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by Douglas Wilson

# RECOVERING THE LOST TOOLS OF LEARNING

*An Approach to Distinctively  
Christian Education*

Douglas Wilson

CROSSWAY BOOKS • WHEATON, ILLINOIS  
A DIVISION OF GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS

trial and an untrained mind encountering familiar material. The answer should be obvious.

5. And lastly, the study of Latin provides a great foundation from which to study other modern languages. The help it would be in the study of languages that are direct descendants of Latin is obvious. The student would have a head start on French, Spanish, Italian, and others (the student could have a good understanding of around 80 percent of the vocabulary of these languages). In addition, he or she would have a solid grasp of how an inflected language works, which would be a considerable help with Russian or German.

In short, the return to Latin is not the work of reactionaries. There is a solid educational value in it; the educational value can be, and has been, empirically shown. Those students fortunate enough to attend a school where it is taught enjoy an incalculable advantage.

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## S E V E N

# THE TRIVIUM AND THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

### PD LIKE AN EDUCATION—TO GO

In modern America, the fast-food mentality has penetrated the realm of the mind. The modern student has a mind full of McThoughts. Information comes to him processed and prepackaged, and he does his duty as a consumer. This does not mean that intellectual activity has disappeared, but having your mind full of mental “stuff” is not the same thing as thinking. This problem did not just arrive a few years ago; insightful people have seen it coming for some time now. In 1947, Dorothy Sayers, a clear-thinking classicist, lamented lack of true thought: “. . . do you sometimes have an uneasy suspicion that the product of modern educational methods is less good than he or she might be at disentangling fact from opinion and the proven from the plausible?”<sup>1</sup>

She goes on: “. . . although we often succeed in teaching our pupils ‘subjects,’ we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think. . . . They learn everything except the art of learning.”<sup>2</sup> Her suggested solution to this problem was a return to an older educational method—the *Trivium* of the Middle Ages. This *Trivium* consisted of three parts: grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. The three-part program prepared students for the *Quadrivium*—the study of various subjects. The *Trivium* equipped students with the tools of learning in order to undertake the discipline and specialization of the *Quadrivium*.

Sayers matches the three stages of the *Trivium* to three stages

of child development. Grammar, which involves memorizing basic facts, goes nicely with what she calls the "Poll-parrot period." Younger children love to chant, recite, and memorize. Dialectic, the study of formal logic and argumentation, fits well with what she calls the "Pert" stage. Because children are argumentative at the junior high and early high school level anyway, they might as well be taught to argue properly. The third level, rhetoric, should accompany the child's "Poetic" phase.

When grammar, dialectic and rhetoric are taught at these ages, the teacher is teaching "with the grain." Two things are accomplished. The children enjoy what they do, and what they do equips them with the tools of learning. They are then ready for the *Quadrivium*, and beyond that, life. In contrast, modern educational method emphasizes the teaching of various subjects from the beginning. We begin with the *Quadrivium* and never leave it. This has the unfortunate effect of causing students to perceive each subject as a universe of its own with no relationship to other subjects. "... modern education concentrates on teaching subjects, leaving the method of thinking, arguing and expressing one's conclusions to be picked up by the scholar as he goes along. . . ." <sup>3</sup>

Although her arguments were cogent, Miss Sayers observed: "It is in the highest degree improbable that the reforms I propose will ever be carried into effect."<sup>4</sup> She was, happily, entirely wrong in this. She underestimated the power of ideas, or at least the power of this one. From its inception, Logos School has built its curriculum around the basic structure she suggests. Of course, some of our terminology is different, but our basic methodology follows this pattern. It is the purpose of this chapter to show how such a medieval method looks when dressed up in modern American clothing. We are happy to report that Dorothy Sayers was more than a competent essayist. Her thoughts on education have been put into practice, and *they work*. But the approach does not mean that our students have been equipped with truckloads of arcane knowledge of no use to anyone approaching the twenty-first century. Fundamentally, we are not teaching a different body of knowledge; we are approaching the knowledge we have differently.

## GRAMMAR

We begin with children who have been taught the basic skills of reading, writing, and ciphering. This preparation occurs in the first and second grade as they are given basic verbal and mathematical literacy. The formal instruction in grammar, including Latin gram-

mar, begins in the third grade. This stage is concerned with the accumulation of facts since children of this age love to memorize. Our students study Latin from third grade to sixth grade. In the first year of Latin, we emphasize the memorization of words and the chanting of word endings. Dorothy Sayers made this point about such memorization: "Latin should be begun as early as possible—at a time when inflected speech seems no more astonishing than any other phenomenon in an astonishing world; and when the chanting of *'amo, amas, amat'* is as ritually agreeable to the feelings as the chanting of 'eeny, meeny, miney, mo.'"<sup>5</sup>

Before I explain how this works in the classroom, it will be necessary to give a brief explanation of how Latin functions. In English, we determine what function a word has in a sentence by its location in the sentence. For example, "The boy sat on the chair" has a meaning entirely different from "The chair sat on the boy." This is true even though all the *words* are exactly the same. In Latin, the function of the word is determined by its ending. Word order does not affect the meaning of the sentence the same way it does in English. So, for example, "*Deus mundum amat*" and "*Mundum Deus amat*" mean the same thing—God loves the world. In order to change the meaning of the sentence, we would change the *endings* of the two nouns. "*Mundus Deum amat*" means the world loves God. Consequently, the student of Latin not only must learn the various endings for the verb forms, he must also learn the endings for the *nouns*. Fortunately, as Dorothy Sayers realized, children love to chant, and they can memorize by chanting.

This love of chanting is manifest again and again in our classrooms. When I taught Latin to our third graders, I could say, "Please finish this—o!"

They, in unison, would then chant, "s, t, mus, tis, nti bo, bis, bit, binus, bitis, bunti bam, bas, bat, barnus, batis, banti. . . ." They keep going for a while; it is quite a spectacle. These are the verb endings for the present, future, and imperfect tenses.

With nouns, I could say, "Please repeat after me—a, ae, ae, am, ai"

They would respond, "a, ae, ae, am, ai"

"ae, arum, is, as, is!"

"ae, arum, is, as, is!"

And so it goes. The children, of course, have very little idea what this all means, but the memorized chants are very useful a couple of years later when they are in third and fourth year Latin.

They need to learn these endings because, for example, the noun for girl is *puella*. Its different forms are *puella, puellae, puel-*

*lae, puellam, puella, puellae, puellarum, puellis, puellas, and puellis.* At this point, a skeptic might be tempted to say, "And so what? Why have the kids memorize a bunch of word endings in a dead language? Why not have them chant through some other collection of useless data?"

The objection can be met in two ways. The first answer is that in the study of language, Latin is not useless at all. It aids the student with his ordinary English vocabulary, and in addition, it can be a great help with technical vocabularies in medicine or science. As we discussed in the last chapter, there is great usefulness in classicism.

The second answer is that we do not teach grammar by teaching Latin. Each subject has its own grammar, which the children are at this stage committing to memory. For example, history has a grammar (dates, events, personalities), and so does geography (cities, rivers, states). So Latin does not supply the children with the grammar for, say, arithmetic, but it does lay the foundation for future language study. So we teach Latin grammar as one grammar among many.

### DIALECTIC

In Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *The Mikado*, the Lord High Executioner has a little list. If he gets his chance, the offenders on the list will all meet with their just reward. They include, alas, "children who are up in dates, and floor you with them flat." Messrs. Gilbert and Sullivan were apparently acquainted with the "Pert" stage. This argumentative tendency is in full bloom around sixth and seventh grade. As children mature, they tend to use the information learned in the course of their studies in disputation. They love to try to catch their parents, the teacher, or their schoolmates in any kind of error. Instead of suppressing this tendency, teachers should use it.

It will doubtless be objected that to encourage young persons at the Pert Age to browbeat, correct, and argue with their elders will render them perfectly intolerable. My answer is that children of that age are intolerable anyhow; and that their natural argumentativeness may just as well be canalised to good purpose as allowed to run away into the sands.<sup>6</sup>

This does not mean that educators give in to this kind of argumentativeness. Instead, the teacher molds it and shapes it. For example, in sixth, seventh and eighth grade Bible class, I have noticed that

the sixth graders are by far the most questioning. "Why didn't God let Moses into the promised land? That was mean." "Why doesn't God make everyone a Christian?" Instead of squelching such questions, I have encouraged students to ask and dispute. If done correctly, this encouragement does not teach them that disputation is automatically good. If you encourage disagreement for disagreement's sake, then you will get disagreeable children. But if you teach them that it is good to question (provided the questioning is intellectually rigorous and honest), then you are *educating*.

We do not limit the encouragement of a questioning attitude to certain subjects. In seventh grade history, the students were studying the Civil War. Special guest speakers presented the causes of both the North and the South. The children were asked to do their own thinking and draw their own conclusions (supported by facts). The subjects the children study provide the raw material. The students are encouraged to take what is taught and think it through.

We noted earlier that the Christian teacher is not worldview neutral. But this does not make the disputation a sham. We want our children to have open minds in order that they may find and close on the truth. As discussed earlier, it is possible to believe in ultimate truth and pass that truth on to students without propagandizing them. One of the best ways to do this is to utilize the "pertness" of the average student. If they are going to question anyway, then teach them *how* to question. Teach them to recognize a fallacious argument, and they will not just hold the rest of the world to that standard; they will hold *you* to it.

### RHETORIC

In the study of rhetoric, the student learns how to express what he thinks. The substance is settled; the question now concerns how best to present that substance. It is not enough to believe what is correct; the truth must be presented in a manner worthy of that truth. Obviously, rhetoric includes teaching speech, debate, essay-writing, etc. Style and clear-minded expression are important.

But rhetoric goes beyond the mere question of eloquence. William Blake put it this way: "Rhetoric completes the tools of learning. Dialectic zeros in on the logic of things, of particular systems of thought or subjects. Rhetoric takes the next grand step and brings all these subjects together into one whole."<sup>7</sup> Another way of saying this is that eloquence, properly understood, is not glossiness of speech. The truly eloquent man grasps the larger picture.

The student who is being trained in eloquence should, there-

fore, be taught in two ways. The first way is obvious. It involves correcting split infinitives and the like. The second way is to encourage the student to draw from other subjects in his presentation. Breadth of knowledge is an important part of rhetorical skill, even though the subject being presented is fairly limited. It should be apparent that this is why rhetoric is built on a foundation of accumulated knowledge (grammar) and disputations about the reliability of that knowledge (dialectic).<sup>8</sup>

It is also important that this training in rhetoric not begin too early. John Milton objected to this mistake with regard to Latin and Greek; the objection applies just as well to English. He spoke of "... forcing the empty wits of children to compose themes, verses, and orations, which are the acts of ripest judgment. . . ." <sup>9</sup> Of course this does not mean that young children are not to begin the process of writing or expressing themselves in other ways. It simply means that such early attempts should not be treated as though they were the final product. Children should be praised for their efforts, but their efforts should be treated as merely a *step* toward mature self-expression. We should be pleased with what they do, but not satisfied.

Here is a table of the progressive learning of students:

Grades K-2 Children learn to read and cipher. Obviously, some elements of the grammar stage can be seen here.

Grades 3-5 Basic grammar is taught. The children learn dates, declensions, multiplication tables, places, etc.

Grades 6-8 The dialectic stage. The children continue to learn subjects, but they now challenge some of what they learn. This tendency should be drawn out and encouraged.

Grades 9-12 Rhetoric is taught at this level. The students learn how to present what they know and what they are learning.

Grades 11-12 The *Quadrivium* begins. The student begins to decide where he wants to specialize. This process continues through graduation, and on into university studies.

So then, rhetoric is the capstone of the *Trivium*. It is at this point that the educational process begins to bear real fruit. It is sad that because so many Christian parents have reacted to public schools, they are content with basic literacy. But this basic literacy

can be accomplished in the first grade. This is not education; it is the first step. We cannot say that our job as educators is done until the children have been taught how to learn for themselves and how to express what they learn. When that has happened, the children, now young adults, have been equipped to face the world. Again, John Milton: "I call therefore a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war."<sup>10</sup> In short, they are prepared for life.

### BASIC GOALS

From our inception, Logos School has operated under the motto "A classical and Christ-centered education." That motto stated in a general way the philosophy of the individuals who started the school. In 1984, the board of Logos School met together and committed to paper the primary objectives or goals of the school. It seemed good to organize these more specific statements around the structure provided by the motto. The list of goals was thus divided in two. The first section has three goals under the heading "Christ-centered," and the second section, labeled "Classical," also has three goals.

#### *Christ-Centered*

In all its levels, programs, and teaching, Logos School seeks to do the following things.

1. *Teach all subjects as parts of an integrated whole with the Scriptures at the center.* (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Colossians 1:15-20)

In order to be Christ-centered, Christian education must be more than a baptized secularism. It is not enough to take the curricula of the government schools, sprinkle it with prayer and a Bible class, and claim the result is somehow Christian. Secular education places man at the center of all things, while Christian education places the God/man at the center. There is no such thing as neutrality in education. Every fact, every truth, is understood in the light of a certain worldview. This means that history, art, music, mathematics, etc., must all be taught in the light of God's existence and His revelation of His Son Jesus Christ. Because the Scriptures occupy the crucial role in teaching us about this revelation, they must also occupy a central role in Christian education. In his critique of Christian schools, Gregg Harris notes that "inserting a Bible class into an otherwise secular curriculum does not a Christian school

make. . . . The Christian school should be more than a good non-public school.<sup>11</sup>

This is quite right, and it is a point that needs to be made with regard to all forms of Christian education—whether in a private school or at home. Bible classes, Christian teachers, and prayer in school are all necessary for true Christian education. But many Christian educators, both at home and school, assume that such practices are sufficient to guarantee Christian education. They think that wherever these exist, Christian education exists. It does not. True Christian education requires that a Biblical worldview be successfully passed on to the students.

At Logos School, we hire Christian teachers. We are sponsored by a Christian church. We have many Christian textbooks. The children sing hymns and read the Bible. The teachers pray. But this does not insure the education will be Christian. When I walk into a classroom, I must view the students from a Christian perspective. Or, to use Harry Blamires' term, I must view the students "Christianly."

When I prepare a lesson, I must view the material in the same way. We have learned at Logos that true Christian education goes far beyond the mere possession of textbooks that refer to God. It is not enough to have Biblical window-dressing. It is our conviction that public education in America is failing, and that the failure can be traced to certain root assumptions about man and knowledge. In public education, those assumptions have been humanistic. It is therefore self-defeating for Christians to build schools based on the same assumptions. At best, such efforts will only return us to the public school system of fifty years ago. But it doesn't matter how many Christian flourishes are added if the foundation remains humanistic.

The foundational questions concern the nature of man and the nature of knowledge. Such questions cannot be answered without recourse to a certain worldview. The Christian answers these questions one way, and the answers affect the entire process of education. The humanist answers the questions another way, and the process is equally affected, although clearly in another direction.

2. *Provide a clear model of the Biblical Christian life through our staff and board.* (Matthew 22:37-40; Matthew 5:13-16)

When hypocrisy is tolerated, it leads to major problems. At best, the integrated Christian worldview becomes a dead orthodoxy; at worst, anti-Christian living leads to anti-Christian teaching. As Christian educators, we recognize that hypocrisy on our part will place a stumbling block in the path of the students. Because we are in the business of teaching a Christian worldview, we must also be in the business of living exemplary Christian lives. In a school of any

size, it is necessary for the teachers to know that the discipline of Christian living is expected of them. And unless the administrators of the school are willing to encourage, admonish, rebuke, and correct, it will not happen.

3. *Encourage every child to begin and develop his relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ.* (Matthew 28:18-20; Matthew 19:13-15)

Without regeneration, a Christian worldview and a Christian lifestyle are unachievable. If a man is dead, it is wasted effort to seek to revive him with a nourishing meal. If the life principle is absent from the student, no amount of instruction and example on the part of the teacher will make that student grow. We do have the responsibility to plant and water; we also have the responsibility to recognize that growth comes from God alone. God initiates growth in the life of the individual when he or she is born again. From that time on, nurturing instruction results in genuine growth as the Christian puts what he learns into practice. So it is not our role as educators to attempt to replace God's work in human lives. There is no way to perfect human beings by means of instruction, even if that instruction is Christian in content. The error of thinking that education can perfect man influenced the government schools at their inception and still governs their philosophy. To repeat this error—even with Christian instruction—will create a legalistic atmosphere in the school. In contrast, the good news that God offers us in Christ will create a moral atmosphere in the school.

Good instruction is conducive to rational Christian minds and godly Christian lives, but only if it presupposes and is built on the gospel. This gospel is: Christ died for sinners in accordance with the Scriptures, and He rose again on the third day. A person who responds to this message with repentance and belief will be saved. It is our goal to be used by God to bring every child who does not have a relationship with the Father into such a relationship through Christ. Then, and only then, will the rest of the education we offer be fully understandable. If the child already knows the Lord, it is our goal to encourage him or her to develop that relationship. As the child grows, the education received will further that growth.

## CLASSICAL

As used here the word *classical* refers to the structure and form of the education we provide. It also refers to the content of the studies.

In all its levels, programs, and teaching, Logos School seeks to do the following things.

1. *Emphasize grammar, logic, and rhetoric in all subjects.*

The structure of our curriculum is traditional with a strong emphasis on "the basics." We understand the basics to be subjects such as mathematics, history, and language studies. Not only are these subjects covered, they are covered in a particular way. For example, in history class the students will not only read their text, they will read also from primary sources. Grammar, logic, and rhetoric will be emphasized in all subjects. By grammar, we mean the fundamental rules of each subject (again, we do not limit grammar to language studies), as well as basic data that exhibit those rules. In English, a singular noun does not take a plural verb. In logic, *A* does not equal *not A*. In history, time is linear not cyclic. Each subject has its own grammar, which we require the student to learn. This enables the student to learn the subject from the inside out.

The logic of each subject refers to the ordered relationship of that subject's particulars. What is the relationship between the Reformation and the colonization of America? What is the relationship between the subject and object of a sentence? As the students learn the underlying rules or principles of a subject (grammar) along with how the particulars of that subject relate to one another (logic), they are learning to think. They are not simply memorizing fragmented pieces of knowledge. The last emphasis is rhetoric. We want our students to be able to express clearly everything they learn. An essay in history must be written as clearly as if it were an English paper. An oral presentation in science should be as coherent as possible. It is not enough that the history or science is correct. It must also be expressed well.

2. *Encourage every student to develop a love for learning and live up to his or her academic potential.*

This goal is impossible to realize unless the teachers have a real love for the subject. If the teacher is not excited about having this knowledge, then why should the student be excited about acquiring it? Because our school has a good student/teacher ratio, the instructor has ample opportunities to encourage individual students. If this goal is successfully reached, then the student will spend the rest of his life building on the foundation laid during his time at Logos. Not only did the child receive the tools of learning, he or she acquired the desire to use them.

3. *Provide an orderly atmosphere conducive to the attainment of the above goals.*

There is only one way to maintain an orderly atmosphere in a school, and that is by means of strict, loving discipline. It is possible for discipline to be strict without ceasing to be fair or loving.

Indeed, when discipline lapses, fairness and love are usually the first casualties. There is no way to love or instruct a child in the midst of chaos. Our discipline policy includes the use of corporal punishment. This is not done in a way that usurps the authority of parents. When a child is being disciplined, the parents are involved at every step. It is our desire to be a service to parents, not a replacement for them. This attitude is true of the entire program at Logos, but it is particularly true of our discipline policy. We understand that many children who are discipline problems have deep-seated difficulties that cannot be solved by means of discipline at school. Nevertheless, our primary obligation is to the majority of students who require an orderly atmosphere in which to learn, so we do not tolerate the presence of a disruptive student. He must either submit to the standards of the school, or he will be subject to expulsion.