Liberal Arts for the Christian Life
Jeffry C. Davis & Philip G. Ryken, editors
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Reviewed by: Gene C. Fant, Jr.

The current scrutiny afforded the liberal arts by pundits is white-hot precisely because this approach to learning has been declared stone-cold dead. The sentiment is not new, however, as even a century ago, Booker T. Washington lampooned such pretentious, hoity-toity students who were above hard work. Washington’s image has been repeated widely in our age: the liberal arts are dead or are, at a minimum, a dead end that is disconnected from the economic realities of our age.

Jeffry C. Davis and Philip G. Ryken assert a welcome antidote to this image. Connecting the liberal arts with both the Christian faith and with life writ-large is intriguing enough, but the occasion of the volume is even more riveting: it honors the illustrious career of Wheaton College’s Professor of English Leland Ryken. For those of us who know Leland, his heritage as a farmer’s son and his research into Puritan concepts of work yield a compelling vision of liberal education.

Liberal Arts collects the thoughts of some of Wheaton’s brightest minds, and the contributor’s list reads like a Who’s Who list: Alan Jacobs, Roger Lundin, Jill Pela’ez Baumgaertner, James Wilhoit, Read Schuchardt, and Duane Litfin, among others. The lead essay, however, is from Master Leland himself, “The Student’s Calling,” which demands that educators and students alike recover the classic notion of vocation. Rooted in the theological truth that humankind is responsible directly to God, vocation demands diligence and a thorough understanding of divine authority: “God calls Christians to make his will prevail in every [emphasis added] area of life” (17). This means that education is preparation for a divine appointment; there is no such thing as disposable learning.

From this opening charge emerges not a defense of the liberal arts, but rather a vigorous application of them through various
The first section outlines the foundational understandings that follow, identifying the latent tensions between Christian and pagan ways of knowing that have dogged the church since its earliest days. By highlighting the roles of the citizen and the skeptic, the essays (by Davis, Richmond, and Blumhofer) arc toward the theological elements that were crucial to the expansion of the United States in its earliest days. The story of American education is the story of Christian liberal arts education, at least in a cultural sense.

The second section details theological convictions that must be part of a truly Christian approach to learning, for a complete integration of faith and learning must move beyond mere pietism to an intellectually fulsome framework for thinking about the important questions of life. These essays are essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand more than a few bon mots about the enterprise of Christian thinking. These solid introductions explore the doctrine of humanity (Lundin), thoroughly Christocentric thought (Greenman), redemptive vision (Martindale), and fulsome love (Litfin).

The third section outlines practical applications of these theological foundations. By examining the most basic of intellectual activities, the reader is prepared for the disciplinary activities addressed in the next section. The skills of habit (Mead), reading (Jacobs), writing (Coolidge), listening (Chase), character cultivation (Wood), and work (Ivester) all combine to prepare learners for the truly hard labor of disciplinary preparation, not merely for professional careers but for life in general.

The fourth section delves into disciplinary understandings of how these skills may yield fruit that will provide succor for a life of godly service. While the editors provide a caveat that disciplinary distinctions are something of a violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of liberal learning, they provide such viewpoints that help to illustrate the various ways in which application works. In turn, the selections explore the natural sciences (Chappell), social sciences (Allen), humanities (Baumgaertner), music (Wilder), the visual arts (Walford), and theater (Lewis).

The final section examines the goals of applied liberal learning, asking the basic question championed by Francis Shaeffer:
“How then shall we live?” The essays touch on topics familiar to most students: social media (Schuchardt), the body (Walkters), personal formation (Wilhoit), lifelong learning (Augustine), global engagement (Townsend), and the consummation of all things in eternity (Philip Ryken, appropriately providing a bookend to his father’s opening essay).

For an era where attention spans continue to shrink, *Liberal Arts*’ selections are brief and pithy, avoiding the temptation to become either precious or obscure, but providing helpful introductions to the topics. On the other hand, the selections tend to whet one’s appetite more than slake it, but perhaps this is strategic in that they spur further thought and interest in more in-depth considerations.

*Gene C. Fant, Jr.*

*Professor of English*

*Executive Vice President for Academic Administration*

*Union University*