

**REFORMING CLASSICAL EDUCATION:  
TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM**

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“My son, if you receive my words  
and treasure up my commandments within you,  
making your ear attentive to wisdom  
and inclining your heart to understanding,  
if you seek it like silver  
and search for it as for hidden treasure,  
then you will understand the fear of the LORD,  
and find the knowledge of God.”

—*Proverbs 2:1*





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## INTRODUCTION

### On Naming The World:

### A Protestant Vision for Training in Wisdom

Bradford Littlejohn, The Davenant Institute

#### **CALLING THE WORLD BY NAME<sup>1</sup>**

WHEN I walk into my living room each morning, the first thing that greets me (assuming I've awoken early enough to enjoy some solitude) is the mesmerizing spectacle of the Blue Ridge Mountains, tinged with violet and pink in the first rays of the sun, dominating the horizon outside my windows in a great arc from West to North. An awe-inspiring vista for anyone, but for me, the ridge is more than that. For me, each peak and trough in the great ridge line is not merely a pretty sight, but an old friend. When I first moved my family back here to my old family stomping-grounds, my children wanted to know the names of the peaks. Thankfully, schooled by my father decades ago, I could still rattle them off: Hogback, Rocky Spur, Melrose, Little Warrior, Big Warrior, Round Mountain, Tryon Peak.

Naming, of course, comes naturally to small children: “What’s this? What’s that?” are usually among their earliest words as they poke their stubby index fingers in the direction of anything in sight. Too often, we run out of answers embarrassingly quickly: “It’s a tree.” “What kind of tree?” “Who knows? A big one.” Naming, however, is the building-block of learning at every age. Even in describing complex processes, understanding comes when we are able to give things a name and rightly understand that to which the name applies. We learn not only to distinguish turtles from tortoises and annuals from perennials but also to distinguish the moderate Enlightenment from the radical Enlightenment and the benign tumor from the cancerous. As we reach out with the gift of language and lasso each new mystery with its own unique word or phrase, we render the murky transparent, the unfamiliar familiar.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge my fellow teachers of Davenant’s “How to Read the Bible and the World” course for helping to stimulate many of these thoughts over the years: Peter Escalante, Alastair Roberts, Joe Minich, and Nathan Johnson.

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Familiarity can breed contempt, as the saying goes; but familiarity can also engender love—one of the four loves that C. S. Lewis so memorably chronicled, in fact: *storge*, that is, affection. This love is not merely expressed through naming, it is also *activated* through naming: we call those whom we love by name. Moreover, I would argue, we come to love those things that we are able to call by name.

Why is this? Why is naming so important to us? If we turn to Scripture, we do not have to look far—no further than Genesis 2 in fact. When God planted Adam in the garden, the first task he gave him was to give every creature a name. Interestingly, God did not *command* Adam to name the animals; rather, “he brought them to the man to see what he would name them” (2:19)—he knows that Adam cannot help but name them.<sup>2</sup> Our own naming of the world is the way in which we participate in the Adamic task. This Adamic task is kingly and even *divine*. Consider Psalm 147:4: “[The LORD] determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.” Naming things is a divine prerogative, and it is through our sub-creative power to name the world that we image the divine Creator who called the world into being through his Word.

This Adamic task must be at the heart of any Christian vision of education: we educate, above all, by equipping each new generation to name the world rightly. In this naming, I argue, lies one profound answer to the idea that we educate only to acquire concrete utility-maximizing skills—a reductionistic functionalism which characterizes so much of modern education. Within such a functionalist framework it becomes increasingly difficult to explain why everyone should be educated. After all, some function more highly than others. What is more, in a world of gadgets and search engines, machines function, for most purposes, more highly than any of us.

Increasingly, modern educators have been at a loss to explain why they should teach children to multiply instead of using a calculator, to spell instead of using a spell-checker, and to know history instead of merely consulting Wikipedia. Why, indeed, not simply accept the fast-approaching utopia/dystopia of a small, highly educated, code-manipulating “creative class” able to design optimal experiences for a vast dependent underclass?

There’s a favorite passage of mine from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Fellowship of the Ring* that gestures toward an answer, offering us profound insights into

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to my colleague Rhys Lavery for this insight.

the purpose of education. The Fellowship are on their way south from Rivendell, and they awake one morning to find the Misty Mountains ahead of them rather than on their left. The following dialogue ensues:

“‘Dangerous or not, a real sunrise is mighty welcome,’ said Frodo, throwing back his hood and letting the morning light fall on his face.

‘But the mountains are ahead of us,’ said Pippin. ‘We must have turned eastwards in the night.’

‘No,’ said Gandalf. ‘But you see further ahead in the clear light. Beyond those peaks the range bends round south-west. There are many maps in Elrond’s house, but I suppose you never thought to look at them?’

‘Yes I did, sometimes,’ said Pippin, ‘but I don’t remember them. Frodo has a better head for that sort of thing.’

‘I need no map,’ said Gimli, who had come up with Legolas, and was gazing out before him with a strange light in his deep eyes. ‘There is the land where our fathers worked of old, and we have wrought the image of these mountains into many works of metal and of stone, and into many songs and tales. They stand tall in our dreams: Baraz, Zirak, Shathur.

‘Only once before have I seen them from afar in waking life, but I know them and their names, for under them lies Khazad-dum, the Dwarrowdelf, that is now called the Black Pit, Moria in the Elvish tongue. Yonder stands Barazinbar, the Redhorn, cruel Caradhras; and beyond him are Silvertine and Cloudyhead: Celebdil the White, and Fanuidhol the Grey, that we call Zirakzigil and Bundushathur.

‘There the Misty Mountains divide, and between their arms lies the deep-shadowed valley which we cannot forget: Azanulbizar, the Dimrill Dale, which the Elves call Nanduhirion...

‘Dark is the water of Kheled-zaram,’ said Gimli, ‘and cold are the springs of Kibil-nala. My heart trembles at the thought that I may see them soon.’”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 296.

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Pippin here epitomizes your typical modern student—“Frodo has a much better head for such things.” From the functionalist standpoint, why not let the high-functioning do the task of navigating for you? Or better yet, let your smartphone do it. The modern-day Pippin could’ve said, “Hey Siri, give me directions to Mordor.” Of course, even from within a functionalist framework, Pippin’s dismissal of the need for personal knowledge proves short-sighted. Occasionally, after all, you really will be left to your own resources and will regret not cultivating a basic knowledge of the path you may be called to tread—as Pippin later does in *The Two Towers*.

There is, however, a deeper critique here. Pippin’s lack of education leaves him not merely useless as a route-finder; it makes him miss most of what makes this journey through Middle-earth more than mere drudgery. Contrast the clueless Pippin with Gimli and the “strange light” in his eyes. For Gimli, these mountains are not just impressive peaks on the horizon or points on a map. They are more like cherished friends; he does not simply *know about* them, he *knows* them intimately and personally. And this despite the fact that he has almost no direct experience of them! Rather, Gimli’s knowledge is the result of what we might call a well-rounded dwarvish liberal-arts education. He has studied these peaks in geography and history; he has seen them in art, wrought in works of metal and stone; he has heard them in music, sung of in many songs, and studied them in literature, told of in many tales.

In short, we learn how to name the world, not merely for the sake of truth, but for the sake of beauty; not merely so that we can navigate the world, but so that we can *delight* in it. Such delight is an experience that we should aim to give to every son of Adam and daughter of Eve, according to their capacity. The vehicle for such delight, as Tolkien knew better than almost anyone, is language.

Tolkien’s love affair with language is on bold display in the passage quoted above, as Gimli indulges in a dazzling and excessive display of polyglot pleonasm, calling each of the geographical features by three or four different names. From a purely functionalist standpoint, such multiplication of names and languages is a massive inefficiency. A world with only one language, like the world before Babel, is the dream of every global capitalist. The multiplication of languages, though, was not solely a divine punishment but a divine blessing, as the affirmation of a many-tongued people of God at

Pentecost and in Revelation suggests. We need many languages to name the world because no single language can do so adequately. Reality is ever so much greater and richer than our words for it, and so, we need as many of them as possible. This is the purpose of poetry, which re-names creation in language and image that is ever-new, trying to capture in word the inexhaustible richness of the world, the “dearest freshness deep down things” that both transcends human speech and depends upon it.

## GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS CREATION

But why “depends upon it”? Why, indeed, was it so important for Adam to name the world? Couldn’t the creatures have gotten along just fine without such a tedious ceremony? True, the catalyst for the naming of the animals is the need to illuminate Adam’s need for a suitable helper. God, however, brings the animals “to see what he would call them” (Gen. 2:19), and so it seems that Adam cannot *but* name the creatures, wife-finding regardless. For a more developed answer, let’s consider Psalm 119:1–4:

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.  
Their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.  
In them he has set a tent for the sun.

We are all, I imagine, familiar with these lines. We all intuitively recognize that this is an elaborate metaphor. The day does not *in fact* speak. Nor does the night. You can stand there straining your ears all day long, and you’ll never hear the sun make a peep, much less communicate in any known language. Who does speak then? Well, the psalmist of course! Here in Psalm 19, David *gives voice* to the voiceless heavens. He does the same in Psalm 104 at much greater length, describing the glory of God throughout the world.

Few of us pause to ask ourselves why God gave us the power of speech. No other creature has it, after all. Other creatures can *communicate*—they can send messages to one another, conveying their emotions, warning of danger, or signaling the presence of food or a mate. But they, however,

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cannot and do not attempt to describe the world around them except insofar as it relates directly to them. Even dolphins, so far as we know, while they can communicate a great deal to one another about the herring they are trying to catch, have no ability or desire to talk about what herring are *in themselves*—only as potential edibles. From this standpoint, we can see that modern education seeks to reduce us to the level of animals. It wants us to learn to talk about the world solely from the standpoint of its utility for our human purposes. We know carrots as food, oil as fuel, silicon as potential microchips.

This animalian level of communication is not, I would argue, why God gave us the power of speech. God gave us the power of speech because he *didn't* give it to the lower creation. The lower creation is shouting out God's glory, but inaudibly and inarticulately. It is waiting for man to give it voice. That is why God can say of creation on each day, "it is good," but only after the creation of man, "it is very good." Without man to name and describe the voiceless creation, the glory of God will go undeclared. Creation is so rich and manifold that one name will not do—we need a world's worth of languages to properly express creation's glory. The comet, the rose, the eagle, is waiting for the psalmist or poet to give it voice—like Gerard Manley Hopkins, who wrote:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God," as Hopkins says in another famous poem, but it is waiting for us to discover and declare that glory. The same is true for mathematics. The triangle was waiting patiently and inarticulately for Pythagoras to announce his glorious theorem. The planets were waiting for Kepler's Law of Planetary Motion and Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation. By rightly naming the creation, man brings to completion, to fruition, to glory, God's work.

What about history and literature? The great deeds of men and women in ages past were great in themselves, but they are incomplete without a

chronicler or a bard. They are waiting for their Homer or their Lord Macaulay to give voice to their voiceless deeds, and in so doing, to unfold the hidden glory of God's providential action. Indeed, the deeds of God's image-bearers do more than that—they point to Jesus Christ, “the express image of the invisible God.” Hopkins continues his poem:

I say more: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace; that keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—  
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

## **CALLED TO MASTERY**

And yet, much as we might like to, we cannot stop with poetry. We educate for delight, yes; we educate to glorify God, yes; but we educate also for a task that God has given the children of man: dominion. This means we educate in order to equip one another for mastery of the world. Such language is, of course, politically incorrect, since man's multiplying and filling the earth has increasingly shown how readily mastery can become domination, and domination exploitation. Still, we should not shy away from this kingly task.

Nonetheless, it matters deeply how we conceive of this mastery. There is a kind of mastery driven by hate and a kind driven by love. In the latter, we feel ourselves *mastered* in the midst of *mastering*; the world forms us even as we seek to impose form on it. This is indeed the classical Aristotelian understanding of knowledge according to which the already objective, already active form present in the matter of a thing impresses itself upon the mere potency of our organs of perception, compelling our minds to shape themselves in response to the reality of the world outside of our heads. Contrast this with the paradigmatically modern idea of knowledge, in which the ever-active intellect of man sallies forth to impose order on the formless and shapeless raw matter of the world; thus, creating a world in his own image and for his own purposes.

Most of us are still old enough to be familiar with that old euphemism of the King James Bible, “And Adam *knew* his wife.” That euphemism was the product, not of prudish translators, but of a literal rendering of the Hebrew text in which *yada'* (“to know”) could be used for the most intimate

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of human acts. To know, in biblical language, is to love: is to enter into intimate union with the thing known, a union of mutual indwelling. For modern man, however, the work of knowledge is more akin to rape than marriage. We have put the cosmos to death in order to know it properly—which is to say, to make better use of it for our purposes. As C. S. Lewis writes, “We do not look at trees either as Dryads or as beautiful objects while we cut them into beams: the first man who did so may have felt the price keenly, and the bleeding trees in Virgil and Spenser may be far-off echoes of that primeval sense of impiety. The stars lost their divinity as astronomy developed, and the Dying God has no place in chemical agriculture. . . From this point of view the conquest of Nature appears in a new light. We reduce things to mere Nature *in order that* we may ‘conquer’ them.”<sup>4</sup>

The modern ideal of knowledge resembles what the medievals would have dismissed as the vice of *curiositas*. Medieval writers understood the love of knowledge, like any other wholesome love, could be disordered—warped toward wrong ends or pursued in a wrong way. On this basis, they distinguished the virtue of *studiosity*—which every educator should seek to inculcate—from the vice of *curiosity*. Among the many forms of curiosity was one that seems to particularly characterize our modern age, which we might call *impertinent curiosity*—impertinent in the sense of rude or disrespectful. This occurs when we seek to know things in a manner more certainly than they can be known, doing violence to the object of knowledge by forcing it into a Procrustean bed that will shave off all its mysteries. Rather than being animated by love of the object of knowledge, we are driven by hatred of the unknown.

As Paul Griffiths argues in his brilliant meditation *Intellectual Appetite*, this is the paradigmatically modern mode of knowing, which Griffiths calls *mathetic*: “Advocates of mathesis imagine a world of discrete objects arrayed spatially on a grid, each related to others causally in various ways, but each definable and knowable exhaustively in itself, each, that is, fully transparent to the appropriately catechized gaze and passive before that gaze, there to be gazed upon and addressed without itself returning or exceeding the gaze.”<sup>5</sup> This sort of knowledge, he argues, prefers the visual, schematic, and atomized to the continuous interwoven text that is the paradigmatic mode by which

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<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 70–71.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 145.

the studious know.<sup>6</sup> Although easily confused with it, such mathesis is far from the Adamic vocation of naming, which understands that however much we might seek to provide a taxonomy of the world, the world as object always exceeds our gaze. Too often the curious modern believes he can know best of all through data arranged on a spreadsheet, while the studious seeker after wisdom understands that the object of knowledge must be grasped through a personal encounter, whether that object be a babbling brook or a profound theological truth. “The curious,” observes Griffiths, “inhabit a world of objects, which can be sequestered and possessed; the studious inhabit a world of gifts, given things, which can be known by participation, but which, because of their very natures, can never be possessed.”<sup>7</sup>

## THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM

I have just used the word “wisdom” for the first time in this introduction. Wisdom is at the heart of the educational task, and a constant theme of our work at the Davenant Institute—but what does “wisdom” mean? I have ventured several definitions over the years, but here is one that I think captures the heart of the matter: wisdom is *a humble yet confident attunement to the order of reality that gives both delight and competence*. The wise man is humble, recognizing that he stands on the shoulders of giants, but also genuinely confident because he has come to possess the truth through hard-won personal encounter, rather than merely receiving it secondhand.

The essays comprising this volume, *Reforming Classical Education: Toward a New Paradigm*, were originally presented at a conference subtitled “A Protestant Vision for Training in Wisdom.” What might we mean by such a sectarian adjective as *Protestant*? Well, many things might be said, and several of them will be said in the essays that follow. For now, it is worth stressing that Protestantism has always had a certain democratizing impulse, challenging both the explicit elitism of ancient classical education and the implicit elitism of modern education. As William Tyndale said to the Roman clergyman of his day: “If God spares my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!”

Thus a Protestant vision of wisdom stresses the hard-won personal encounter with truth and the confidence it engenders. My point is not to

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<sup>6</sup> Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite*, 151–54.

<sup>7</sup> Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite*, 22.

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knock modern Roman Catholic education, which in many cases puts Protestant education to shame. At its inception, however, Protestantism set its face firmly against the intellectual elitism of the Roman church, and its doctrine of “implicit faith.” On this medieval understanding (understandable, to be sure, in a society where books were scarce and education was a luxury), it did not much matter if the believer’s faith had any clear grasp of the content of the Christian story and the hard truths of Christian teaching; so long as the believer trusted implicitly in his priest and his bishop, they could do the intellectual part of believing for him.

The Reformers hotly demurred, not least because this was a recipe for intellectual laziness on the part of priests and bishops as well, as Tyndale pointed out. Every believer must be trained, as much as possible, for a personal encounter with the Word of God—for a faith seeking understanding. Of course the Reformers recognized that there would still, of necessity, be an intellectual elite with special gifts and tasked with teaching. Contrary to Catholic caricatures then and now, the Reformers never sought to claim that every Tom, Dick, and Harry’s reading of Scripture was equal to St. Augustine’s. They did stress, however, that everyone had something to gain from reading the Scriptures for themselves and should be equipped accordingly.

From the beginning, it has been our contention at the Davenant Institute that this original message of the Reformation, this bold call for a society of sages, still needs vigorous restatement. In this, we cheerfully swim against the current of all of our age’s fashionable laments about the death of expertise and out-of-control individualism. When we look at the modern landscape, we do not see too many people willing to think for themselves, but too few. American evangelicalism is increasingly characterized by a search for authority in a chaotic world. Such a search lends itself to a frenzied intellectual outsourcing, a “guru syndrome” that has been intensified by the disruptive technologies of the digital age. Instead of actually opening their eyes to the world around them, most Christians, fearful of the sea of uncertainty in which they have been called to swim, turn to their favorite answer-man pastors or political talk show hosts to provide them with a pre-packaged and pre-digested account of the world, which they can share comfortably with all of their fellow followers. We have seen this phenomenon vividly in the epistemic whirlwind of 2020 and 2021, as most Christians have allowed their tribal allegiances, rather than the minds that

God gave them, to determine their judgments about a pandemic, about racial violence, about an election.

The solution, of course, is not “going it alone”—striking off across the danger like some intellectual Abraham in a Kierkegaardian romance—any more than the Reformers called for an intellectual levelling that would put the complete novice on the same level as the seasoned scholar. We obviously need experts, in the sense of master-craftsmen in the various arts and sciences. We depend upon them through the technologies we take for granted every hour. But we do not need gurus. What, then, is the difference?

The path of wisdom is one of imitation, not the imitation of the mere copycat or fanboy, not the carbon-copy mimicry of the follower who retweets his hero’s every pithy insight or killer takedown. No, the path of wisdom is far narrower—there is no room upon it for the crowds that clamor after the guru. It is also far more difficult. The wise apprentice learns by closely observing and imitating the methods of a master craftsman—looking over his shoulder, as it were, as he works upon the world. The guru-follower fixes his enchanted gaze upon the face and lips of the guru, while the wise apprentice looks at his hands; or else follows the master’s gaze, learning to fix his own eyes on the same objects that the master is studying. Every good human master will urge our attention back to the words and the world from which he himself has gained his skill and insight. Only the great Master, Jesus Christ, radiates enough wisdom that we are invited to fix our eyes on him.

The guru-follower, on the other hand, obsessively seeks to download the guru’s every sermon, to read everything he has written, to memorize his canned slogans so he can recite them on every occasion. He tries to find the guru’s every opinion, so as to make them (seemingly) his own. While the disciple of the master-craftsman has a decent shot at actually surpassing his master, improving on his work, the guru-follower will never be more than a follower—boring, tedious, and slavish in the full Aristotelian sense.

## **WISDOM VS. WORLDVIEW**

This brings me, at last, to the distinction between *wisdom* and *worldview*, a distinction central to the vision for renewing classical Christian education that the essays in this volume present, and one that has been a recurrent theme of our work here at Davenant. Reformed Evangelicalism’s turn to worldview is an understandable response to modernity’s separation of Word and world and fundamentalism’s decision to hunker down in the bunker of the Word

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to avoid the taint of worldly knowledge. Realizing that Christians must stake some kind of claim to knowledge of the world if their God created it, a generation of late-twentieth-century Christian thinkers adopted the German idealist concept of a *Weltanschauung*, “world-view,” as a kind of shortcut back to the holistic grasp of the world that the intellectual titans of an earlier Christian humanism had genuinely possessed. In most of its forms, however, this movement proposed simply to one-sidedly map Word onto world, conjuring from the pages of Scripture a comprehensive vision of reality that could then substitute for actual critical engagement with the world of nature and history, and often, one that could be weaponized against any insights that secular thought might dare to propose to the Church. The disconnect from earlier eras of Christianity, in which theologians had praised Plato and Cicero for both their wisdom and piety and leaned heavily on Islamic and Jewish philosophers to formulate their doctrinal systems, was jarring.

To be sure, the worldview concept can be used in helpful and nuanced ways, but much more often than not, it tends toward just the sort of pre-fabricated, pre-digested knowledge peddled by the guru, a Cliff’s-Notes-version of reality that excuses you from the hard work and rich delight of really reading the world. Indeed, for all its fulminations against the evils of modernity, it is characteristically modern in its haste to transcend the fog of uncertainty endemic to the modern condition and in its “mathetic” mode of knowledge. “Advocates of mathesis,” after all, as Griffiths notes, “imagine a world of discrete objects arrayed spatially on a grid,” and anyone who has been to a Christian worldview seminar or bought a Christian worldview curriculum will know just how much the genre loves to use diagrams and schematics.

Christian-worldview training is like a map-reading seminar in Elrond’s house—not useless, to be sure, and sometimes the best that you are going to get, but only a starting point, and deeply dangerous if you believe that the seminar has told you everything you need to know. Too often a “Christian worldview” becomes not an aid to, but a stand-in for, actually learning to *view* the *world*. There are tens of thousands of Christians who have been trained to walk around asking and telling each other what “the Christian worldview” has to say about any given subject, all the while never once pausing to actually observe the world to find out the truth of the matter.

But *can we* actually find out the truth of the matter? It’s a fair question, given that the “worldview” metaphor is often employed more in the sense of

a set of lenses through which we view the world (rather than a map by which we gain an overview of the world). In this usage, worldview is often used to emphasize bias and the unreliability of perspective. Unbelievers misconstrue some aspect of the world because they approach it from a “secular worldview.” We, on the other hand, can look at the exact same issue and offer a radically opposed answer because we approach it from a “*Christian* worldview.” More adventurous intellectual voyagers might want to stop in and try out more exotic sets of lenses, such as a Buddhist worldview, a nihilist worldview, or an existentialist worldview. One of the most popular books on this topic was tellingly titled *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*. Ironically, this style of thinking and speaking often goes hand-in-hand with un-self-conscious denunciations of “postmodern relativism.”

Of course, such writers are not wrong to emphasize the importance of bias and perspective. It is true that each of us can see a radically different landscape depending on our point of view. I recall how disorienting it was when I visited a friend’s house a few miles further along the Blue Ridge and he showed me his own stunning view of Melrose Mountain—but a Melrose Mountain all-but-unrecognizable from that to which my own eyes had been trained since childhood. Yet it is more important in our relativistic age to stress that, for all that, we are all looking at the same reality. How, then, do we see reality so differently? Well, many differences of perception owe to our divergent social locations and life experiences. There is no need to fancify all of these particular inflections of sight with the “-isms” so beloved by worldview diagnosticians. Other differences, however, do seem to go hand-in-hand with rigorous Christian belief, or lack thereof. There really do seem to be ways in which Christians are able to perceive the world differently (and better, we would argue) than unbelievers.

With these observations, we are on much firmer terrain than that of Kantian idealism. In Book I of his *Institutes*, John Calvin himself speaks of Scripture as providing “spectacles” for rightly reading the world and God’s glory in it.<sup>8</sup> And Calvin is well-known for his rather dim view of unbelievers’ knowledge, a knowledge that has been damaged by what theologians call “the noetic effects of sin.” These effects are surely real—Romans 1 describes a terrifying (and terrifyingly familiar) pattern of mass self-delusion—but it is important to be clear about the source and nature of these effects. The Fall,

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.6.1.

## INTRODUCTION

after all, did not, as best we can tell, directly damage man's higher rational faculties in themselves; at any rate, the feats of mathematicians and logicians, fallen though they may be, remain dazzling. Sin's attack on our reason is more sneaky and subversive; it comes at us through the back door of our twisted will and depraved appetites. As a mentor of mine once put it memorably (if you'll pardon the vulgarity), "The Fall didn't so much impact our brains as our bellies and our balls." If knowledge is always a form of love, the Fall attacks our reason by making us love the wrong things and fix our eyes in the wrong places.

A closer look at the "spectacles" metaphor is quite illuminating in this regard. Although Calvin himself casually uses the example of the aged, unable to read (usually a result of farsightedness), I would suggest that the more usual form of bad vision—nearsightedness—is an apt metaphor for our fallen epistemic condition. The world is still the same, God's good creation, beautiful and ordered. And we are still capable of looking at it, and indeed, capable, in principle, of discerning its order and making sense of it. The problem is that there is so much of it, and we don't have the patience to look properly. Worse still, our eyes have become curiously unfocused, only able to see clearly those shiny, glittery goods in the foreground that cry out to our appetites. In the far distance behind them loom richer, truer goods, blurry and out-of-focus, and beyond them still, the craggy uplands of the heavenly country that is our final end, but lost to our fallen eyes in a blue haze. The best philosophers, willing to go to the hard work of getting up, walking around in the world, and peering beyond the juicy, distracting fruits in the foreground, have been able to gain some real, though fragmentary, knowledge of the truth, goodness, and beauty of the world. But only with the aid of Scripture, which sharpens our focus and restores our vision, will we have any hope of an authentic view of the world as it is.

Even here, however, the metaphor can mislead. For this corrective vision is not a one-time thing: "Just put on your biblical worldview glasses and everything will become clear." It's more like when you are in the optician's chair and they are incrementally improving your vision, constantly swapping out "Lens A" and "Lens B" until you are finally seeing every detail as a healthy person would. The task of Christian education is like a lifetime's worth of optician's appointments interspersed with field trips, as we return to the Word to have our vision sharpened a bit more and then head back out into the world to see what we can see. Of course, we speak here only of the

role of Scripture in perfecting natural knowledge; as a source of supernatural knowledge, the spectacles of Scripture prepare our eyes to gaze straight at the Sun of Righteousness that illumines all else in creation.

This of course brings us back to my remarks about imitating craftsmen. Too many peddlers of Christian worldview hold up their worldviews as maps to be endlessly studied or lenses to be endlessly admired. They never seem to put the maps and the lenses to use in exploring the terrain. They forget that, useful as a good map or a good set of spectacles is when trying to follow old trails or blaze new ones, neither is a substitute for a good guide—especially if we want not merely to get from point A to point B, but to take dominion over all we see en route, naming and mastering the world. This we will do by learning to follow a master’s gaze—focusing our attention on those features of the dizzyingly complex landscape that he knows how to pick out. By following his gaze, we learn to ignore the distracting foreground features that are apt to consume the attention of the unwary and to grasp the true shape of the reality we are seeking to know. By naming the world rightly, as the adept guide and explorer has himself learned to do from his mentors, we are enabled to join the ranks of the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve on a voyage of wonder through the cosmos, staking a claim to every square inch of creation in the name of our King. This, then, is the task of Christian education, the Protestant vision for training in wisdom.







I:  
THE LIBERAL ARTS AND THE ART OF SERVICE:  
PROTESTANTISM'S CHALLENGE TO CLASSICAL  
EDUCATION

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## INTRODUCTION

ONE OF the few fronts in the culture wars that Christians actually seem to be winning is education. As progressive education devolves into psychological conditioning and political indoctrination, churning out graduates with scarcely any knowledge or skills, Christians are rediscovering and implementing classical education. Though many Christians would be glad to simply protect their children from the baleful influence of the public schools, the new classical Christian schools and homeschools are outperforming their secularist counterparts *academically*. They are turning out young Christians who are learned, intellectual, and accomplished. They are the sort who will very likely outcompete their poorly educated peers and be in a position to exert a Christian influence on the culture once again.

Experience with the products of both progressive and classical education, on all educational levels, calls to mind the education of Gargantua, a story recounted in *The Works of Rabelais*.<sup>1</sup> The young giant had been educated for 53 years trying to master medieval commentaries. According to Rabelais, “At the last his father perceived, that indeed he studied hard, and that although he spent all his time therein, yet for all that did he profit nothing: but, which is worse, grew thereby a fool, a sot, a dolt, and

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<sup>1</sup> François Rabelais (d. 1553) was a French Renaissance writer, physician, humanist, scholar, and monk. His status as a monk makes his educational satire here all the more pointed.

blockhead.”<sup>2</sup> Whereupon a courtier suggested a comparative test with his twelve-year-old page who had studied for only two years in the new classical learning that was creating the Renaissance. The child delivered a learned and gracious discourse before the Giant King. As Rabelais puts it, “All this was by him delivered with such proper gestures, such distinct pronounciation, so pleasant a delivery, in such exquisite fine terms, and so good Latin, that beseemed rather a Gracchus, a Cicero, an Aemilius of the time past, than a youth of this age.” Then it was Gargantua’s turn to show what he could do. Reports Rabelais, “But all the countenance that Gargantua kept was, that he fell to crying like a cow, and cast down his face, hiding it with his cap.”<sup>3</sup> Gargantua was sent to the page’s schoolmaster, Ponocrates, who gave him a comprehensive education that turned him into Rabelais’s comic model of a Renaissance Man, or, rather, a Renaissance Giant.

Ironically, though, the scholastic education that Rabelais lampoons was also a type of classical education. Classical education is a rich, multi-faceted tradition, which allows for many different variations and emphases. Those variations and emphases, in turn, reflect different philosophical, cultural, and theological commitments. The Reformation itself was a product of the Renaissance approach to classical education, and the schools that the Reformers established to teach the laity how to read the Bible were classical schools of a particular kind.

Gargantua’s liberal education included listening to “sermons of evangelical preachers.”<sup>4</sup> His daily regimen, overseen by his humanist teacher Panocrates, included Bible reading and worship. “There was read unto him some chapter of the Holy Scripture aloud and clearly,” Rabelais writes. “According to the purpose and argument of that lesson, he oftentimes gave himself to worship, adore, pray, and send up his supplications to that good God, whose word did shew his majesty and marvelous judgment.”<sup>5</sup> For all of his exuberant scatology and iconoclastic satire, Rabelais, a monk writing in France in 1532, supported the reform of the Church. His ridicule of

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<sup>2</sup> François Rabelais, “Gargantua and Pantagruel,” in *The Works of Rabelais*, trans. Thomas Urquhart and Peter Antony Motteux (Privately Printed, via Cornell University), <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/pdf/ebh565b2452783.pdf>, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Rabelais, “Gargantua and Pantagruel,” 35.

<sup>4</sup> Rabelais, “Gargantua and Pantagruel,” 53. “Evangelical preachers” here likely means early Protestants.

<sup>5</sup> Rabelais, “Gargantua and Pantagruel,” 48.

scholasticism and his rude and crude depictions of bishops and monks are little different from what the Reformers were turning out.

This essay will explore various approaches to classical education, both historically and as they manifest today. I want to focus on the kind of classical education cultivated by the Reformers and how it was distinct from other approaches. This, in turn, can help Christian educators today as we recover the rich heritage of classical Christian education, showing how we can ensure that it remain both classical and Christian.

## THE VARIETIES OF CLASSICAL EDUCATION

### ***Liberal Education in the Classical Era***

What is classical or liberal, to use a more descriptive term, education? Although “liberal” has acquired unfortunate connotations owing to its American political association with progressivism, the word “liberal” in this context comes from the Latin *liberalis*, which means “befitting free men.”<sup>6</sup> Originally, in ancient Greece and Rome, the distinction was between education in the liberal arts (*artes liberalis*)—the skills necessary for a free citizen—and education in the servile arts (*artes servilis*)—the skills necessary for a slave. Slaves needed to learn how to perform their crafts, do as they were told, and be productive functionaries of the economy. But the free citizens of the Greek democracies and of the Roman republic had to be educated so that they could be active participants in the deliberations and decisions of the *polis*. The free citizen needed to be able to use his mind at a very sophisticated level—he was responsible for receiving, applying, and transmitting the achievements and heritage of the past; he had to be able to express himself effectively in the forum so as to persuade others; he needed to conduct himself with honor and wisdom.

The specific list of liberal arts varied somewhat in the classical era. Plato gave a prominent role to gymnastics.<sup>7</sup> As Christians like Cassiodorus and Boethius appropriated classical education, seven liberal arts became the educational foundation: the trivium of grammar, dialectic or logic, and rhetoric (arts which would lead to the mastery and application of language)

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<sup>6</sup> See the entry for “liberal” in *The Online Etymological Dictionary*: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=liberal>

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Book II.

and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy (arts which would lead to the mastery and application of mathematics). Medieval educational theorists supplemented the “arts”—that is, skills—with the “sciences,” that is, categories of knowledge. These liberal sciences were natural science (the knowledge of nature; that is, the objective creation); moral science (the knowledge of human beings and their interactions); and theological science (the knowledge of God). In effect, all knowledge could be included in these categories so that the classical curriculum studied a comprehensive range of subjects.

Other qualities and features of a liberal education would also emerge: the cultivation of the good, the true, and the beautiful; an emphasis on original sources; a concern for virtue; the imitation of excellence; reading good literature and cultivating creative and eloquent expression; study of the language and literature of the Greeks and Romans; Socratic questioning, so as to lead students to a personal discovery of truth.

### ***The Rediscovery of Liberal Education***

Some characteristics became clear when progressive education—beginning with the nineteenth-century German university model and continuing with Dewey and other modern theorists—reacted against the classical model. Whereas progressive education is highly specialized, liberal education introduces the student to a wide range of subjects in an attempt to develop all of the powers of the human being; progressive education emphasizes what is new and tends to denigrate the past, whereas liberal education values the achievements of the past and studies works that have stood the test of time; progressive education promotes change, whereas liberal education seeks to transmit the civilization to the next generation.

Today, many Christians and even non-Christians, in reacting against progressive education, have been rediscovering what is, in effect, the educational tradition of Western civilization. Much of this recovery has been piecemeal: Dorothy Sayers brings back the trivium; Mortimer Adler promotes the Great Books; Christian educators discover the *progymnasmata*, a powerful method of teaching writing; classical colleges bring back disputations, in which students publicly argue to support a thesis, as in Luther’s academic exercise that sparked the Reformation. The classical Christian school movement, pioneered by Douglas Wilson and put into

practice by hundreds of schools and thousands of homeschools, is bearing impressive fruit as it continues to grow.

In some instances, however, one element of the classical liberal arts has been mistaken for the whole. In the twentieth century, universities recognized that higher education on the German model could result in graduates who might know a great deal about a narrow field but remain essentially uneducated outside of that specialty. In response, universities crafted “liberal arts” requirements, ensuring that students sample a wide range of disciplines, including a dose of the “humanities.” Unfortunately, those required classes were often just as specialized as every other program, with little effort to integrate the learning or to approach the different fields in a comprehensive, humane way.

At times, the elements of liberal education have been obscured by misconceptions. Dorothy L. Sayers was the catalyst for the current revival of classical education, but she did not get it completely right. She wrote perceptively about the importance of the trivium, but grammar, logic, and rhetoric are not simply developmental stages. There is a developmental element to them, as will be seen shortly in examining Johann Sturm’s school, but the trivium refers more directly to discrete subjects and phases in the mastery of language. More profoundly, the trivium corresponds to the faculties of the mind as developed by St. Augustine: the memory (grammar), the understanding (dialectic), and the will (rhetoric). Thus, the trivium provides a blueprint for learning any subject in depth, with the entire mind, as the student progresses from knowledge through understanding to persuasion and creative personal application. While Sayers was very helpful in focusing on the trivium, she was simply wrong about the quadrivium. Arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy do not stand for the “subjects” (i.e., content) that students study in the upper grades. Rather, these are liberal *arts*. The knowledge that the arts are applied to are the natural, moral, and theological *sciences*; put differently, the quadrivium has to do with mathematics. The liberal arts comprise the two means of human learning: language and mathematics.

Forgetting that the liberal arts include mathematics, let alone that mathematics comprises four of the seven arts, has distorted classical education and damaged its appeal. Thus, in universities today, the term “liberal arts” has become synonymous with the “humanities.” As a result, universities play off the “liberal arts”—often understood as literature,

philosophy, history, and the like—against the much more desirable “STEM subjects” (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Such dichotomizing entirely overlooks the fact that Western science grew from the soil of the classical liberal arts. Today, science and the humanities are separated from each other, to the impoverishment of them both, whereas true classical education brings them together.

Classical educators need to recover the *quadrivium*, just as they have recovered the *trivium*. The opportunities are vast, since mathematics education is floundering in progressive schools, and there is an ever-growing need for professionals trained in STEM. However, a greater need from the Church’s perspective is the role of mathematics in rebuilding Christian wisdom. Mathematics is a bracing tonic for those inclined to believe that there are no absolutes, that there are no objective truths, and that human beings construct their own realities. In both the “humanities” and the “sciences” today, separate though they are, it is commonly said that the universe is meaningless; and yet mathematics is a sheerly mental operation, which—amazingly—is found to describe, account for, and even predict the nature of the external, objective world, suggesting that there is a Mind that looms behind all physical reality.

The quadrivium employs mathematics not only in the numeric operations of arithmetic but in the spatial realm of geometry, the aesthetic realm of music, and the empirical observations of astronomy. As such, mathematics is an integrative discipline, just as language is. It teaches students to think objectively and to recognize the reality of forms and patterns and order. That recognition, in turn, has moral implications, as well as aesthetic ones. As classical educators explain the quadrivium, their students will see that arithmetic is about number; geometry is about number in space; music is about number in time; and astronomy is about number in space and time. Being able to think in terms such as these is an important legacy of the liberal arts.

Even when liberal education is clearly understood, there are still variations and options. In his history of liberal education, Bruce Kimball has shown how classical educators of different times and cultures have always vacillated in emphasis between logic and rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> The Greeks stressed

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: College Board, 1995).

dialectic, the pursuit of truth; the Romans stressed rhetoric, the formation of effective and influential citizens for the Roman Republic; in the Middle Ages, the conversational pursuit of dialectic was formalized into an emphasis on logic, leading to the rationalistic systems of scholastic philosophy and theology; the Renaissance version of classical education re-emphasized rhetoric, with its creativity and expressiveness.

To be sure, the genius of liberal education is integration—learning to embrace both the trivium and the quadrivium, rather than asserting one over the other. Why shouldn't a student be adept in both logic and rhetoric, language and mathematics, science and aesthetics? The highest achievement of liberal education is the "Renaissance Man," such as Leonardo da Vinci, a master of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, who was also an artist of the highest order; or Sir Philip Sidney, the statesman and theologian, the soldier and poet. Such a level of integration is hard to achieve, of course, let alone sustain. Moreover, different worldviews manifest themselves in different kinds of education. Medieval Catholicism was rationalistic, and so, of course, its universities would put logic at the center. The Reformation, however, had a different basis and grew out of and promoted a different kind of liberal education.

## **CLASSICAL EDUCATION PLUS CATECHESIS**

It is no exaggeration to say that the Reformation grew directly out of Renaissance classical education. It began at the University of Wittenberg, one of the new institutions built around the new learning. In accord with the educational methodology of *ad fontes* (meaning "to the sources" in Latin), the Renaissance curriculum focused on the reading of original sources instead of secondary scholarship. In the field of theology, whereas the scholastic universities studied commentaries and systematic treatises such as Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, the Renaissance universities studied the Bible. The catalyst for this new Renaissance classicism was the rediscovery in Western Europe of the Greek language. The great Renaissance humanist Erasmus edited and published his new edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516, which differed at many points from the Latin Vulgate. It was in the course of preparing lectures on the Bible that one Wittenberg professor, Martin Luther, realized the significance of the passage "the just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17). Luther posted ninety-five theses for the purpose of holding an academic disputation—an exercise that was a staple of both medieval and

Renaissance universities—on the topic of indulgences. That disputation never took place, but others did, such as Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation on the theology of the cross, and universities throughout Europe would be the forum for the theological debates of the Reformation. Later, Luther would use Erasmus’s Greek New Testament and his colleague Philip Melanchthon’s expertise in Hebrew to translate the Scriptures into the vernacular, the first translation of the whole biblical text from the original languages since the Latin translation of St. Jerome. The new Renaissance curriculum emphasized rhetoric, which carried over into the Reformation’s emphasis on preaching. The new liberal learning stressed the formation of the free, individual human being, which carried over into the Reformation emphasis on personal faith.

### ***Reformation and Renaissance***

The Reformation, in turn, was a catalyst for the founding of new schools. The immediate goal was to teach everyone possible—not only clergy but laity, not only men but women, not only the socially privileged but peasants—how to read the Bible. The schools that the Reformation started were classical Renaissance schools.

The Reformation continued to employ classical education for centuries, though in a particular way. Thomas Korcok defines the Lutheran educational tradition as classical education plus catechesis<sup>9</sup>—that is, as the liberal arts combined with catechetical instruction.

In his history of Lutheran education (which likely also tracks with education in the Reformed tradition), Korcok shows that the theological conflicts of the Lutheran churches accompanied educational ones. The Enthusiasts wanted neither the liberal arts (considering them too worldly) nor catechesis (opposing the emphasis on doctrine rather than personal experience). They called for schools that simply taught students how to read the Bible. The Pietists likewise considered the liberal arts too worldly and catechism too doctrinal, calling for schools that taught the Bible and that prepared young people for a vocation. Later, the Rationalists opposed both the liberal arts and catechesis in favor of a “scientific” education. Throughout each controversy, however, the orthodox Lutherans insisted on liberal education plus Christian catechesis. Alternative approaches to

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Korcok, *Lutheran Education* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 57.

education—anti-intellectual fundamentalism, vocational training, and progressive scientism—persist today. Classical Christian educators must contend with them all, demonstrating that the classical Christian model is indeed the best alternative.

The Reformation schools also found themselves in conflict with other kinds of classical education. The first educational reforms put forward by the Reformation were in reaction against medieval scholasticism, a variety of classical education that put logic—along with Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas—at the center. Prof. Korcok summarizes the issues:

In order for the Church to be free of these Thomistic and Aristotelian teachings, it was necessary to remove them from the classroom and replace them with a different approach to the liberal arts. This simultaneous need to reform the Church and education was apparent to Luther early on. In a letter to Jodocus Trutfetter in 1518, Luther said, “To explain myself further, I simply believe that it is impossible to reform the Church unless the canon law, scholastic theology, philosophy and logic, as they are now taught, are thoroughly rooted out and other studies put in their stead.”<sup>10</sup>

The studies which took their place were the liberal arts as cultivated by the new Renaissance classicism, emphasizing rhetoric and accompanied by literature and other “humane” studies. Taking the lead in this project of educational reform was Melanchthon—Luther’s friend, the author of the Augsburg Confession, and arguably the greatest humanist scholar next to Erasmus.

In time, tension grew between the Renaissance and the Reformation, a conflict that was both theological and educational. Renaissance educators such as Erasmus believed that a liberal education was sufficient in itself to shape its students in a life of virtue and spiritual enlightenment. Catechesis in the Law and Gospel was not, strictly speaking, necessary. The *artes liberalis* would result in a fully empowered human being who was “free.” The exaltation of the “humanities” manifested itself in a high view of human potential, such that the so-called humanist learning tended to become “humanistic.” Korcok again summarizes:

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<sup>10</sup> Korcok, *Lutheran Education*, 20.

While humanists like Erasmus were given to viewing the [liberal] arts as the starting point for a progressive life of moral improvement, Erasmus' contention that there was still a "scintilla of perfection" in a child led him to believe that the arts had the ability spiritually to reform a person. The Evangelicals could not accept that premise. For Luther, the corruption of the human soul was complete, voiding Erasmus' optimistic view.<sup>11</sup>

This controversy occasioned Luther's decisive break with Erasmus in his treatise *The Bondage of the Will*. Still, the Reformation schools did not abandon their commitment to the liberal arts. "The result," says Korcok, "was a new form of humanism: one which historian Josef Dolch calls a 'Confessional Humanism.' Unlike the humanism of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, this 'Confessional Humanism' placed catechetical instruction as the first priority."<sup>12</sup> Catechetical instruction—with its grammatical memorizing, dialectical questions, and rhetorical confession—was itself an application of liberal pedagogy. Thus, humane learning was thought to fit well with a distinctly Christian framework. As Reformation historian Steven Ozment has said, "Humanities became for Protestant theologians what Aristotelian philosophy had been to the late medieval Catholic theologian, the favored handmaiden of theology."<sup>13</sup>

The Erasmian faith in classical liberal arts education as a self-contained religion persists today. Not all classical schools are classical *Christian* schools, though the very power of the liberal arts can vest them with a religious aura. Notice how the vocabulary of classical educational theory is replete with theological terminology. We have a "canon" of Great Books. For some, the Great Books—according to one canon or another—have precisely that kind of authority. Literary and philosophical masterpieces constitute secular scriptures, to which people can look for inspiration, guidance, and transcendence. While Christians may agree with such people about politics,

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<sup>11</sup> Korcok, *Lutheran Education*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Korcok, *Lutheran Education*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Steven Ozment, "The Intellectual Origins of the Reformation," in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History*, ed. F. Forrester Church, George Huntson Williams, and Timothy George, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 9:147. Quoted in Korcok, *Lutheran Education*, 33.

the decadence of modern life, and the value of Western civilization, they remain humanists, and nothing more.

Having used the theological terms “transcendence” and “inspiration,” we could add “creation,” “epiphany,” and “revelation.” It is very easy to turn classical education into a religion. This is a testimony to the brilliance of classical education, but it is no substitute for Christianity. Wise Christians recognize this, and when the necessary distinctions are made, liberal education and the Christian faith can complement each other. But sometimes, an education that seems to provide all the answers, that offers pleasures instead of disciplines, that makes fewer demands, and that exalts the student beyond all measure can be twisted into a substitute for Christianity. It is entirely possible for Christians to send their children to excellent liberal arts colleges which cause them to lose their faith

A liberally educated person, even one externally disciplined by the classical virtues, can still be a desperate sinner. Indeed, an excellent and dangerously equipped sinner, whose education makes him capable of doing worse things than he otherwise would have been able to do. This is the lesson of classical education itself. Socrates’s most brilliant disciple was Alcibiades, who would betray his native Athens first to the Spartans and then to the Persians. Aristotle’s most notable pupil, Alexander the Great, conquered the known world and, yet, he shed rivers of blood and met his end because he could not control his own appetites. Thankfully, *Christian* classical education—the liberal arts plus catechesis—can give rise to another kind of empowered human being and another kind of freedom.

## **CLASSICAL EDUCATION PLUS VOCATION**

Another important difference between the Reformation’s classical schools and many liberal arts schools today deserves mention. Apologists for the liberal arts often distinguish between their approach, which pursues its subjects as ends in themselves, and “vocational” training, which aims at the pragmatic end of teaching young people an occupation, trade, or profession. The Reformation discussions of the liberal arts, however, nearly always related them to “vocation”—not in a contemporary, narrow occupational sense, but in light of the Reformation doctrine of vocation. That is to say, a liberal education as the Reformers conceived of it equips its students for *service* to their neighbors. This understanding of vocation and its relation to the liberal arts complicates the classic distinction between “liberal” and

“servile” education, resulting in a different notion of the freedom that liberal education cultivates.

### ***Luther’s Commitment to Liberal Education***

Luther’s *Large Catechism*—one of the official confessions of faith for Lutherans—enshrines the Reformation’s commitment to a classical liberal arts education. Luther’s explanation of the commandment to honor one’s father and mother ends with a discussion of parental responsibilities:

For if we wish to have excellent and apt persons both for civil and ecclesiastical government, we must spare no diligence, time, or cost in teaching and educating our children, that they may serve God and the world, and we must not think only how we may amass money and possessions for them. For God can indeed without us support and make them rich, as He daily does. But for this purpose He has given us children, and issued this command that we should train and govern them according to His will, else He would have no need of father and mother. Let everyone know, therefore, that it is his duty, on peril of losing the divine favor, to bring up his children above all things in the fear and knowledge of God, and if they are talented, have them learn and study something, that they may be employed for whatever need there is [to have them instructed and trained in a liberal education, that men may be able to have their aid in government and in whatever is necessary]. If that were done, God would also richly bless us and give us grace to train men by whom land and people might be improved, and likewise well-educated citizens, chaste and domestic wives, who afterwards would rear godly children and servants.

Parents are charged to bring up their children in the fear and knowledge of God and also, according to the Latin translation, “to have them instructed and trained in a liberal education, that men may be able to have their aid in government and in whatever is necessary.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, *Concordia Triglotta*, trans. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 631. The specification of a “liberal” education is present only in the official Latin version of the *Large Catechism*. Lutherans have

It would seem, then, that Lutherans would be confessionally bound—“on peril of losing the divine favor,” no less—to give their children a classical liberal arts education. As it happens, though, confessional subscription must be to the German version, which leaves out the reference to a distinctly liberal education and speaks only of “formal study.” So a commitment to the classical liberal arts, as such, though highly favored by the Reformers, is not an absolute confessional mandate. Nevertheless, a commitment to education is. It is the parents’ “chief duty” to educate their children for both the spiritual and earthly kingdoms. The purpose of both the “formal study” in the German version and the “liberal education” in the Latin version is “service.” That is, the purpose of education for Luther as well as his fellow educators and confessors is vocation.

### ***The Two Kingdoms and Liberal Education***

In other words, Luther is referring to the importance of parents equipping their children for both of God’s two kingdoms: God’s eternal kingdom (to bring them up “in the fear of knowledge of God”) and God’s temporal kingdom (“that men may have their aid in government and in whatever is necessary”). This two kingdom framework, described here as “both for civil and ecclesiastical government,” explains why the Lutheran educational tradition consists of liberal education for the temporal kingdom and catechesis for the eternal kingdom. The competing approaches to education mentioned earlier, to which the Reformers were opposed, each neglected one of the two kingdoms in favor of the other: the humanists, in thinking a temporal education sufficient, neglected man’s citizenship in the eternal kingdom; the Enthusiasts, in thinking an education for eternity sufficient, neglected man’s citizenship in the temporal kingdom; although the Pietists understood the necessity for both kingdoms, their focus on economic callings narrowed the true scope of vocation and Christian service.

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traditionally accepted the original German version as authoritative, which has opened the door to other approaches.

### ***The Three Estates and Liberal Education***

Luther taught that God reigns in His temporal kingdom through three “estates”: the Church, the family, and the state. Christians have multiple vocations in all three of those estates: in the Church, as pastors, other church offices, and laypeople; in the family, as husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter, and other positions in the extended family; in the state, as ruler, magistrate, soldier, or simply citizen. As for what people do to make a living—as in our contemporary meaning of “vocation”—Luther included it primarily as part of the family estate, calling it “the household,” namely how the family supports itself. In the late medieval economy of peasant farmers, craft guilds, and feudal landholdings, most economic labor was inextricably tied to family. Luther also occasionally writes about vocations within the state, as with the offices of government, law, administration, and the military.

We must not miss that Luther’s *Large Catechism* says that a liberal education is the best preparation for vocations in *all* of the estates. Luther specifically refers to “government,” “well-educated citizens,” and improving people in the state, as well as the vocations of the “household”: those who improve land, servants (that is, employees), parents, and wives. He also highlights “chaste and domestic wives, who afterwards rear godly children and servants.” Luther believed that women too should be educated—and with a liberal education—which he believed would help them not only as mothers but also as governors of their household servants.

### ***Luther on Vocation as Service***

Luther is not advocating “vocational” education in the modern sense. He explicitly rejects the notion, commonly-held today, that the purpose of education is to train young people so that they will obtain gainful employment and amass wealth. He tells parents, “we must not think only how we may amass money and possessions for them.” God will provide these things. Rather, the role of parents is to give their children an education that equips them for *service* in both of God’s kingdoms: “we must spare no diligence, time, or cost in teaching and educating our children, *that they may serve God and the world.*”

In his tract *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany, That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524), Luther explains how liberal education

equips young people for service. He discusses vocation and education in the same terms:

Hitherto the sophists have shown no concern whatever for the temporal government, and have confined their schools so exclusively to the spiritual estate that it was well nigh a disgrace for an educated man to marry; he had to hear such remarks as, “Behold, he is turning secular and does not care to become a spiritual!” just as if their estate were alone pleasing to God and the secular estate, as they call it, were altogether of the devil and unchristian.<sup>15</sup>

Herein lies the pivotal insight which led to Luther’s doctrine of vocation: a rejection of the notion that the spiritual orders are more holy than the temporal orders. The medieval church taught that a person who desires Christian perfection must become a priest, a monk, or a nun. This required taking vows of celibacy (thus forswearing participation in marriage and parenthood) and poverty (thus forswearing ordinary economic activity). In the medieval church, the word “vocation” referred solely to a call to the religious orders. Luther, however, extended the concept to the temporal orders. Thus, the Table of Duties in Luther’s *Small Catechism* refers to being a husband, wife, parent, child, master, servant, day laborer, worker, and the like as being “holy orders,” the same term used for those who have taken clerical vows.<sup>16</sup>

Luther’s educational reforms promoted the “priesthood of all believers.” The new Reformation schools went far beyond teaching lay people how to read the Bible. Rather, since vocation opened up the secular realm as the proper arena for the Christian life, they provided liberal education.

“But,” you say again, “granted that we must have schools, what is the use of teaching Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and the other liberal arts? We can still teach the Bible and God’s Word in German, which is sufficient for our salvation.” I reply: Alas! I know well that we Germans must always

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<sup>15</sup> Luther, *Concordia Triglotta*, 631.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, “Table of Duties,” Luther’s Small Catechism (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 33.

remain brutes and stupid beasts, as neighboring nations call us and as we richly deserve to be called. But I wonder why we never ask: What is the use of silks, wine, spices, and strange foreign wares, when we have in Germany not only wine, grain, wool, flax, wood and stone enough for our needs, but also the very best and choicest of them for our honor and ornament? Arts and languages, which are not only not harmful, but a greater ornament, profit, honor and benefit, both for the understanding of Scripture and for the conduct of government, these we despise; but we cannot do without foreign wares, which we do not need, which bring us in no profit, and which reduce us to our last penny. Are we not justly dubbed German fools and beasts?<sup>17</sup>

Here we see the common notion of the liberal arts elevating human beings above their natural barbaric state. But Luther goes further, saying that these arts, particularly the ancient languages that were the foundation of a classical liberal arts education, are gifts of God: “Truly, if there were no other use for the languages, this alone ought to rejoice and move us, that they are so fine and noble a gift of God, with which He is now richly visiting and endowing us Germans, more richly indeed than any other land.”<sup>18</sup>

Luther then relates the liberal arts to vocation:

If then there were no soul, as I have said, and if there were no need at all of schools and languages for the sake of the Scriptures and of God, this one consideration should suffice to establish everywhere the very best schools for both boys and girls, namely, that in order outwardly to maintain its temporal estate, the world must have good and skilled men and women, so that the former may rule well over land and people and the latter may keep house and train children and servants aright. Now such men must come from our boys and such women from our girls. Therefore the thing to do is to teach and train our boys and girls in the proper manner.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany, That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (1524), accessed March 29, 2022, [http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther\\_d9.htm](http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther_d9.htm)

<sup>18</sup> Luther, “To the Councilmen”.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, “To the Councilmen.”

What such an education can give both boys and girls is not specific job-training. In this same treatise, Luther states that such practical training for specific professions should be conducted outside of school, in apprenticeships. The kind of education he is envisioning, however, teaches the ability to “rule well” in the natural, social, family, and economic orders.

It is highly significant that the Reformation schools rejected a model of servile education and instead began providing a liberal education, designed specifically to equip human beings for freedom, for all classes of people, doing so even in a hierarchical sixteenth-century society, and for girls as well as boys. Once peasants received such an education, they did not stay peasants for long. The Reformation was soon accompanied by unprecedented social mobility. This was due in part to the churches’ efforts to make all Christians not only literate but liberally educated. In time, this education for freedom would lead to the rise of social and political freedom as well. The liberal arts could liberate human beings precisely by cultivating their intellectual and creative powers and drawing out their individual talents. This, too, Luther related to vocation.

Luther recognized how liberal education cultivates original thought and independent thinking:

If children were instructed and trained in schools or elsewhere where there were learned and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses to teach the languages, the other arts, and history, they would hear the happenings and the sayings of all the world and learn how it fared with various cities, estates, kingdoms, princes, men, and women; thus they could in a short time set before themselves, as in a mirror, the character, life, counsels and purposes, success and failure of the whole world from the beginning. As a result of this knowledge, they could form their own opinions and adapt themselves to the course of this outward life in the fear of God, draw from history the knowledge and understanding of what should be sought and what avoided in this outward life, and become able also by this standard to assist and direct others.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Luther, “To the Councilmen.”

This education, for Luther, also had a moral dimension, akin to the First Use of the Law, in regulating “this outward life.”<sup>21</sup> Here too, Luther relates liberal education to vocation, the equipping of Christians “to assist and direct others”; that is, to love and serve their neighbors, the purpose of every vocation.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, for Luther, liberal education *was* vocational education—not in the sense of professional training, but in the sense of equipping young people to love and serve their neighbors in their families and societies. This does distinguish Luther, to a certain extent, from perhaps the best-known theorist of the liberal arts, Cardinal John Henry Newman. A liberal education, in his view, involves knowledge pursued for its own sake, as opposed to mechanical “instruction,” which employs knowledge for other ends, that is, to be “useful.”<sup>22</sup> Cardinal Newman’s idea of the university as a realm unto itself for the pursuit of the higher good, unsullied with the demands of the world—making the university a sort of secular monastery—may owe something to the ancient Catholic tradition. It goes back further, though, to Luther’s philosophical nemesis, Aristotle. In his *Politics*, the great philosopher not only develops the notion that knowledge pursued for its own sake is a higher good, but specifically rejects the concept of service: “The object also which a man sets before him makes a great difference; if he does or learns anything for his own sake or for the sake of his friends, or with a view to excellence, the action will not appear illiberal; but if done for the sake of others, the very same action will be thought menial and servile.”<sup>23</sup>

While Aristotle believed that doing things for others is not fitting for a free man and, thus, that education that benefits others is inferior to that pursued for its own sake, Luther had a very different view—not only of

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<sup>21</sup> Article VI of the Book of Concord defines the first use of the law as “that thereby outward discipline might be maintained against wild, disobedient men [and that wild and intractable men might be restrained, as though by certain bars].” The Formula of Concord – Epitome, *The Book of Concord*, accessed March 29, 2022, <https://bookofconcord.org/epitome/third-use-of-the-law/>.

<sup>22</sup> John Henry Newman, “Discourse 5,” *The Idea of a University*, accessed March 29, 2022, <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/discourse5.html>

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, “Politics,” in *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), 138.

education but of freedom. In his treatise “On the Freedom of a Christian,” Luther said that true freedom manifests itself in vocation; that is, in love and service to one’s neighbor:

A Christian... ought to entertain this view and look only to this object—that he may serve and be useful to others in all that he does; having nothing before his eyes but the necessities and the advantage of his neighbor... . And as our heavenly Father has freely helped us in Christ, so ought we freely to help our neighbour by our body and works, and each should become to the other a sort of Christ, so that we may be mutually Christs, and that the same Christ may be in all of us; that is, that we may be truly Christians.<sup>24</sup>

If freedom for the Christian is expressed in service, it would follow that the kind of education associated with freedom—that is, the liberal arts—would also exist to serve the neighbor.

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520), trans. R. S. Grignion, accessed March 29, 2022, <http://www.ctsfw.edu/etext/luther/freedom/>.

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II:  
ON CORRUPTING THE YOUTH:  
A PLATONIC EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

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**A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE POPULAR  
PERSPECTIVE**

READ Plato from the popular perspective and his theory of education is thought to go as follows: “Plato’s works describe and deploy a pattern of education which is applicable to all education, not just successful or ideal education. He accepts the outcome of being a good citizen as a worthwhile end, which encompasses and includes many other good outcomes.”<sup>2</sup> Given

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally delivered as a response to a paper by Dr. Al Harmon entitled “Plato’s Logic of Education,” which was the first address in a public discussion entitled “Plato’s Theory of Education.” The original audio of the exchange can be found at <https://soundcloud.com/user-240690980/discussion-on-platos-theory-of?in=user-240690980/sets/national-convivium-2021>.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased from “Plato’s Logic of Education” by Dr. Al Harmon. Harmon’s argument in that paper is a robust restatement of the authoritative interpretation of Plato on the issue of education. And he cites several passages which support his position. I summarize it in larger form as follows: Socrates promises in several places that the art he teaches is “the political art” by which one can manage both their household and the city itself (cf. *Protagoras* 318e–a7; *Meno* 91a3–6). But it isn’t a tyrannical art because it also requires the student to learn to be ruled if they are to be a good citizen—to rule and be ruled in turn (cf. *Laws* 643e3–644a2). And a major component of ruling and being ruled is itself having the piety and self-regard to want to pass on the education which the city offered you to future generations—an education in the form of life conducive to life in the city (cf. *Laws* 653a5–c4). As such, the education which Plato describes is also the one he offers his readers; it is all inclusive of the other goods of the city. This argument is particularly convincing

this reading, it is no secret that many schools in the classical Christian education movement consider Plato an integral part of their curriculum. Such schools are spreading like fire—which is, we should note, one of the most hopeful developments in modern educational theory and practice. Reading Plato in such schools, they say, allows Plato to instruct schoolmasters on how to get educated and, in so doing, he educates. Students learn to ask questions “socratically,” trading the strong and proper noun in for the weak and slack adverb. They think about, and discover, real virtue and become good little boys and girls. And on and on rolls the defense of the teaching of Plato in secondary schools. All the while these Plato boosters think such a defense is a defense of Christianity. And so they teach Plato.

They should not.

We can preface our response to this popular reading by stating agreement with the above argument on every point. Plato does, in fact, describe a process of education which purports to create good citizens and a happy, peaceful, civic order. There is, however, a sizable gap between the reading of Plato offered in this essay and the one outlined above. I can summarize this as follows: if Plato’s theory of education is merely to produce good citizens, who are activating their natural capacities and becoming useful to themselves and their fellow man, then it would seem that we do not need Plato at all. Surely there are manifold works which can teach us these lessons—works more accessible and more effective at accomplishing these goals. The Bible alone will do quite nicely, as will more contemporary works—perhaps the *Autobiography of Ben Franklin* combined with a quick course on financial literacy and modern tax law. Surely such a course of study will be more pragmatic for our students. Such a proposal may sound like putting Socrates on trial a second time. This is not the case. Rather, it is to

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if one reads Plato’s theory as developing over time into something fundamentally at peace with his world and temporal situation and downplays the comparatively rare, terse statements which arrest the attention of characters and readers. Readers can engage my argument as a response to his, but this essay is also intended to stand on its own as a more general engagement with the question of Plato’s role in classical Christian education. For other literature to see that our argument is in disagreement with a broader position held in the modern Church see Louis Markos’s recent book, *From Plato to Christ* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), which we will quote favorably later on. It serves as a good example of the kind of book which trades in broadly similar arguments to Harmon, even if Markos, on the edges, is aware that the reading of Plato is a deal more complex than it may at first appear.