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Review of Davis and Ryken's "Liberal Arts for the Christian Life"

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Liberal Arts for the Christian Life

Edited by **Jeffrey C. Davis & Philip G. Ryken**

Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012, 301 pp. \$17.99 (paperback)

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Over the past decades, evangelical scholars have produced a number of works reflecting and arguing for the unique value of a liberal arts education. These volumes particularly focus on how this pedagogical approach aligns with faith in Jesus. Due to the current North American educational climate, which is heavily focused on the monetary value of education and concerns over career prospects postgraduation, many of these volumes become apologetics for the liberal arts. Some take the philosophical approach and others the purely pedagogical.

Ryken and Davis' collection of essays is different from the usual liberal arts conversations. Unlike many previous works that focus on the philosophy or pedagogy of the liberal arts, the authors represent a myriad of disciplines, creating an intriguing addition to the conversation. This book has a central focus examining the implications of the liberal arts for the follower of Jesus and vice versa.

While not a classical *festschrift*, the volume is a collection honoring Leland Ryken on his 70th birthday. Ryken, a gifted scholar and educator, has influenced generations of Wheaton College students. The book brings together works by his colleagues and friends, all revolving around one of his central passions, the Christian liberal arts. Understandably, one of the striking details of this book is that most of the essay authors are Wheaton faculty and colleagues. However, they represent an eclectic and surprisingly varied disciplinary group. The editors indicate that the celebratory purpose influences the book's audience by stating, "Rather than writing for other academics, the authors have chosen to honor Professor Ryken by producing a book especially for students" (p. 13).

The volume is accessible to students but retains its stamp of scholarly reflection. Anticipating a reader's hesitation to engage in this conversation, Leland Ryken himself lays out a challenge: "You may be tempted to turn your back on the very subjects that interest you the most, which may be the areas where your greatest potential contributions to church and to society lie" (p. 15). He acknowledges the tension students feel: "Your instincts as learners pull you in one direction, while voices of activism and preoccupation with landing a job pull you in other directions" (p. 15). This collection of essays names and tries to clarify the tension while seeking to lessen the dissonance students are experiencing.

The volume is divided into five parts, touching on terminology and history, theological implications, implications for character, disciplinary responses, and the future of liberal arts (These are my interpretations of the sections, not what they were labeled.). Although this is not a book to read in one sitting, there is plenty of congruence throughout it, with ideas presented in a unique and creative manner. The chapters are well written and engaging.

As suggested earlier, one of the unique features of the book is how different disciplines approach the central topic. While much of the work on the liberal arts and Christianity has been written by philosophers, theologians, and educators, this volume does broaden the conversation. It draws scholars in from the natural and social sciences, the fine and performing arts, as well as the humanities. Dorothy Chappell, approaching the liberal arts from the natural sciences, provides some very insightful and thoughtful emphasis. She notes the glory and wonder that faithful scientists find in studying the natural world. Then she moves on to how the gathering of knowledge as a scientist should affect “habits and formation” (p. 182) of personal virtues. Virtues should then lead to what she calls “acts of reconciliation” (p. 182). This reconciliation informs interaction with peers, technology, and creation. It is intimately related to justice, which she notes is an “immense concern” (p. 189) for Christ. She observes that God has initiated a “continuing preservation of creation for his intended purposes” (p. 183). This manifests itself in terms of health, seasons, and myriads of other observable phenomena. However, it also includes nonempirical miracles. Chappell notes that natural scientists are driven by curiosity and that “science is constantly in a state of correction” (p. 183). New things are observed, technology enables greater understanding, and knowledge is in a steady state of growth. However, she asserts that scientists who are followers of Jesus are concerned that their work “not be isolated from other dimensions of life” (p. 188). The core of Christian liberal arts for the natural scientist is shaped by a commitment to justice and reconciliation.

In exploring the interconnectedness of disciplines, Henry Allen particularly scrutinizes the connections within the varied social sciences. In defining the social sciences, he observes that in contrast to the humanities, which “evaluate and interpret the cultural heritage of civilizations” (p. 194), the social sciences, using scientific methodology, “explore present or future phenomena” (p. 194) or the “social relationships” (p. 196) of human beings. In writing about social sciences, Allen notes that when they are linked with theology and other disciplines, “they can be instrumental to the best wisdom humans can access” (p. 196). Further, Allen asserts that the social sciences provide “multidimensional parameters needed to love human beings in such a way as to encompass the full spectrum of their interpersonal and institutional diversity” (p. 198). In other words, the social sciences provide the insight and means to extend grace to the full diversity of the human race.

With a provocative title, Jill Pelaez Baumgaertner asks whether or not pursuing the liberal arts with a humanities focus is an “indulgence” (p. 199). The title, “The Humanities as Indulgence or Necessity?” suggests that it might be a luxury in a time where the United States needs to focus on hard skill development and professional programs. Baumgaertner observes that the humanities provide a place to ask the hard questions of life. Further, they actually stimulate the questions in a different way than other disciplines. The humanities can encourage a “curiosity and a propensity to ask questions and pursue answers” (p. 203). Unfortunately, many students are moving away from subjects that allow these questions. The disciplines found in the humanities help a student to learn how “to ask the right questions” (p. 203). A significant part of the college or university that

a student chooses will affect whether they are permitted or given space to ask the big questions of vocation, beliefs, and relationships.

In summary, this collection of essays is solid and varied; it is a primer for those wondering what the liberal arts add to the faith of a follower of Jesus. It also provides a glimpse into how faith informs a liberal arts education. The thought that has stayed with me is a simple observation made by Jeffrey Davis: Most individuals work and sleep for a certain number of hours per week. After these hours are taken from the total, they will still have 70 hours in any given week. The implication is that a Christian liberal arts education enables individuals to live wisely and well. The liberal arts prepare them beyond their work toward living their lives and affecting the world around them.