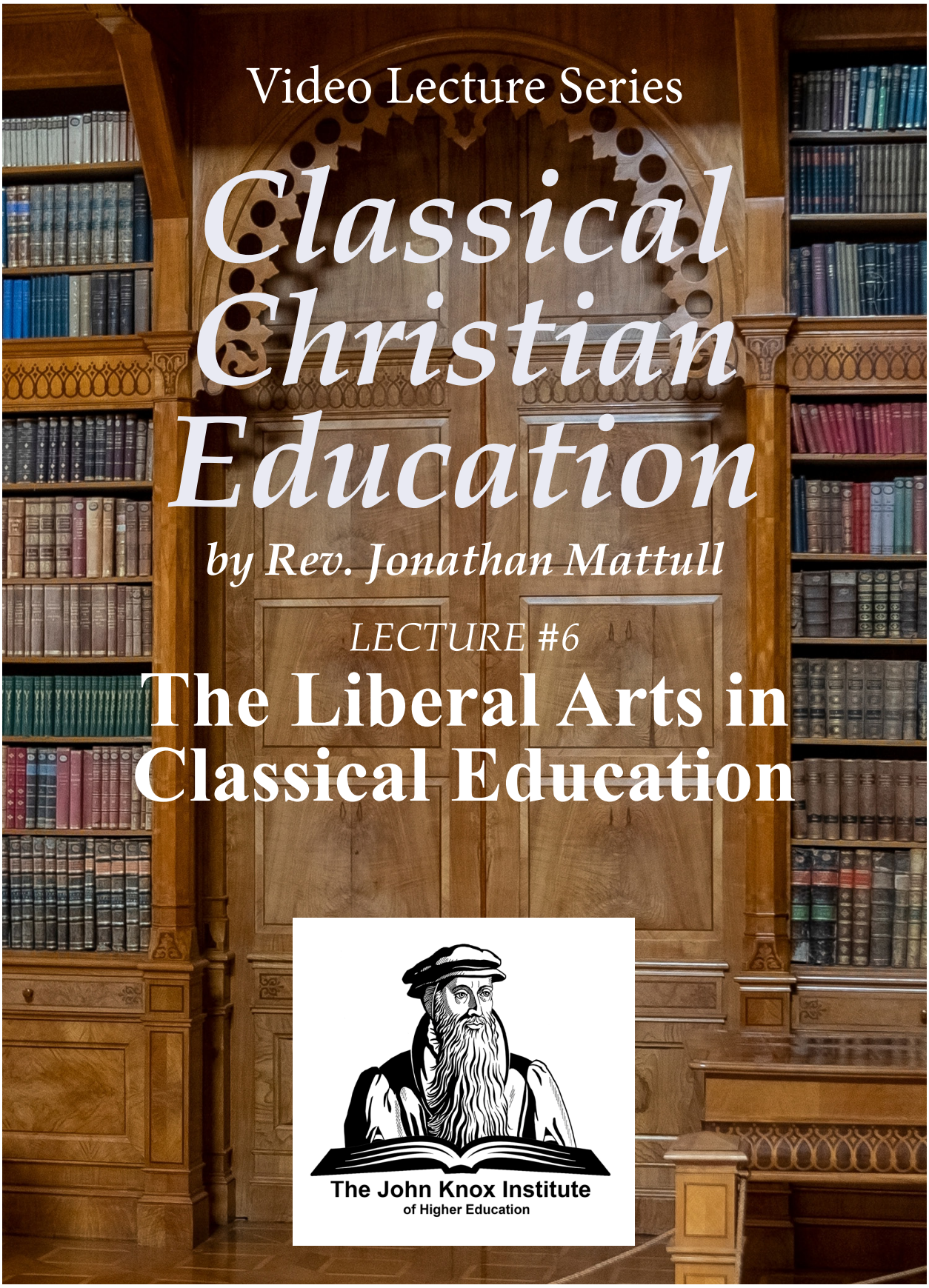
Video Lecture Series
Classical Christian Education
by Rev. Jonathan Mattull
LECTURE #6
The Liberal Arts in Classical Education
The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education
Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Rev. Jonathan Mattull is minister of the gospel at Sovereign Grace Presbyterian Church, in St. Louis, Missouri, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States of America.

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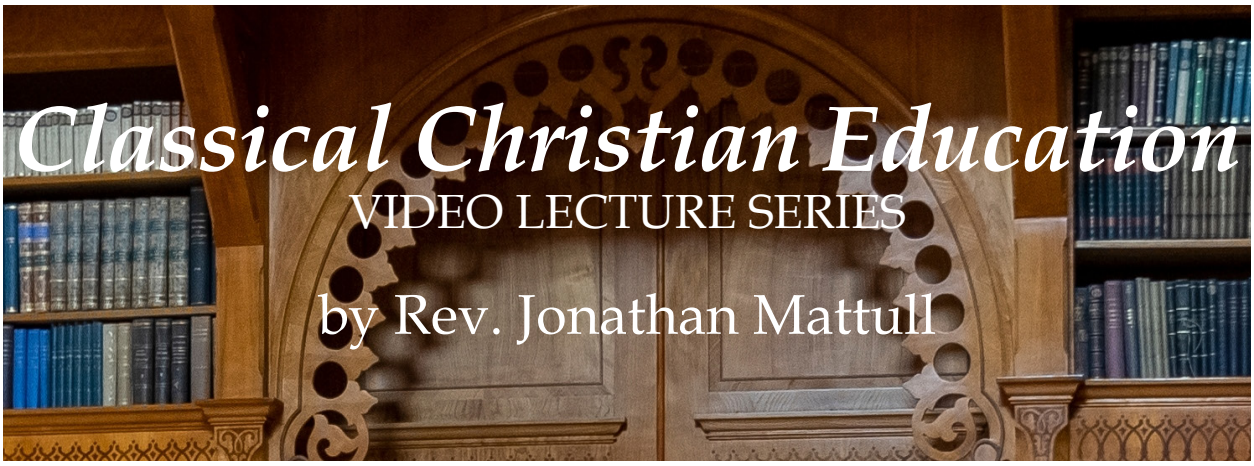

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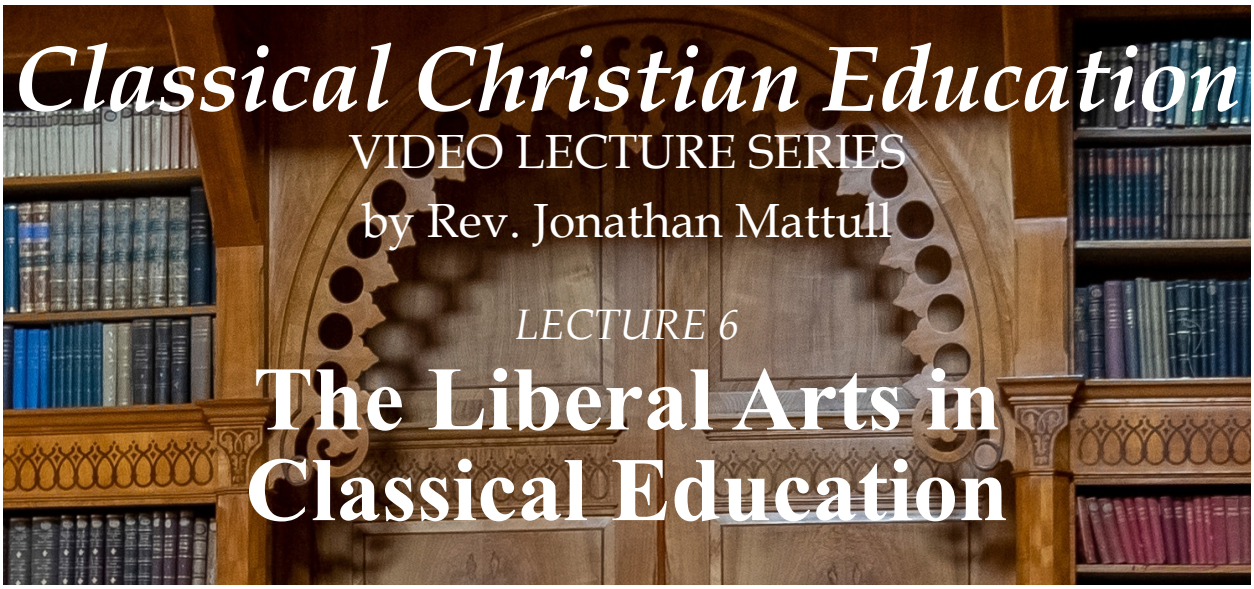

With this lesson, we enter the core of Classical Christian Education. As we stated earlier, Classical Education focuses on the Liberal Arts. Throughout history, what we call "Classical Education" has often been referred to as a Liberal Arts education. Now, this is true of non-Christian ancients, as Pathagoras,[1] Euclid,[2] Plato,[3] and others. It also includes those Christian educators, and those who have written on the subject, as Chrysostom,[4] and Augustine,[5] and many others besides. We could go into the late Middle Ages, into the Reformation—John Calvin,[6] and Philip Melancthon, and many others would have understood what was meant by education as something that referred to the Liberal Arts. When we speak of Classical Education, we're referring to the Liberal Arts.

That raises the question, what are the Liberal Arts, and what did they focus, and why did the ancients focus on them, how were they used, and perhaps more relevant to ourselves, why should we use them today? Our lesson seeks to lay the foundation for answering these questions. We'll look more at how to use them today in future lessons, but today we focus upon the identity, and

1 Pathagoras of Samos (c. 570–495 BC), an ancient Ionian Greek philosopher, polymath, and the eponymous founder of Pythagoreanism. His political and religious teachings were well known in Magna Graecia and influenced the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and through them, Western philosophy.

2 Euclid, (fl. 300 BC), was an ancient Greek mathematician active as a geometer and logician. He is considered "the father of geometry," is chiefly known for the *Elements* treatise establishing the foundations of geometry.

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

4 John Chrystostom (AD c. 347–407), was an important church Father and archbishop of Constantinople. He is known for preaching and speaking against abuse of authority in the church and state, a prolific author in the early Christian church.

5 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.

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

the purpose, and the use of Liberal Arts in Classical Christian Education. So we established the general meaning of the term, while future lessons will show how they were used and understood, and how we can use them today. So we summarize our thoughts for our lesson in three points. First, *The Identity of the Liberal Arts;* second, *The Purpose of the Liberal Arts;* and third, *The Use of the Liberal Arts.*

So first, *The Identity of the Liberal Arts.* The expression "Liberal Arts" may be familiar to you, and certainly, if you've been following along with our lessons, you've been exposed to them already, and perhaps could explain the basic meaning. In the West, we speak of a Liberal Arts college or university degree, someone attends a Liberal Arts school. Yet, few consider what the term means, or what its background was. In general, the term "liberal arts" refers to foundational language and mathematical skills and disciplines. We've mentioned before, and it's worth repeating that, historically, the Liberal Arts refer to seven particular arts that one was to master, and they were to master these in order to progress toward becoming a well-educated person.

Here, the term "art" refers to a particular skill that someone has mastered. It demands careful attention and regular practice. Today, we speak of the "fine arts" and perhaps this gives us a little bit of an insight. Painting is a fine art. Well, to paint well, one must be instructed and taught. They must devote time and attention, and they must devote regular and repetitive practice for developing their skills. And here, we get something of the kernel of what Classical Education is doing. It is focusing upon the repeated mastery of skills, in order that they would then have liberty to use these skills in all of life. But to be clear, we aren't talking about the fine arts, like painting or instrumental music. Classical Education focuses on the Liberal Arts. The term "liberal" refers to the idea of freedom. You can think of these Liberal Arts as arts required for a free man, as opposed to a slave. In other words, these Liberal Arts are the skills needed for a free man and for a free society.

And these seven Liberal Arts were divided into two groups. The first group was referred to as *the trivium.* And this word "trivium" refers to a place where three ways or three roads meet. The trivium consisted of the language arts of *grammar*, *logi*c, and *rhetoric*. The trivium led the students along a pathway toward mastering thinking and speaking. And we note this that there was an understood connection between one's mastery—not just use or familiarity with—but mastery of language, in order to think well and speak well, as well as these combining toward a mature human. The last group of the arts consisted of four, and these were referred to as the *quadrivium.* This term referred to a place where four ways or roads met. The quadrivium consisted of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. Sometimes they're referred to as *the mathematical arts.* These look at the physical world of space and time, and they help students understand the order and harmony of the created world.

So, if we take these in order, we consider the following arts: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. Now, we cannot go into a great detail on any one of these, and certainly not all of them together. We should also note that you'll find different thinkers and teachers in the past ordering these a little bit differently on occasion, but this represents the general consensus. And for our purpose, we hope to glean the basic understanding of what was included in each of these arts.

We begin with *grammar*. Grammar refers to all that which is related to words. Hugh of Saint Victor[7] explained grammar as that which concerns words with their origin, formation, combination,

7 Hugh of Saint Victor (AD c. 1096–1141), was a Saxon canon regular and leading theologian and writer on mystical theology, who spent the rest of his life at Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris, where he became head of the school.

inflection, pronunciation, and all things else pertaining directly to utterance alone. In other words, a student would learn what letters combined to spell a word, and what sounds a letter or combination of letters produce. They would learn the parts of speech, and how they relate to one another. We see, of course, a connection to our own time. Any education of an academic sort includes some lessons in the basics of spelling, and speaking, and phonics, and the way that words work. You'll notice that it's not just about spelling, but it's about parts of speech, and connections of thought, and how one word modifies another.

Well, the second would be *logic*. Logic develops right thinking. As an art, it teaches and practices sound reasoning. It assesses whether an argument—which, by the way, is made up of words—is valid and sound. This reminds us that logic is fundamentally a language art. And so, we have computational, or computer-type logic that is in great demand today. And certainly there is much reasoning, as you would say, that goes into that kind of logic. But classical logic is looking at the formation of arguments, and how words work, and if they work well together or poorly together, if the argument presented is a sound argument, and a valid argument. Students would study deductive and inductive reasoning. This would not only develop clear, accurate reasoning, it taught them abstract thinking in a way that related to words or language. And so, it was another way of mastering language.

Rhetoric, the third of the trivium, taught how to employ words in such a way that was not only sound—that's logic—or grammatically proper—that would be grammar—but in a way that presents the truth beautifully and persuasively. Aristotle[8] taught that rhetoric gives us the ability to see the available means of persuasion in each case. Quintilian[9] defined it as the science of speaking well. While there were teachers who taught students to manipulate others, the teachers that have stood the test of time—Aristotle, Cicero,[10] Qintilian, Augustine, and much later, others like Philip Melanchthon,[11] Jean Sturmius[12]—these taught that true rhetoric was for leading men to embrace the truth.

Now, the first three arts were language arts. That is, they taught students how to use language well. From the language arts, we move to the four remaining arts in the quadrivium. And in the quadrivium, we consider the arts of numbers or mathematics.

8 Aristotle (384–322 BC), Ancient Greek philosopher and polymath. His writings cover a broad range of subjects spanning the natural sciences, philosophy, linguistics, economic, politics, psychology, and the arts. He founded the Peripatetic School of philosophy in Athens, and began the Aristotelian tradition which set the groundwork for development of modern science.

9 Marcus Fabius Quinilianus, AKA Quintilian, or Quintillian, or Quinctilian (c. 35–c. 100 AD), Roman educator and rhetorician, born in Hispania, he opened a public school of rhetor, surviving under several Roman emperors including Domitian, who made him tutor to his two grand nephews in AD 90.

10 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 know for treatises on rhetoric, philosophy, and politics, and he served as consul in 63 BC, and was assassinated by Mark Antony's followers.

11 Philip Melanchthon (AD 1497–1560), a German Lutheran Reformer, a collaborator with Martin Luther. He was the first systematic theologian of the Protestant Reformation.

12 Johannes Sturmius, 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.

The first of the mathematical arts is *arithmetic*. Arithmetic deals with numbers, or numeracy, what a number is, what it represents, how it relates to other numbers; patterns between them. Well, most of us in today's world, when we think of arithmetic, we think of addition—two plus two equals four; eleven plus eleven equals twenty-two. Well, this is certainly part of arithmetic, but for the ancients, arithmetic was more. The patterns of numbers and the relationships between them cultivated wonder and delight. Students were exposed to the idea of unity and diversity, the one and the many. How can something be one, but have many parts? Arithmetic was not simply about addition or subtraction; it included multiplication and division, and other mathematical operations not unfamiliar to us. But what's different is that all of these show ways that numbers and, by consequence, ideas relate to one another. And it was taught in order to form the mind to think in clear ways. And though theoretical, yet ways that would allow them to see something true about the universe in which they lived.

Well, from arithmetic, we move to *music.* Music was a way of applying number. The ancients realized that number related to music and musical patterns. And even today, if you study music, you think in terms of number—you have whole notes, and half notes, and meter, and so on. While we typically think of music as something a musician performs, music as a liberal art developed one's understanding of truth. It taught relationships between sounds, such as harmony. It cultivated the mind to observe the truth that some things join together beautifully, and please us, as in harmonious sounds; while other things don't join together in such a way that pleases us—dissonant sounds. It trained the student, in other words, to observe that in God's world, some things work well together and belong together; other things did not. For instance, the beauty of harmony taught students that there were objective truths for beauty itself. Beauty is not something that we just interpret to exist, but rather, we come to discern. And a very tangible way of teaching students to see that was by the various measurements of sound, and putting them together. Now, of course, there is much more involved, but the point they were emphasizing is that music was an art which was helping the student to discern truth and beauty.

Now, we consider *geometry*. Even today, many people study Euclid's work, *The Elements*, and this is a geometry text. Geometry, of course, considers the relationship between theoretical points and lines, and other dimensional ideas, as area and volume. However, the ancients used geometry to train the mind, not simply how to measure things. In other words, the one who is studying arithmetic, music, geometry—they weren't studying these things in preparation for a vocation in science. Though certainly, some who went through these kinds of studies became well known as, what we refer today as scientists or mathematicians. But these basic subjects, these arts were being taught in order to form something in the soul of the student beyond a vocation. For instance, Plato emphasized that geometry developed one's mind to think clearly. The relationship between points, lines, angles, lengths, and areas all help the student how to prove things. They could look, as it were, at something and see that there was objective truth. It trained the mind to think about objective truth and claims about it. Something on the geometry before them could be proven to be true, or proven to be false. So it was developing the idea to think abstractly and argue to conclusions from limited facts. If you have this knowledge of a geometric shape, its angle, and so on, you can prove, from that limited amount, certain other things about that shape. In other words, it taught the student how to think.

As many have emphasized, Classical Education is not primarily focused on teaching students what to think, but how to think. Now, it's not that we should pit one against the other, for both are involved. But one thing that Classical Education is emphasizing is the training of the student in

how to think well, rightly, truly. One said it this way—geometry, particularly Euclid's *Elements,* provides the paradigm of certain and airtight reasoning.

Well, lastly, we have *astronomy*. In astronomy, the ability to understand size, dimension, shape, and the relationship between these things, was applied to the observable bodies in the sky above us—the sun, the moon, the planets, the stars. They took the lessons of geometry and applied them to the real world. Students learned to see the amazing precision of placement between the heavenly bodies, their patterns of travel and movement. They learned, as it were, to mark out the calendar by certain bodies above them in the sky, and some relationships between them. It's not merely for practical purpose, however, as in navigation, or schedules as a calendar. It was for discerning the wonders of God's world, and seeing that the abstract notions of arithmetic and geometry applied to the real things of the world around us, and seeing that the abstract notions of arithmetic and geometry applied to the real things of the world around us. They were not merely overwhelmed by the grandeur of a clear starry night. They saw the wonder of an ordered sky, and the beauty of God's wisdom and power displayed in it. It taught the student to look to the Maker of these things and wonder at his handiwork.

So we've seen something of *The Identity of the Liberal Arts*. Secondly, we move to consider *The Purpose of the Liberal Arts.* And we've discussed this in previous lessons, so we don't need to be as involved in this point. But it is worth emphasizing. The Liberal Arts form and develop the student's understanding, discernment, and engagement with the world. They are used to mature the student's abilities to discern and employ truth. They provide the student with necessary skills to learn more. The Liberal Arts lay the foundation for all future learning. They give skills for all future learning that the student will have, and vocational training, perhaps. But even as an adult, perhaps in retirement, they are able to take up thought and engage in the world because of having mastered these fundamental arts. In other words, the Liberal Arts were not ends in themselves, nor were they means to a career. They taught students how to think well, and, as we'll see, this is an emphasis that remains in the best of Classical Education today.

Now, it's true, of course, that the Liberal Arts assisted one in finding a vocation, and in making use of that vocation well, but they were not meant for job training or career readiness. This is because the Liberal Arts work in the mind and soul of the student to cultivate understand of truth and wisdom. In other words, you think of the *servile arts*, as opposed to the liberal arts. And, to be very general, the servile arts are teaching a human how to do certain things as far as a vocation is considered. So you get a very honorable form of work—farming—and there's certain things you have to know, and learn, and do, and be able to do so skillfully. You could have a foolish farmer, versus a wise farmer. You could have an unjust farmer versus a just farmer. The idea of Classical Education is, regardless of the vocation one may pursue, these arts are needed in order to cultivate one who is wise, and prudent, and so on. Mastering language allows one to think clearly, to reason soundly, to speak persuasively. These arts are not career specific; they are essential for developing human maturity. To the extent that one does not understand language—how to think rightly, how to argue soundly, how to communicate well—they are hindered from living mature lives in this world. Now, we do not mean they are any less human. Rather, they are not developing their essential humanity in the way of maturity. One can be mature as a man or a woman, or immature as a man or woman. And these arts, by the blessing of God's grace, aid in cultivating maturity.

Most contemporary men and women think that education is primarily about preparing for a job. Or, in some countries, as in the United States, these basic grades of education are often looked at as foundational for future forms of education. So, you have elementary school, and high

school, or primary schooling, which leads toward college or university schooling. Well, certainly, Classical Education prepares for future learning and academic studies, or for jobs, however, it does not prepare them for a specific job, nor are these arts actually aimed at any specific job. Classical Education prepares our students for life as mature humans. It is the fundamental training required for living well in this life, whatever one's calling is. Christians acknowledged this as adapted—as we'll see in future lessons—this truth. However, both non-Christian and Christian educators within the classical tradition, share this fundamental point. Education in the Liberal Arts is aimed at developing maturity in the student. We've discussed this point before, and we leave the rest of the development to what's been said, and will be said in future lessons.

However, before we move to our third point, let me simply emphasize this. Because if we miss this point, we actually miss something fundamental to the Liberal Arts tradition. The Liberal Arts aimed at developing students into adults who are mature—those who would be wise, just, courageous, and self-controlled. Anything else that comes from Classical or Liberal Arts education is something that certainly is related to the work of training our students, but it's not the main focus. So, for instance, to put it in our own place, if a parent comes to our school, and we're consciously thinking through in terms of Classical Education, they're asking, "But how are they going to be prepared for this job, or that job?" There is a disconnect here. Fundamentally, Classical Education is not focused on preparing for this field of work or that field of work. It's about preparing the human to be a mature man or woman in whatever field the Lord may call them to.

Well, third, *The Use of Liberal Arts.* Historically, both in pagan and Christian settings, the Liberal Arts were taught as skills—skills to be mastered. But over the past fifty or so years, some have misrepresented these arts as "stages of learning." Now this is particularly so with the trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric. This understanding of stages emerged from an essay published in the 1900s by Dorothy Sayers.[13] Reacting to modern carelessness in education, some Christians took up the essay by Sayers, and used her terms referring to stages, and used them in such a way as to redefine what Classical Education is. So, today, many Classical Christian schools emphasize these stages as what is unique to Classical Education. Because of this, we need to clarify an important difference between the stages view and the actual historic tradition of Liberal Arts education.

he modern view of Classical Education as stages of learning means something along the following lines. There is a grammar stage, a logic stage, and a rhetoric stage. In general, the grammar stage is usually referred to the early years of learning. It's during this stage that students focus on memorizing facts, reciting poems, stories, and history timelines. They called the next stage the logic stage. This stage runs something around ten years old to fourteen years old. But in this stage, children develop and begin making connections, therefore teaching begins to help them see connections between ideas; or they sometimes will say the logic of how things relate to one another. So, the logic stage prepares for the final stage, roughly fourteen years old to eighteen years old, and this is referred to as the rhetoric stage. In this stage, students are more concerned with their own presentation. They learn how to present themselves well, and their arguments well, and things well—their drawings, and everything about them is focused on appearing well in front of others. This can be with math, or science, literature, or any other subject. But in the end, these schools refer to grammar, logic, and rhetoric as stages of learning, and these stages are roughly in line with the child's natural stages of development.

Just as an aside, I have seen a different use of the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, as

13 Dorothy Sayers (1893–1957), was an English crime novelist, playwright, translator, and critic.

referring to the grammar, logic, rhetoric that every subject has. In this sense, grammar refers to the basic facts of a subject; logic to the rules that govern that subject; and rhetoric to the connections and beauty of that subject. But if we return to our main point here, each of these models certainly represent something true. All of us recognize that students develop over time. When they're young, they memorize quickly; they enjoy reciting, and singing, and learning facts. As they grow, they start to make connections and see how one thing, even in a different subject, relates to another thing. They start to try to understand how these relations occur and what they mean. And finally, as they mature, they become interested in how they themselves appear and how their work appears to others. And it's also true that there are basic facts for every subject. Math has certain facts that one can memorize. Arithmetic is foundational for more advanced math. Algebra shows certain ways in how these numbers relate to one another. All of these things are true.

However, when we think about the use of the Liberal Arts in history and in this Classical tradition, the ancients never use these terms in these ways. In other words, you don't find an ancient speaking of the grammar stage, or the logic stage, or the grammar of a subject, or the logic of a subject. When the ancients, both pagan and Christian, wrote about grammar, they referred to the discipline, or what we might call the subject of grammar, that is, learning about words, their letters, syllables, sounds, meaning, the relationship of other parts of the sentence, and parts of speech. When they wrote about rhetoric they were clearly focused on the art of persuasion.

If we are embracing Classical Education in a way that is historically informed and traditionally faithful, we will emphasize grammar, logic, and rhetoric as actual subjects, not stages, not parts of a subject. Now, this is not to discredit the fact that humans develop, and there are something akin to observable stages of development. But these are not to be associated with a grammar stage, a logic stage, and a rhetoric stage. When we do that we actually confuse things and introduce misunderstandings. When we use the term "grammar," if again, faithful to our tradition, we're referring to the subject, the discipline, the skill of grammar—understanding words, learning sounds, how to spell, parts of speech—and this is certainly emphasized early on, but as they develop, as they mature, as they age, grammar will always refer to grammar as a discipline; and logic, it is that focus upon right reasoning; rhetoric, the art of reasoning—not stages, but disciplines, arts.

Well, what are we to do with these things? Well, first, we should, as we're trying to emphasize, reclaim the meaning of Classical Education and the Liberal Arts. If you're an English speaker, or are able to understand English, and you were to search Classical Education, you'll find how profuse this idea of a grammar stage, logic stage, rhetoric stage is. And yet, we ought to push back against that. And the reason is, we want to glean what the ancients taught, because they provide tremendous insight into language, and math, and science. And to confuse the matter, in the end, is simply that—confusing. We long for clarity. And so, if it is that we prize Classical Education, we should prize what they prize—careful use of language. To misuse the term "trivium"—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—represents a misunderstanding. So we should honor these arts as specific arts.

Someone says, "Well, what's the big deal about this?" Well, in today's world, it's interesting and, at times, overwhelming, how little education there is in grammar, just as one example. When you look at today's world of education, and the careless approach to understanding words and their relationship and parts of speech, it's contrasted with the care, precision, and attention given by our forefathers. Someone says, "Well, haven't times just passed on, and we're in a different place?" Well, certainly time has passed on, and we are in a different place, but if you look at the fruit of our forefathers, the kinds of men and women that education produced, versus the fruits of our current day, the results are obvious. Certainly there were godless men, wicked men in ancient days, and

there are godly men in our day, but when we think of well-rounded, beautifully-spoken, well-read men and women, our forefathers far outdo our own day. One reason for that is their attention upon and mastery of these Liberal Arts.

Well, a second thing is that we need to pursue growth as teachers, administrators, and communities ourselves. It's most likely the case that we don't have a well-established Liberal Arts education. That's changing, and we thank the Lord for that. But most of us did not receive this kind of Classical Education, and we are longing for our children to enjoy something that we did not. But if we're going to provide that education, whether in the home as homeschoolers, or in the class as teachers, we ourselves need to read, to write, to learn poetry, to memorize Scripture, to read the epics, to listen to and develop excellent speeches. And as soon as we hear that, we feel the weight of demand that's upon us. That means we must then give attention to these things that we weren't taught when we were younger. And that's true. We can feel as if that's overwhelming, and it is if we look at the whole lot of it. We'll actually have a lesson where we talk about how we, as adults, can cultivate a Classical Education in our own time. But for this lesson, for this point, it's simply noting that we have work to do. In other words, we don't say to our children simply, or to our students, simply, "You need to do this." If we're the teacher, as a parent, or as a teacher in a classroom, we need to be doing this, as those who are leading them as well, to love the arts as arts. We may not have had an excellent Liberal Arts education. We may be shaky in our understanding of arithmetic or geometry. The good news is, there are means that will help us to grow in that understanding, which will then help us to lead our students and children in their understanding.

Well, finally, as with all of these things, we must pray that the Lord would help us, personally, because these arts are meant to mature us; and that he would bless us as we serve our children and students, that he would bless these labors. Because it's not simply that we want these boys and girls to become men and women who can speak well and think well, but that by his blessing, these efforts will be used to create within them a love for truth, and beauty, and goodness. The best teacher in this world cannot do that, but God can use even a weak teacher who faithfully pursues these things to create that love in these students. Let that be our prayer.