics, etc.) and to continue today's conversation by joining our senior thesis discussion board / email list. Connect and collaborate with other teachers by posting questions, sharing resources and insights, and learning more about other schools' challenges and successes.*

## **What is the Senior Thesis?**

**The senior thesis is an independent study of a significant and challenging subject that culminates in a paper and a public conversation designed to enrich our school community intellectually and morally.**

1. The senior thesis is an independent study of a significant and challenging subject...

2. ...that culminates in a paper...

3. ...and a public conversation designed to enrich our school community intellectually and morally.

## Survey – Senior Thesis Practices Across Classical Schools

*The following results are from an informal online 2024 survey of classical schools. The survey was sent to all ACCS member schools and posted online through social media. Most of the 82 respondents teach at ACCS schools.*

### What does your school find most challenging about running a successful senior thesis program?

**Most common responses, categorized:**

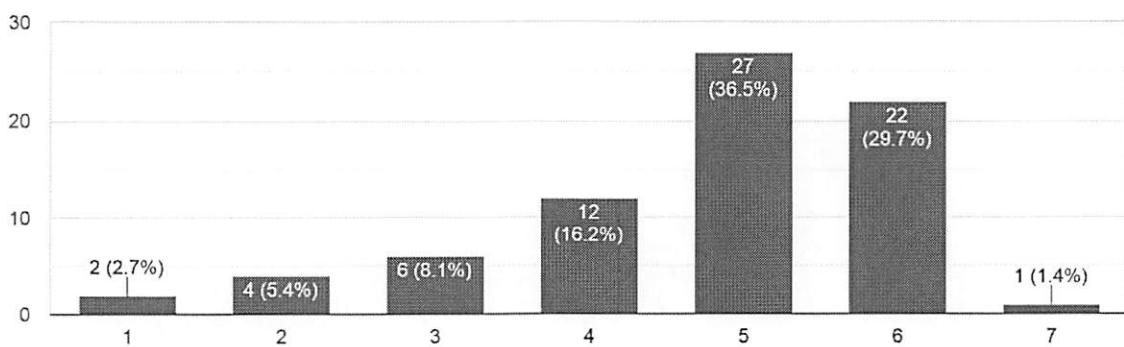
10. Cheating and AI use	5. Unmotivated and struggling students
9. Lack of buy-in from families	4. Students entering the class unprepared
8. Challenges knowing how to grade	3. Lack of qualified resources for research
7. Getting students to choose worthwhile topics	2. Lack of qualified advisers
6. Unclear understanding of the project's purpose and rigor	1. Lack of time (for both students and teachers)

### How have you improved your senior thesis program over the years?

**Most common responses, categorized:**

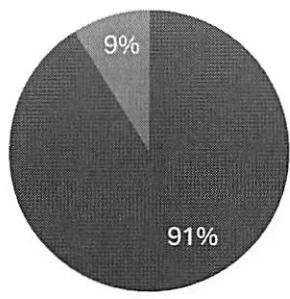
8. Made the presentations a more formal/beautiful event	4. Better topic selection process (better guidance, expanding or revising pool of topics)
7. More successfully integrated classical Christian curriculum into thesis sources	3. Added faculty advisers
6. Clarified expectations and procedures	2. Improved K-11 curriculum
5. Simply finding small ways to improve every year	1. More effective timeline of due dates

### How would you rate the current state of your senior thesis program?

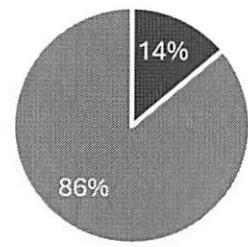


*How accurate is this self-reported assessment? It is difficult to say without more information, but it is important to note that schools with high perceptions of their programs are much less likely to abandon them.*

### Does your school have a senior thesis program?



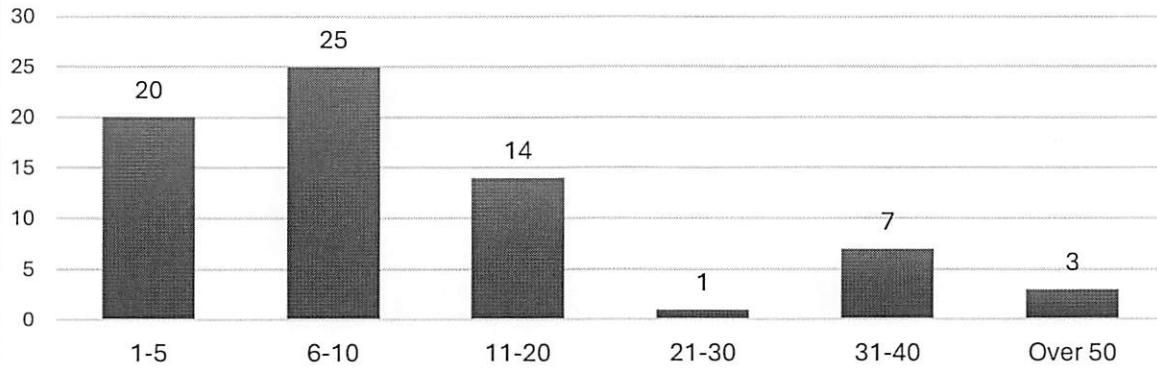
### Do students write a paper and speech separately, or just a speech?



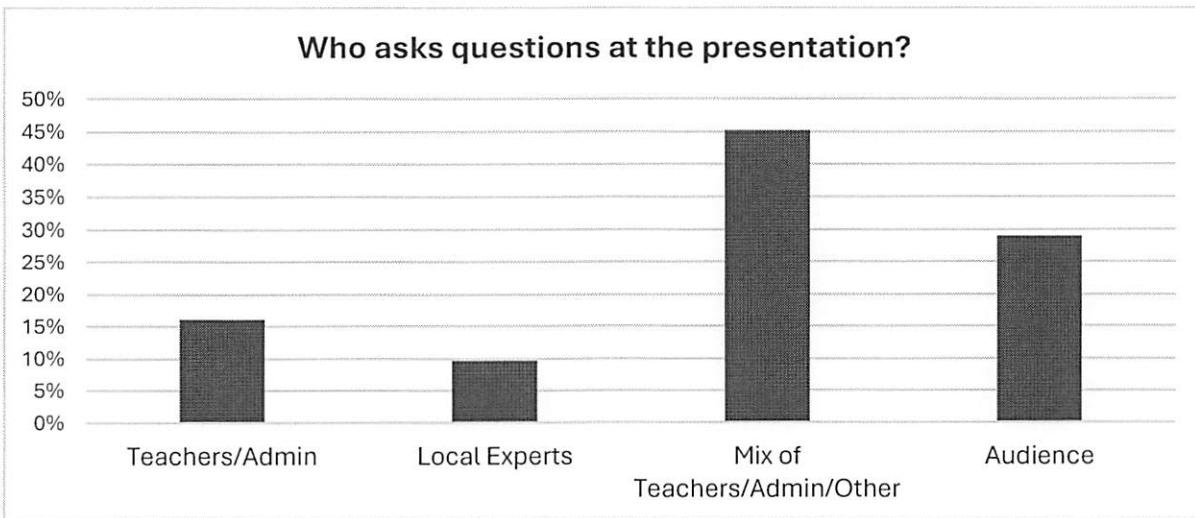
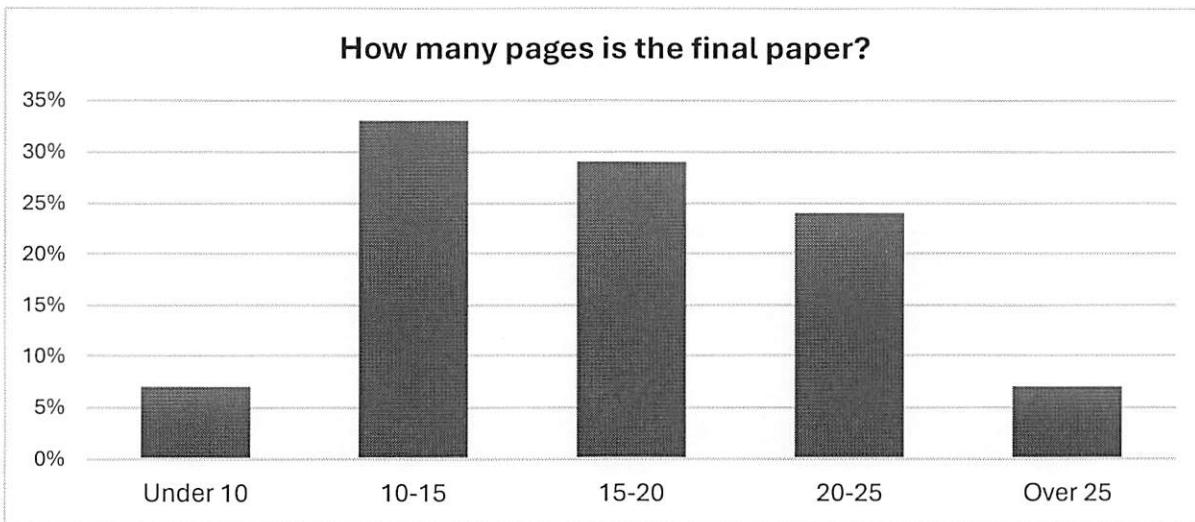
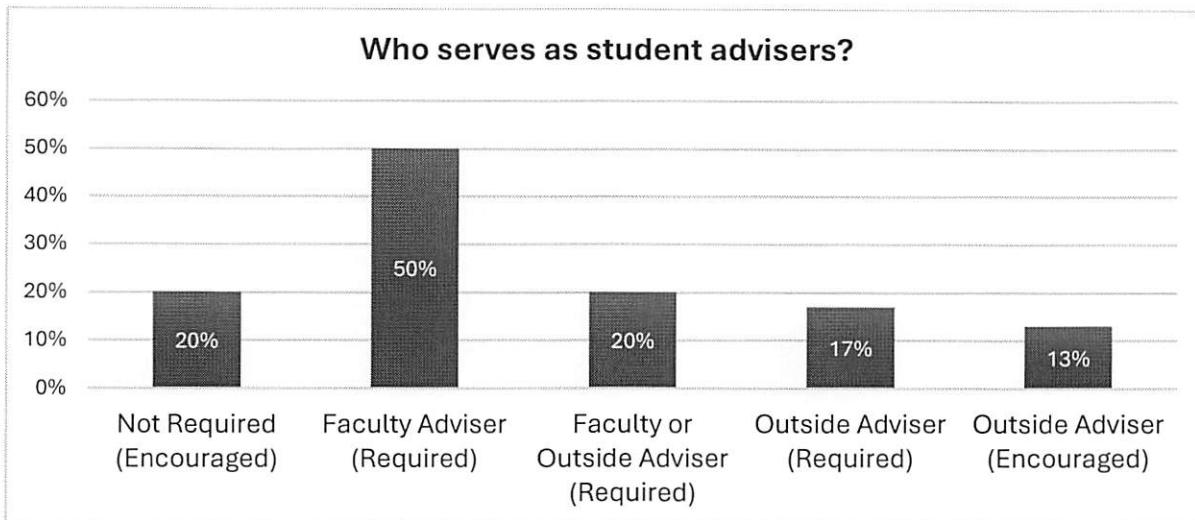
*The 9% of schools without senior thesis programs simply do not have seniors yet. No schools indicated that they simply choose to forego a senior thesis, though there are likely a small number that do.*

*In addition to the speech and paper, a small number of schools also have students complete a hands-on project related to their topic. For instance, the Poiesis project at Veritas School (Newberg, Oregon) prompts students to engage in community service, tackle an engineering/scientific endeavor, or produce an artistic piece which they write and speak about.*

### How many seniors did you teach last year?



*Smaller and larger schools share many of the same challenges as well as unique ones. Smaller schools have fewer seniors to manage but teachers stay busy teaching a high number of different preps. Larger schools have more resources but have to manage dozens of seniors and topics.*



## What do you consider the greatest benefit of a senior thesis program?

### Select responses:

- It teaches the process of writing a persuasive paper, backed by evidence, from start to finish. It stretches them to consider other viewpoints and opinions beside their own. It synthesizes rhetoric, logic, and debate into a capstone project that not only challenges them, but proves they can. Ultimately, it prepares them for college and the workplace by teaching them how to write (and argue) logically and persuasively and to overcome personal hurdles.
- Senior Thesis is meant to be an application of knowledge and skills acquired throughout their classical education. As opposed to being a "capstone" it is seen as a starting line or blocks at the beginning of a race that will launch them into the rest of their lives where they will need to know truth and apply it wisely to the glory of God.
- It is a demonstration of the student's learning to interact with classical and Christian/biblical sources to support a thoughtful and controversial thesis on a topic of interest. It gives the student the chance to practice the tools of life-long learning. It allows students to begin to bless the Church by doing the careful thinking and application to life that we have trained them to do.
- It teaches students to think on their feet about a topic they've spent a year becoming familiar with. It also forces them to think through questions that they normally would not think through.
- It is the culmination of everything learned throughout the primary, middle, and high school years. Students are required to research, learn, compile, and organize facts. They are to use those facts in a reasoned argument to persuade people toward their position. The topic is one that students connect with at the heart level, so they are learning how to use their thinking skills to change the world in ways that are important to them. Combining formal writing with formal speaking is what we desire all of our high school graduates to be able to do well.
- Presenting from memory a project they care about and answering questions--many fear it, and then feel so satisfied they made it through, and even shined.
- The integration of classical rhetorical skills and texts into a current topic of concern. Students have the opportunity to invite the great voices of the past to speak into an issue today. They are learning to use these skills not to win an argument to heal their community.
- It teaches students to persist in immensely difficult work over a long period of time. Thesis is much more of an endurance test than most academic work.
- It challenges the student, provides assessment for the school to evaluate overall student development
- According to our alumni, the thesis program is unparalleled in the way that it prepares them for their college writing assignments.
- Lots of academic benefits, but the greatest benefits I see are increased confidence and triumph in the child. They learn (again) that the Lord is faithful. They also have an opportunity to minister to one another through support, encouragement, and prayer. I cheer from the sidelines, but they walk through this process together, and they emerge as a strong spiritual community.
- The students have the opportunity to put all they have learned into one paper. They are able to use the writing skills, chapels, Omnibus, Bible studies, etc. they have learned during their time at our school and put that knowledge into one place. It is also a good place to understand how to write a paper so that those going to college are prepared. We hear from our seniors how valuable the paper was because they went into college feeling prepared. In fact, several say college is easier!! Finally, it is their opportunity to give the secondary students words of wisdom as they depart. I know of at least 3 students that changed their mind about leaving our school when they heard the senior thesis speeches. They stayed because they wanted the knowledge and wisdom the seniors displayed.
- I think it's incredibly rewarding for the students. It's a beautiful capstone that is a

culminating achievement of their education at our school, and it equips them for entering the world with rhetorical skill and grace.

- Student develop the ability and confidence to successfully navigate and complete a large complex multiyear project. Additionally, they develop skill in an area of interest which may help them determine the Lord's intentions for their life.
- Independent research and learning into an area they themselves choose; having to be independently motivated and keep to deadlines; not procrastinating; interacting with other adults/professors/business owners.
- I believe that it will allow our seniors a chance to put all of their education together in a cohesive project. It is a fantastic preparation for those that are furthering their education at the college level.
- Confidence: It's a real challenge (they are exposed and have to do the work, they can't wiggle out of it or ride through it ) to push them to use the skills they have personally learned through their years at the school. The "process" pushes each student in a very unique and different way. Some struggle in the invention stage, some in the research, and others in the delivery. However, they all end in a better position than when they began. They can say to themselves, "Wow, I can do this!"
- The student proving to him or herself and others that he or she has learned how to learn and been able to tackle this year-long project, including organizing and seeking out both paper and people resources for assistance along the way. It is a real step at independent learning that tends to energize the students to do more of that in the future.
- Past graduates have commented that after making it through senior thesis, they are confident and ready to learn anything set in front of them.
- The students experience the rigor of finding the truth in a contentious topic and then preparing the best way to present that truth in a way that will invite agreement. They learn how arduous it can be to answer complex questions in a thoughtful, meaningful way, and they experience the joy of communicating

the truth in a way that can help their audience flourish. They also learn the value of dialogue, discourse, and even disagreement.

- Senior thesis is the capstone of classical and Christian learning. It reinforces 12 years of learning. It involves our learners in the Great Conversation to the point they realize they have something to say that speaks to culture and glorifies God.
- Developing courage and fortitude as students must defend their ideas against people they respect without being able to shy away from stepping on toes. Skill in oratory and writing are also huge benefits. Graduates routinely talk about how the thesis was more difficult than anything they have encountered in college, ultimately making later studies and projects seem easy.
- It prepares students for the academic challenges they will face in college and, more importantly, for any significant challenges in life. It teaches them the value of working diligently on long projects, and gives them experience in breaking those projects down into appropriate steps. It demonstrates the value of a liberal education that prepares students to handle a range of questions with skill, insight, and Christian wisdom.
- The struggle :) They start completely overwhelmed, but by the end, they are confident and mature
- Preparing the students for what God has called them to do.
- Evaluating a controversial topic from a biblical worldview; looking at both sides of an issue, learning they won't have all the answers.

*For more responses, view full survey results at [patrickhalbrook.com](http://patrickhalbrook.com)*

## HOMER ON COURAGE

The *Iliad* is not a melodrama, where the good guys are all good and the bad guys all bad (as is the case with the *Odyssey*). *Iliad* is at once pro-war (it glorifies the battlefield where men win glory) and anti-war (it is graphic and shows us the casualties). Achilles is both the greatest warrior of all time and the first pacifist, who becomes something of a conscientious objector. Troy is supposed to be the enemy, but Homer makes us love Troy and fear the Greeks: we see Troy as a place of domestic peace, unlike the Greek camp. We like Hector more than Achilles.

In Hector & Achilles, we see two different kinds of courage. Hector shows courage by staying true to what society expects of him; Achilles shows courage by breaking those expectations. Two key scenes, where heroes show their respective courage: 1) Book 6.369-529: Hector says farewell to Andromache; Book 9: Achilles refuses the gifts.

#

Hector sees battle turning against him and goes in for 3 reasons: 1) to get his mother to pray to Athena; 2) rouse up Paris to fight; 3) say goodbye to his wife. He is within the walls, but he must go back to fight. They meet at gate. Entire scene hangs on the meeting. We learn that Hector's nickname for Astya is "she who holds him in. In fact, he embodies all that is good. He has a terrible decision to make that is not

y to get him to stay  
fe; she to tower:  
she is not chattel.  
good qualities, do  
by will die with him.

Hector, like all tragic and epic heroes, is in a bind with his own will pressing out (1) past (to past epithet), and future (worries about what it's been instilled in him as it must in a pre-

and fates that press  
nic), present (live up  
turned to be valiant;  
& nemesis (blame).

Supreme human moment as Hector takes a stand to go or stay (he will not run off to "Canada" as Burke): literature (especially proverbs) provides on these strategies in times of crisis. Given

ma: he must either  
Living (Kenneth  
mmas. We fall back  
f he is to be a hero.

In second speech to his wife, he falls back (1) he must do his duty (Koran); 2) he and she must do their duty (like dharma in Hindu/Gita). He will be true to himself no matter the outcome. As long as he and Andromache stay within their spheres, they will find balance in a mad world; when Hector dies, Andromache is working at loom. *Iliad* VI ends with Type A Hector calling on lazy Paris. As a man of duty and honor, he cannot understand his coldness and lack of concern for men who are dying for him. He's ashamed of his irresponsible younger brother yet loves & defends him & feels sorrow when others criticize him.

#

Why do the Greek (and Trojan) soldiers fight? They fight to gain honor, but who's to say who has most honor? He has most honor who has most meeds of honor (war booty like armor, gold, horses, captive women). Since they're all mortal, they want to gain as much honor as they can before they die—by accumulating meeds. When Agamemnon steals away Achilles' meed (Briseis), he steals his honor, and Achilles pulls out. When Agam. sends Odysseus, Aias, and Phoinix with a huge number of meeds, everyone expects that Achilles will take the offer and return. Phoinix, his old tutor, explains that no one has been mad yet at Achilles but that now he must take the gifts and return—and then tells a tale of Meleagros to illustrate his point (513-605). But Achilles has been thinking strange new thoughts while out of the war (between Books 1 and 9) and has come up with a new ethic different than the meeds of honor.

He explains that fate is the same for cowards and brave men (318-320), that no one can put a price tag on human life (400-403), and that he has intrinsic value because he is alive (606-610). These ideas are inconceivable to the soldiers. Homer's world is not ready for this new ethic, and no one understands Achilles. Achilles himself doesn't fully understand, for he is a soldier rather than a thinker. He also has no support group to discuss his ideas with. Tragically, when Patroclus is killed, Achilles throws out his new ethic, and the world will have to wait for Socrates (and then Jesus!) to suggest such an ethic. But Achilles shows courage in trying to fashion it.

Louis Markos, Prof. of English & Scholar in Residence at Houston Christian Univ., holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities; his 25 books include *From Achilles to Christ*, *From Plato to Christ*, & *The Myth Made Fact. Passing the Torch: An Apology for Classical Christian Education* & *From Aristotle to Christ* are due from IVP in 2024/5.

## HOMER ON COURAGE

The *Iliad* is not a melodrama, where the good guys are all good and the bad guys all bad (as is the case with the *Odyssey*). *Iliad* is at once pro-war (it glorifies the battlefield where men win glory) and anti-war (it is graphic and shows us the casualties). Achilles is both the greatest warrior of all time and the first pacifist, who becomes something of a conscientious objector. Troy is supposed to be the enemy, but Homer makes us love Troy and fear the Greeks: we see Troy as a place of domestic peace, unlike the Greek camp. We like Hector more than Achilles.

In Hector & Achilles, we see two different kinds of courage. Hector shows courage by staying true to what society expects of him; Achilles shows courage by breaking those expectations. Two key scenes, where heroes show their respective courage: 1) Book 6.369-529: Hector says farewell to Andromache; Book 9: Achilles refuses the gifts.

#

Hector sees battle turning against him and goes in for 3 reasons: 1) to get his mother to pray to Athena; 2) rouse up Paris to fight; 3) say goodbye to his wife. He is met by 3 women (mother, sister, wife), who all try to get him to stay within the walls, but he must go back to fight with his men. He runs to domestic place to find wife; she to tower: they meet at gate. Entire scene hangs on threshold, a frozen moment in time—he loves his wife; she is not chattel. We learn that Hector's nickname for Astyanax is Scamandrios. Tragic that his own strength, his good qualities, do him in. In fact, he embodies all that is good about Troy (as Lee did for South). When he dies, Troy will die with him. He has a terrible decision to make that is *not* easy for him.

Hector, like all tragic and epic heroes, is inscribed within a circle where he must balance duties and fates that press down with his own will pressing out (2 Cor. 4:8-9). He bears burden of past (live up to patronymic), present (live up to epithet), and future (worries about what others will say about him when he's dead). He has learned to be valiant; it's been instilled in him as it must in a pre-law society. What he's internalized is *aidos* (shame) & *nemesis* (blame).

Supreme human moment as Hector takes off helmet, kisses son, and laughs. This is a true dilemma: he must either go or stay (he will not run off to "Canada"). How to solve dilemma? Literature as Equipment for Living (Kenneth Burke): literature (especially proverbs) provides us with strategies for dealing with difficult dilemmas. We fall back on these strategies in times of crisis. Given "microcosm" of the *Iliad*, how does Hector choose, if he is to be a hero.

In second speech to his wife, he falls back on two strategies: 1) he has his death day which he cannot escape (true of Koran); 2) he and she must do their duty (like dharma in Hindu Gita). He will be true to himself no matter the outcome. As long as he and Andromache stay within their spheres, they will find balance in a mad world; when Hector dies, Andromache is working at loom. *Iliad* VI ends with Type A Hector calling on lazy Paris. As a man of duty and honor, he cannot understand his coldness and lack of concern for men who are dying for him. He's ashamed of his irresponsible younger brother yet loves & defends him & feels sorrow when others criticize him.

#

Why do the Greek (and Trojan) soldiers fight? They fight to gain honor, but who's to say who has most honor? He has most honor who has most meeds of honor (war booty like armor, gold, horses, captive women). Since they're all mortal, they want to gain as much honor as they can before they die—by accumulating meeds. When Agamemnon steals away Achilles' meed (Briseis), he steals his honor, and Achilles pulls out. When Agam. sends Odysseus, Aias, and Phoinix with a huge number of meeds, everyone expects that Achilles will take the offer and return. Phoinix, his old tutor, explains that no one has been mad yet at Achilles but that now he must take the gifts and return—and then tells a tale of Meleagros to illustrate his point (513-605). But Achilles has been thinking strange new thoughts while out of the war (between Books 1 and 9) and has come up with a new ethic different than the meeds of honor.

He explains that fate is the same for cowards and brave men (318-320), that no one can put a price tag on human life (400-403), and that he has intrinsic value because he is alive (606-610). These ideas are inconceivable to the soldiers. Homer's world is not ready for this new ethic, and no one understands Achilles. Achilles himself doesn't fully understand, for he is a soldier rather than a thinker. He also has no support group to discuss his ideas with. Tragically, when Patroclus is killed, Achilles throws out his new ethic, and the world will have to wait for Socrates (and then Jesus!) to suggest such an ethic. But Achilles shows courage in trying to fashion it.

Louis Markos, Prof. of English & Scholar in Residence at Houston Christian Univ., holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities; his 25 books include *From Achilles to Christ*, *From Plato to Christ*, & *The Myth Made Fact. Passing the Torch: An Apology for Classical Christian Education* & *From Aristotle to Christ* are due from IVP in 2024/5.