

The Trivium in Biblical Perspective

Pastor Randy Booth

The fear of the Lord is the starting place (Prov. 1:7) and the ending place (Eccl. 12:12-13) of all legitimate learning. It is God's creature functioning in context. Absent the recognition of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life, the learning of particular facts is vain and the assembling of those facts into a cohesive whole is impossible. It is somewhat like lifting sentences at random from a novel and trying to organize them into something that makes sense without acknowledging there ever was a novel or novel writer.

The unbeliever learns, but to what end? Perhaps he becomes proficient, or even excellent at performing particular tasks—he gets a good job—he makes a lot of money. Nevertheless, what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" It does not matter how smooth and fast the train is if in the end the bridge is out. It was the *rich* man that found himself on the other side of the great chasm from Abraham, crying for a drop of water.

While the unbeliever swerves into the truth on a regular basis, without the fear of the Lord he has no means of discerning good from evil (Heb. 5:14). He is a creature, made in God's image, living in God's world. However, since he does not acknowledge any of this, the truths he does pick up fall short of accomplishing their intended purpose which is to glorify God.

The development of the trivium model of classical learning is, perhaps, an example of how unbelievers borrow truth from God's world and yet fail to give God the credit. As believers we should adopt or reject the trivium model of learning not for pragmatic reasons but because it is either true or false. Our primary concern should be: is it biblical? The Scriptures are our *only* rule of faith and life, not the Romans or modern pedagogues. All truth claims must pass the biblical standard.

What is the "Trivium"?

I believe the trivium model of learning (as far as it goes), passes the biblical test. While the Romans did not start or end with the fear of God (though some in the medieval period perhaps did), nevertheless, they did get part of it right. The "trivium" has reference to educational method-*how* to educate. The model is comprised of three phases of learning: 1) grammar, 2) dialectic, and 3) rhetoric. These are but new labels for the biblical concepts of: 1) knowledge, 2) understanding, and 3) wisdom. All learning will involve these three steps: gathering particular information (grammar or knowledge phase), assembling that information into its proper relationships (dialectic or understanding phase), and then applying that understanding of the particulars to various

situations in an effective way (rhetoric or wisdom phase). This is simply the way God made us and the world in which we live. The Jigsaw puzzle illustrates the process—particular pieces must be arranged in the right relationship to one another before we can see the big picture.

These three areas of learning interact, each one with the other. Without knowledge there can be no understanding or wisdom. Knowledge and understanding are likewise necessary if there is to be wisdom. The wise man is able to acquire even more knowledge and understanding, thus becoming more wise—he has learned how to learn.

Child development is the maturing process—proceeding from the simple to the complex—knowledge, understanding and then wisdom. There are plenty of smart six-year-olds but not very many wise ones. Thus the trivium begins with young children focusing on learning the grammar of every subject—multiplication tables, parts of speech, spelling, books of the Bible, events in history, etc. At about age 12 or so, children ask more and more the "why" questions. This is where the trivium focuses on dialectic or logic. The student begins to understand the place and importance of each subject of study. The final focus of the trivium is on rhetoric. The older students now learn how to articulate and apply the various fields of study to life.

Biblical Terminology

The Bible clearly distinguishes these three types of learning while also revealing their interdependency. Each aspect of learning comes as a gift from God. Moses commended Bezalel saying, "And He has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding and in knowledge and in all craftsmanship" (Ex. 35:34). Proverbs declares, "For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (2:6) and "Wise men store up knowledge..." (10:14). Daniel describes God as the One who "gives wisdom to wise men, and knowledge to men of understanding" (2:21).

In Scripture, knowledge (grammar) seems to be focused on particular **words, information** or **instructions** that must be **received** or **rejected** by the **hearer**. A wise teacher instructs a willing learner who receives particular information from his instructor. Balaam spoke of, "The oracle of him who *bears* the *words* of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High" (Num. 24:16). The Proverbs also make this connection evident: "Leave the presence of a fool, or you will not discern *words* of knowledge" (14:7); "the *lips* of the wise spread knowledge" (15:7); "the *ear* of the wise seeks knowledge" (18:15); "Cease *listening*, my son, to discipline, and you will stray from the *words* of knowledge" (19:27); "when the wise is *instructed*, he receives knowledge" (21:11); "Incline your *ear* and *hear* the words of the wise, and apply your mind to my knowledge" (22:12); in Ecclesiastes, "the Preacher taught the people knowledge" (12:9) and in Malachi, "for the *lips* of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek *instruction* from his *mouth*" (2:7).

Understanding (dialectic) in Scripture is directed toward **discerning** good from evil, truth from falsehood. In other words, the one who has understanding has good **judgment**. He comprehends the right relationship of the particular pieces of knowledge to the whole. This is the syntax or logic of learning. King Solomon prayed, "So give Thy servant an understanding heart to *judge* Thy people to *discern* between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). Job observes, "And to *depart from evil* is understanding" (28:28). Genuine understanding is evidenced in obedience to the truth as we see in these passages from Psalms: "A good understanding have all those who *do His Commandments*" (111: 10); "Give me understanding, *that I may observe Thy law*, and keep it with all my heart" (119:34); "Give me understanding, *that I may learn Thy commandments*" (119:73); "From Thy precepts I get understanding; therefore *I hate every false way*" (119:104). The Proverbs observe: "a man of understanding *walks straight*" (15:21) and "The rich man is wise in his own eyes, but the poor who has understanding *sees through him*" (28:11). God complains to Jeremiah, "For My people are foolish. They know Me not; they are stupid children, and they have no understanding. *They are shrewd to do evil, but to do good they do not know*" (4:22). Daniel and his companions were described as those who were "endowed with understanding, and discerning knowledge" (Pan. 1:4). The apostle John points us to the ultimate purpose of understanding when he writes, "And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true..." (1 John 5:20).

Wisdom (rhetoric) is the ability to **arrange, articulate** and **apply** knowledge and understanding in a variety of circumstances. "In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he *pondered, searched out and arranged* many proverbs" (Eccl. 12:9). "The tongue of the wise makes knowledge *acceptable*..." (Prov. 15:2). "The lips of the wise *spread* knowledge..." (Prov. 15:7). Israel recognized Solomon's wisdom, "for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to *administer justice*" (1 Kings 3:28). The Psalms declare: "The *mouth* of the righteous *utters* wisdom" (37:30); "My *mouth* will *speak* wisdom" (49:3). Again, the Proverbs support this aspect of learning: "The *mouth* of the righteous *flows* with wisdom" (10:3 1); "She opens her *mouth* in wisdom" (31:26). Wisdom is the practical application of knowledge and understanding as revealed in Ecclesiastes: "For wisdom is protection just as money is protection. But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom *preserves the lives of its possessors*" (7:12); "Wisdom *strengthens* a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city" (7:19); "Wisdom is *better than strength*" (; 16); "Wisdom is *better than the weapons of war*" (9:18); "Wisdom has the advantage of *giving success*" (10:10). You are to have the "word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom *teaching* and *admonishing* one another..." (Col. 3:16); the Scriptures are "able to give you wisdom *that leads to salvation* through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15); and we are told, "conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, *making the most of the opportunity*" (Col. 4:5).

The use of classical terminology (e.g., the "trivium," "grammar," "dialectic" and "rhetoric") is useful, provided we comprehend that the substance of this model is rooted in Scripture. It is only in the context of the fear of God that genuine knowledge, understanding and wisdom can be attained. All other efforts, in the end, prove to be folly. *Tota et sola Scriptura*. Our final allegiance is to *all* of Scripture, and *only* Scripture.