Introduction

Following familiar paths, the liturgy has led the congregation on its weekly journey from invocation, through confession and absolution, prayer, Scripture, and hymns to the sermon. The pastor enters the pulpit with a sense of eagerness, ready to deliver a stirring and strong homily rich with solid doctrine, in tune with the season of the church and the world, scripturally accurate, and overflowing with magnificent gospel proclamation. The final feat will be no small accomplishment, especially considering his text for the day. Adhering to a self-imposed commitment to preach through an entire book of the Bible, the pastor's experiment in serial preaching has saddled him with a particularly difficult challenge from the latter part of Paul's letter to the Colossians:

> Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart. Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. (Col. 3:18-25, NASB)

Bound to a text focused entirely on right behavior within human relationships, a text that is brimming with what any reader would immediately recognize as ethical or moral directives and admonitions, the pastor nevertheless manages to save the sermon. That is, he transforms the ethical directions and encouragements from Paul into withering convictions of human sinfulness resolved in the gospel of grace. Paul's moral instruction is overcome by the pastor's assurance of forgiveness for his listeners' failures to be what they should be in their relationships. Against the odds, against the text itself, the pastor manages to salvage an otherwise dangerously moralistic text.

The congregation reaches the end of the sermon with its pastor and breathes a silent sigh of relief, having been assured that Paul's words about submission, obedience, sacrifice, service, rewards, and consequences within their most personal relationships are meant only to expose human inability and sin and their own crying need for God's forgiveness, which the sermon amply supplies. The hearers, then, are freed by the gospel from actually having to follow Paul's direction. Of course, there is an implicit expectation that God's good news should make some difference in their lives, but that's all left rather vague and unspecified—by intention. So the people return home still wondering what to do about the concrete realities and problems that have been plaguing them all week. The weary wife whose newly hired attorney will file on Monday her petition for divorce has heard again how impossible it is to have an "idealistic" biblical marriage, but takes solace in the assurance that there is always forgiveness. At hearing the Scripture read, the father with the petulant daughter began to consider what it might mean to "exasperate" his child but was dissuaded from the exercise, convinced by the sermon that the Bible isn't supposed to provide practical direction for modern problems like rearing a fifteen-year-old. For her part, when she heard the text read, the daughter shot a glance across the nave toward her family's usual place in the pews and wondered with a pang of guilt what it would be like actually to obey her parents in everything. But, like her father, she was restored by the preaching to the status-quo position that once one has grace, the specifics about what is right and wrong are determined by pragmatics and individual human hearts. After all, a book that endorses slavery can't have anything relevant to say to the world of the twenty-first century.

The problem is not the gospel. This must be understood. The imaginary pastor deftly preaching through the moralistic minefield of Paul's admonitions to the Colossians was not wrong to deliver the good news of the forgiveness of sins—all sins—through God's gift of the gospel. Indeed, the pastor was successfully accomplishing exactly what his education had trained him to do. He preached the forgiveness of sins, even when the text itself did not preach it. The gospel is central and is the unique message of the Christian faith. It deserves a prominent and permanent place in the preaching of the church. The problem is not the gospel. The problem is when the preaching of the gospel leaves no room for anything else. The problem is when the gospel is made to trump the call for a certain way of life on the part of God's people. The problem is when those who hear Christian preaching conclude that morality is a matter of personal preference and individual interpretation. The problem is

when the preaching of the church undermines and even eliminates any place for the teaching of morality.

For some, the word *morality* may conjure uncomfortable and unwelcome visions and feelings, but it is simply the description of the way that a life is normed or shaped. For a Christian, morality means being formed according to the way that Christians live. But, of course, to state things so simply is to beg the question about whether or not such a thing as Christian morality actually exists. And in recognizing that such a question exists, we move considerably closer to the basic problem and the reason for this book. An emphatic and unapologetic concentration on the declaration of free forgiveness for the sake of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a hallmark of Christian faith—but it can also lead to a denigration and dismissal of any concrete or specific articulation of the way of life for Christians. In the name of "gospel freedom," it is sometimes insisted that the only acceptable norm for the Christian is the gospel of love, and that any attempt to spell out more clearly the content of that love is a faithless capitulation to morality and works righteousness. One purpose of this book is to consider this problem as a theological problem. Indeed, in the pages that follow, I will argue that the flight from ethics evident among some Christians is the outworking of a mistake in understanding the place of the gospel. It is a theological mistake. Complicating the situation exponentially is that this theological mistake is perpetrated in the context of an increasingly amoral society that has been made incapable of doing any meaningful moral reflection.

The extent to which the thinking of academics actually shapes the attitudes and actions of a culture is an old debate. Some see those in the "ivory tower" as irrelevant and insignificant. Others assume a slow and incomplete, yet inexorable, impact as the thoughts and paradigms of great thinkers trickle down into the everyday lives of citizens who live far from the halls of academia. While making no claim to be a shaper of society, Alasdair MacIntyre has proven to be a keen observer of the trajectories of Western thinking and a reliable teacher about the impact of such thinking on ordinary life. In the brief first chapter of his book *After Virtue*, MacIntyre skillfully employs an extended illustration of an imaginary displacement from and then reintroduction of natural science to common life and the subsequent absurdities and tragedies imposed on the society. His argument, however, is not about science and imaginary worlds: ". . . in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I have described. . . . we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension both theoretical and practical, of morality."[1]

Publishing his text in 1984, MacIntyre had to address the fact that what he was presenting as an epic catastrophe, the defeat of "the language and practice of morality," was an event unrecognizable to all but a few.[2] He makes his case by arguing that, since academic history did not begin until after the catastrophe had already occurred, it would be unaware of the event and would actually be subject to the very problem itself. Thirty years later, it seems that the number of those aware of the catastrophe, or at least its ramifications, has increased significantly, perhaps in no small part because of MacIntyre's work. In 2000, James Davison Hunter was already chronicling this new interest in the morality of the American people: "There is much talk these days about the character of America and its people. A great deal of it is laced with anxiety."[3] Thus a new phenomenon arose, the "values industry." "Its premise is simple enough: if a tide of moral decadence is overtaking American society, then we must stem that tide by cultivating virtue and character among its people, especially among young people."[4] But Hunter is more than pessimistic about the possibility that such an industry might find success. He supports the declaration of his book's title, *The Death of Character*, with a "Postmortem" that precedes the book's introduction. The Postmortem begins: "Character is dead. Attempts to revive it will yield little. Its time has passed."[5] Hunter's book nicely complements MacIntyre's work. *After Virtue* provides the academic and intellectual history of the fall of morality and character in Western society, and *The Death of Character* provides the account of the more recent attempts and inevitable failure to revive and teach morality and character. Hunter concludes his Postmortem with a series of observations that capture perfectly the situation in which we who live in twenty-first-century America now find ourselves:

> We say we want a renewal of character in our day but we don't really know what we ask for. To have a renewal of character is to have a renewal of a creedal order that constrains, limits, binds, obligates, and compels. This price is too high for us to pay. We want character but without unyielding conviction; we want strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt or shame; we want virtue

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 2.

2. Ibid., 3.

3. James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 3.

4. Ibid., 4.

5. Ibid., xiii.

but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist upon it; we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms that we want it.[6]

So, what's the point? What does the degradation of American moral culture and individual character have to do with the problem of Christian preaching so zealous to shun any hint of moralism that it willfully ignores a scriptural text and leaves its hearers without ethical direction? How does the problem of morality's collapse relate to the problem of impractical preaching? Most obviously, the moral wilderness of the Western world provides the context within which preaching occurs. In other words, those who listen to the preaching and are shaped by the teaching of the contemporary Christian church in America inhabit a world in which morality has little meaning and even less content. At the risk of sounding alarmist, this situation continues to degenerate for all the reasons that MacIntyre and Hunter so convincingly present. Those who listen to Christian preaching do not live in a vacuum, and the world handicapped by an inability to speak authoritatively about issues of morality has a profound effect on the average listener—whether or not he or the preacher realizes it. Simply put, Christians in America are not being positively shaped into having lives of basic morality and noble character merely by being a participant in the wider culture. Quite the opposite is the case. This is the context within which preaching occurs, and preachers must take care not to ignore this context.

Considering the present dearth of character and absence of ethical moorings, it might seem self-evident that a clear solution lies ready at hand: simply provide preaching and teaching within the church that will shape character and teach morality. This obvious and innocent suggestion brings us back to the driving concern of this book, because such preaching and teaching is precisely the thing that cannot happen. It is simply ruled out, as illustrated by this chapter's imaginary preacher who carefully crafted a sermon that left his congregation without ethical direction. There is a theological barrier that prohibits such a possibility; at least in some corners of the church today, there is such a barrier. The imaginary pastor inhabits such a corner; so do many people in my own denomination, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). The objective of this book is to address this theological barrier, to expose it, and then, more importantly, to overcome it. The hope is that once freed from mistaken theological notions, the church—even those corners now afflicted

6. Ibid., xv.

by an apparent aversion to morality—could actually do what it is uniquely positioned to do: it could provide a setting for the inculcation of morality and the formation of character that can work. All those essential ingredients for morality that Hunter details, ingredients summarily rejected by the wider society yet ingredients without which character can neither be taught nor sustained, are present—indeed, are held precious—in the church. The church is perfectly poised to be a place of remarkable relevance in the world because the church is capable of producing the people of character and moral conviction that society desperately needs. But this cannot happen until the theological problem is addressed.

For those who empathize with my imaginary preacher and who share his concern about the threat of moralism, what I have been suggesting is likely to cause genuine concern and a compelling urge to toss this text aside with a dismissive declaration, "Legalist!" Or the reader may be tempted to pronounce a yet more damning condemnation and invoke the withering charge of pietism. The temptation or urge to dismiss my argument out of hand is, of course, exactly the problem that this book seeks to address. For too many, it is assumed that when morality enters, the gospel is displaced; this is the upshot of the muddled theological thinking that will be the focus of the investigation presented in the following pages. It will take some time for the case to unfold, which will require the reader's patience. I hope that such patience will be granted—and I hope that it will not be disappointed. Suggesting a place for morality and character formation within the church does not necessitate a corresponding loss of the gospel in the church's preaching and teaching. Assertions cannot stand alone, of course, and it is my purpose to substantiate this claim and dispel the fears of those who treasure the gospel of free grace above all. I include myself among that number. Nothing matters more than the clear proclamation of the forgiveness won by Christ and delivered in his church. Justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone remains the church's central doctrine and *raison d'être*. It is not, however, the only thing that the church can do or is called to do.

While those who occupy our pews and listen to sermons may have grown to expect the concerns and challenges of their mundane existences to be all but ignored by preachers intent on doing one thing and assiduously avoiding anything that might compromise that one thing, they are nevertheless being ill served. Faced with the relentless barrage of life's trials and woes, people certainly need the undiluted balm of the gospel's comfort and assurance. Yet, faced with those same trials and woes, people certainly also need the challenging and directing standard of bona fide Christian ethics. People need practical answers

to their utterly practical concerns. This is the province of Christian ethics. Rightly understood, Christian ethics is not so much concerned with end-of-life questions or societal justice as it is with simply teaching what it means to live the Christian life. As the argument develops in the chapters that follow, much consideration will be given to those who have made similar observations about the state of the contemporary Christian church, particularly its Lutheran manifestation and the role of ethics within that church. Two of the most important thinkers, however, provide interesting corroboration of the thesis that the church, even extending well beyond its instantiation in the LCMS, is marked today by a distinct distaste for questions of ethics. Stanley Hauerwas, who will be more fully introduced in the chapter that follows, observes that in the church today, "no matter how sincerely many believe what it is they believe about God, they in fact live lives of practical atheism."[7] Elaborating on his term, Hauerwas writes: "quite profound and sophisticated theological systems can be developed, but the theological discourse seems to 'float,' making no difference for how we live."[8]

Hauerwas's observation coincides with the scenario of the irrelevant imaginary preacher. The theological system is duly impressive, but it does not touch the daily lives of the people. What takes place in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning leaves no detectable impression on the remaining hours and days of the week. The mundane and ordinary struggles of living seem somehow unspiritual and untheological. Consequently, life is met without the practical resources available to the church; and Christians live, Monday through Saturday, in the routine of life, as if God makes no difference. Whether God exists or not is not the point. Nor would any of these church-going people deny God's existence. Regardless of the ontological reality, however, too many believers continue to live as if God does not exist. What Hauerwas calls practical atheism is, then, another way of describing the ethical difficulties of the church already noted.

Reinhard Hütter also provides a memorable phrase in his attempt to articulate the malady that he detects within the contemporary church and within Lutheranism in particular. The current aversion to ethical questions that is pandemic in significant portions of the church Hütter terms "Protestantism's Antinomian Captivity."[9] Hütter contends that in its unflagging quest for

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7. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2000), 140.

8. Ibid.

9. Reinhard Hütter, "(Re-)Forming Freedom: Reflections 'After *Veritas Splendor*' on Freedom's Fate in Modernity and Protestantism's Antinomian Captivity," *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 2001): 117–61.

"freedom," Protestantism has shunted away the law and with it any meaningful ethics. "When the ethics of autonomy construes freedom to be the very core of subjectivity," argues Hütter, "it—from the very outset—eliminates the law's otherness and therefore reception."[10] What is left is the inevitable harvest of such autonomy and rejection of the law: "individual sovereignty, will to power, and license."[11] Hütter's description is essentially that of Hauerwas but considered from a somewhat different perspective. Unable to affirm or appreciate the place of the law, those captive to their antinomianism demonstrate the same sort of ethical failure, or practical atheism, identified by Hauerwas.

The licentiousness that Hauerwas and Hütter describe is at bottom precisely the problem illustrated in the opening account of the irrelevant pastor. A distaste for the law, a Sunday-only Christianity, and a disregard for the practical concerns of daily living are all different facets of the common problem, a problem readily recognizable in many of today's churches. Personal encounters and routine engagements with this ethical malaise were the catalyst for the study that eventuated in the present volume. I hope that the research and conclusions presented herein will help to treat the malady, end the atheism, and point a way out of the captivity. The parish pastor, of course, is certainly in mind as the argument is developed; by virtue of Christ's call through the congregation, every pastor is compelled to contend with the realities of the current situation of ethical distrust. However, it is for the person in the pew, who listens to sermons, and who eagerly desires to face the realities of practical life in ways that reflect his faith, that the argument which follows is presented. While pastors are no more easily generalized and classified than any other segment of humanity, it seems safe to assume that virtually all of those serving in parish situations have some sense of the reality and urgency of their parishioners' practical concerns. Unfortunately, the awareness of this need is too often met with unhelpful or unfaithful responses ranging from cavalier dismissal to the uncritical adoption of the latest theologically errant, but often practically useful, teaching fads.

The intent, then, is first simply to offer a way that parish pastors can rethink the place and the legitimacy of providing ethical direction and character training in a parish setting. Of course, I hold out hope that the reader will also put these new ways of thinking into actual practice so that a renewed emphasis on character and morality may find its way into parish life. In other words, rather than simply making another appeal for such an emphasis that is grounded in the acute need, the argument that is developed in the pages of this

10. Ibid., 120.
11. Ibid., 121.

book will offer a theological foundation for the work of forming character and giving direction for ethical living at the parish level that is at once orthodox and pragmatically useful. It is my intention at the very least to encourage further discussion of the appropriate place of training in ethics—that is, teaching the practical matters of living the Christian life. Understood scripturally, the goal is quite simply to provide a way for congregations faithfully to practice the Lord's parting instruction to make disciples—baptizing them, yes—*but also* "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt. 28:20, NASB). A critical, but too often overlooked, aspect of such teaching is the work of character formation, which will be particularly emphasized. This emphasis is meant to further the understanding of Christian ethics less as the adoption of a set of basic rules of behavior or the provision of answers to perplexing moral dilemmas and more as the shaping of individual character.[12] Ethical training is neither the anticipation and resolution of every conceivable quandary that a Christian may eventually encounter nor the development of an exhaustive list of right activity. Rather, ethical training is about equipping and shaping individuals to be people of character so that, in whatever circumstances they may find themselves, they act virtuously—that is, in conformity with God's will for God's people.

The Shape of This Book

A call for training in virtue and shaping of character is a defining characteristic of a rediscovered school of thought known as virtue ethics. Virtue ethicists do not strike out into new territory but, rather, seek to retrieve what has in recent centuries been neglected or forgotten. A proponent of providing training in virtue, Josef Pieper insists on this characteristic: "In this realm, originality of thought and diction is of small importance—should, in fact, be distrusted. It can hardly be expected that there will be entirely new insights on such a subject. We may well turn to the 'wisdom of the ancients' in our human quest to understand reality, for that wisdom contains a truly inexhaustible contemporaneity."[13] The rise and essential tenets of virtue ethics will be considered in chapter 1. Special attention will be given to one of the most prominent proponents and outspoken voices in the contemporary reclamation of virtue ethics, Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas's significance for this study will be made clear as that chapter unfolds.

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12. The shaping of character should not be perceived, however, as antithetical to directions for living or commandments meant to guide behavior. Indeed, they cannot be divorced. Nevertheless, the recent climate in which character and the virtues have been neglected argues for a special emphasis on character development and its place within the Christian life.

13. Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), xii.

Of special interest for this book's focus is the challenge that virtue ethics presents to contemporary manifestations of Lutheranism. Chapter 2 will then listen to four important Lutheran theologians who have committed themselves to a careful analysis of Lutheranism's struggles with the ethical task in the context of contemporary America. Their observations will highlight and support the importance, as well as the relevance, of the present study. Not only will their observations be considered, but their proposed solutions will be examined and the various arguments' strengths as well as shortcomings, whether actual or potential, will be assessed.

Chapter 3 will turn to the first generation of sixteenth-century Lutherans in an effort to discern their attitude toward the concept of shaping character and training in virtue. This chapter's investigation will center on Lutheranism's formative and norming documents: the Lutheran Confessions, particularly the Apology of the Augsburg Confession and the catechisms. The intent of this chapter is to discern whether Lutheranism is, as some have charged, *inherently* incapable of providing a meaningful account of Christian ethics. That is, do the theological presuppositions and emphases of Lutheran doctrine require a de facto disqualification of any attempts to articulate a Lutheran understanding of ethics? This chapter will seek an answer in the work of the reformers.

Having considered the contemporary situation within the Lutheran church and the relative faithfulness of the current manifestation of Lutheranism vis-à-vis the teaching of the reformers themselves, chapter 4 will consider possible avenues out of Lutheranism's ethical predicament. Potential solutions to the problem of locating ethics within Lutheran theology will be examined and evaluated, particularly in the light of the findings of the previous chapter. These will include readily recognized 'standard' solutions, as well as some less familiar.

Chapter 5 will continue the task initiated in the prior chapter but will begin the constructive work of proposing and defending a framework that is able to overcome the shortcomings of those previously considered. Ultimately, the chapter will suggest a paradigm or framework within which one may ably conduct the tasks of theology and ethics in a way that is wholly faithful to Lutheran doctrine. This is my driving concern, and will mark the heart of the book's argument.

Finally, chapter 6 will articulate conclusions that can be drawn from the material presented in the preceding chapters. Additionally, concrete practical applications of the study as well as avenues for further investigation suggested by the study will be considered. In particular, the ability of Lutheran doctrine, when faithfully articulated and practiced, to provide a compelling answer to the problem of contemporary society's moral crisis will be explored. Far from

perfunctory addenda, these suggested applications should be recognized as the compelling purpose that has fueled this study from the outset. It is the theological and practical needs of parish pastors and their parishioners that have always motivated and directed the research and writing of this book, even from its earliest days when it first took shape as a dissertation. It is for the sake of the church and her people that this book was written.

Definitions

Providing a careful account of key terms and definitions at the beginning of a book is an enterprise fraught with peril. Such material seems to take on a life of its own and quickly results in overwrought and tedious text that demands too much of the reader. Aware of the dangers, it is nevertheless necessary to make some effort to provide a common vocabulary and starting point for the work that follows. In particular, the terms *ethics, virtue, formation,* and *character* require some definition and clarification in order to forestall any confusion or misunderstanding.

As the term will be used in the following pages, *ethics* refers to the overarching responsibility of the Christian to live all of life in conformity to Christ. Hauerwas rightly notes that "ethics is never finally a matter of theory; rather it is a reflective activity not easily learned."[14] Broadly considered, ethics can rightly be understood as reflection on the subject of sanctification, or discipleship, as those terms are popularly understood to name the challenge of living in a way that is shaped by the scriptural account of Christ heard within the church. Ethics is concerned with all that it means practically to be a Christian in this world. Robert Benne provides a succinct definition: "the disciplined reflection on Christian moral life," or "critical and constructive reflection on Christian moral practice."[15] While this definition certainly leaves space for questions about what should or should not be done in difficult "borderline situations," in concert with the focus of this book, it reflects an interest in questions of Christian identity and the shape of the unexceptional routine of Christian living.

Less easily defined, *virtue* names the skills, habits, and ways of being that enable one to conform more nearly to an accepted standard or goal.

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

15. Robert Benne, "Lutheran Ethics: Perennial Themes and Contemporary Challenges," in Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme, eds., *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 11.

Significantly, such a goal or telos should not be assumed or understood to be inherent or universal among human beings. Hauerwas's recurrent assertion that all ethics must be qualified by an adjective[16] articulates the truth that different communities adopt different understandings of the telos of human existence. The particular telos which is adopted or enforced in turn determines the virtues necessary to achieve or arrive at that telos. Hauerwas poignantly explains the particularity of a community's telos and subsequent virtues: "Christian ethics is not written for everyone, but for those people who have been formed by the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. Therefore Christian ethics can never be a minimalistic ethic for everyone, but must presuppose a sanctified people wanting to live more faithful to God's story."[17] The fact that even Christians often seem incapable of complete agreement on the telos of Christian life corroborates the claim that virtues are far from universal. It is impossible, then, to define virtue simply by producing a list of noble skills or behaviors. Another proponent of virtue ethics, Brad Kallenberg, observes, "the first step in ethics, therefore, is to identify the *telos* of human life."[18] Having done that, virtues can be considered. After his own meticulous discussion, Lutheran theologian and ethicist Gilbert Meilaender comes close to a precise definition of virtue: "The moral virtues—those excellences which help us attain the furthest potentialities of our nature—are, then, not simply dispositions to act in certain ways. They are more 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, helping to determine not only who we are but what world we see."[19] Virtues are the specific traits, skills, and behaviors that serve both to define and guide those on the journey toward the agreed-upon telos.[20]

Formation describes the process by which an individual is shaped or nurtured into the adoption and espousal of a particular community's telos and attendant virtues. Formation is a complex process that takes place throughout

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16. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 1.

17. Ibid., 97.

18. Brad J. Kallenberg, "Positioning MacIntyre in Christian Ethics," 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), 52.

19. Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11.

20. The illustration of an athlete in training is helpful. The telos is an Olympic gold medal. En route to that goal, however, the athlete must adopt and achieve a score of auxiliary goals requisite for the fulfillment of the desired end. Thus goals, or virtues, are established relevant to strength, skill, speed, endurance, resilience, etc. While certain commonalities would no doubt arise, each sport would advance its own peculiar "virtues."

life in virtually every area of life as the community strives, intentionally or not, to conform a person to that community's way of life. Obviously, formation entails vastly more than a high school or college course on "values clarification"; and it will not be accomplished via a school signboard broadcasting the virtue of the month or through fifteen minutes of basic morality instruction at the outset of each school day. Formation is best understood in the broadest possible sense as it includes a community's unique teaching, conversations, observation of rituals, and practices extending from infancy to death.

While it hardly qualifies as the definitive source for theological purposes, it is interesting that even Webster's etymology for the word *character* captures the intimate connection between formation and character: "*fr. charassein* to scratch, engrave."[21] Put too simplistically, character is the resultant impact of formation on a person's being. More specifically, Webster helpfully provides this definition of character: "the complex of mental and ethical traits marking and often individualizing a person, group, or nation."[22] Individual traits or habits of thinking and behaving make up the composite of factors that combine to be described as a person's character. Seeking to clarify the distinction between our doing and our being, Hauerwas writes, "Character is a designation that marks the continuity present throughout the changes that constitute a complete human life."[23] Understood in a thoroughly practical way, character "is not a theoretical notion, but merely the name we give to the cumulative source of human actions."[24] In other words, character is the essential identity and impetus manifest in a person's thinking, speaking, and doing.

Character describes the matrix of personal traits that define, direct, and name an individual. Hauerwas clarifies that character is roughly synonymous with what is understood by identity. A person does not exhibit character as an external reflection of one's more central identity or agency. The person and the person's character are indistinguishable. They are one. He writes, "Our character is not merely the result of our choices, but rather the form our agency takes through our beliefs and intentions. . . . character is not a surface manifestation of some deeper reality called the 'self.' We are our character."[25]

21. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1979), 185.

22. Ibid.

23. 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), 126.

24. 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), 29.

25. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 39.

Hauerwas makes this point even more emphatically and, given the importance of this definition, it is worth hearing him at length:

> Nothing about my being is more "me" than my character. Character is the basic aspect of our existence. It is the mode of the formation of our "I," for it is character that provides the content of that "I." If we are to be changed in any fundamental sense, then it must be a change of character. Nothing is more nearly at the "heart" of who we are than our character. It is our character that determines the primary orientation and direction which we embody through our beliefs and actions.[26]

Quite rightly, this definition of character offers no grounds for differentiating between an individual's identity and that individual's character. Such psychological or anthropological distinctions appear arbitrary at best. To shape character, then, is to shape the person.

Conclusion

The definitions suggested here raise important questions for the theologian, whether pastor or parishioner, especially for the Lutheran theologian striving to maintain an unencumbered proclamation of divinely accomplished salvation by grace alone through faith alone. If God is the creator of our persons and the author of our renewal, in what sense can it be said that character is shaped and formed by human effort? If virtue is shaped by the particular telos embraced by the individual and the community, do Christians have anything to gain ethically from pagan philosophers, regardless of the possible civil nobility of those philosophers? And, what exactly is the telos for a Lutheran believer? Finally, does the church that focuses on the delivery of the gospel have anything significant, much less definitive, to say to a culture, or even its own Christian people, about morality and character? The consideration of these and related questions will direct the investigation in the chapters that follow.

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26. Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975), 203.