

## WHOSE VIRTUE? WHICH ETHICS?: THE ECCLESIAL TASK OF VIRTUE FORMATION

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In late 2019, our local theologian fellowship took up the task of virtue. The plan was to initially move through two books within the group's next quarterly meetings to orient us to the topic, each book assigned and read by half of the fellowship and then switching for the next meeting. Knowing my interest and doctoral work around the subject, I was asked to recommend a book or two on the matter. The readings were divided and assigned, and we each read and returned to the fellowship. I was in the half of the fellowship that began with N. T. Wright's popular, *After You Believe*,<sup>2</sup> an edifying and practical work that I had not read prior. The other half read my recommendation—Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, it had been three or four years since I had last picked up the classic in a doctoral research seminar, but I recalled it to be insightful, thorough, and fascinating. I did not recall that it is also dense. The assignment was apparently an intimidating and arduous one for that unfortunate half-fellowship, I think for two reasons.

The first is that intense tomes of ethics are better enjoyed by the moral philosopher's rose-colored memory than they are by its unsuspecting victims. The second is that MacIntyre, like so many other brilliant men and women, seems at times to forget that his audience is not as smart as he is. He picks the strings of history and philosophy like a Spanish guitar, reverberating with every summary and critique. And while it is a thing of beauty to see and hear, there is little instruction, it seems, for those of us holding cigar boxes with plastic strings, unsure how to begin or if this

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<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

would even qualify as the same instrument. Such is often the task of virtue formation in the church.

So, rather than sending an Amazon link or loaning out a personal copy of a well-loved, though possibly faintly remembered, book—even with the supposed advantage of insightful underlines and marginal notes—this essay will offer the present state of virtue ethics. Even as MacIntyre’s work is a profound one, it has been nearly forty years since it was published. As such, there is a tautness to note between the immutability of virtue and the constantly shifting contexts to which virtue is applied. This essay hopes to present a snapshot of virtue ethics over the past several decades, its present landscape, and some questions and observations of how it may be best applied in an ecclesial setting.

## II. THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

To understand the present state of virtue formation, it might be most beneficial to ask another question or two, tied again to our Scottish herald of moral thought: “Whose virtue?” “Which ethics?”<sup>4</sup> The state of virtue today is by no means one of homogeneity. Even as this essay is taking up the question in an ecclesial landscape that is broadly evangelical,<sup>5</sup> virtue has wider expressions in Hinduism, Buddhism, Naturalism, and other faith traditions and schools of thought.<sup>6</sup> Virtue’s definitions can further be wide ranging and its applications ethereal, at times. To offer lucidity, it will be most helpful to outline today’s most common critiques of virtue theory, the modern forms of the theory offered in response to those critiques, and a few noteworthy applications.

### A. VIRTUE’S MODERN CRITIQUE

Like any ethical system, virtue ethics is not impervious to critique. Traditionally, these critiques have been that virtue tends to be ambiguous as it relates to concrete action compared to systems which offer definitive lists of approved actions or duties like divine command theory. Another common critique is that as virtue is found in such wide and disparate thinkers as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, there is little consensus regarding an authoritative list of virtues. Many have answered and accommodated these traditional critiques through clarity of application or through adaptation of the system itself.<sup>7</sup> Still other critiques remain. Within the church, particularly, critiques can trend towards issues with philosophy and social science or towards biblical and theological concerns. It is argued that either

<sup>4</sup> A common, if perhaps overdone, form of reference to Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Evangelical here is intended as the broad theological category of a mere Protestantism, often typified by Bebbington’s quadrilateral.

<sup>6</sup> David McPherson, “Homo Religiosus: Does Spirituality Have a Place in Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics?” *Religious Studies* 51 (2015): 335–46.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Deontological Virtue Ethics in Mark Liederbach and Evan Lenow, *Ethics as Worship: The Pursuit of Moral Discipleship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2021), 271.

the church has elevated the biblical in a way that passes thematic readings as psychological diagnoses, or that it has elevated the extrabiblical in ways such that social theory would upend biblical insight and distinction.

Beginning with the first category, some social scientists have questioned the categories of virtue and vice in the assessment of habit and behavior. This is easily the newest critique but is still one that has been a point of debate for more than two decades, at least. The brunt of the critique is that virtue ethics oversimplifies unified themes which modern empirical psychology attributes to micro-shifts in acute situations and factors. The result is situationism, or the situationist critique. John Doris was one of the first to level this charge when he asserted that at their core, “character-based approaches are subject to damaging empirical criticism.”<sup>8</sup> Since then, there has been an ebbing and flowing tension between a total rejection of character traits and the virtues and an integration within positive psychology of traditional virtue categories and modern empirical psychology.<sup>9</sup>

On the other extreme is the critique that virtue—and habits in particular—miss a biblical-theological justification in their assessment. Some even go so far to say that the theory is more closely aligned with legalism than biblicism. Consider J. Gary Millar’s critique of James K. A. Smith’s “Cultural Liturgies” trilogy,<sup>10</sup>

[Smith’s] contention that habits (or liturgies) change people, may be Augustinian, but it is a long way from being “Reformed” in any meaningful sense. . . . Smith shifts the focus very firmly and decidedly to external actions. One is left with the sense that the solution to disordered desires is simply to do things differently together, and all else will fall into place. By attempting to overcome the power of secular liturgies with “thicker,” better Christian ones, he is inadvertently flirting with legalism. The trouble is that, ultimately, liturgies cannot fix the heart. Despite his intentions, in tackling some of the excesses of post-enlightenment and rationalism, Smith has, to a large degree, lost the centrality of the gospel, which itself has the power to change people.<sup>11</sup>

Note Millar’s critique. Habit is a purely external action. Its works are simple, even legalistic. It has lost the centrality of the gospel. This portrayal of Smith’s approach as philosophical to the point of lacking biblical or theological categories, and even downplaying the effects of sin, is a common one. In nearly every reflection, the history of virtue begins in Athens rather

<sup>8</sup> John M. Doris, “Persons, Situations and Virtue Ethics,” *Noûs* 32 (1998): 520.

<sup>9</sup> See Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Mark R. McMinn, *The Science of Virtue: Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2017), as two such integrationist approaches.

<sup>10</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); and *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 192.

than Eden. As such, there seems to be an immediate suspicion that virtue and habit do not align with a biblical ethic. But this is not so.

In both the Old and the New Testament, when believers yield willingly to God . . . The Christian *new being* that emerges in surrender to God is enriched by the attitudes and dispositions that both Testaments extol. In that way the biblical virtues are greatly instrumental in reinforcing the moral character that is hidden in God.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the best evidence for this is to see the ways in which virtue theory is embodied today.

### B. VIRTUE'S FORM

As a whole, virtue is a teleological framework in the sense that it looks to the end to determine ethical or moral good—that is, whatever is virtuous.<sup>13</sup> But virtue's end is a knotty affair. In the historic sense, goodness ascribes to a platonic form and pursues *eudaimonia* (flourishing) through virtue. This traditional understanding of virtue possesses no essential connection to the triune God or the Bible and is likely the form of virtue which biblicist critiques have in mind. But it is not the exclusive form. Two other forms are worth mentioning here.

The first is Christine Swanton's target-centered virtue, which "is a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way."<sup>14</sup> The shift from goal to target may seem insignificant, but it is a notable departure from Plato. Rather than an idyllic form, good enough is perfectly virtuous, so long as it satisfies the target virtue by what it promotes or defends. In this regard, target-centered virtue is more permissive of vice than its ancient form, moving further away from a biblical-theological category. Enter its contemporary, exemplarist virtue ethics.

Rather than targeting a desired result or pursuing the good and flourishing life, exemplarist virtue identifies the normative motivations of virtuous individuals. Think of it as providing a philosophical rootedness to the 1990's popular church idiom, "What Would Jesus Do?" Linda Zagzebski, one of the leading proponents of exemplarist virtue ethics, writes, "We do not have criteria for goodness in advance of identifying the exemplars of goodness."<sup>15</sup> By seating virtue in an exemplar of virtue, namely God in Trinity, the question shifts from a definitive list to a definitive person. This perspective makes virtue an effectual fruit within the Christian life in step

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Wirt Farley, *In Praise of Virtue: An Exploration of the Biblical Virtues in a Christian Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 161.

<sup>13</sup> This is putting aside the aforementioned adaptation of Deontological Virtue Ethics.

<sup>14</sup> Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 41.

with the image of God revealed in Christ. This form of virtue is the one best equipped to examine and apply virtue formation in an ecclesial setting.

### III. VIRTUE'S MODERN APPLICATION

Today, virtue formation's revival has only grown since its renaissance at Notre Dame. Its study has branches in elements of positive psychology,<sup>16</sup> artificial intelligence,<sup>17</sup> politics,<sup>18</sup> and other increasingly diverse applications. The John Templeton Foundation, as one example, has devoted a significant portion of its grant initiatives specifically to character virtue development. Between 2019 and 2023, Templeton is expected to fund related projects with up to \$325 million.<sup>19</sup> As these fields develop and take new forms and applications, they will inevitably move through two spheres—the individual and the community.

#### A. THE INDIVIDUAL AND VIRTUE

The individual is the primary sphere of concern within virtue formation. Be that in the traditional framework of habits which form neural pathways in the brain, or spiritual disciplines which shape the soul, the individual ultimately bears the weight of change in virtue or vice. The very question of right versus wrong, which has historically driven so much of moral philosophy, is framed primarily as individual decision-making. Even the communal questions of moral dilemmas, in their concern for a greater number of people, are phrased not to inquire of the masses but of the sole person. But life rarely comes in moral dilemmas—simply not enough people take the trolley anymore. Instead, “even our trivial desires, choices, and acts have moral meaning because they have some effect—no matter how small—on the person we are in process of becoming.”<sup>20</sup> The better question then, it would seem, is how the individual ought to consider virtue formation—more than that, how the Christian ought to do so.

There are at least three ways for the individual to embody a distinctly Christian virtue formation. The first is to foster habits which deepen an experiential knowledge of the Divine Exemplar. Consider the call of the people of Israel in Hos 6:3, “So let us know, let us press on to know the Lord. / His going forth is as certain as the dawn; / And He will come to us like the rain, / Like the spring rain watering the earth.”<sup>21</sup> As the Christian pursues a deep relational knowledge of the person of Christ, the Spirit

<sup>16</sup> McMinn, *The Science of Virtue*.

<sup>17</sup> Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Gisela Striker, “Aristotle’s Ethics as Political Science,” in *The Virtuous Life in Greek Ethics*, Burkhard Reis, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 127–41.

<sup>19</sup> See <https://www.templeton.org/funding-areas/character-virtue-development>.

<sup>20</sup> David L. Norton, “Moral Minimalism,” in *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue*, Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 186.

<sup>21</sup> All Scripture will be in the New American Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

gives growth to the believer, shaping them into greater likeness of the true Image of God. He is as certain as the dawn, as life-giving as the spring rain.

The second habit of the Christian is in pursuit of spiritual discipline and the fruit of virtue. Here, mundane habits and practices develop deep rewards in the Christian faith. Take, for example, the application of prayer to just one facet among the full fruit of the Spirit. Joseph Kotva writes,

Learning to pray thus means learning to wait, learning a different sense of time's passage, learning patience. . . . The pastor who desires her own moral transformation, who desires the moral growth and transformation of her parish or congregation, and who desires a more just community, must learn patience. Patience is vital if she is to avoid despair over the slight moral progress, backsliding, and failure that are so often a part of church life. Patience is vital if she is to resist the temptation to manipulative or corrosive means in the name of a just cause. Patience is vital if she is to communicate a gospel that claims that salvation comes, not in frantically working for it, but as a gift.<sup>22</sup>

Such applications can be extended into similar practices of reading Scripture, fasting, generosity, worship, fellowship, confession, and more. Habit and spiritual discipline are a synonymous work in the life of the believer.

The final habit of virtue is the application of virtue into the context and social location of the individual. This is more than the fruit of the Spirit or other universal applications of the character of God into the regular practices of the individual's week. This is an attunement to the unique needs to which the Christian can respond, through the Holy Spirit, with the virtue of Christ. Situational to a degree, this would include a virtuous response to racial injustice, spiritual and physical abuse, issues of sexuality, poverty, or whatever else the individual's social location might merit. The world may constantly shift and squirm in birthing pains, but Christ and his virtuous character do not, nor should the Christian.

## B. THE COMMUNITY AND VIRTUE

If the individual is the primary target of virtue, the community is the oldest. Plato and Aristotle did not write in a bubble. Their politics and philosophy engaged individuals and considered the citizen, but they did so almost always in relation to the greater *polis*. If Christ leaves the ninety-nine in pursuit of the one, Plato forfeits the one for the ninety-nine. This is not a question of utilitarianism, but an extension of being and doing for the individual as a member of the *polis*. Moreover, it is the question of the Christian within the church and the church's role in the Christian's formation. Evan Hock explains,

To foster the corporate nature of life heightens the awareness of the church as an ethical community. . . . Our discipleship then

<sup>22</sup> Joseph J. Kotva, Jr., "The Formation of Pastors, Parishioners, and Problems: A Virtue Reframing of Clergy Ethics," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 17 (1997): 276.

must never be abstracted from the sense and duty of membership in the church . . . by modeling virtue: keeping promises, honoring commitments, speaking to edify, showing forgiveness and such examples.<sup>23</sup>

There is an obvious and significant place of the community in virtue formation.

As such, the church would do well to consider the ways in which its corporate nature fosters virtue or emboldens vice. Even the structure of the church gathering can be an intentional part of virtue formation. Scott Aniol writes, “How a church worships week in and week out forms the people—it molds their behavior by shaping their inclinations through habitual practices, because the shape of the liturgy transmits its values.”<sup>24</sup> Essentially, a congregation’s regular use of “Scripture-shaped gospel liturgies will inform people’s liturgies of life, which will in turn form their moral behavior.”<sup>25</sup> The ecclesial community is one that reinforces existing character through habit. It is also one which reveals and imparts the initial seeds of the garden-bed of virtue. As Michael Rhodes reflects, “Formative practices do not just *require* character, political practices, a shared story, and a communal *telos*. They *cultivate* virtues, *embed* participants into a narrative, *shape* a community’s politics, and *orient* the community towards that shared telos.”<sup>26</sup> This is the proper love of one’s neighbor, doing good to all, and especially to those of the household of faith (Gal 6:10). The community’s role in the individual’s virtue formation is a palpable necessity and should not be understated. But it should also be asked if the community itself is capable of virtue.

It is one thing to speak of community as comprised of individuals and another to speak of that same community as having a single personhood or conscience beyond that of the individual. This has often been described as a corporate personhood.<sup>27</sup> The corporate person is a claim of ontological being. This is more than a singular representative expression given to a plurality of individuals in the sense of name or identity, such as that of a group, entity, nation, or corporation. Instead, this is towards the possibility of a corporate person as holding a unified conscience, unique to itself. For example, in the Hebrew Bible when Israel is indicted by God for its idolatry, it is not simply that some, most, or even all of the individuals within Israel are culpable, but that collectively the nation as a unified person would also be indicted. The corporate person is often represented in a single person or group, such as the king or priests, that serve as a single proxy for the

<sup>23</sup> Evan C. Hock, “Theology and Ethics,” *Reformation and Revival* 5 (1996): 46–47.

<sup>24</sup> Scott Aniol, “Practice Makes Perfect: Corporate Worship and the Formation of Spiritual Virtue,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 10 (Spring 2017): 101.

<sup>25</sup> Aniol, “Practice Makes Perfect,” 104.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Jemison Rhodes, “‘Forward unto Virtue’: Formative Practices and I Corinthians 11:17–34,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 11 (2017): 136.

<sup>27</sup> David McClendon, “It’s Not Business, It’s Personal: Implicit Religion in the Corporate Personhood Debate,” *Implicit Religion* 17 (2014): 47–61.

unified whole. This representation stands less as a symbolic representative and more as an embodied envoy of the larger whole.<sup>28</sup>

The principle of corporate personhood is most often applied to the question of corporate culpability, and it demonstrates its limitations in that regard. A corporate person does not possess an agency outside of its individual actors. It is unable to act apart from the persons which constitute it. If it is guilty or innocent, vicious or virtuous, it does so as an extension of the agency of its individuals. Further, the term "person" carries with it a connotation seemingly unique to human persons, as those individuals possessing a soul or bearing the image of God. Perhaps it would be better then to speak of the conceived entity not as simply a corporate person in an economic sense alone, but as one possessing an objective spirit.<sup>29</sup> The question that remains concerns the unique ways in which any group can speak of a representative conscience beyond the consciences of its individual actors.

If this is possible, it would be most apparent, and most relevant for our purposes, in the church. More so than any other grouping, the body of Christ is unified in conscience as it submits itself to the will of the triune God. This submission of the individual will joins the reciprocal will of others in a declaration of subserviency to the greater body. Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to this structure as the objective spirit which, "thrusts itself as a third entity right between the two who are bound together . . . Thus the persons themselves experience their community as something real outside themselves, a community that distances itself from them without their willing it, rising above them."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps it would be best to illustrate the claim by way of example.

If there is a representative conscience which is capable of vice or virtue, it would be evident in instances of corporate error and guilt. Corporate culpability speaks to the unity of a group in a mutual accountability which recognizes that the actions of individuals within the same body have bearing and reflection beyond them. This speaks to the continued existence of the corporate person beyond the participation or even lifetimes of its members. This is most obvious in corporate persons which exist across

<sup>28</sup> An analogy to aid this distinction might be the difference between those who view communion strictly as a memorial practice and those that view it as possessing a real spiritual presence.

<sup>29</sup> Adam Kotsko, "Objective Spirit and Continuity in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Philosophy and Theology* 17 (2005): 17–31. Both the term "corporate person" and "objective spirit" have nuances which separate them. In general, the former term finds its primary function in the economic, while the latter finds its function in the sociological. The terms are by no means synonymous, nor are they innately theological. For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to speak of them distinctly as corporate persons possessing objective spirits. Hegelian to a degree, the perspective I wish to draw out is more by way of Bonhoeffer, who roots the spirit in theological categories rather than in Hegel's expression of Reason. See Kotsko, "Objective Spirit and Community," 22.

<sup>30</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 98.



several generations, such as Israel's confession of sin for themselves and for the sins of their fathers in Neh 9:2 or, more recently, in consideration of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was hardly birthed from virtue. The SBC formed through its departure from the Triennial Convention in 1845 in order to allow slaveholders to serve as missionaries.<sup>31</sup> The SBC was not only complicit in slavery and racism, it was a leading proponent.<sup>32</sup> One hundred and fifty years later, the SBC publicly repented of this past in its 1995 "Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention." Most relevantly, the resolution states,

WHEREAS, Our relationship to African-Americans has been hindered from the beginning by the role that slavery played in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention; and WHEREAS, Many of our Southern Baptist forbears defended the right to own slaves, and either participated in, supported, or acquiesced in the particularly inhumane nature of American slavery; and WHEREAS, In later years Southern Baptists failed, in many cases, to support, and in some cases opposed, legitimate initiatives to secure the civil rights of African-Americans; . . . Be it further RESOLVED, That we lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest, and we recognize that the racism which yet plagues our culture today is inextricably tied to the past; and Be it further RESOLVED, That we apologize to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime; and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously (Psalm 19:13) or unconsciously (Leviticus 4:27); and Be it further RESOLVED, That we ask forgiveness from our African-American brothers and sisters, acknowledging that our own healing is at stake; and Be it further RESOLVED, That we hereby commit ourselves to eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry . . .<sup>33</sup>

The language of this resolution is not one which overwhelmingly affirms the concept of corporate personhood, even limiting its language to "racism in our lifetime." In fact, the concept would likely ruffle more than a few feathers in a denomination which holds firmly to local church autonomy, the priesthood of the believer, and a ready insistence on the place of the

<sup>31</sup> Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, 1845 Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention (Southern Baptist Convention, Richmond, VA): 12–18. [http://www.sbhla.org/sbc\\_annuals](http://www.sbhla.org/sbc_annuals).

<sup>32</sup> See Paul J. Morrison, *Integration: Race, T. B. Maston, and Hope for the Desegregated Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022), 25–29.

<sup>33</sup> "Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention" (1995). <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention/>.

individual.<sup>34</sup> But the need for such a resolution speaks a different word. The existence of a corporate personhood would sustain the SBC's culpability as an entity beyond the lives and sins of the individuals which founded it. Its corporate voice here has been seen through its resolutions, policies, and statements of faith. Even as some might point out that the SBC is not strictly a denomination, but a convention made up of local autonomous churches, its individual churches face the same problem. This is not to depart from the question of virtue, but to establish its need.

If the preceding does in fact show the reality of the objective spirit of a corporate person's culpability and sin, it demonstrates the reality of corporate vice. As such, corporate virtue also has its place. Corporate repentance reveals and fosters the fruits of corporate humility and self-control. Its ongoing work and progress of repair would then be a corporate virtue formation. Not only does the individual who commits themselves to the virtue of Christ grow, but so does the corporate person of whom they are part. To be sure, there are a great number of questions which follow this digression, but if there is an objective spirit, the church and her shepherds ought to consider well the obligation they bear to not only foster virtue in the individual, but of the community itself.

#### IV. THE PASTOR THEOLOGIAN AND VIRTUE FORMATION

The role of the pastor theologian in helping form virtuous communities is one of great opportunity. One future direction of virtue formation in the church is the expansion of the virtuous being through knowledge of the full person of Christ. Rather than a reductionist vision of virtue, Stephen Bilynskij advocates against the temptation to oversimplify virtue beyond the cardinal and instead to a single fount. He writes,

For the Christian, we might be tempted to single out love as the distinctive mark of Christian character. Love is certainly given a prominent place in the Christian story. But to base all of Christian ethics on a single principle of love, à la Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics*, is to forget that the story we live as Christians is a complex story. It is no accident that love abides with faith and hope, for, in the complexity of the story that God is telling in the life of Christ and his people, love could not abide without faith and hope.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> This of course would depend on the individual member, pastor, or church within the SBC. It is interesting to note that at this point the conception of individual versus systemic or corporate guilt ranges greatly between racial groups. Specifically, the gap widens most between White evangelicals and Black evangelicals, as White evangelicals will emphasize the individual to the severity of an exclusion of the corporate altogether. See Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Kindle Location 2350. Further, this is not to say that the doctrines of ecclesial autonomy or the priesthood of the believer are at any way at odds with the concept, but simply to show the tradition's emphasis on the individual.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen S. Bilynskij, "Christian Ethics and the Ethics of Virtue," *The Covenant Quarterly* 45 (1987): 130.

Not only is this a complex story, but it is also finds its source in a complex, yet simple, God. The root of virtue is found in the eternal character of God. Love is not an action which God carries out, but a standing disposition which radiates from God's very person. It is not that God is loving, but that God is love. Such is the case with all of virtue.

The virtues are not divisible attributes of God, but the essence of God himself.<sup>36</sup> Divine simplicity then would push the pastor theologian to consider which virtues are essential to the person of God, and which masquerade as such, but are altogether glittering vices. This could be done through a systematic approach through any classical list of virtues, such as the compilation of Aristotle's golden mean by Benjamin Farley,<sup>37</sup> and placing it within the formula, "God is  $x$ " to measure its veracity. It could also be done through an application of virtue to questions and topics of ethical, pastoral, and theological concern. Pastor theologians have much to consider to this end.

Ecclesial theology is a weighty task. Christ has charged those who keep his sheep to protect, feed, and love them as he would. His is a charge to exhort, admonish, and equip the saints to grow in Christlikeness. If virtue is seated in Christ, then pastor theologians must embody virtue, model it, and encourage it in their spheres of ministry. Its future study holds the potential to greatly edify the church, and its neglect similarly to cause and perpetuate much harm.

## V. CONCLUSION

It is my hope that I have presented an accurate picture of virtue formation in general as well as specifically as it relates to the church today. I believe that virtue offers an opportunity for a fresh engagement of theology and ethics in ways which move to the heart of our growth in Christ rather than trendy issuism and moral dilemmas. The question of virtue's form and the spheres of its practice ought to be of particular interest to the members of the body of Christ, to grow into good and generous neighbors in the kingdom—individually and corporately.

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<sup>36</sup> Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> Farley, *In Praise of Virtue*, 15.