

Name

Class

Date

Pagan Education and the Ascent of the Soul:

A Brief Defense of Christian Classical Learning

The question of how Christians should appropriate pagan writing and learning has persisted across millennia. Tertullian's famous question "What indeed hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?" has, in different forms, continued to challenge the Christian attempt at retrieval of classical learning and ancient wisdom. The question at its heart is earnest and well-spoken. If, as Augustine says in *On Christian Doctrine*, "whatever man may have learnt from [pagan] sources, if it is hurtful, it is there [in Scripture] condemned; if it is useful, it is therein contained [in Scripture]," one wonders whether Christians should make use of pagan writings and learnings, if Scriptures contains all things necessary for faith and practice.¹ In this short essay, I will primarily use the writings of Clement of Alexandria to show that pagan writing and learning can be useful to Christians as a preliminary and equipping education, one that will enable the Christian to grow in knowledge of God, faith, and virtue.

Clement of Alexandria was one of the first Christian writers and leaders to formally and unequivocally advocate for the use of pagan philosophy and the liberal arts for the formation and education of the Christian. In his *Stromateis*, he asserts that philosophy is a kind of "preparatory science" for Christianity: "For philosophy was to the Greek world what the Law was to the

Commented [MOU1]: Make sure to include a title for your essays. Your professor may also require a title page.

Commented [MOU2]: The introduction should in some way lay the groundwork for the paper's topic and introduce the important questions or problems that will be addressed.

Commented [MOU3]: Notice the footnotes below. All footnotes should be indented, and there should be a space between each footnote.

Commented [MOU4]: It is not always required to explicitly state in your thesis statement "I will argue x" but you need to make it clear to your audience exactly what your thesis statement is. The thesis should be the last sentence of the introduction and it should forecast your main argument.

Commented [MOU5]: Every paragraph should have a clear main point that appears within the first three sentences of the paragraph. The main point should be the single argumentative assertion of the paragraph.

¹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, in *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to Be an Education Human Being*, ed. Richard M. Gamble (Wilmington: ISI, 2012), 227.

Hebrews, a tutor escorting them to Christ.”² Here, Clement asserts that the reason why the Gospel was understood and received in the Greco-Roman world was that Greco-Roman philosophy and education had prepared them to receive the answers to the questions they had been wrestling with. For example, the Scriptural assertions about the nature of Christ as the *logos* (John 1), the *telos* of creation (Col. 1:15-17), and the persisting source of being and the created order (Col. 1:15-17) speaks to the philosophical background of Greco-Roman learning, such that he is the one for whom they have longed to know (Acts 17). The Greco-Roman emphasis on the persistence of vice in the human heart, the need for virtue, and the dismal attempts to find meaning in light of death also created the context by which Christ was understood and embraced.

If Clement is correct that pagan philosophy was preparatory for Christ, one could assert that it is *no longer* necessary, for we do not live in the Greco-Roman world. In response to this, Clement claims that philosophy still functions the same way, for it “opens the road for the person whom Christ brings to his final goal.”³ The reason for this is that none of us are born with a complete “readiness” to understand and embrace Christ. In order to see Christ and understand him for who he is, we must be trained, and our “readiness to see what we ought to see is largely due to this preliminary training” of philosophy.⁴ Referring to the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, he mentions “number [arithmetic and music], size [geometry and astronomy], and definition [grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric]” as the things that “implants in the soul” the ability to

Commented [MOU6]: Quotes or references from primary texts should be used to support your assertions.

Commented [MOU7]: After giving a quote, make sure to explain what it means and why it supports your main point.

Commented [MOU8]: For Scripture references, you don't need a footnote. You can cite them in parenthesis.

Commented [MOU9]: In a persuasive essay, it is important not merely to give proof for your thesis, but to anticipate counter-arguments and address them accordingly.

Commented [MOU10]: Quotation marks should go *outside* the period and footnotes should go *outside* the quotation marks.

Commented [MOU11]: When including your own clarifying additions to a quote, put those words in brackets.

² Clement of Alexandria, *Stromatis*, trans. John Ferguson, in *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to Be an Education Human Being*, ed. Richard M. Gamble (Wilmington: ISI, 2012), 169.

³ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

understand Scripture and to be “purified from its sense perceptions and rekindled with the power of discerning the truth,” for it is by the truth that we discern what is true.⁵

Clement’s argument is, at its core, rooted not in an ungodly love for pagan letters, but rather in the kind of common sense that the book of Proverbs points to in training its readers toward virtue and love of God. We all learn through a process of observation, imitation, and contemplation. None are born with a “divine dispensation” of virtue or knowledge.⁶ Rather, we are told to “go to the ant” to become wise. While some may insist that simple faith or simple knowledge of the Scriptures is enough, Clement pushes back on this idea:

We are to understand that the good of creation is rekindled by the commandment, when the soul learns by instruction to be willing to choose the highest. But just as we say that it is possible to have faith without being literate, so we assert that it is not possible to understand the statements contained in the faith without study. To assimilate the right affirmations and reject the rest is not the product of simple faith, but of faith engaged in learning.⁷

Here, Clement grants that it is possible to have saving faith without education, but that education in the liberal arts and philosophy enables the mind and soul to understand what it is we believe and to choose the true and good and reject the false and evil. We are not born with the natural ability to do this, and without proper learning, we will simply be shaped and formed by our closest personal and cultural influences—influences that are most likely not shaped by understanding and virtue.

We must hold Clement’s assertions in tension with the reality—expressed by Jerome and Augustine—that the study of pagan literature and philosophy can also lead the soul astray into error, vanity, and vice. Thus, faith, worship, Scripture, and love must be the beginning and end

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Commented [MOU13]: Notice the formatting for the citations below. *Ibid.* can be used when you are referencing the same source that was previously referenced. Still make sure to include the page number. The footnote always goes at the end of the sentence, even when citing more than one text as in this case. Use only one footnote and simply separate the citations by a semicolon or period.

Commented [MOU14]: If you introduce a quotation with an independent clause (one that can stand along as a complete sentence), then you should place a colon (not a comma) before the quote.

Commented [MOU15]: For quotes longer than three lines, place them in a single-space block that is fully indented. Because it is in a block, do not put quotation marks.

Commented [MOU16]: As stated previously, make sure to interpret and apply your quotations in the sentences that follow the quotation.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 169; See Plato’s *Republic*, Book VII.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

of a liberal arts education rooted in the tradition of the Greek and Romans. With these as our foundation, even if they are in mustard-seed form, we would do well to be shaped, guided, and equipped by a liberal arts education to better know, love, and worship God with our minds, bodies, and souls.

Commented [MOU17]: The conclusion should in some way bring together your main argument and leave the reader with things to think about. It *should not* be a mere summary of your argument.

Works Cited

Augustine. *On Christian Doctrine*. In *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to Be an Education Human Being*. 224-227. Edited by Richard M. Gamble. Wilmington: ISI, 2012.

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromatis*. Translated by John Ferguson. In *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to Be an Education Human Being*. 169-175. Edited by Richard M. Gamble. Wilmington: ISI, 2012.

Commented [MOU18]: Notice the formatting for the works cited.