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Virtue Ethics and the Challenge of Hauerwas

William Bennett touched a national nerve in 1993 when he published his bestseller, *The Book of Virtues*.[1] Many Americans seemed to be longing for the sort of ethical foundation that Bennett endorsed. The idea that there are enduring virtues that deserve to be taught appealed to many who had grown weary of living in a climate of moral uncertainty rife with ethical ambiguities. In Bennett's thick book, everything was reassuringly black and white. Here were stories with heroes to be emulated and villains to be despised. Here was right and wrong that could be grasped and taught. Of course, not all agreed with Bennett's implied understanding of what constitutes the virtuous life, and some offered alternate anthologies of stories and suggestions for their use.[2] That such debate exists is one of the problems besetting the wider culture, which possesses no means of judging between competing claims.[3] Even if agreement on what actually constitutes a universal list of the virtues may well be altogether impossible, the desire for such a list, or even lists, illustrates that there is a chord in contemporary American society responsive to the idea of virtue. It should be noted, though, that the efforts of Bennett and others to champion the restoration of the moral fiber of contemporary culture is but the populist tip of a significant body of work that has come to be called virtue ethics, or an ethics of virtue.

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1. William J. Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

2. Colin Greer and Herbert Kohl, eds., *A Call to Character* (New York: HarperCollins,1995).

3. The reasons for this are complicated and have more to do with politics and sociology, rather than with what is immediately theological. James Davison Hunter ably explores this reality in *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); see esp. 205–20.

The Rise of Virtue Ethics

The academic antecedents to Bennett's popular efforts began several years earlier. Indeed, it is easily and safely argued that an ethics of virtue is as old as Aristotle or even Plato. It was Plato who identified and Aristotle who thoroughly expounded what by the Middle Ages had become the first four of the "seven cardinal virtues" (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance). Aristotle's carefully considered ethics supplied the enduring framework for thinking about the virtues and their human manifestations.[4] It was he who set the standard for virtually all subsequent virtue thinkers, including Christian teachers of ethics such as Thomas Aquinas and Philip Melanchthon. Contemporary virtue ethics certainly is interested in the classic virtues as presented by Aristotle and made complete with the addition of the three "theological virtues": faith, hope, and love.[5] Still, today's interest in an ethics of virtue is about much more than the promulgation of anthologies describing virtuous individuals or a school district's decision to assign a virtue for each month in the academic calendar in the hope of encouraging the cultivation of correspondingly virtuous behavior in students and perhaps even faculty.[6]

Having been overshadowed and displaced by the Kantian and later utilitarian directions of Enlightenment ethics, an ethics of virtue began a renaissance in the last part of the twentieth century. "The past fifteen years," wrote Gregory Trianosky in 1990, "have witnessed a dramatic resurgence of philosophical interest in the virtues."[7] He continues, "The charge that modern philosophical thought neglects the virtues . . . once apposite, is by now outmoded; and the calls for a renewed investigation of virtue and virtue ethics are being answered from many quarters."[8] Of the many quarters providing answers to the call for a retrieval of virtue ethics, or at least the study of virtue, one of the most important is Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre is generally credited with fueling the resurgence of interest in an ethics of virtue by attracting the attention not only of the philosophical community but of the

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4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, esp. Books II-VII.

5. The work of Josef Pieper not only serves as an excellent example of contemporary interest in the ancient virtues, but also provides an outstanding discussion of these virtues and their relevance to life in the church today. See Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967).

6. This practice has been in evidence on the roadside signboards of St. Louis–area schools for the past fourteen years and counting.

7. Gregory Trianosky, "What Is Virtue Ethics All About?," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (October 1990): 335.

8. Ibid.

wider academic community and even, to some extent, the general public. With his sharp insight and compelling prose, MacIntyre fully deserves his continuing position of influence and prominence.

Alasdair MacIntyre and After Virtue

MacIntyre's *After Virtue* was published in 1981 and still inspires interest and discussion, as well as no shortage of detractors.[9] In this landmark volume, MacIntyre argues that without the moorings provided by a unified community that prizes and nurtures virtue, isolated moral imperatives make no sense. How can there be agreement on questions of morality when there is no agreement on what is good or virtuous? The result is social moral conflict that is "interminable." "I do not mean by this," writes MacIntyre, "that such debates go on and on and on—although they do—but also that they apparently can find no terminus."[10] He cites the ongoing cultural angst over abortion as a prime example. With essentially antithetical conceptions of what is good, it should be small wonder that opposing forces in the current debate find little room for agreement. Because unity cannot be achieved solely through reason, the tone of this and other moral debates inevitably becomes increasingly shrill. MacIntyre's harsh analysis of modernity's moral paralysis still rings with authenticity. Yet, the very truth of his critique provides not even a remote possibility for societal curatives. Indeed, MacIntyre holds out meager hope for the intentionally pluralistic society at large. Essentially abandoning the wider society, he seems instead to advocate or desire the founding and flourishing of intimate communities modeled on an Aristotelian standard. Recognizing the significant monastic contribution to medieval society, MacIntyre hopes that the modern refuges he envisions might replicate the monastic success and be bastions in which virtue can be taught, morality encouraged, and the future of civilization itself guarded.

While MacIntyre's cultural assessment may well be accurate and important, what is most of interest for theological ethics and for the present study is his

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9. MacIntyre recognizes that his critique of contemporary culture is an attack on the "Enlightenment Project," his label for the Enlightenment agenda largely responsible for the present ethical collapse in the West. Naturally, his work provokes the anticipated negative reactions from those yet committed to the tenets of modern liberalism. See, for example, Richard J. Bernstein, "Nietzsche or Aristotle? Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*," *Soundings* 67 (Spring 1984): 6–29. See also John Horton and Susan Mendus, eds., *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

10. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 6.

success in returning virtue to the forefront of ethical discussion and thought. En route to that end, he has also served the development of virtue ethics by providing many of the concepts and terms that now make up the vocabulary of thinkers in virtue ethics. Two of the most significant of these terms are *narrative* and *practice*. The ideas signified by these terms have become foundational for the movement that has come to be known as "virtue ethics." The tremendous influence of these concepts and their importance as underpinnings for this book warrant a closer examination.[11]

By *narrative*, MacIntyre refers to the relationships, responsibilities, and experiences that combine into the particular shape taken by an individual's life. The narrative in which a person lives will in turn direct and explain much of what that person does. A simple example is that "getting dressed for work" and "warming up" will mean quite different things for a concert pianist and a football player. Each lives in a different narrative, each of which in turn relates to a wider community of others in similar narratives. MacIntyre writes, "For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity."[12] MacIntyre's concept of narrative is closely related to the idea of practice.

Though often referenced by subsequent thinkers in virtue ethics, MacIntyre's definition of a *practice* is less succinct or simple than one might hope.[13] A practice is:

> . . . any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[14]

11. Indeed, some Christian ethicists have seen "a *theory* of Christian ethics lurking in his [MacIntyre's] writings," and elaborated a Christian ethics accordingly. "Preface and Acknowledgments," in Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation, eds., *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), xi (emphasis in original). Kallenberg's essay "The Master Argument of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*" is quite helpful, but also acknowledges the difficulty of succinctly explaining MacIntyre. "The tricky part of his analysis is that each of the central concepts—*virtue, practice, narrative,* and *tradition*—can be defined only, finally, in terms of the other concepts." Ibid., 20.

12. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221.

13. Kallenberg accurately observes: "MacIntyre defines a *practice* somewhat tortuously" ("Master Argument," 21).

Brad Kallenberg derives a Christian ethic from the work of MacIntyre and provides some guidance in unpacking MacIntyre's rather unwieldy phraseology. He helpfully identifies four central concepts in MacIntyre's definition. First, he observes that practices are human activities that are more than social, but are also "complex enough to be challenging, and coherent enough to aim at some goal in a unified fashion."[15] "Second," continues Kallenberg, "practices have goods that are internal to the activity."[16] Thus, while external goods, such as economic benefits, fame, or societal prestige, certainly attend some practices, "true practices are marked by *internal* goods—those rewards that can be recognized and appreciated only by participants."[17] So it is that baseball players have been known to testify that it is "the love of the game" that motivates their play regardless the financial compensation.

Making his third point, Kallenberg asserts, "practices have standards of excellence without which internal goods cannot be fully achieved," that is to say, those involved in the practice know what counts as great success because they have been taught by the "historical community of practitioners" or, more plainly, by those who have gone before them. "The joy of chess is in having played *well*."[18] Finally, Kallenberg's fourth point is that in MacIntyre's definition, "practices are systematically extended." Practices are not static but demonstrate advances that are an essential aspect of the practice itself. The practice of medicine has progressed dramatically since the time of Hippocrates, and even since the accomplishments of Christiaan Barnard, yet the practice is still that of medicine and there is a continuity with and appreciation for what preceded. Having a better grasp of MacIntyre's understanding of practice, it is now possible more fully to appreciate another important contribution of *After Virtue*: MacIntyre's definition of virtue as ". . . an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods."[19]

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14. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

15. Ibid. Kallenberg gives several examples: "Building a house is a practice, while taking long showers is not. The game of tennis is a practice, but hitting a backhand is not" (ibid.).

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid. (emphasis in original).

19. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191.

Important Aspects of Virtue Ethics

The influence of MacIntyre's thought will become apparent as our investigation of virtue ethics proceeds. One of the immediate and readily detectable results of MacIntyre's work has been a shift within the entire field of ethics. MacIntyre's emphasis on the classical virtues was eagerly embraced by many who were dissatisfied with the traditional choice between doing ethics either as a deontologist or as a consequentialist. An ethics of duty, or deontology, achieved its clearest articulation in the monumental and enduringly influential work of Immanuel Kant.[20] Affirming the reality and authority of absolutes, deontologists teach that there is a universal duty that one must follow in order to be moral. Utilitarian, or consequentialist, ethicists advocate a decidedly different approach. Represented well by John Stuart Mill, utilitarians discount the existence of absolutes and argue that moral actions are determined not by duty but by what brings the greatest good to the greatest number.[21]

Christian ethics in the recent past typically busied itself with the task of discerning the appropriate interface and emphases within the space marked out by these modern ethical approaches.[22] In Christian circles, the debate hinged on whether theological ethics was better described as doing a duty anchored in the divine nature or as focusing on the extrinsic goal of meeting the needs of others.[23] While questions of duty and utility deservedly retain a place within the dynamic of ethical discussion, the revival of interest in the virtues provides a way around the limits imposed by ethical systems that consider only these two possibilities. Virtue ethics is best seen not as an alternative or third way but, rather, as a wider view of the ethical task, one that encompasses the concerns and contributions of both deontological and utilitarian ethics.

Advocates of virtue ethics regard both deontological ethics and ethics of utility in their usual narrow manifestations as insufficient for the most critical task of ethics. Describing the recent rise of virtue ethics, William

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20. See Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981).

21. The best-known account is Mill's essay "Utilitarianism," first published in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1861. One of many reprints can be found in Steven M. Cahn, ed., *Classics of Western Philosophy*, 5th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999).

22. For a representative contemporary example of this constrained understanding of the purview of ethics, see Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

23. While innumerable examples are available, two roughly contemporaneous representatives could be found in Joseph Fletcher, with his infamous dictum that love for neighbor overrides all else, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who taught that man's task is to live in concert with the will of God as revealed within the structure of creation itself.

Spohn observes that "almost all proponents of virtue ethics consider it more adequate than utilitarianism or neo-Kantianism because it provides a more comprehensive picture of moral experience and stands closer to the issues of ordinary life."[24] Indeed, this is the great strength and attraction of virtue ethics. Trianosky concurs: "Perhaps the most persuasive argument in favor of studying the virtues is simply that they are the stuff of which much of the moralities of everyday life are made."[25] Rather than obsessing over moral quandaries arising out of difficult, though exceptional and rarely encountered, ethical dilemmas, an ethics of virtue concentrates on the development of people who display virtuous character in the mundane routines of ordinary life. Proponents of virtue ethics find little value in plaguing those venturing into the work of ethics with artificial situations that demand a decision, such as the ubiquitous "Should a person lie to save a life?" Those who embrace virtue ethics believe, rather, that it is far more important that students be nurtured by their communities, according to the norms and standards of those communities, into people of virtuous character who will make ethically virtuous decisions in all the ordinary as well as the extraordinary circumstances of life.

Certainly, extraordinary moments of ethical perplexity do arise. Nonetheless, "an ethic of virtue," Gilbert Meilaender observes, "seeks to focus not only on such moments of great anxiety and uncertainty in life but also on the continuities, the habits of behavior which make us the persons we are."[26] Put another way, an ethics of virtue focuses on "being" while traditional ethics of duty or utility tend to focus on "doing." Stanley Hauerwas concurs: "Christian ethics is concerned more with who we are than what we do."[27] He adds, however, a clarification which eliminates any notion that virtue ethics is perhaps unconcerned about questions of behavior: "This is not to suggest that our actions, decisions and choices are unimportant, but rather that the church has a stake in holding together our being and behaving in such a manner that

24. William C. Spohn, "The Return of Virtue Ethics," *Theological Studies* 53 (March 1992): 60.

25. Trianosky, "What Is Virtue Ethics All About?," 342. Hauerwas offers a more basic, if less flattering, explanation for the rise of virtue ethics: "For in effect the paradigm of ethics inherited from Kant has been burdened by so many anomalies, has died the death of so many qualifications, that a new alternative simply needed to be suggested. Thus some may well have been attracted to the emphasis on virtue and character because if offered a relief from boredom." Stanley Hauerwas, "A Retrospective Assessment of an 'Ethics of Character': The Development of Hauerwas's Theological Project (1985, 2001)," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 77.

26. Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 5.

27. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 33.

our doing only can be a reflection of our character."[28] Virtue ethics, then, strives to join the expected ethical questions concerning behavior and choices of right versus wrong with the broader issues of the formation of enduring character and the cultivation of virtue.

Another contribution of ethics centered on virtue is the recognition that an individual's character has much to do with that individual's perception of ethical situations. Put differently, the sort of virtues that shape a person's life will determine how that person thinks about moral questions. One man's paralyzing moral dilemma is another's black-and-white conclusion. One woman's compelling sense of moral obligation is for another a casually dismissed sense of preference. Meilaender notes, "What we ought to do may depend on the sort of person we are. What duties we perceive may depend upon what virtues shape our vision of the world."[29] Those who advocate virtue ethics recognize that it is quite impossible to practice a deontological or a utilitarian ethic without that ethic's being shaped by one's virtues or lack thereof. In fact, whether acknowledged or not, the essential truths of virtue ethics have always been in operation even when the ethical task was assumed to be limited to questions of duty or utility. Contemporary virtue ethics seeks to articulate these broader truths and so enrich the field of ethics and its wider contributions and applications to individuals and society.

Virtue ethics, then, certainly is concerned with, among other things, the promotion and cultivation of virtue. Obviously, however, this is not virtue according to the traditional populist understanding: that peculiar asset of women who have lived chastely and maintained their sexual purity. Neither is the understanding of virtue to be diminished into what Meilaender terms the "cardinal virtues of our time, sincerity and authenticity—in short, being true to oneself."[30] In contrast to a subjective morality of individual autonomy, an ethics of virtue contends that there do exist objective standards for human being, the pursuit of which is encouraged and enhanced by the adoption of virtues. Virtues, then, are significantly more than guidelines for polite human interaction. Virtues "call attention not only to certain basic obligations which we owe each other; they call us out on an endless quest toward the perfection of our being."[31] Virtues direct individuals toward some goal or standard. Meilaender captures the significance of virtues when he calls them "those excellences which help us attain the furthest potentialities of our nature."[32] More

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28. Ibid., 33–34.

29. Ibid.

30. Meilaender, *Theory and Practice*, 4.

31. Ibid., 7.

than "simply dispositions to act in certain ways," virtues are "like skills which suit us for life generally—and still more like traits of character which not only suit us for life but shape our vision of life."[33] Hence, virtue ethics actually encompasses the particular interests and emphases of both deontological and teleological or utilitarian ethics. There are standards grounded in the authority of absolutes, and there is an end or a telos that serves as a goal for human beings.

At first blush, it would seem that those within the church would enthusiastically applaud the rise of virtue ethics. Certainly, virtue ethics appears particularly attractive when considered in the light of the great ethical fad that swept church and society in the latter part of thetwentieth century. Traditional Christian believers found little to admire in the situation ethics of Joseph Fletcher. In Fletcher's hybrid ethics, where one's duty is to do the most loving thing, norms and mores that had been in place for millennia seemed to be carelessly jettisoned and the moral relativity of the culture justified.[34] By comparison, virtue ethics allows church and society to return to an unapologetic affirmation of traditional morality and ethical education. How can the church argue with a movement that produces people of virtuous character, that is, people who live morally decent, upright lives, and who support standards of thinking and acting that can conform even to biblical norms? But, of course, things in the church are not always simple, and the obvious is not always recognized as such. In fact, the church has found a way to argue even with an ethics of virtue.

The Place of Virtue in Christian History

It is worth digressing here for a brief consideration of the history, or what might be seen as the rise and fall, of virtue within the church. The current effort to establish a place for virtue within Christian theology is actually better understood as retrieval rather than innovation. There was a significant period when virtue was encouraged as the superior explication of Christian ethics. In a helpful study, Robert Bast traces virtue's ascendancy to the second century, when Ireneaus contended that Christian ethics excelled Jewish law, even as Jesus exceeded the limits of the Decalogue with his amplifications.[35] In the late sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great advanced the argument by drafting

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32. Ibid., 11. It is not difficult to detect the influence of MacIntyre in Meilaender's definition of virtue.

33. Ibid.

34. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

35. Robert James Bast, *Honor Your Fathers: Catechisms and the Emergence of a Patriarchal Ideology in Germany 1400–1600*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 63, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 33.

an entire moral system based not on the Ten Commandments but on New Testament imperatives. "Culling ethical imperatives and prohibitions almost exclusively from the Gospels, the Epistles, and patristic theology," writes Bast, "Gregory created a patchwork of moral teaching organized into seven virtues and seven vices (or 'deadly sins')."[36] Christian ethics based on the virtues and their corresponding vices held sway in the church for better than half a millennium. Thomas Aquinas contributed to the secure position of the virtues with his own explication of the virtues in the *Summa Theologica* and his affirmation of Aristotelian ethics.[37] Gradually, however, through a combination of factors, the Decalogue regained its place within Christendom. Bast credits Hugh of St. Victor and then Peter Lombard with the beginning of the reemergence of Christian interest in the Commandments.[38] This interest gained momentum in subsequent generations: "Though it [the Decalogue] never entirely replaced the Gregorian system of the virtues and vices, by the fifteenth century it had become the single most popular guide for moral instruction in much of Europe—a position confirmed in the catechetical programs of Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century."[39] Bast attributes the mounting interest in the Decalogue at the time of the Reformation to the unrest and chaos in society. The Commandments were "the intended tonic for a critically ill Christendom . . . a tool to fashion an ordered, godly society."[40]

It is interesting to note that at least through the Reformation period, the Commandments were not perceived as a replacement for the system of virtue. Rather, they could be reckoned as complementary, the Decalogue providing guides for specific behavior, whereas the virtues "generally dealt with feelings rather than actions."[41] The Lutheran reformers, as later chapters will

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36. Ibid., 34. Gregory's vices were: vainglory, envy, anger, melancholy, avarice, gluttony, and lust. Corresponding in number to these vices were the "highest virtues": prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice, faith, hope, and love. (Other "intermediary virtues," such as patience, chastity, humility, etc., were added as necessary specifically to combat the vices.) Peter of Waltham, *Source Book of Self-Discipline: A Synthesis of* Moralia in Job *by Gregory the Great: A Translation of Peter of Waltham's* Remediarium Conversorum, trans. Joseph Gildea, American University Studies Series 7, Theology and Religion 117 (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 86–87, 241–42. The remarkable influence of Gregory's system in subsequent centuries, indeed, even down to the present, provides sufficient argument of its importance. Nevertheless, a more thoroughgoing analysis of his detailed proposal lies beyond the scope of the present investigation.

37. MacIntyre observes that "Aquinas' commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* has never been bettered" (*After Virtue*, 178).

38. Ibid., 35.

39. Ibid., 36.

40. Ibid., 43.

demonstrate, embraced the Commandments yet continued to use the language of virtue. Eventually, however, interest in the system of virtues faded as the Commandments "became the normative guideline for teaching and enforcing morality."[42] The virtues continued their decline, especially within Protestantism, until today's present interest in the virtues is typically perceived as an innovation. While there are relevant historical factors involved in the rise of the Ten Commandments and erosion of the place of the virtues, Josef Pieper supplies perhaps the most convincing explanation for the present displacement of virtue within Christian theology. He candidly observes: "It is true that the classic origins of the doctrine of virtue later made Christian critics suspicious of it. They warily regarded it as too philosophical and not Scriptural enough. Thus, they preferred to talk about commandments and duties rather than about virtues."[43] Writing in the middle of the twentieth century, Pieper sought to overcome that suspicion and offered a compelling case for renewed study and application of the virtues. He was convinced that the pursuit of virtue should be taught and encouraged for the sake of the actual lives and witness of Christian people: "The doctrine of virtue . . . has things to say about this human person; it speaks both of the kind of being which is his when he enters the world, as a consequence of his createdness, and the kind of being he ought to strive toward and attain to—by being prudent, just, brave, and temperate."[44] That others agree with Pieper accounts for what has come today to be known as virtue ethics. It was a time of cultural and civil crisis that brought a resurgence of interest in the Commandments before and during the Reformation. Perhaps the same motivations are driving the call for a return of virtue. There yet remain, though, a few crucial theological factors that may very well militate against a Lutheran endorsement of virtue. And in arriving at those factors, we have, of course, arrived at a central focus of this book's argument.

The Lutheran Dilemma

While churchly supporters of virtue ethics such as Josef Pieper are increasingly common, a more considered evaluation quickly raises some fundamental concerns. In the minds of some Christians, Lutherans in particular, the idea of cultivating virtues is tied too closely to popular notions of self-fulfillment.[45]

41. Ibid., 44.

42. Ibid., 45.

43. Pieper, *Four Cardinal Virtues*, xi.

44. Ibid., xii.

45. See, for example, Ivar Asheim, "Lutherische Tugendethik?," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 40 (1998): 239–60.

People who achieve a state of virtue, it is thought, are people who have arrived at self-realization, and efforts at self-realization hardly seem compatible with the New Testament's teaching of self-sacrifice. Virtue ethics could be charged with complicity in the creation of the very egocentric, self-serving individuals so prevalent in contemporary culture over which the Christian church typically and loudly laments. Meilaender clearly articulates a perhaps even greater concern: "Furthermore, the very notion of character seems to suggest—has suggested at least since Aristotle—habitual behavior, abilities within our power, an acquired possession. And this in turn may be difficult to reconcile with the Christian emphasis on grace, the sense of the sinner's constant need of forgiveness, and the belief that we can have no claims upon the freedom of God."[46] Could it be that virtue ethics actually promotes the most damnable and dangerous of all enemies of Christian truth: self-righteous legalism? Indeed, doesn't any emphasis on behavior and virtuous character run the risk of advancing the works righteousness that seems always to lurk just outside the door of orthodoxy?

These are weighty questions for any heir of the Reformation. For Lutherans in particular, the tenets of virtue ethics can arouse substantial theological concerns. An ethics of virtue elevates the pursuit of character and extols the practice of habituation as an integral aid in the cultivation of character. Of course, these were central concepts in the Scholastic theology against which the reformers fought with such vehemence. In fact, a favorite teacher of many virtue ethicists is none other than Thomas Aquinas, the oft-quoted and misquoted patron of many of the Scholastics whose works righteousness the reformers found reprehensible. Luther, and the reformers who bore his name after him, placed the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone at the heart and center of their theology. Anything that threatened this doctrine was to be resisted and rejected. Of course, the actual practice of applying this central article of the faith while still encouraging a life of Christian obedience led to significant debates within Lutheranism even during Luther's life and certainly after his death. Nevertheless, the legacy of that article by which the church stands or falls continues to provide the essential shape of Lutheran doctrine and practice today. And some would conclude that this legacy does not allow for the kind of emphases found in virtue ethics.

At the risk of stating the obvious, it is certainly a very good thing that the free gospel of forgiveness is held dear as the definitive message and work of the church. It is to their credit that Lutherans teach the doctrine of justification

46. Meilaender, *Theory and Practice*, 6.

with great zeal and devotion. But does this legitimate priority of promoting and defending the central teaching of the church render impossible any meaningful appropriation of the benefits of virtue ethics? It is not without cause that jokes about the Lutheran reluctance or perhaps inability to handle theological ethics continue to abound.[47] There is enough truth behind the in-house and classroom comedy, however, that it can be rightly classed as gallows humor. Lutheranism's arguably infamous detachment from ethics has prompted a number of contemporary critics to voice their concern over the apparent failure of Lutheranism to articulate a significant place for the ethical task within the work of the church.[48] *Ethical task* here refers not to questions of social action, moral management of new technologies, or guidance in making difficult decisions in borderline situations. The ethical task that seems too often beyond the grasp of Lutheran theologians and thinkers is the fundamental, altogether practical, work of providing concrete guidance and intentional shape to the routine Christian life. Bill Bennett, a politically savvy Roman Catholic, can do it, but can Lutheran pastors and people do it?

There are some who would conclude that they cannot. Surprisingly, or maybe not so surprisingly, there are some even from within the Lutheran community who question the ability of Lutherans to provide a compelling account of the Christian life and the ethics that describe that life. One of the clearest articulations of the Lutheran failure to handle the concerns of ethics, however, comes from the pen of a Methodist named Stanley Hauerwas.

An Introduction to Stanley Hauerwas and His Work

A brief consideration of the work of Stanley Hauerwas actually serves a twofold purpose within the scope of this discussion. Not only does an examination of Hauerwas yield an increased understanding of the challenge that virtue ethics poses to some contemporary interpretations of Lutheran doctrine, but as a recognized representative of virtue-centered ethics, Hauerwas provides a fuller grasp of the concerns and contributions of virtue ethics. Hauerwas is the Gilbert T. Rowe Professor Emeritus of Divinity and Law at Duke Divinity School.

47. A case in point is the introduction of a speech Gilbert Meilaender delivered to fellow Lutherans: "The letter of invitation . . . asked that I 'point with pride to some past Lutheran accomplishments' in the field of ethics and that I speak for about an hour. Taken together, of course, these requests might be thought to constitute a rather difficult assignment, but the letter bore no traces of irony, nor did it even hint that to combine 'Lutheran ethics' and 'accomplishments' might be what the logicians call a *contradictio in adjecto*." Gilbert Meilaender, "The Task of Lutheran Ethics," *Lutheran Forum* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 17.

48. Representative voices will be considered in the chapter that follows.

Through his teaching and writing career, he has gained the deserved reputation as one of the prominent spokespersons of contemporary virtue ethics. John Berkman identifies him as "a seminal figure in the 'recovery of virtue' in theological ethics."[49] Nancey Murphy recognizes that "there has been a sea change in *Christian* ethics, due largely but not exclusively to the prolific Stanley Hauerwas."[50] Hauerwas is of further specific interest in relation to the scope of this book, however, in that he directly addresses the apparent inability of Lutheran doctrine to handle the necessary questions of growth in virtue and character development.

Not a clergyman, Hauerwas nevertheless regularly contends, with some justification it seems, that he is more theologian than ethicist. "I am a Christian theologian who teaches ethics," he writes, adding, "Being a theologian has become a habit for me that I cannot nor do I wish to break. I am also an ethicist, but I do not make much of that claim."[51] Early in his academic career, Hauerwas characterized his own "central concern" as the "task of finding the most appropriate means to articulate how Christians have understood, and do and should understand, the relationship between Christ and the moral life."[52] In words that have proven to be normative for his subsequent career, Hauerwas described his work and its emphasis: "I have tried to reclaim and to develop the significance of character and virtue for the moral life. Character is the category that marks the fact that our lives are not constituted by decisions, but rather the moral quality of our lives is shaped by the ongoing orientation formed in and through our beliefs, stories and intentions."[53] This is indeed a precise description of Hauerwas's work and, it should be noted, of virtue ethics itself. Raised a Methodist, Hauerwas earned his doctoral degree at Yale and taught at Notre Dame before making the move to Duke. Confirming in his own life his insistence on the crucial significance of one's community in the shaping of character, Hauerwas's work amply evidences the influence of each

49. Quoted in John Berkman, "An Introduction to *The Hauerwas Reader*," in Berkman and Cartwright, eds., *The Hauerwas Reader*, 3.

50. Nancey Murphy, "Introduction," in Murphy, Kallenberg, and Nation, eds., *Virtues & Practices*, 1. "Prolific" accurately describes the work of Hauerwas: "He has authored or edited over thirty books and well over three hundred and fifty scholarly articles." Berkman, "An Introduction," 3.

51. Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 201.

52. Stanley Hauerwas, "The Ethicist as Theologian," *The Christian Century* 92 (April 1975): 409. Decades later, Hauerwas confirmed his contention: "Given the nature of my subsequent work, I think it is apparent my primary agenda was and always has been theological." Hauerwas, "A Retrospective Assessment," 79.

53. Hauerwas, "Ethicist as Theologian," 411.

of these communities.[54] Throughout the scores of published essays and books that bear his name, several themes consistently appear and reappear. Naturally, as an ethicist, Hauerwas is compelled to address some of the pressing ethical quandaries of the day including abortion, homosexuality, and the breakdown of the family. His impassioned advocacy of many traditionally conservative causes has led some to label him accordingly. Though Hauerwas does regularly occupy positions in sympathy with those of more conservative Christians, he defies easy categorization.

Always near the forefront of Hauerwas's practical concerns is an appeal for Christian pacifism, or as he usually refers to it, nonviolence. Hauerwas consistently advocates the standard of thoroughgoing nonviolence for God's people and church.[55] Hauerwas also regularly returns to the question of people with handicaps and the tremendous importance and significance of their being welcomed into Christian families and communities.[56] Finally, another representative issue occurring with some regularity in Hauerwas's corpus is a deep suspicion of the modern capitalistic, democratic nation-state. While Hauerwas is no Marxist, he has concerns about the Enlightenment-formed foundation that underlies the American experiment.[57] Throughout all of his occasional writing, however, the recurrent and foundational themes are the ones staked out in 1975: the importance of virtue and character. Nancey Murphy concurs that these are the central aspects of Hauerwas's efforts: "Hauerwas tends to talk about Christian morality in terms of *narratives* and *community, virtue* and *character*."[58] The twofold emphasis on virtue and character is joined with the pair, narrative and community, which receive particular emphasis in his discussions on church and theology.

Making good on his own self-categorization, Hauerwas demonstrates an able competence in facing the challenges that the discipline of theology poses. Trained at Yale by, among others, Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, Hauerwas reflects common postliberal ideals such as the importance of the community

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54. Not surprisingly, Hauerwas is quite candid about the various influences that shaped him theologically and ethically. See, for example, his "On What I Owe to Whom" in Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, xix–xxv.

55. For example, see his discussion connecting the resurrection of Christ to "the establishment of a kingdom of forgiveness and peace," in Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 87–91.

56. Stanley Hauerwas, with Richard Bondi and David B. Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 147–56.

57. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 72–86.

58. Murphy, "Introduction," 1 (emphasis in original).

in shaping individuals and the centrality of narrative in theology. These are themes that have been present in his work from the beginning. As he began his career, he wrote of his hope that the church would "stand as an alternative society that manifests in its own social and political life the way in which a people form themselves when truth and charity rather than survival are their first order of business."[59] In *Resident Aliens*, his only book aimed specifically at a popular audience, Hauerwas and co-author William Willimon write: "The challenge of Jesus is the political dilemma of how to be faithful to a strange community, which is shaped by a story of how God is with us."[60] Here both themes coalesce. The church is political in a broad sense in that it is about people gathered together in community or *polis*. For Hauerwas, the community in which a person should be shaped and formed in character is none other than the church, and that community should be shaped in turn by its faithful commitment to the story of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels.

Hauerwas closely binds these twin concerns of narrative and community in other places as well. In *A Community of Character*, "the primary task of the church," he tells us, "is to be itself—that is, a people who have been formed by a story that provides them with the skills for negotiating the danger of this existence trusting God's promise of redemption.[61] This is such a prominent aspect of Hauerwas's work that it would be difficult to overemphasize it. In yet another place, he states his position this way: "The nature of Christian ethics is determined by the fact that Christian convictions take the form of a story, or perhaps better, a set of stories that constitutes a tradition, which in turn creates and forms a community."[62] It is this emphasis on the creating and norming narrative of the church that guides Hauerwas to his critique of the way that Lutheran doctrine too frequently approaches questions of virtue and character formation. Hauerwas is convinced that ethics must be intimately bound to the doctrinal task of the church. He is also convinced that Lutheranism has too often shown itself ill-suited for achieving and maintaining such a union.

Hauerwas's Critique of Lutheranism

It is important to recognize that the essence of Hauerwas's critique of Lutheran doctrinal practice springs from his commitment to the narrative nature of

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59. Hauerwas, "Ethicist as Theologian," 411.

60. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 30.

61. Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 10.

62. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 24.

the Christian faith. In other words, Hauerwas contends that one must look at the Christian life not as two parts, namely what a Christian believes and what a Christian does. Instead, as Hauerwas sees it, what a Christian believes and what a Christian does are so thoroughly interrelated and interdependent as to be indistinguishable. This is what he means when he says, as he often does, that ethics and doctrine must be bound together: "Theological claims are fundamentally practical and Christian ethics is but that form of theological reflection which attempts to explicate this inherently practical nature."[63] Christian doctrine and Christian ethics should not, then, be divided into two separate disciplines. They are equally significant and interdependent aspects of one unified story. Hauerwas insists that the division between ethics and doctrine, so commonplace in contemporary Christianity, was not always so: "Once there was no Christian ethics simply because Christians could not distinguish between their beliefs and their behavior. They assumed that their lives exemplified (or at least should exemplify) their doctrines in a manner that made division between life and doctrine impossible."[64] This is not to say that it is impossible or imprudent to distinguish at times between theology and ethics. "The task of the theologian," Hauerwas explains, "is not to deny that for certain limited purposes ethics can be distinguished from theology, but to reject their supposed ontological and practical independence."[65] Hauerwas takes sharp issue, therefore, with seminary curricula that require the completion of systematic theology as prerequisites for courses on ethics. "In such a context theology begins to look like a 'metaphysics' on which one must get straight before you can turn to questions of ethics."[66] This alienation between theology and ethics, Hauerwas believes, leads to the diminution of both. Theology becomes increasingly theoretical and removed from the practicalities of Christian living. Ethics, in turn, struggles to find a ground that lends it legitimacy and significance in the life of the church.

As Hauerwas sees it, a combination of factors contributed to this unfortunate divorce between theology and ethics. A chief culprit was the Enlightenment, which eroded confidence in Christian truth-claims and left theologians trying "to secure the ongoing meaningfulness of Christian convictions by anchoring them in anthropological generalizations and/or turning them into ethics."[67] Put another way, "enlightened" theologians felt

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63. Ibid., 54.

64. Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them*, 20.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 32.

67. Ibid., 30.

compelled to abandon the embarrassingly exclusive propositional claims of Christianity and embraced instead the more palatable and sophisticated pursuit of humanity's assumed common ethical foundation. But it is not just the Enlightenment that is to blame for the disastrous bifurcation between doctrine and ethics that typically leaves ethics shrouded in a cloud of suspicion. Hauerwas also finds fault with the Reformation itself:

> Yet the polemical terms of the Reformation could not help but reshape how ethics was conceived in relation to theology. Faith, not works, determines the Christian's relationship to God. Moreover works became associated with 'ethics,' particularly as ethics was alleged to be the way sinners attempt to secure their standing before God as a means of avoiding complete dependence on God's grace. So for Protestants the Christian life is now characterized in such a way that there always exists a tension between law and grace.[68]

It should be noted, though, that Hauerwas does not credit this division with Luther. He insists, "Neither Luther or [sic] Calvin distinguished between theology and ethics," and offers Luther's treatise "The Freedom of a Christian" as his evidence.[69] The rift between theology and its practical form demonstrated in the Christian life, what we commonly call ethics, came about, ironically enough, when a zeal to guard the Reformation's central doctrine led subsequent reformers into positions eschewed by the very forebears credited with the doctrine's rediscovery.[70]

Hauerwas indulges in historical consideration not for its own sake. He does it only to reinforce his case that things are not now as they once were—or should be. Always, his concern is with the contemporary situation. He decries the ongoing failure of Christians to rectify the unwarranted division between theological truth and the ethical task. He levels his complaint against Protestantism in general and sharpens his thrust with a specific rebuke of contemporary Lutheranism. Lutheranism, he alleges, is particularly culpable for perpetuating the estrangement between ethics and theology. Presumably, Hauerwas is acquainted with a number of theologians who might be considered Lutheran. However, it is Gilbert Meilaender and his work that receive particular consideration in Hauerwas's essays. Since Meilaender is one of the few Lutheran

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68. Ibid., 27.

69. Ibid.

70. The teaching of the reformers, particularly Philip Melanchthon, will receive greater attention in chs. 3 and 4.

ethicists writing in support of virtue ethics, it is reasonable that Hauerwas would choose to interact with him. Further, Meilaender specifically addresses the relation of ethics to theology, providing Hauerwas ready material for evaluation. In at least two separate essays, Hauerwas takes up Meilaender's argument and considers its merit. It is prudent, therefore, to offer a brief overview of Meilaender's position as critiqued by Hauerwas.[71]

The Christian life, as Meilaender describes it in one of his early essays, may be pictured as both dialogue and journey. According to the dialogue paradigm, the Christian life is a movement back and forth between the two words of God: law and gospel. The law condemns and convicts, driving the despairing believer into the gospel. Comforted and confident in the wake of the gospel encounter, the believer is freed to return to the law—only to be crushed again and so driven back once more to the gospel. And so it goes: back and forth, back and forth. "On this model," observes Meilaender, "there can be no notion of progress in righteousness; for righteousness is purely relational in character."[72] Before God, *coram Deo*, this is precisely the way that Christians experience life. Yet, this is but half the picture.

The Christian life, Meilaender argues, can also be understood as a journey, that is, "the process by which God graciously transforms a sinner into a saint, as a pilgrimage (always empowered by grace) toward fellowship with God."[73] In this image, the Christian life is aiming at a particular goal. It is going *some*where, not just back and forth. Both portrayals have their strengths and weaknesses. Both testify to critical aspects of the Christian's life. Both find support in Scripture. Both, Meilaender insists, must be kept in tension in the Christian life: "The tension between these two pictures of the Christian life cannot be overcome, nor should we try to overcome it."[74] Hauerwas, however, is unconvinced and takes exception to Meilaender's Lutheran argument: "This strikes me as what a good Lutheran should say—namely, that it is crucial to keep the two metaphors in dialectical tension so that the full range of Christian existence coram deo is before us. But I am not a good Lutheran, and I want to argue that the metaphor of the journey is and surely should be the primary one for articulating the shape of Christian existence and living."[75] Concerned that "Meilaender's faithful Lutheranism" extends, and indeed exacerbates, the

71. Meilaender and his work will be examined more thoroughly in ch. 2.

72. Gilbert Meilaender, "The Place of Ethics in the Theological Task," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 6 (1979): 200.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid., 210.

75. Hauerwas, "A Retrospective Assessment," 87.

unfortunate divide between doctrine and ethics, Hauerwas presents a vision of the Christian life that joins Meilaender's two separate paradigms into one unified portrayal. From Hauerwas's perspective, Meilaender's Lutheranism is no small part of his problem. "Meilaender's account of dialogue is too Lutheran for me," Hauerwas avers. "After all, a dialogue can be an ongoing conversation in which one can certainly make progress."[76] Hauerwas is dissatisfied with the seemingly endless circularity of Meilaender's account of dialogue and sees an emphasis on the journey metaphor as the way to escape what he sees as a stultifying cul-de-sac. "The metaphor of dialogue only makes sense as a necessary and continuing part of the journey."[77] For Hauerwas, the truth of the Christian's forgiveness through Christ's life and resurrection belongs to the overall narrative of the Christian's life. What Lutherans name as justification, in distinction from sanctification, Hauerwas makes a part of (and a normative part of) the journey that is the Christian's story as it is lived in relation to Christ's story.

Hauerwas frankly admits that his concentration on the metaphor of journey, including his move to subsume the dialogue metaphor—and with it the doctrine of justification—within that journey image, may well be misconstrued. Writing with Charles Pinches, he concedes, "We no doubt appear to leave justification behind in emphasizing sanctification and the virtues it makes available."[78] Determined to dispel this appearance, however, Hauerwas strives to demonstrate that the Christian's forgiveness is at once the beginning as well as the context for the journey that describes the Christian's life: "Suppose we fix on what is perhaps the most rudimentary notion of justification imaginable: by justification we are made just before God. As Paul makes plain, something decisive has occurred in Jesus that has changed our status as God sees us. Put this way, we can see that 'justification' begs for narrative display: what we were before, what are we now, and where is this change taking us?"[79] Far from negating the importance of justification, Hauerwas seeks to impart particular prominence to justification by considering it within an eschatological context. "Paul's emphasis upon justification, and virtually all else he says," according to Hauerwas, "is incomprehensible apart from his eschatology."[80] It is the Christian's life, his eschatologically oriented journey, which becomes the

76. Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them*, 127.

77. Ibid.

78. Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 116.

79. Ibid., 117.

80. Ibid., 118.

"narrative display" or the concrete shape of his justification, even when this is understood in a strictly forensic sense.

This emphasis on eschatology, pointing to the telos of the Christian narrative, bolsters Hauerwas's case for the sufficiency of the journey motif, without recourse to Meilaender's separate dialogue paradigm. "The metaphor of dialogue," Hauerwas argues, "only makes sense as a necessary and continuing part of the journey."[81] For Hauerwas, the truth of the sinner's justification before God is contained within and illuminated by the idea of growth or journey: "We can grow in Christian virtue, yet it is best to describe this as growth in grace, whose hallmark is forgiveness."[82] For Hauerwas, this growth, naturally, is bound up in eschatological reality: "If we refuse to be forgiven, we grow neither in virtue nor in grace. . . . Our acceptance of forgiveness is the means by which our souls are expanded so that we can hope. Through hope we learn to endure suffering, confident that God has given us the character faithfully to inhabit the story of the redemption of all creation, of which we are part."[83] Dialogue or justification, and journey or sanctification, thus blend into a single narrated account. Seen from Hauerwas's viewpoint, then, Meilaender's portrayal of two distinct paradigms is not a helpful way of considering the Christian life, but an unnecessary and unhappy division that perpetuates the disastrous divorce between theology and ethics.

Hauerwas is insistent on the necessity of overcoming Meilaender's tension between dialogue and journey because of his conviction that ethics and doctrine, or practice and belief, must not be driven into separate corners. He charges that Meilaender's (and Lutheranism's?) approach needlessly supports precisely this separation. "The problem," Hauerwas explains, "is that when either justification or sanctification becomes an independent theological notion something has gone wrong."[84] The correction of this wrong turn is a consistent concern of Hauerwas and motivates his criticism of Meilaender's Lutheranism. In *The Peaceable Kingdom,* Hauerwas explicitly expresses the importance of adopting a structuring horizon for the Christian life wider than the maintenance of perpetual tension. This is perhaps his clearest articulation of the relationship between justification and sanctification, and so demands careful attention:

81. Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them*, 127.

82. Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues*, 128.

83. Ibid.

84. Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them*, 127. As subsequent chapters will indicate, this is a statement that many Lutherans would willingly affirm.

> For the language of "sanctification" and "justification" is not meant
> to be descriptive of a status. Indeed, part of the problem with those
> terms is that they are abstractions. When they are separated from
> Jesus' life and death, they distort Christian life. "Sanctification" is but
> a way of reminding us of the kind of journey we must undertake if
> we are to make the story of Jesus our story. "Justification" is but a
> reminder of the character of that story—namely, what God has done
> for us by providing us with a path to follow.[85]

The essential ideas of justification (what God does for us) and sanctification
(our response of holy living) are retained, but Hauerwas places both in the
wider context of a narrated theology. The Christian life is not understood
as a tension between theology and ethics, or between dialogue and journey.
Christianity, as Hauerwas sees it, is as wonderful and as simple as the Christian
learning to make his story part of Jesus' story. Justification and sanctification are
merely components of that wider frame.[86] Accepting as the norming horizon
an irresolvable tension between dialogue and journey or between doctrine and
ethics, Hauerwas would charge, leads inevitably to an ethics set adrift and
consequently a lackluster interest in the cultivation of virtue and character
formation.

    Recognizing the significance of this point of doctrine, Hauerwas has
considered it more than once. A thorough summary of his distinctive
theological position appears in *The Hauerwas Reader* and provides a fitting last
word on this discussion:

> I am aware that my claim for the priority of the journey metaphor
> for the display of the Christian life can only reinforce the suspicion of
> some that I have abandoned the central Christian contention of the
> priority of God's grace. I know of no way in principle to calm such
> fears. Moreover I am aware it is not sufficient to claim, as I have here
> and elsewhere, that I have no intention of qualifying the necessity
> of God's grace for the beginning, living, and end of the Christian

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85. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 94.

86. Obviously, many Lutheran as well as other theologians would take exception to Hauerwas's
definition of justification and the inclusion of justification within the journey imagery. The Lutheran
concerns with Hauerwas's teaching on justification are considered more fully in the next chapter. For
now, it is sufficient to suggest that from a Lutheran perspective justification might better be understood
as the fact that the reality of Jesus' story before, and outside of, the believer is wholly sufficient for that
believer's eschatological acquittal, entirely independent of the believer's own subsequent efforts to live the
story.

life. What I hope is now clear, however, is that I refuse to think the only or best way to depict the priority of God's grace is in terms of the dialogue metaphor. This has certainly been the dominant mode among Protestants, but exactly because it has been so, we have had difficulty articulating our sense of the reality of and growth in the Christian life.[87]

Conclusion

Virtue ethics, it seems, poses a significant challenge to Lutheran theology. Lutheranism's proclivity for tension and duality is well known and readily documented. Equally recognized is Lutheranism's typical ambivalence toward issues of ethics, as it seems to prefer instead an emphasis on the church's central article of justification. Appearances notwithstanding, however, the intent of this book is to demonstrate that virtue ethics and Lutheranism are in fact altogether compatible. Contemporary virtue ethics has much to contribute to the Lutheran church of today, and reciprocally, the field known as virtue ethics can learn important lessons from Lutheranism. Of course, a Lutheranism ready both to receive from and to contribute to an ethics of virtue will likely look substantially different from the one Hauerwas recognizes. Interestingly, the portrayal of Lutheranism I will offer may also be altogether unfamiliar to some of those who today bear the reformer's name. It is hoped, however, that while the account of Lutheran theology presented here may appear foreign to certain contemporary manifestations and understandings of Lutheranism, it will nevertheless prove to be one that the reformers themselves would have readily recognized. As the reformers knew and taught, there is a place within Lutheran theology for ethics. Today, that place can be filled remarkably well by ethics that focus on the cultivation of character and the promotion of the virtues. Before that case is made, though, some time should be spent listening to a few notable representative voices within contemporary Lutheranism.

87. Hauerwas, "A Retrospective Assessment," 88.