

The Pursuit of Divine Wisdom

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The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts Trans. & notes by Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 254 pages.

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The *Didascalicon* is one of the finest works in educational philosophy of the Middle Ages. Educational philosophy based on solid Biblical truth apparently ceased in Christendom after Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*. The philosophies of Dooyeweerd and C. Van Til point to some of the problems in education, but they do not develop a comprehensive view of education adequate to rebuild our schools from top to bottom in full conformity to the truth of Scripture and at the same time sensitive to the many advances in education made by earlier Christians. Christ-honoring education was viewed as imperative and received considerable attention by reformers of the sixteenth century and by those who followed in their train. Theological and ecclesiastical battles, however, so occupied their time that no major work on education true to our faith entered the Protestant Reformation. The humanists, on the other hand, have not neglected education but have produced major works treating the whole order of teaching and learning. John Dewey represents the latest in a long series of major humanist writers advancing their cause through educational thought.

The foundations of Christendom were laid during the Middle Ages. Hugh formulated his Augustinian view of education without either conforming to popular ideas of the day or echoing Augustine at every turn. The book is original and timely, written between 1125 and 1130 AD, and influenced Christians for several centuries. This ground floor of our history is lamentably neglected. Columbia University, reprinted its 1961 translation of the *Didascalicon* by Jerome Taylor in order to make this work more readily available to students. Yet this same university teaches no history courses on the Middle Ages. They teach ancient history up to Constantine and skip over to modern history beginning about 1660. Columbia University is not altogether atypical in this respect. Is it any wonder that our Christian brothers who receive Ph.D.s in history are likely to know too little about the Middle Ages? Thanks to a renewal of interest among some Catholic scholars, this era is not completely neglected. Jerome Taylor of Notre Dame, the editor of this work, is among these able scholars.

The *Didascalicon* is not easy reading—in the first three books in particular—but for those willing to carefully read Taylor's Introduction and many footnotes a rich reward awaits. Without Taylor's scholarly and insightful work, this first complete English translation would not be nearly as meaningful. Taylor provides an extensive and well defined overview of Hugh's thought where it is not fully developed in the *Didascalicon* itself. For example, as one reads the *Didascalicon*, it is clear that Genesis is fundamental to Hugh's world and life view. Taylor further shows from other writings how Hugh argued intently against the theistic evolutionists of his day. Hugh showed that his contemporaries who viewed God as an Artificer who re-arranges the stuff of this world to produce the wonderful world we live in failed to set forth God as the absolute Creator. Such an argument supports Henry Morris's view that there are only two positions available: evolution by chance or creation by Almighty God. Both Hugh and Morris provide no comfort for Christians seeking refuge in a middle position in their attempts to reconcile Scripture with pagan evolution.

Genesis is also fundamental to Hugh's philosophy of education. His viewpoint is reminiscent of Cornelius Van Til's Christian philosophy of knowledge. The writings of C. Van Til will never take root in the church today until we extricate thoroughly the false, pagan and damaging notions of evolution from the thinking of Christian men. Hugh understood the importance of Genesis and argued against those who interpreted creation allegorically. Hugh, in opposition to his contemporaries, framed a literal Biblical view of life based on faith in an absolute Creator. Those who are proficient in Mediæval Latin would do us a great favor by bringing into English Hugh's arguments against the theistic evolutionists of his day.

The Genesis account of the fall of man is likewise important to Hugh's philosophy. Philosophy assists in the restoration of man from the effects of the Fall. The first stage in this recovery is study, with which the *Didascalicon* is concerned. Study inaugurates one into this path and points beyond to meditation, prayer, performance and finally contemplation. Hugh's aim is not to create bookish Christians, but Christians who truly live lives to the honor of God.

The English translation of the *Didascalicon* takes up about one hundred pages. ("*Didascalicon*" can be considered equivalent to our term "didactic".) The remainder is Introduction, Notes, Bibliography and Index. Hugh set forth his view on education in six books: three books argue for the place the arts or disciplines have in his scheme and the last three treat the role of Scripture in education. This division reminds me of the opening statements of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

The knowledge of God and that of ourselves are connected.... Without Knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God. Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts

to the contemplation of God, in whom he “lives and moves” (Acts 17:28)... Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were leads us by the hand to find him.... Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. (*Institutes*, I, i., 1, 2)

Calvin chooses to treat the knowledge of God first. Hugh begins with the arts of the knowledge of man, but in doing so he continually demonstrates the interrelationship of the two as he develops his position on the arts. Faith and reason are not antithetical but serve each other in understanding both God and ourselves. In this sense Hugh is consistent with Augustine and anticipates John Calvin and C. Van Til.

Hugh argues in the first place for the role of the arts in schooling. Although he lists twenty-one arts that are important to the well being of man, he defends the inclusion only of the Seven Liberal Arts; namely, the Trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy). In this regard Hugh follows Mediæval thinkers such as Cassiodorus, Isodore and Maurus in limiting the Christian curriculum to these seven arts. The twelfth century witnessed the growth of urban centers of influence and an increasing interest in specialized education such as medicine, law, and so on. Hugh, more so than Augustine, saw the need for these specialized studies due to the nature of society in his day, but he understood at the same time the dangers of narrow education without the base of training in the Seven Liberal Arts. Pressures to meet the demands of specialized education confront men at times. President Charles W. Eliot of Harvard College succumbed to those pressures during the later part of the nineteenth century. Eliot declared that we no longer know what constitutes a liberal arts education and accordingly ended its long history of training men in our traditions of liberty. Hugh faced similar pressures in his day but ably defended the Seven Liberal Arts as the foundation for all specialized training and Christian growth. His defense is based on his notion of philosophy and its role in bringing a man to maturity.

For Hugh, philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom. Philosophy is essentially Christian philosophy. Hugh concedes that pagan philosophers were preeminent in their writings and influence and that they sought Wisdom, but not believing in Christ, they did not know the way. The ancient philosophers developing some of the arts, especially the Trivium and the Quadrivium, were but laborers upon an inferior truth, while Christians alone possessed Wisdom, the second person of the trinitarian Godhead. Only Christians could point the way, while profitably using the efforts of the ancients in this enterprise. Hugh's estimation of the central role of Christian thought is in the keynote sentences in Book One, “Of all things to be sought, the first is that Wisdom in which the Form of the Perfect Good stands fixed. Wisdom illuminates man so that he may recognize himself; for man was like all the other animals when he did not understand that he had been created of a higher order than they. But his immortal mind, illuminated by wisdom, beholds its own principle and recognizes how unfitting it is for it to seek anything outside itself when what is in itself can be enough for it.” (p. 46) “Wisdom” is capitalized to refer

to the second person of the trinitarian Godhead. “Form” and “Perfect Good” are capitalized for the same reason. Philosophy then is not the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake, but it is the pursuit of Jesus Christ who is Wisdom itself. This pursuit is not to satisfy the intellect alone, but its aim is to bring man into joyful conformity to Wisdom's ways. The Augustinian emphasis on morality and the love of God and man is not lacking in Hugh; however, Hugh points in the first place to Wisdom as the path to morality. In this respect Hugh departs from Augustine put aims for holiness in the life of the believer as does Augustine.

Today, Christians speak about all learning being God-centered and God-honoring. Emphasis is also placed on seeing every fact as a God-created fact. These principles draw to our attention the shortcomings of modern thought, but there is very little effort to argue for the placement of a particular subject in the curriculum. Our mediæval Christian fathers scrutinized carefully each subject taught for its contribution to the overall goal of education. Each subject had its niche and could not be removed without upsetting the total plan. Show me a Christian philosophy of education today that measures up to the efforts of Hugh and others in the Middle Ages; it seems that men despair of arguing for such a limited and integrated curriculum. The myriad of subjects are thought to be fine for a Christian school so long as God is in some way honored as the source of all learning. Such a stance is important to counter the dominance of humanism in education, but does it go far enough to give our schools a unified and world changing place in our world today?

The *Didascalicon* is valuable as a model for those concerned to write a Christian philosophy of education. It shows the necessity of a well defined, workable goal for schooling such that all the subjects chosen are shown to occupy a vital position in the total outlook. Teachers guided by such a philosophy will be highly motivated to do their part to achieve the end result. Teachers today largely operate without such well defined goals. One may have a general notion of what he wants to accomplish, but does the teacher down the hallway operate with the same vision? The Middle Ages had the advantage of teachers who were not socialized by either the state, the church or non-professionals. The teaching enterprise stood on its own merits and integrity and accordingly produced such giants in the profession as Hugh of St. Victor. The recovery of education depends much upon an examination of our mediæval roots and bringing the best into our day.

The role of Scripture, or the knowledge of God, occupies Hugh in the last three books of the *Didascalicon*. I found this section one of the most rewarding treatments of Scripture I have encountered. Again, one must consider that Hugh operates in terms of wholes and not in terms of certain good things here and there. His is not a patchwork operation. In the first place Hugh defines what is part of the Biblical canon, ruling out by name extraneous contenders for this position. Today, we have very little problem with stating which books are canonical. The challenge to Scripture today comes from the long effect of the school of higher criticism which removes material from the *Textus Receptus* in favor of supposed earlier and more reliable texts. There is a need in a philosophy of education to

declare which versions are true to the received text. Without a clear notion of what constitutes the Word of God, our teaching of Scripture has a shadow of uncertainty upon it. Hugh did the right thing in his day. It is possible for us to do the same?

Hugh begins his analysis of the study of Scripture by saying, “First of all, it ought to be known that Sacred Scripture has three ways of conveying meaning—namely, history, allegory, and tropology.” (p. 120) “Allegory” is what we designate as “doctrine”. “Tropology” means for us “ethics or moral teaching”. The unique thing about this is the place history has in teaching the Bible. Hugh argues that history is the foundation of all meaning in Scripture. The importance of history in general I learned from the writings of R.J. Rushdoony, which have been a source of rich blessing in my pursuit of wisdom, but no one has brought this into as clear a light as Hugh of St. Victor. Every pastor, Bible teacher, elder and parent can profit immeasurably by attending to Hugh's claim for the role of history as a necessary antecedent to understanding Scripture.

For Hugh, understanding Divine Scripture is like erecting a building. The foundation is first laid with large stones sufficient to support the superstructure. Once the foundation and principle of sacred learning is laid in the teaching of history, the truths of the doctrines of Scripture are extracted. These doctrines are like the smooth brick of the superstructure. History is the means through which to admire God's deeds, and doctrine is the means through which to believe his mysteries. (p. 138) The first course of brick to lay is the doctrine of the Trinity. The second course is the doctrine of creation. The third course is the doctrine of the fall of man. The fourth, concerns restoration and salvation. The fifth is the teaching of the Law. The sixth, the mystery of the Incarnation. The seventh, the mysteries of the New Testament. The eighth, of our resurrection. On these initial doctrines other Scriptural teaching rests. Only the absolutely certain aspects of a doctrine were to be taught. Controversy and speculation were reserved for the man strong in the faith. My experience in the Reformed community of believers is that great emphasis is placed upon a sure knowledge of doctrine with history coming in second place at best. Is this why people resent the continual emphasis on doctrine? Our seminaries assume a student has knowledge of the history of the Bible and proceed to concentrate on doctrine. Are they putting the cart before the horse?

All those responsible for teaching in the kingdom of God, whether at home, school, church, college or seminary will find this book rewarding if or no other reason than to gain new insight on teaching the Bible.