

Martin Cothran and the Language of Learning: The Classical Method

Diane Wheeler

Have you ever met a conference speaker or curriculum provider that you listen to on a regular basis? It is like meeting a long-lost friend. These people faithfully assist us in our daily responsibilities, and I, for one, appreciate it greatly. A recent addition to our day is *Traditional Logic* from Memoria Press, and, thanks to the DVDs of that excellent program, author Martin Cothran is a regular guest on my television. I met Martin at a conference this summer and was delighted with the historical perspective he has on classical education. We agreed that a more lengthy discussion would be a great asset to The Old Schoolhouse® community, and we are delighted to welcome him to our classical education issue.

TOS: Welcome, Martin Cothran, to The Old Schoolhouse® Magazine this issue! We are happy you could join us for our annual Classical Education issue. Please share with us: what exactly is this? Can you discuss progressive, pragmatic, and classical education and why classical education is a valuable option?

Martin Cothran: Each of these sees the purpose of education differently. Progressivism is the idea that education is a means to accomplish the end of changing a culture. John Dewey, in the late nineteenth century, was an example of this. He wanted to use schools to move our culture toward what we would now call a liberal end. A lot of the multiculturalism and political correctness we see in schools today is a reflection of his progressivist bent.

The second way of looking at education is expressed in pragmatism. Pragmatism does not want to change culture by using students, like progressivism; rather, it wants to change students to fit the current culture. This became popular in America in the 1940s in what was called the "Life Adjustment Movement." This was when things like home economics and, later, sex education and drivers' education, came into the curriculum. Schools started seeing themselves as replacements for the family instead of as academic institutions. The current stress on vocationalism in schools is an example of pragmatism.

Classical education differs from both of these in that it sees as its purpose the passing on of a particular culture, namely Western culture. According to the classical Western view, education is the cultivation of wisdom, virtue, and taste through meditation on the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. It is composed of a set of intellectual skills, called the "liberal arts," and a body of cultural knowledge, called "Western civilization."

TOS: "Education is the cultivation of wisdom, virtue, and taste through meditation on the good, the true, and the beautiful." Is this your quote? I really like it and would love some discussion on how we can cultivate these qualities in our homes and families.

Martin Cothran: That formulation originally comes from my good friend Andrew Kern of the Circe Institute in Charlotte, North Carolina. We are coming out with a book next year called *What Is Classical Education?* The part about the Good, the True, and the Beautiful originated

with the ancient philosophers and was taken up by the great theologians of the early church and the Middle Ages.

The classical tradition has handed down to us the answers various thinkers have given to the question "What is the Good, the True, and the Beautiful?" It gives us the right answers that have been given so that we can know what wisdom, virtue, and taste are; and it gives us the wrong answers that have been given so we can learn what these things are not. The set of answers to this question is what we call "Western civilization."

TOS: When you talk about Western civilization in presentations that you give, you mention something called the "Three Cultures." What are the Three Cultures?

Martin Cothran: I point out that Western civilization, as that term has traditionally been used, is the study of three cultures: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem. These are the cultures that have attempted to give answers to the question "What is the Good, the True, and the Beautiful?"

By "Athens," I mean the study of Greek culture. The Greeks are speculative man in miniature. Practically every great idea-good and bad-can be traced to some ancient Greek thinker. The Greeks asked the great questions. They didn't always get the right answer-and they did not have access to the Revelation of God-but they asked a lot of the right questions.

By "Rome," I mean the culture of ancient Rome. The Romans were political man in miniature. They were the great administrators and road-builders of ancient times. They were concerned with the practical. The American Founders, in fact, who had a justifiably low regard for the government of the Greeks, looked to the old Roman republic as an organizational model.

And by "Jerusalem," I mean the history and culture of the Hebrews. The Hebrews were spiritual man in miniature. By studying the record of their culture, we learn how God deals with individuals and nations.

If you look at history, you discover that classical culture-the culture of the Greeks and Romans-was dumped into the laps of the early Christians (many of whom were Jews) when the empire of Rome was falling apart. So it was sort of like having an old member of the family die and having to go through their attic trying to decide what to keep and what to get rid of. The church found some things in the attic of the dead classical culture that it threw away. But it found a lot of things that it found useful and kept. The part that it kept and passed on to us-and what it added to it and refined-we call Western civilization.

TOS: You also mentioned the "liberal arts." That's a term a lot of people have heard but can't define. What are the liberal arts, and what role do they play in classical education?

Martin Cothran: Traditionally, there were considered to be seven Liberal Arts: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The first three of these-grammar, logic, and Rhetoric-were called the "trivium" (which means "the three ways" in Latin). The last four-arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music-were called the "quadrivium" (which means "the four ways").

The trivium skills were language skills, and the quadrivium skills were math skills. The liberal arts were the generalized academic skills-linguistic and mathematical-that every learned person was expected to know.

TOS: In most discussions about classical education today, classical education seems to be equated with the trivium. Are you saying that classical education is broader than that? And how does the trivium differ from the quadrivium?

Martin Cothran: Yes. In fact there are a couple of things that most modern discussions of classical education usually ignore. The first is that the liberal art-the skills part of classical education-encompasses mathematics. Some people seem to have the idea that classical education is just the classics. They forget that traditionally it encompassed math skills as well.

The second thing is that in the old classical curriculum, logic was not a part of math. It was not in the quadrivium; it was in the trivium. The modern, symbolic system of logic, which is highly mathematical, was unknown in ancient and medieval times. They taught the system of traditional logic, which is far different from the modern system, and was a language art, not a part of math.

TOS: Piggybacking on the pragmatic aspect you mentioned, could you discuss how receiving a classical education is, indeed, helpful and useful for a student's future?

Martin Cothran: I would say that classical education is the best preparation to do anything. Vocational training-which is different from education-trains a person to do certain things well. If you are going into carpentry, then working with a hammer and a saw are going to help you to do that. If you're going to be an accountant, you're going to have to master debits and credits.

What classical education does is something very different from vocational training. Whereas vocational training teaches you to do one thing well (and woe be unto you if it's not the thing that you end up doing with your life), classical education trains you to do anything well. Mortimer Adler, the late executive editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, once said something to the effect that, although everyone is not a scientist and everyone is not an accountant, everyone is a citizen and everyone is a philosopher. We might add that we are all children of God as well. We all operate in a social and political culture, and we all must ask the great questions about life and reality-and about our relationship to God. That's what classical education is about.

Classical education doesn't try to guess what specific set of skills you are going to need for a specialty that you might want to engage in later in life; the guess is likely to be wrong anyway. Who could have predicted the computer revolution, for example? Instead it teaches you a set of academic skills, called the liberal arts, and a body of cultural knowledge, called Western civilization, that prepare you for anything you might do in life.

TOS: What role does Latin play in classical education? Why is it considered so important in classical education?

Martin Cothran: Up until the first two decades of the twentieth century, if you went to a good school, you had to learn Latin and Greek at a fairly early age. The reason for this was that there

was a great stress on grammar-the first trivium skill. That's why schools for the elementary grades were called "grammar schools."

The reason for learning Latin and Greek was that it was considered the best way to learn grammar. Learning grammar in your own language is very hard. But when you go to study another language, grammar all of a sudden becomes very important. This is particularly true with Latin because, unlike modern languages like Spanish and French, it is a highly grammatical language. It is also very regular: the rules almost always apply, so you can see the grammatical structure of language-any language-in clear relief.

When most people think of the benefits of Latin, they think of the vocabulary benefits. That's true also. Latin is the root of about sixty percent of academic English, and it's still the language of the sciences. It's still the language of learning.

TOS: What do you say to homeschooling parents who don't have any background in subjects like Latin and logic?

Martin Cothran: That's an important question. And of course the problem is that Christian educators-whether they are teaching their kids at home or are involved in a private school-are engaged in cultural renewal. We are trying to build on the ruins of a great civilization. Many homeschool families are trying to give their own children a better education than the one they got, and many times that requires the parent to learn something they didn't know before.

In fact, when I get into discussions with people in the public education establishment who question the qualifications of homeschool parents, I often point out that what they consider a problem is actually a great opportunity, since many times parents are learning along with their kids.

At the same time, there are many programs on the market now that make the teaching of Latin and logic very easy. In fact some of them are almost self-instructive. Several publishers of classical material, for example, have produced instructional videos or DVDs for some of their programs. At Memoria Press, we are currently in the process of producing DVDs for all of our programs. This will make the parent's job a lot easier.

TOS: Thank you, Martin, for your time.

Martin has much more to offer in the way of specific help in teaching logic and rhetoric, and we will look forward to hearing from him in the future.

Biographical Information

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Diane Wheeler is the senior staff writer for The Old Schoolhouse. She and her husband John live in Placerville, California.

***Martin Cothran** is a writer and teacher, living with his wife and four children in Danville, Kentucky. Author of Memoria Press' [Traditional Logic](#), [Material Logic](#) and [Classical Rhetoric](#) programs, he is an instructor of Latin, Logic, Rhetoric, and Classical Studies at Highlands Latin School.*