

# BOOK REVIEW: *THE LIBERAL ARTS TRADITION: A PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTIAN CLASSICAL EDUCATION*

*Reviewed by: Alex Markos, Geneva School of Boerne*

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With classical Christian schools on the rise across the country, many educators inside and outside of the movement are asking the same question: what exactly *is* classical Christian education? Many scholars and educators alike have offered glimpses of the movement's history, philosophy, and curriculum, but there seem to be few authors who can give us the total picture. Dorothy Sayers's essay "The Lost Tools of Learning" gave us an introduction to the Trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) as the foundation of classical education. Her essay inspired modern educators like Douglas Wilson (*Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning*) and Evans and Littlejohn (*Wisdom and Eloquence*) to explore the specifics of a Christian education in the classical tradition of the liberal arts. Yet even these insightful books lacked a full-bodied treatment of the movement's rich history and failed to address the integration of subjects like music, P.E., math, and science. This is why Clark and Jain's revised and expanded edition of *The Liberal Arts Tradition* is such a welcome addition to the scholarship on this topic.

For many years, Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain taught together at the Geneva School in Winter Park, Florida, and draw on fifteen years of teaching experience, discussions with key leaders in the movement, and a lifetime of reading old and new books. They write

KEVIN CLARK AND RAVI  
SCOTT JAIN,  
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TRADITION: A  
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specifically for those already invested in the movement—teachers, administrators, and parents—who are hungry for more information and deeper insight on this kind of education. Clark and Jain's purpose for this book is to faithfully lay out the history, philosophy, and development of classical Christian education and to provide educators involved and interested in this educational paradigm with "resources that will inform and inspire their teaching" (xii). In this, they happily and largely succeed.

*Alex Markos, who holds a degree in ancient history and classics from Hope College (Holland, MI), teaches Latin at the Geneva School of Boerne, Texas. He is currently pursuing a master of apologetics at Houston Baptist University.*

## THE PGMAPT PARADIGM

What sets this book apart is that it gives a clear and total picture of the components of classical Christian education, drawing on a vast knowledge of primary and secondary sources, supplemented with copious footnotes and references. Indeed, the most helpful aspects of their book are its extensive bibliography, its glossary of key terms, and its detailed chart outlining all seven liberal arts. These provide quick reference guides for busy and curious teachers and administrators. The first edition of Clark and Jain's book came out in 2013 and was successful enough to deserve a revised and expanded edition that will please those who found their first edition too short. They offer again their six curricular categories of piety, gymnastic, music, arts (liberal arts), philosophy, and theology, reflected by the acronym PGMAPT. Included in this edition are greatly expanded sections on natural and moral philosophy, new essays on reading, classical languages, and natural philosophy, examples of student work, and longer quoted passages in the text and footnotes.

A strength of their work in this book is that they note where scholarship on the movement's history has already begun—in books like Evans and Littlejohn's *Wisdom and Eloquence* and Sayers's essay "The Lost Tools of Learning"—while also challenging and correcting common misconceptions. They engage with both ancient and contemporary voices with a view to the movement's future, indicating areas of development and growth.

Clark and Jain do not offer a simple summary of the liberal arts tradition, nor do they call for a return to the Middle Ages ("turn back the clock"), as many of the movement's chief critics claim, but outline how schools today can embody the principles and carry out the mission of classical Christian education. For example, in their discussion of music (the M in their PGMAPT model), they show that the songs, chants, games, etc.

used in the early years of grammar school are not meant to teach students the "grammar of" multiple subjects, nor do they represent the "elements" of the liberal arts. Instead, their teachers are actually "engaged in the truly classical enterprise of music education" (34). The purpose of grammar school is not to teach grammar but to cultivate students' affections and sense of wonder through stories, songs, and poetry.

## WONDER AND WISDOM

Their treatment of the seven liberal arts also warrants close attention, particularly the quadrivium, which has always been a sticking point for classical educators. According to Clark and Jain, the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) "ought to strike a balance between wonder, work, wisdom, and worship" (69). In this section, they are not shy about recommending "countercultural" changes to the typical vision of math and science. Most notable is their call to resist our culture's utilitarian view and recover the perspective of the ancient mathematicians, who "treated numbers not just as a practical tool, but as a locus of wonder and mystery" (71). They also make an appeal to return to the foundational elements of mathematics and to "recover the lost distinction between continuous magnitude and discrete number" (79). They recommend that in light of this distinction, geometry should precede algebra, not the other way around as in most public schools.

In the expanded section on moral philosophy, they give a wide overview of the history of the social sciences, particularly economics, politics, and government, that should prove beneficial to the teachers of these subjects. They also do a good job of situating these subjects in their historical context and of demonstrating the role of the church in their origin, development, and recovery. They admit that their purpose for the lengthy section on moral philosophy is to explore "how Christianity

has influenced the origins and development on the social sciences” (192). While the discussion does chase some rabbit trails, such as the relationship of church and state, it should help readers understand the role and responsibility of classical Christian educators to make use of the opportunities afforded them in a private school setting.

Clark and Jain also frequently remind readers of the failures of public schools to cover these subjects properly—which, according to them, cannot be taught effectively outside of a Christian classroom where Scripture holds the central place of truth. Pointing back to Lewis’s insightful book *The Abolition of Man*, they expose the inherent weaknesses in a natural or social science curriculum that is divorced from any grounding in man’s true, fallen nature. Such studies are not simply doomed to failure; they are destructive of civilization. This is why grounding all subjects in theology is vital to the total success of classical Christian education.

## TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

Although this new and expanded edition warrants praise, the sheer quantity of added material unfortunately creates some difficulties for the reader. The long quotes (sometimes taking up more than a page) from major scholars of the ancient (Plato and Aristotle), medieval (Augustine and Aquinas), and modern world (Christopher Dawson and Charles Taylor), slows down the pace and can be a bit overwhelming for readers unfamiliar with the works and authors. At times, the quotes threaten to drown out Clark and Jain’s voices altogether. However, it is evident that they are knowledgeable and passionate about their subject and have taken great pains to collect and present their research in a manner that will be accessible to a wide audience.

While all parts of the book are thoroughly researched and footnoted, the parts of the book feel unbalanced,

with natural and moral philosophy receiving a total of almost 90 pages, while all seven liberal arts combined, only 60, and the early stages of education, barely 25. This stark disparity in length is not as detrimental as might be supposed. Clark and Jain frequently mention how the later years of philosophy and the liberal arts build on and reinforce what was learned in the early years of piety and gymnastic. Still, their huge focus on philosophy makes this book more useful to upper-school teachers who want to gain a broader perspective on their subjects and to see how their work is designed to build on what was accomplished in the lower school.

Finally, the section on theology rounds out their full view of classical Christian education, maintaining that theology unifies the whole curriculum. Theology, however, is not merely a subject to be studied; it is something that undergirds everything that the school does, from the liberal arts to gymnastics to school culture to the fellowship among the faculty. Their challenging call to Christian teachers to pass on the entire culture of the Church (*paideia* of the Lord) is both daunting and inspiring. For them, the essentials are “wisdom and virtue pursued within the context of piety born of the grace of Christ through union with him” (230). It is a welcome reminder that as Christian educators, we are not called to “just educate smart pagans,” but to make disciples of Jesus Christ.