

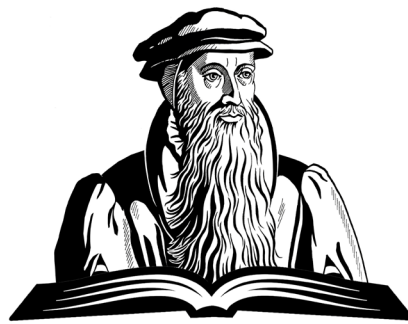
Video Lecture Series

Classical Christian Education

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

LECTURE #4

Reading Authors from Antiquity with Discernment and Benefit



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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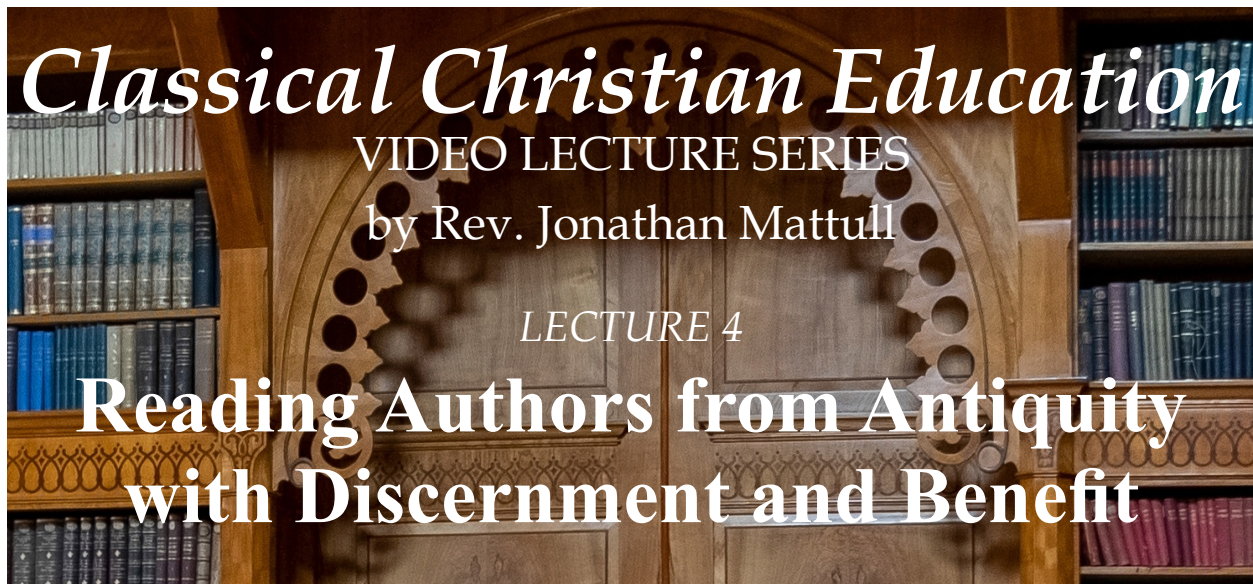
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This marks the fourth lesson in our series on education. In it, we look at Classical Christian Education in reading the pagans. In Classical Christian Education, students and teachers will be exposed to the reading of pagan literature, poetry, rhetoric, and philosophy. While acknowledging a need for discernment, this lesson must show why and how one must incorporate this material into his education. We provide our thoughts in three headings: first, *A Biblical Model*; and second, *A Theological Explanation*; and third, *A Pastoral Warning*.

And so, first, *A Biblical Model*. We can begin by defending our use of the pagans biblically. We want to stress from the very beginning that we do not mean, in using the pagans and reading the pagans, that we adopt all of the substance what they're saying. However, as we look at the biblical record, we find the use of pagans by such men as Paul and others. The Bible itself records evidence of acquaintance and use of pagan literature. In passing, it's worth indicating that both Mosel and Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were all trained in the schools of non-Christian pagans. Of Moses, we read in Acts 7, verse 22: "And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds." While this certainly does not prescribe for us training in pagan learning or education, it does illustrate that such learning may be used unto faithful service in God's kingdom, of course, as blessed by God.

However, we can look at a more particular case—the Apostle Paul. There are three specific instances wherein Paul makes use of pagan literature unto the glory of God. His use of them shows his deep familiarity with them, but it also shows us how a Christian may make use of the pagans in his own learning. The three instances are found in Acts 17, verse 28; 1 Corinthians 15:33; and Titus chapter 1, verse 12. Looking these with some attention will instruct us in a good use of classical literature.

So, first, Acts 17, verse 28. The words are found in the midst of Paul's sermon on Mars' Hill, or the Areopagus in Athens, a place that was well known for arguing, and speeches, and debates among the ancients. The words themselves are: "For in him we live, and move, and have our being, as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring." Well, in the context of Paul's sermon, he's arguing against the making of idolatries. Thus, in the next verse, he says, "Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device." In other words, Paul is

arguing against the idols that were well known and much used in the pagan world. Now, here is the interesting part. Verse 28 contains a direct quotation from a pagan poem by a man name Aratus.¹ The words, “For we are also his offspring,” is a quotation from his poem originally intended for Zeus. Likewise, at the beginning of the verse, he quotes from Epimenides:² “For in him we live and move and have our being.” Well, by this, Paul is not equating the pagan poems with inspired Scripture. Nor is he equating Zeus with the biblical God. Rather, he’s showing the Athenians that even the pagans recognized important truths regarding that. Though the pagans falsely attributed these to Zeus, they were truths, nonetheless. And if these truths were considered well, they would argue against idolatry.

Another example is in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 33. The verse reads: “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.” In biblical context, Paul is exhorting the Christians at Corinth unto holiness, in light of the resurrection. Thus, the next verse, verse 34, reads: “Awake to righteousness, and sin not; for some have not the knowledge of God: I speak this to your shame.” Again, we may be surprised to learn that verse 33: “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners,” is actually a quotation from Menander,³ an ancient pagan poet. There are only fragments of the original poem we have access to, but it again indicates familiarity with pagan literature and employing it to God’s glory.

Well, the last example is from Titus 1, and verse 12. The text reads: “One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are alway liars, evil beasts, slow bellies.” In context, Paul is warning Titus against the tendencies of the inhabitants of Crete. The next verse contains Paul’s exhortation: “This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith.” Well, once again, Paul is making use of an ancient pagan poem. Verse 12, “The Cretians are alway liars, evil beasts, slow bellies,” is a quotation from Epimenides.

Now, what are we to make of these quotations? Paul is obviously arguing for truth—truth regarding God; truth regarding Christian practice. But he’s making use and borrowing from pagan sources, some of which are directly speaking of Zeus. Well, first, we see that Paul was familiar with the ancient pagans and their literature. To be able to quote, on occasion, word for word, even in a sermon, demanded that Paul had taken the time to read and even memorize key parts of pagan literature. Now, Paul was a thorough Christian. He was opposed to all compromise and corruption in the things of God, and yet he was able to cite and use the pagan literature to express truth. To do so, he had to be familiar with it. So, one thing that we can take away from this is, it’s not wrong for the Christian to be familiar with pagan literature. What we can say further is that it is most certainly the case that it would be wrong to adopt the substance of all that is said in pagan literature. But there are little parts of pagan literature that are pointing us in the direction of truth, which we’ve seen Paul do.

Well, second, we see Paul adopting the ancient pagans and their literature. Several of these quotations are from sources that honored Zeus, a false god. Clearly, Paul is opposing false gods throughout his writings and sermons. He’s arguing for the true and the Triune God. However, he discerned elements within the pagan literature that stated truth. Though in the original sources, they were misapplied to false gods, they were, nonetheless, statements of truth. What did Paul do?

1 Aratus (315/310 BC–240 BC), a Greek didactic poet of Soli in Cilicia, from his poem, *Phaenomena*.

2 Epimenides of Knossos (or of Crete), 7th or 8th-century BC Greek Seer and philosopher-poet.

3 Menander (342/341–c. 290 BC), was a Greek scriptwriter best known for Athenian new comedy.

Well, he adopted them unto the service of Christ. He didn't say that everything that the poets were saying was true. He didn't condone all of the false things that were cultivated in those sources, but he adopted certain parts in order to apply it unto the truth in Christ. In many ways, we see Paul showing what he means in 2 Corinthians 10, and verse 5: "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." He was employing truths found in pagan literature, and using them unto the obedience of Christ. Thus, in Paul, we find a biblical model of how to read, understand, and adopt the pagan literature to the glory of God.

Now, before moving onward to a theological explanation, we should be clear of what is being said and what isn't being said. What is being said is, for Paul to make use of these sources, he had to know about them, and even more so, be familiar with them, and even more so, have meditated upon them to such an extent that he memorized certain key portions. So he was exposed to it, and that with a purpose. But the thing we aren't saying is that everything in pagan literature is noble, good, and worthy of our acceptance. Clearly, Paul was in no way saying that what was said of Zeus, the false god, is true of Zeus; but rather, saying what was said here is true about the true God. And so, there was discernment in the use of these things. That has to be a key feature of our biblical model.

Well, we move now, second, to *A Theological Explanation* as to reading the pagans. Well this relates to what we refer to a general and special revelation. General revelation, of course, referring to that true revelation of God through creation, even conscience. And special revelation being that true revelation given to us by the prophets, and as recorded in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, infallibly and inerrantly.

Well, much knowledge is simply due to careful observation and study. Perhaps this shows itself most evidently in science, as we think of it today. If we want to understand the way certain chemicals react in certain circumstances, we observe, we theorize, we experiment, we document, and test again. And then we carefully observe what happens. When we've done this and seen the same results take place over time, we determine that we have discerned a certain truth. Now notice, we don't go to the Bible—special revelation—to figure out chemical reactions and things of that sort. We observe what's around us, what takes place in certain circumstances, and our observation of those things, in controlled environments, allows us to discern truth. Well, the same is true in other realms of knowledge. Much of what we know is available to us by means of careful observation of the world around us. Truths of salvation require the special revelation of God's Holy Word. There is no knowledge of Jesus Christ and the way of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, without the Bible. This is the difference between general and special revelation.

God has revealed truth regarding himself and mankind generally throughout creation. But that revelation does not, and cannot save sinners. However, he has also revealed saving truths about himself, Jesus Christ, the way of salvation through the Bible. This is special revelation. In order to learn about salvation, we must have the Bible. We cannot know about salvation—the way of reconciliation with God, the way of pardon of sins, the way of eternal life—except we look at the Bible.

However, in order to learn about non-saving truths regarding the world, man, and even God, we can look at creation. This is taught to us in Psalm 19, and Romans 1, and other places as well. Notice, for instance, Romans 1, verse 18 to 21: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” Paul indicates that man can learn about God’s eternity, power, and divinity, simply by observing creation—the world. This is general revelation. However, man cannot learn the way of salvation without the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. That knowledge is found only in the Scriptures.

Well, this being the case, we can learn much from unbelievers regarding math, science, literature, society, government, philosophy, and so on. John Calvin,⁴ a Protestant Reformer of the sixteenth century articulated this well in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. I’ll give you two rather lengthy quotations from him which will help explain this point well. As I give them to you, notice how Calvin is pointing out that we may learn much from the pagans because of their observing of the world. The first quotation identifies the difference between true knowledge of earthly things and true knowledge of heavenly things.

“There is one kind of understanding of earthly things, another of heavenly. I call earthly things those which do not pertain to God or his kingdom, to true justice, or to the blessed of the future life, but which have their significance and relationship with regard to the present life, and are, in a sense, confined within its bounds. I call heavenly things the pure knowledge of God, the nature of true righteousness, and the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom. The first class includes government, household management, all mechanical skills, and the liberal arts. In the second are the knowledge of God, and of his will, and the rule by which we conform our lives to it.”

Now, notice, Calvin was testifying of the general knowledge that we can glean from creation, and in that, he included specific reference to the liberal arts. Well, we move to the second quote, which acknowledges the insight which even corrupt pagans have regarding truth of these earthly things. So Calvin again:

“Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? What shall we say of the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are. How shall we count anything praiseworthy or noble without recognizing at the same time that it comes from God? Those men whom Scripture calls natural men were indeed sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us accordingly learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature, even after it was despoiled of its true good.”

Again, a lengthy quotation, but it helps us perceive this point. What Calvin is expressing is the fact that when a man, believer or unbeliever, accurately discerns truth regarding the world, God has generously provided insight into his world. It does not mean that God has inspired that person; it does not mean that that person is regenerate or a true believer. It simply means that that person

4 John Calvin, or, Jean Calvin, (1509–1564), was a well-known French theologian, pastor, writer, and well-known Reformer in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation, after whom many Reformers patterned their teachings.

has discerned truth by the gift of God. Now, this being a theological expression of this truth, helps us to understand how reasonably we can benefit from reading the pagans. There are many things they say that are wrong, and yet, there are things that they say that are right. And it's those right things that are to be received, which demands discernment and study and meditation and judging it in light of the Scripture. The point is, there's a theological reason for us to benefit from the reading of unbelievers in their writings.

We move now, third, to *A Pastoral Warning*. The world of classic literature, poetry, philosophical treatises, and plays are a world of wonder and intrigue. If someone begins to read Homer,⁵ Demosthenes,⁶ Plato,⁷ Cicero,⁸ and others, even in translation, they begin to discern the able insight and beauty of expression they exhibit; and such will also be exposed to false views of God and men, erroneous views of the world around them. All of this, then, demands discernment and prayer. How do we do this in the classroom, whether in the home or in the school?

Well, first, we need to help our students exercise discernment. The ancients often had deep insight into truth and beauty, and their use of words was truly mesmerizing at times. To read Demosthenes or Cicero is to be exposed to masters of language, understanding, and rhetoric. There's a reason that the speeches of these men have been studied diligently, literally for thousands of years now. However, we need to warn our students that there are problems, errors, and even grievous faults with the ancients, and we should not hesitate to indicate this. Doing so helps our students learn that they need to be discerning readers. For that to happen, we, as teachers, must read with discernment as well.

Augustine⁹ gives us a helpful model in his *On Christian Doctrine*. He writes: "All good and true Christians should understand that truth, wherever they may find it, belongs to their Lord. Then, after weighing it up and acknowledging it also in the sacred books, they should repudiate all superstitious fictions." A bit later, he writes: "Superstition includes anything established by human beings which refers to the making and worshipping of idols, or the worshipping of creation, or any part of creation as God; the consultations and certain agreed codes and communications settled in collusion with demons."

The point that Augustine is making is that we should be willing to receive the truths that the ancients articulated, yet we should reject their idolatry, their immorality, and their wickedness. What we see actually is an expression of exactly what the Apostle Paul did at the Areopagus. He saw the truth that was asserted by these pagans; he rejected the idolatry; but he employed the truth for Christ's glory.

5 Homer (c. 8th century BC), ancient Greek poet credited as the author of *The Iliad*, and *The Odyssey*, two epic poems. One of the most revered and influential authors in history.

6 Demosthenes (384–322 BC), was a Greek statesman and orator.

7 Plato, *nee* Aristocles (c. 428–348/347 BC), famous ancient Greek philosopher of the Classical period, considered a foundational thinker in Western philosophy, and innovator of written dialogue and dialectic forms. His main studies were Epistemology, Metaphysics, Political philosophy. He was teacher to Aristotle.

8 Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC–43 BC), a Roman statesman, lawyer, scholar, philosopher, orator, writer, and Academic skeptic, who tried to uphold optimate principles during the political crisis that led to the establishment of the Roman Empire. He's known for treatises on rhetoric, philosophy, and politics, and he served as consul in 63 BC, and was assassinated by Mark Antony's followers.

9 Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) Christian theologian of Berber origin, was the bishop of Hippo in Numidia, Roman North Africa. His prolific writings influenced the development of Western Christianity, and is viewed as one of the most important church fathers in the patristic period.

Well second, we need to recognize that some of the classical literature is simply not appropriate for certain ages, and other classical literature is not appropriate for any age at all. We have the benefit of a long-standing heritage of those that have gone before us to help guide us in these things. Johannes Sturm,¹⁰ of whom we'll hear more later, was an educationalist during the Protestant Reformation. And he wisely wrote, though arguing for the inclusion of Cicero and others, he said, "Nothing should enter the boys' ears and minds that is not chaste, pious, elegant, and worthy of a free man." Thus, we need to exercise care that what we use of the ancients is pure and noble. This doesn't mean that it needs to be explicitly Christian, however, it should show forth truth and beauty in a noble way that accords with Christian standards. In other words, we're not to say, "Well, it's classical, therefore we must read it," or, "It's ancient, therefore we must use it in our classrooms." Rather, we should read with discernment. We don't just say, "Others have read it," but we look at it, we think it through. And what we do present to our students, we present ourselves discerning, but also helping our students to discern the truth and separate it from the error.

What that means is, we can't be lazy in our teaching. We don't just compile a reading list of all of these ancients and others, and then assign the reading, and say, "Go and figure it out." But as we select books, as we select readings and present them to our students, we're careful to point out the things that are wrong. And it's not just that we have tell them all the time, but we're using that as well to help formulate their own ability, asking them, "How do we see this to line up with Scripture?" or how not, and we're helping them to start formulating their ability to think well and carefully with these things.

By the way, this will help them in the present world. We live in a world where there are all manner of ungodly men saying one thing at one time and another thing at another time. And some Christians have taken the view that we should simply refuse everything that is said by anyone. And we start to characterize certain things, and what happens is, we start to mischaracterize what's being stated. But you see, as we read the pagans with discernment, we're teaching our children as well, how, in the modern contemporary world, we may do the same when we listen to others.

Well, as we close, where does all of this lead us? Well first, it gives us the warrant to read the ancients well. We saw how Paul did so, even able to quote them verbatim. Christians should not hesitate to read the ancients deeply. Now, this is not to say that if your conscience is struggling, you should violate your conscience, but rather, this point is to inform your conscience. If the Bible is our standard of what is acceptable before God, and what is right for us, we'll note, the Bible shows us models of those who had read pagan literature deeply, and yet did not compromise at all in their stance in holding fast to the Word of God. So what we have to acknowledge is that there's a way to do this well, and a way to use what is read to the glory of the Lord.

Well second, it demonstrates that we need to do this with discernment. We exercise discernment as to what stories we give to our children, and at what age. We exercise discernment over the material, to sift the truth from error. We, as Paul, are seeking to take captive every thought, to the obedience of Christ. Again, there is a way that we can help our students, however young, however old, to be discerning readers, discerning thinkers, separating the truth from error, which will be a skill that will benefit them all their lifelong. We don't want them simply to say, "Well, this source is

¹⁰ Johannes Sturm, or, Jean Sturm, (1507–1589), a German educator and Protestant Reformer who was influential in the design of the gymnasium system of secondary education. Sturm was generally regarded as the greatest educator connected with the Reformed Church. He implemented a gradation of the course of study, and novel methods of instruction, and his work shaped the practice of secondary education in Germany, England, and France.

a good source, and so we're going to adopt everything there," or, "This source is a bad source, and we're going to refuse everything there." Rather, we're teaching them to look for the truth carefully. And that is an excellent gift to give to anyone.

Well third, this directs us to make use of what we find in the ancients that is good and beautiful, and employ it to God's glory. Whether this is in honorable living, logical reasoning, or other areas, if we find something that is true, good, and beautiful, we should thank the Lord and use it for his praise. It is one way, in which today, we plunder the Egyptians. We take what is beautiful, and good, and useful, and yet we don't use it as the Egyptians did, for their idolatry; we set it apart to the service of God. This is what we're called to do. By the way, this is what we're to do in science, and math. This is what we're to do with literature and reading. This is what we're to do with rhetoric and speaking. All of these skills that we're gleaning and gaining in our education are to be employed, not for carnal and earthly ends ultimately, but rather, for the glory of God. So when we read literature, whether contemporary or ancient, we're gleaning insights that we can then use to the service of the Lord.

Well, we have another lesson before us that will provide the final piece of a foundation for our understanding of education. And after that next lesson, we'll be making progress in some of the details of what Classical Christian Education should be. So in our next lesson, which is the last of our foundation, we'll consider how Christ transforms education, and what this means for the Christian, whether in learning, or in teaching. And so, as we turn our attention to that next lesson, may the Lord give us wisdom that we would read well all that is before us and employ it to his glory.