

## Presuppositions of a 'Proverbial Pedagogy'<sup>1</sup>

By design, the Rivendell curriculum aims at offering an innovative approach to Liberal Arts education that is intentionally informed by Christian theism. But, of course, this is a claim (legitimately) made by many others. So how does Rivendell differ?

Naturally, the answer to this question can take many forms. But perhaps a brief discussion of the curriculum's underlying 'pedagogy'—called here 'Proverbial Pedagogy'—is the simplest way to introduce a few of the 'distinctive' perspectives that shaped the development of the program. And the place to begin is with a quick explanation of the term 'Proverbial Pedagogy' itself.

Frankly, this is a (somewhat forced) phrase coined to evoke recollections of the biblical book of Proverbs and its potential pedagogical value for the Christian educator. But why the book of Proverbs?

1. First, because it is, by its inclusion in the *Old Testament*, a recognized part of the *Christian* canon and is, therefore authoritative for Christian theists on issues to which it speaks.
2. Second, the book of Proverbs is, by its inclusion in the *Hebrew Scriptures*, a recognized part of ancient *Israel's* canon but is, as 'wisdom' literature, more specifically taken up with themes/topics traditionally viewed as falling (generally) within the purview of the 'liberal arts' in Western educational thought.<sup>2</sup>
3. Third, while scholars still debate this, the book of Proverbs appears to be something of an innovative curriculum itself employed in educating Jewish children (at least sons!) in ancient Israel, giving it something like an intrinsic pedagogical value—the only biblical book, in fact, that might seriously make this claim in quite this way.
4. Fourth, over against other portions of the Hebrew canon (e.g., the Law, the Prophets, etc.), the book of Proverbs is (arguably) more didactically inclusive than those sections of the Hebrew Scriptures that are more explicitly addressed to those enjoying covenant membership in ancient Israel (again, e.g., the Law and the Prophets)—a contrast somewhat similar to that between the Noahic (cf. Gen. 9) and Abrahamic (cf. Gen. 12) covenants and their respective constituencies. As such, it seems capable of functioning, to

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<sup>1</sup> This document is an *ad hoc* production in the strongest sense of the term. Consequently, a few of its essential qualities should be borne in mind while reading. (1) It is an *informal* [rather than a *formal*] statement, meaning it makes no attempts to enter, engage or extend current or historical debates regarding educational theory and/or pedagogy. To that extent, it is merely a partial exploration of a limited range of pedagogically related issues. And (2) it is a *rhetorical* [rather than a *conceptual*] statement, meaning it employs an (over!) abundance of stylistic 'ploys' in articulating and coordinating our views. To that extent, it is more like a sheet of 'talking points' offered to facilitate understanding and perhaps discussion. Finally, it should be noted that the term, 'Proverbial Pedagogy,' is our own and simply represents the first of the above mentioned rhetorical ploys used in this document—in this case aimed at indicating the desire we harbored, while designing/developing the curriculum, to reflect, as much as possible, the educational vision/philosophy found in the biblical book of Proverbs throughout the Rivendell program.

<sup>2</sup> This is due, in part, to the fact that the heavy emphasis upon 'wisdom' in Proverbs arises from the ancient Israelite view that creation itself—with which most 'liberal art' disciplines are taken up in one way or another—was designed by God's own Wisdom, making successful 'adaptation to one's environment' (a popular educational aim in the West) dependent upon the acquisition of at least some of this 'wisdom from above.' In other words, where the ancient Hellenists tended to see 'Reason' as the key to interpreting creation, the ancient Hebrews looked to 'Wisdom'—similar but not identical pursuits. But in both cases, 'interpreting creation' correctly—and so navigating through it successfully—was the educational aim.

some degree, as a kind of ‘pedagogical paradigm’ for other (non-Israelite) educators. So for these and other reasons, the Rivendell curriculum is profoundly shaped by a ‘Proverbial Pedagogy.’

But again, what exactly is a ‘Proverbial Pedagogy?’ In a word, it’s an educational strategy aimed at producing (1) students of stature equipped with (2) the attitude of an apprentice and skilled in (3) the disciplines of discretion acquired through (4) the practice of probing some of (5) the debates and dilemmas found in (6) the laboratory of living, where they’ll need to apply (7) the ways of wisdom to (8) the concerns of creation to fulfill (9) their calling as creatures and avoid (10) the failures of fools. Perhaps I should unpack this ‘definition’ a little. Here’s a word or two regarding each of the numbered phrases in the definition that I hope will help clarify the sense of each.

- (1) By ‘students of stature,’ I mean a ...  
ProPed<sup>3</sup> aims at generating mature learners without requiring them to begin as such.
- (2) By ‘attitude of an apprentice,’ I mean a ...  
ProPed sees learning in terms of acquiring new kinds and degrees of personal dexterity.
- (3) By ‘disciplines of discretion,’ I mean a ...  
ProPed locates the heart of learning in forming habits for making skillful differentiations.
- (4) By ‘practice of probing,’ I mean a ...  
ProPed facilitates the process of learning through ordered exercises in critical reflection.
- (5) By ‘debates and dilemmas,’ I mean a ...  
ProPed centers that critical reflection on disputes of both a theoretical and practical nature.
- (6) By ‘laboratory of living,’ I mean a ...  
ProPed prefers real world disputes in its selection of disputed issues for critical reflection.
- (7) By ‘ways of wisdom,’ I mean a ...  
ProPed points students to prudence as the basis of making skilled differentiations.
- (8) By ‘concerns of creation,’ I mean a ...  
ProPed focuses on preparing students for stewardship of creation’s realities/relationships.
- (9) By ‘calling as creatures,’ I mean a ...  
ProPed equips students for our common human calling before a specific personal calling.
- (10) By ‘failures of fools,’ I mean a ...  
ProPed protects students from the life of futility that flows from discretion deficiencies.

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<sup>3</sup> i.e. ‘Proverbial Pedagogy’

With this ‘definition’ in mind, it’s important to understand that this approach to education (and, in my case, curriculum design/development) rests upon a number of important presuppositions. For these presuppositions are, in fact, the keys to unlocking the ‘mysteries’ of the Rivendell curriculum. So the rest of this paper will simply seek to identify and (briefly) explain a few of the more important ones. In particular, we want to draw attention to five of those assumptions in light of their significance for the Rivendell program.

**P1: Proverbial Pedagogy assumes that Liberal Arts<sup>4</sup> Education begins with a Peculiar Orientation.**

A. What does this mean? -- Simply that a ProPed begins with Christian<sup>5</sup> theism.

Proverbs is clear that the *beginning* of both ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’ is “the fear of the Lord” (cf. Pr. 1:7; 9:10). This is so, from the biblical perspective, because it’s assumed that a right posture before (and ‘picture’ of) the Creator is essential to a right perception of his creation. As such, a pedagogy sharing that perspective will naturally manifest itself in its approach to teaching the liberal arts.

1. **It will begin with God instead of seeking to evade Him.** This counters modern, secular approaches to education that begin with some form of philosophical and/or methodological naturalism. Granted, these approaches can and have yielded valuable descriptive insights into creation. But they struggle to find a unifying center around which all such discoveries might rotate.
2. It will begin with God instead of seeking to end with Him. This counters medieval, scholastic approaches to education that ‘end’ with God, making the liberal arts ‘servile’ tools for the theologian’s occupation. Granted, these approaches can be helpful and need not be completely abandoned. But, in principle, they seem to represent a conflating of ‘liberal’ and ‘servile’ arts and a reversal of the pedagogical approach found in Proverbs.
3. It will begin with God in a way that avoids erring about Him. This calls the educator to a Trinitarian theism as the starting point for his/her pedagogy. Granted, this approach ‘prejudices’ the view of the liberal arts from the outset. But the task of a liberal arts education, as a liberal arts education, is to rightly understand the liberal arts themselves, which itself requires seeing these branches of creational investigation in the context of their Trinitarian Creator.

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<sup>4</sup> It’s important to understand the nature of the ‘liberal arts’ as used in this paper. In a word, I’m using the term loosely in a somewhat historical sense to refer to those academic disciplines traditionally contrasted with the ‘servile arts,’ i.e., those subjects studied with the goal of acquiring ‘occupational’ skills. In this sense, ‘liberal arts’ might be viewed as those subjects pursued with the aim of acquiring ‘vocational’ skills/insights, i.e., equipment needed for answering humanity’s common calling. Of course, I would not want to press either this definition or distinction too far.

<sup>5</sup> This adjective is added here (and throughout this document) to highlight the significant advance on Theology Proper made with the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Godhead. This, of course, gave rise to the distinctive Trinitarian metaphysic that distinguishes Christianity from other forms of theism, e.g., Judaism, Islam, etc. It’s important to note, as well, that a ‘Proverbial Pedagogy’ can accommodate this distinctly *Christian* view of God by virtue of the fact that, as noted earlier, the book of Proverbs, from which that Pedagogy derives, is itself an accepted part of the Christian canon. Some scholars, in fact, even see hints of this more elaborated metaphysic in the book of Proverbs itself (cf., e.g., Prov. 8).

- a. Who, as One-in-Three, grounds the Unity of the arts
  - i. Both externally, i.e., as the Originator of them all
  - ii. And internally, i.e., as the Orderer of each one
- b. Who, as Three-in-One, grounds the Diversity of the arts
  - i. Both externally, i.e., as the Conceiver of them all
  - ii. And internally, i.e., as the Composer of each one
- c. Who, as Loving One, grounds the Relationality of the arts
  - i. Both externally, i.e., as the Sustainer of them all
  - ii. And internally, i.e., as the Shaper of each one
- d. The key here is to see that the liberal arts, taken either corporately or separately, reflect both the unity, plurality and relationality of their Creator.

Why does this matter? – Simply because a liberal arts curriculum that fails to start with this ‘peculiar orientation’ will, to some degree, skew students’ understanding of those arts with regard to their nature, substance, value, use, relations and/or origin.

**P2: Proverbial Pedagogy assumes that Liberal Arts Education is a Parental Obligation.**

A. What does this mean? – Simply that a ProPed reflects domestic educational concerns.

Proverbs is replete with allusions to the ‘father’ and ‘mother’ standing behind the instruction offered to the ‘son’ throughout the book (cf. Pr. 1:8; 6:20). This is so, in part, because the Bible generally identifies the home as that institution in creation responsible for the education of the young (cf. Deut. 6:7; Eph. 6:4). As such, a pedagogy sharing that perspective will view the liberal arts college as a ‘partner with parents’ in the training of their children in an array of disciplines often requiring a measure of academic expertise beyond that possessed by the parents themselves. Consequently, a ‘Proverbial Pedagogy’ will ...

1. Distinguish itself from the curricular concerns of the State
  - a. Which focus on producing Subjects who are loyal to its agendas
  - b. Which focus on producing Statesmen who can lead in its agendas
  - c. In other words, a ProPed will not approach the liberal arts as a politically motivated means of ideological indoctrination. This is both a wrong identification of the institutional agent responsible for the education of the young (i.e., the home) and, as a potential form of intellectual tyranny, a contradiction of the very nature of the ‘liberal’ arts themselves.
2. Distinguish itself from the curricular concerns of the Academy
  - a. Which focus on producing Scholars who are masters of data
  - b. Which focus on producing Specialists who can manipulate data
  - c. In other words, a ProPed will not approach the liberal arts as a means of simply disseminating information. This is a reductionistic view of both education and the human being that fails to equip students with the full range of ‘differentiating skills’ traditionally supplied by the liberal arts.

3. Distinguish itself from the curricular concerns of the Corporation
  - a. Which focus on producing Salesmen who can produce profits
  - b. Which focus on producing Stakeholders who prize (only) profits
  - c. In other words, a ProPed will not approach the liberal arts as a means of occupational preparation. This confuses human vocation and personal occupation and fails to note that the liberal arts focus on equipping students for the former rather than the latter.
4. Distinguish itself from the curricular concerns of the Church
  - a. Which focus on producing Saints who are devoted to the faith
  - b. Which focus on producing Seminarians who can defend the faith
  - c. In other words, a ProPed will not approach the liberal arts as a means of spiritual transformation or ministerial preparation. This fails to distinguish between the curricular content of the church or seminary and the liberal arts college and then results in a wonky transmission of both.
5. Distinguish itself by its similar curricular concerns to that of the Home
  - a. Which focus on producing Sages who can build society
  - b. Which focus on producing a Society that is built of sages
  - c. In other words, a ProPed will approach the liberal arts as a means of the personal and social maturation required to fulfill our shared human vocation. This alone allows the liberal arts to both maintain their own identity and link up with a parent's educational ambition for his/her child, viz., to enter adulthood prepared to enjoy and extend the blessings of a flourishing society.

Why does this matter? – Simply because a liberal arts curriculum that fails to see itself as a partner with parents in fulfilling their important ‘obligation’ to educate their children will, to some degree and in some way, misrepresent the nature, substance, value and use of the liberal arts to the students subjected to it.

**P3: Proverbial Pedagogy assumes that Liberal Arts Education aims at Principal Objectives.<sup>6</sup>**

A. What does this mean? – Simply that a ProPed seeks to instill habits of discretion.

The book of Proverbs, known best for its focus on wisdom, is also, as noted earlier, punctuated with allusions to the ‘fear God’ (cf. Pr. 1:29; 3:7; 10:27; 19:23, etc.) as both the source of such wisdom and the path to human wholeness. This, of course, is due to the fact that ‘wisdom’—in the ancient Hebrew worldview—was itself an aspect of a larger ‘creation ethic’ which, in the end, called the creature to a healthy (and wise) fear of the Creator. As such, a pedagogy sharing this perspective will view the ultimate aim of liberal arts education as helping students maximize their humanity through the cultivation of perspectives and practices that engender and are themselves engendered by this ‘fear.’ In particular, a ‘Proverbial Pedagogy’ will seek to endow students with ...

1. Spiritual Discretion, so they'll retain Fear in their dealings w/God ...
  - a. Theologically—justly choosing orthodox over unorthodox beliefs about God
  - b. Liturgically—justly choosing acceptable over unacceptable worship of God
  - c. Devotionally—justly choosing sincere over insincere allegiance to God
  - d. Spiritually—justly choosing righteous over unrighteous acts before God
2. Relational Discretion, so they'll remain Fair in their dealings w/Others ...
  - a. Domestically—justly supporting “wife and child” as a covenant keeper
  - b. Socially—justly serving “widows and orphans” as a neighbor keeper
  - c. Commercially—justly sustaining “weights and measures” as a heart keeper
  - d. Politically—justly separating “wicked and righteous” as a peace keeper
3. Personal Discretion, so they'll restrain Folly in their dealings w/Self ...
  - a. Intellectually—justly distinguishing truth from error in their perspectives
  - b. Emotionally—justly distinguishing noble from ignoble in their passions
  - c. Volitionally—justly distinguishing good and evil in their purposes
  - d. Physically—justly distinguishing healthy from unhealthy in their practices

Why does this matter? – Simply because a liberal arts curriculum that fails to embrace these three ‘principal objectives’ will, in some fashion, distort the ultimate end of education in general and a liberal arts education in particular.

**P4: Proverbial Pedagogy assumes that Liberal Arts Education effects Particular Outcomes.<sup>7</sup>**

A. What does this mean? – Simply that a ProPed endows students with specific habits/virtues.

Throughout the book of Proverbs, a score of significant virtues are endorsed and/or illustrated, such as integrity (cf. Pr. 11:3), diligence (cf. Pr. 12:11) and purity (cf. Pr. 5)—to name just a few. This is due, in part, to the ancient Hebrew conviction that the possession and application of the wisdom engendered by the fear of God will manifest itself in a number of specific ‘habits’ or ‘virtues’ expressed in contextually appropriate ways throughout one’s life. As such, a pedagogy sharing this perspective will measure the success of its efforts in terms of the realization (or not) of such ‘habits’ in students’ behavior. In particular, a ‘Proverbial Pedagogy’ should result in the development of habits that are consistent with ...

1. Fearing the God who Speaks to a World of Rational Creatures—like ...
  - a. The Analyticity that aids one in hearing God on Any Subject
  - b. The Humility that aids one in hearing God on the All-Important Subject
  - c. The Sagacity that aids one in hearing God on All Subjects
2. Fearing the God who Stands behind the World of Physical Creatures—like ...
  - a. The Dexterity that aids one in stewarding God’s Bounded Creation
  - b. The Curiosity that aids one in stewarding God’s Bodied Creation

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<sup>7</sup> We first enunciated these desired ‘outcomes’ in the commencement address to Rivendell’s first graduating class. And since, at present, this still represents my best effort at articulating them, I’ve simply summarized here the materials covered in much more depth on that previous occasion.

- c. The Responsibility that aids one in stewarding God’s Breathing Creation
- 3. Fearing the God who is Seen in the World of Personal Creatures—like ...
  - a. The Integrity that aids one in showing God thru a Human Reflection
  - b. The Nobility that aids one in showing God thru Human Refinement
  - c. The Fidelity that aids one in showing God thru Human Relations
- 4. Fearing the God who Sits above the World of Moral Creatures—like ...
  - a. The Civility that aids one in pursuing God’s will for Political Societies
  - b. The Equity that aids one in pursuing God’s will for Peaceful Societies
  - c. The Generosity that aids one in pursuing God’s will for Prosperous Societies

Why does this matter? – Simply because a liberal arts curriculum that fails to impart such habits/virtues to students will, to some extent, prove, not only inconsistent with the very aim of liberal arts education, but also ephemeral in its influence on the students themselves—thus leaving them ill-prepared to take up our shared human calling.

**P5: Proverbial Pedagogy assumes that Liberal Arts Education sustains a Provisional Order.**

A. What does this mean? – Simply that a ProPed seeks to sustain order until the Orderer arrives.

The book of Proverbs presupposes and seeks to protect—through its counsels—a creationally grounded pattern for human life, both domestically (cf., e.g., Pr. 5; 31:10-31), socially (cf., e.g., Pr. 6:16-19), professionally (cf., e.g., Pr. 19:10; 30:21-23) and politically (cf., e.g., Pr.29:2). This is due, in part, to the Bible’s more general assumptions that (1) the creational order was disrupted with the fall but that (2) a provisional order can [and should] still be achieved in order to sustain human life [and the rest of creation] until God’s own kingdom is established under His chosen king. As such, a pedagogy sharing this perspective will seek to contribute to this creation-ordering agenda by equipping students both to work against the ever-encroaching disorder all around us and to wait patiently for the One who will bring the kind and degree of order that we cannot achieve without Him. This allows them/us to approach liberal arts education as a means of sustaining ...

- 1. A (somewhat) Healthy—Creator-Honoring—Social Order under the Curse
  - a. By forming Citizens who see that Church and State can exist together
  - b. By forming Citizens who see that Church and Science can exist together
  - c. By forming Citizens who see that Church and Sects can exist together
- 2. A (somewhat) Happy—Creature-Helping—Social Order until the Kingdom
  - a. By forming Citizens who see that Rights and Responsibilities go together
  - b. By forming Citizens who see that Laws and Liberties go together
  - c. By forming Citizens who see that Efforts and Earnings go together

Why does this matter? – Simply because a liberal arts curriculum that fails to communicate the provisional nature of the ‘common good’ we seek through such an education will leave students vulnerable to either an unrealistic, utopian optimism or an equally misguided pessimism

regarding the real-world possibilities for human society, which still groans under the curse and yet awaits the King and His Kingdom.