

Why Only the Trivium?

By Patch Blakey

The liberal arts were defined in the fifth century AD by a pagan author, Martianus Capella, in his seminal and singular work, *On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury*ⁱ, an allegorical account of the union of an intelligent and productive pursuit as represented by Mercury, to his betrothed, Philology, representing the art of letters or the love of words. In writing the story of this particular marriage, one of the wedding gifts presented by Mercury to bride is comprised of seven maids who are intended to serve her. These seven maids represent the seven liberal arts. The liberal arts in ancient times comprised the education that was worthy of a “free” people as opposed to slaves or drudges. Therefore by inference, a liberal education was one that developed the mind of a noble person in the broadest possible sense, and did not just prepare the recipient for a limited, menial vocation.

The first three of the seven liberal arts are known collectively as the Trivium, while the last four are called the Quadrivium. *Trivium* is Latin meaning “three ways,” or the place where three roads meet. The Trivium includes grammar, dialectic (or logic), and rhetoric. The Quadrivium contains the studies of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy (or astrology, in which the modern meaning of that word was included in the understanding).

During the sixth century AD, a Christian Roman statesman, educator and writer, Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator, usually referred to by just his name Cassiodorus, had a high regard for the seven liberal arts and promoted them for the education and betterment of Christians. He was a serious-minded Christian who believed that the Scriptures were central to a right understanding of all things and hence a right understanding of the Bible was essential to a sound education. He saw the seven liberal arts as the means to help develop a broad understanding of the Scriptures, and not just a simplistic one. This was the form of education employed by Western civilization for about the next millennia.

Jumping ahead to the twentieth century AD, Dorothy Sayers noted—in what she thought at the time would be a little-regarded essay—that Western civilization had taken a decidedly bad turn for the worse. In addressing what she thought were much needed teaching reforms in 1947, Sayers stated, “For they [the proposed reforms] amount to this: that if we are to produce a society of educated people, fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom amid the complex pressures of our modern society, we must turn back the wheel of progress some four or five hundred years, to the point at which education began to lose sight of its true object, towards the end of the Middle Ages.”ⁱⁱ Sayers knew that what she was proposing would be considered “reactionary.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Sayers central demand in her essay was a restoration of the use of the Trivium for the education of children. But she also had a key observation that was equally essential. She noted that children learn differently at different stages of their lives. This observation is important, and it is foundational to the current resurgence in classical Christian education. In Sayers view, the application of the Trivium comported with the learning traits of children at each of three stages of their God-created development, which she identified as the Poll-parrot, the Pert, and the Poetic. In defining these stages, she says,

The Poll-parrot stage is the one in which learning by heart is easy and, on the whole, pleasurable; whereas reasoning is difficult and on the whole, little relished. At this age one readily memorizes the shapes and appearances of things; one likes to recite the number-plates of cars; one rejoices in the chanting of rhymes and the rumble and thunder of unintelligible polysyllables; one enjoys the mere accumulation of things. The Pert Age, which follows upon this (and naturally, overlaps it to some extent) is only too familiar to all who have to do with children; it is characterized by contradicting, answering back, liking to “catch people out” (especially one’s elders) and the propounding of conundrums (especially the kind with a nasty verbal catch in them). Its nuisance-value is extremely high. It usually sets in about the Lower Fourth [approximately age 12]. The Poetic Age is popularly known as the “difficult” age. It is self-centered; it yearns to express itself; it rather specializes in being misunderstood; it is restless

and tries to achieve independence; and, with good luck and good guidance, it would show the beginnings of creativeness, a reaching-out towards a synthesis of what it already knows, and a deliberate eagerness to know and do some one thing in preference to all others.^{iv}

Sayers then went on to note the appropriate correlation between the stages of child-learning development and the stages of the Trivium: grammar to the Poll-parrot stage; dialectic to the Pert stage, and rhetoric to the Poetic stage. The Trivium therefore can be applied to all subjects of the curriculum at each stage of the students' development, not just to the individual subjects of grammar, logic, and rhetoric.

This approach, identified by Dorothy Sayers, is the one that the Association of Classical & Christian Schools (ACCS) has committed itself to and actively promotes. That is, ACCS agrees with Sayers that the Trivium includes both age-appropriate instruction as well as its application broadly to all subjects. With regard to the latter, every subject has a *grammar* to it, that is, it has essential components and vocabulary which must be learned by students; a *logic* or proper ordering of those components; and a *rhetoric*, the proper communication and application of the subject. ACCS has seen the positive and successful results of this application of the Trivium in numerous schools over the years. The success is evident in those schools that ACCS accredits and in the standardized test scores compiled by ACCS from its member schools.

Some may object that ACCS does not promote all of the seven liberal arts which include the Quadrivium in addition to the Trivium. ACCS would cheerfully concur. The objective of ACCS is to promote what Sayers called the "tools of learning." From the perspective of ACCS, the Quadrivium represents subjects that are to be approached and studied once the tools of learning have been mastered. ACCS schools focus on instruction in the Trivium, the tools of learning, so that students will grow up to be lifelong learners, able to effectively apply the tools to any subject. Again as Sayers noted in her closing comment, "The sole true end of education is simply this: to teach men how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain."^v

Others may protest that ACCS is not being true to the historical application of the Trivium as it was initially developed and promoted by our ancient forebears. There are proponents of the classical Christian approach who argue that the Trivium consists only of three specific areas of study with regard to language and the ability to speak clearly and persuasively; but that it does not comprise a method that can be applied to other subjects outside the limited study of verbal and written grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Again, ACCS would cheerfully agree that ACCS takes a broader view of the Trivium. Dorothy Sayers' observations are of great value in the instructional process and ACCS does not want to revert to an instructional methodology that had not yet made these insightful connections.^{vi}

Does this mean that ACCS does not promote or encourage the study of math, science, and music in a student's instruction? To the contrary, all of these subjects are present in ACCS member schools, and are required for ACCS accreditation. Because of the ACCS focus on the Sayers approach to the Trivium, these subjects are taught with that in mind; they are presented to students in an age-appropriate fashion so that the instruction coincides with the students' developmental stages.

Others might question what is wrong with just providing the grammar and the dialectic stages at a school that only goes through the eighth grade? ACCS maintains that the grammar and dialectic stages are preliminary to the rhetoric stage, the capstone of a classical Christian education. To only provide a student with the first two stages isn't just omitting a third of the learning process, but it rather misses the whole process altogether. As Augustine wrote:

"Now, the art of rhetoric being available for the enforcing either of truth or falsehood, who will dare to say that truth in the person of its defenders is to take its stand unarmed against falsehood? For example, that those who are trying to persuade men of what is false are to know how to introduce their subject, so as to put the hearer into a friendly, or attentive, or teachable frame of mind, while the defenders of the truth shall be ignorant of that art? That the former are to tell their falsehoods briefly, clearly, and plausibly, while the latter shall tell the truth

in such a way that it is tedious to listen to, hard to understand, and, in fine, not easy to believe it? That the former are to oppose, to melt, to enliven, and to rouse them, while the latter shall in defense of the truth be sluggish, and frigid, and somnolent? Who is such a fool as to think this wisdom? Since, then, the faculty of eloquence is available for both sides, and is of very great service in the enforcing either of wrong or right, why do not good men study to engage it on the side of truth, when bad men use it to obtain the triumph of wicked and worthless causes, and to further injustice and error?”^{vii}

The Trivium is important; it represents what Dorothy Sayers called the “Lost Tools of Learning.” ACCS is committed to recovering the Trivium, to restoring the knowledge and application of these tools through classical Christian schools. They work and this fact is attested to by the growing resurgence of classical Christian schools around the world.

ⁱ Martianus Capella, *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*, Vol II (“The Marriage of Philology and Mercury”), translated by William Harris Stahl and Richard Johnson with E.L. Burge, Columbia University Press, New York, 1977

ⁱⁱ Douglas Wilson, *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 1991, appendix A, Dorothy Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, p.146

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid, p.154

^v Douglas Wilson, *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 1991, appendix A, Dorothy Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, p.164

^{vi} See Douglas Wilson, *Defending Sayers’ Insight*, 2008 ACCS Conference workshop

^{vii} Augustine, “On Christian Doctrine”