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A Renaissance of Character and Virtue

Marvin Oxenham

In the history of mankind, there have been seasons in which the effects of the Fall seemed to have been mitigated. The *Venere of Venus* by Botticelli and the *Vitruvian Man* by Leonardo da Vinci remind us of one such remarkable period, known as the Italian Renaissance, in which the rediscovery of the arts, science and classical culture redressed the darkness of barbarian ignorance, degradation and tyranny and reclaimed a place for human flourishing.

This article envisions a renaissance passing through theological education and the church to benefit society. We need one because we have slipped off the shoulders of giants and need to regain the lost tradition of character and virtue.

I. The Tradition of Character and Virtue

In the twelfth century, Bernard de Chartres penned the words *nanos gigantum humeris insidentes* to indicate that we are all dwarves and are meant to be carried on the shoulders of giants. By those words, he was seeking to encourage educators in cathedral schools to build on the studies of the great scholars who had come before them. As an example of this sentiment, the beautiful stained-glass window in the Chartres cathedral portrays the four evangelists as ordinary men sitting on the shoulders of the Old Testament prophets and thereby seeing further by their understanding of the Messiah.

Postmodern individualism is often not friendly to the giants of the past, but there are some traditions that we evade only to our harm. The tradition of character and virtue is one such tradition that should be recovered.

When we speak of the tradition of character and virtue, we are referring to an age-old conceptual framework that contends that human nature can flourish as it cultivates virtue.[1] There is nothing more important than virtue, it suggests, for living virtuously is what we are designed for and therein we find human purpose and deep happiness.

This tradition, accordingly, claims that the solution to social change is not found in structures or ideologies but in individuals. As the character of individuals improves, society will improve; hence, as Christoph Stück-

1 'Human happiness is the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7).

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elberger says, 'If we want virtue, we must cultivate virtuous people.'[2]

The tradition we are looking at diagnoses 'barbaric' societies in terms of their vices, such as the 'seven deadly sins' of injustice, ignorance, untruthfulness, pride, greed, indifference and acedia. The therapy for these vices is found in returning to the virtues. These include the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and courage; the foundational virtues of constancy and humility; the social virtues of compassion, goodness, decency, diligence, civility, gratitude and honesty; the intellectual virtues of attentiveness, curiosity and open-mindedness; the personal virtues of dignity, humour, patience and appreciation of beauty; and the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. The tradition then claims that, as these virtues shape individuals, we will witness a social renaissance and a healthier *polis*.

This tradition runs deep and wide across history. If we look to the East, it is a prevailing theme in Confucianism,[3] and in the West it as a cornerstone of both Greek and Roman classical culture. Plato wrote extensively about virtue, and Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, laid out what would become one of the most pervasive ontological and teleological visions of human nature.

The Romans carried on this same tradition, mostly through Stoicism and the writings of Cicero, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. After the fall of the Roman Empire and the end of the golden classical era, the discourse around character and virtue was kept alive and developed by innumerable other philosophers, educators and writers:

- According to Petrarch, 'The humanities as a whole aim at creating a good man (*vir bonus*), than which nothing more useful (*utilius*) can be imagined.'[4]
- Erasmus sought to revive Christian virtue in the light of the religious corruption of his time as the means to transform both mind and character.[5]
- According to Comenius, a person who is well informed but not morally formed is merely a 'useless encumbrance on the earth'.[6]
- The primary goal of Locke's education plan was to create a virtuous, well-bred and wise young man, and not to create a scholar.

2 Christoph Stückelberger, 'Integrität: Die Tugend der Tugenden—Der christliche Beitrag zu einer globalen Tugend für Wirtschaft und Politik', farewell lecture at the University of Basel, Department of Theology, 2 November 2016, unpublished manuscript. C. S. Lewis makes a similar claim: 'You cannot make men good by law: and without good men you cannot have a good society. That is why we must go on to think of the second thing: of morality inside the individual.' Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (accessed at http://www.samizdat.qc.ca/vc/pdfs/MereChristianity_CSL.pdf), 43.

3 Central to Confucius' teaching in the *Analects* is the idea of *ren* as the 'perfect virtue'.

4 R. E. Proctor, *Defining the Humanities*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 3.

5 Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 109.

6 Jan Habl, 'Character Formation: A Forgotten Theme of Comenius's Didactics', *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 15, no. 2 (2011): 147.

- Hume was a leader in eighteenth-century Enlightenment experiments around character education.[7]
- Marx believed that character education and an emphasis on key virtues represented the key to social transformation.[8]
- In *The Idea of a University,* John Cardinal Newman prioritized the formation of students as 'gentlemen' as more important than the cultivation of studies.[9]
- Character education was central in Kant's views on education.[10]
- For John Dewey, character education was a key democratic function.[11]
- James Madison, one of the founders of American democracy, stated, 'Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation … to suppose that any form of government will secure liberty and happiness without any form of virtue in the people is a chimerical idea.'[12]
- Alexis de Tocqueville, the famed student of nineteenth-century US democracy, stated, 'Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith.'[13]
- Montesquieu made it clear that virtue was the essential ingredient for justice and order in a democratic society: 'When virtue ceases, ambition enters those hearts that can admit it and avarice enters them all.'[14]
- A renewed discourse around virtue was also a key feature of the Italian Renaissance.

Although not all these figures may be considered 'heroes of virtue' and worthy of emulation, their writings demonstrate the permeating nature of the theme of virtue in Western culture.

At least until early modernity, the tradition of character and virtue was also substantively embraced by early Christianity, subsumed theologically and kept alive as a core expression of the Christian faith. As we look to church history, in fact, we find the golden thread of character and virtue as a recurring theme in the work of

7 James Arthur et al., *Character Education: The Formation of Virtues and Dispositions in 16–19 Year Olds with Particular Reference to the Religious and Spiritual* (Report to the House of Lords, Canterbury Christ Church University and University of Bristol, 2006), 5.

8 Marcia Horniak, 'Moral Character', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/moral-character/.

9 See Marvin Oxenham, *Character and Virtue in Theological Education* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2019), 233.

10 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom*: *Essays on Christian Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), Kindle loc. 2094.

11 Mark L. Jones, Paul A. Lewis, and Kelly E. Reffitt (eds.), *Toward Human Flourishing* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2013), 18–19.

12 James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 4.

13 Tocqueville, quoted in Elizabeth Kiss and Peter Euben, 'Aim High: A Response to Stanley Fish', in Kiss and Euben (eds.), *Debating Moral Education* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 208.

14 Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des lois*, quoted in Hunter, *The Death of Character*, 6.

many Christian thinkers and practitioners:

- In 190 AD, Clement wrote about the 'paideia of God' in direct connection with the classical virtue tradition.[15]
- Origen spoke of holding fast to perfection in virtues, persevering in acquiring and preserving virtue, praying for virtue from God, reverencing virtues, searching the Scriptures to ascertain what the virtues are, seeking virtuous works, striving for virtue, training in virtue and working out opportunities for virtue.[16]
- For the early desert fathers and mothers, controlling the passions of vice and cultivating virtue was the first step to union with God.[17]
- Cassian's *De Institutis Coenobiorum* and the *Collationes* were deeply influential in virtue training practices in the monasteries.[18]
- In his *De Officiis*, Ambrose placed the pagan approach to virtue in a Christian context.[19]
- Augustine wrote in *City of God*, 'Virtues in this life are certainly its best and most useful possessions.'[20]
- Virtue is central both in Benedictine and Franciscan spirituality.[21]
- Thomas Aquinas stated, 'The natural perfection of the human person consists in acting in accordance to virtue.'[22]
- Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* deals extensively with virtue and with the shaping of our character after the character of God.[23]
- For Melanchthon, education was not only about subject matter but about creating virtue to live out one's faith.[24]
- In *Pia Desideria*, Spener proposed a reformation of education to include *formation* and not only *information.*[25]

From the sixteenth century onward, however, this tradition seems to have dwindled and eventually been generally lost. I do not have sufficient space to examine fully the reasons for this shift here, but indubitably the combined forces of Romanticism and Existentialism contributed to replacing virtue with experience and sentiment. The Enlightenment also added to the demise of character and virtue, displacing wisdom and goodness with knowledge and reasonableness

15 David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 11.

16 David W. T. Brattston, *Traditional Christian Ethics*, vol. 3 (Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2014), 511.

17 Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), xxvi.

18 See Oxenham, *Character and Virtue*, 213.

19 See Oxenham, *Character and Virtue*, 183.

20 Augustine, *City of God*, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120119.htm, 19.

21 See Oxenham, *Character and Virtue*, 213.

22 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1225-1274,_Thomas_Aquinas,_Summa_Theologiae_%5B1%5D,_EN.pdf, sections 1–2.5.5.

23 Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 65, 66.

24 Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 72.

25 Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 96.

and giving priority to logical and scientific capacity over moral character. The mind came before the heart, and success came from what you knew and could do rather than from who you were.

Developments in political and social Liberalism can also be cited as debunking virtue frameworks in favour of individual lifestyles and moving questions of good and evil from the realm of fact to the realm of value. As a result, objective 'virtue language' was discarded in favour of a subjective 'value language' and ethical living became an issue of 'authenticity'[26] and personal choice rather than conformity to universals.

The good news is that the long decline is now being countered by a renewed attention to character and virtue. In philosophy, for example, theories such as Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics, which revisits the Aristotelian moral heritage, are gaining renewed credibility. In social discourse as well, analysts are recognizing that character education diminishes crime rates, increases mental well-being and impacts the labour market.[27] The corporate world is likewise admitting that non-virtuous business practices lead to disorder and inefficiency, and professions like law, media and business are acknowledging the importance of virtue.[28]

On a more popular level, we have seen Nobel Peace Prizes awarded to individuals and organizations that demonstrate the virtues of justice, generosity, compassion and peace, and many popular films have portrayed the impact of virtues such as courage, justice, compassion and empathy. But probably the renewed attention to character and virtue has been most evident in the field of education.[29] The work of scholars like Kohlberg, Lickona, Berkowitz, Carr, Arthur and Kristjánsson substantiates the claim that the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have constituted a revival phase for neo-Aristotelian practices in character and virtue education.[30]

But what about the church and theological education? Where do they stand in all this?

II. Virtue and the Church

An examination of where the evangelical church stands in terms of the tradition of character and virtue must begin with a recognition that it too has generally lost track of this

26 Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

27 Jonathan Birdwell, Ralph Scott and Louis Reynolds, *Character Nation* (London: Demos, 2015), 9.

28 Anthony Kronman, *The Lost Lawyer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 5: 'Prudence is the lawyer's central virtue'; Magali do Nascimento Cunha, 'Global Values in Media', in Christoph Stückelberger, Walter Fust and Obiora Ike (eds.), *Global Ethics for Leadership: Values and Virtues for Life* (Geneva: Globalethics.net, 2016), 393–400; Aliza Racelis, 'Developing a Virtue Ethics Scale: Exploratory Survey of Philippine Managers', *Asian Journal of Business and Accounting* 6, no. 1 (2013): 16.

29 For a treatment of how character education can be seen as a response to the 'infernos' of contemporary higher education, see Marvin Oxenham, *Higher Education in Liquid Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 193–96.

30 For references to the work of these authors, see Oxenham, *Character and Virtue*.

thread. The Protestant Reformation contributed towards dislodging the language of virtue, for the cultivation of virtue was seen as an expression of salvation by works and as a denial of the total depravity of man. Although much more can be said about this heritage, it is not without consequence to us today that Luther considered Aristotle a buffoon, a rancid philosopher and the worst enemy of grace, one whose works should be excluded from university studies.[31] Closer to the present, evangelicalism has been described in terms of escapism, conversionism, otherworldliness and activism, and none of these features is a particularly fruitful ground for the development of character and virtue. If one believes that the only things that truly count are evangelism and the afterlife, there is little place for the transformation of character and the renewal of society.

Whatever the reasons may be, the tradition of character of virtue in the evangelical tradition has been conspicuous by its absence. This diminished focus can be seen by examining a range of popular evangelical books on discipleship. They tend to frame discipleship outcomes in terms of service and performance, understanding theology and Scripture, denominational enculturation, mystical encounters with God, consecration, leadership abilities, enhanced relationships and therapeutic healing. Rarely do we find an emphasis on discipleship that is linked to morality, and much less to the language of character and virtue.

Speaking more broadly, it is fair to say that explicit virtue discourse and practice are not on the radar screen of much contemporary evangelicalism. The growing emphasis on 'Christian events', worship-based spirituality and practices of therapy and healing tend to crowd out the cultivation of virtue. In some contexts, virtue can even be seen with suspicion, especially as the moral pendulum swings from excessive legalism to uncritical tolerance. Furthermore, goodness has traditionally been less attractive to evangelicals than truth. Many are ready to fight hard and bloody battles over sound doctrine while the broader realm of good character is left uncultivated.

Sadly, as during the times of the Renaissance, religion can also offer more problems than solutions. Churches can be accomplices to the vices of society. They can generate scandals. They can be known for their lack of love. They can abuse cheap grace and forget their mission to be the salt and light of virtue in barbarian societies. Nowhere, in fact, can the need for virtue be seen more clearly than in the dynamics of ecclesial failure. Churches rarely fail due to poor theology or practical incompetence; they die when leaders are not humble, and leaders burn out when church member are not civil. Churches split when justice becomes tyranny and when truthfulness becomes closed-mindedness. Churches become lukewarm when there is not enough temperance or courage. Churches become clanging cymbals when they miss out on the theological virtues of faith, hope

31 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 2007), 165. For a more detailed treatment of Luther's views of Aristotle, see Jared Wicks, 'Luther and "This Damned, Conceited, Rascally Heathen" Aristotle: An Encounter More Complicated Than Many Think', *Pro Ecclesia* (Berlin) 16, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 90–104.

and love.[32]

And yet, there is hope. Against these grim generalizations, it may appear paradoxical, or perhaps emblematic, that virtuous character ranks high on the wish list of every local church. In a survey of five thousand church members, the highest expectations of ministry were associated with the character of the minister.[33] The Lausanne Movement has called Christian leaders to the virtues of service, humility, integrity, purity and lack of greed,[34] and N. T. Wright has stressed the need for a 'revolutionary idea of virtue'.[35] Deep down, we know that the secret to vitality is not better music, more events or more sophisticated theology. What the church needs is not just better scholars and better preachers, but better women and men.

Together with this hope, our gospel proclaims that, thanks to the atoning work of Jesus, we can be freed from the slavery of sin and enabled to walk in righteousness (Rom 6). If we translate the well-known texts of Romans into the language of character and virtue, we can see that Christians have the unique potential to shun vice and cultivate virtue. And this is the key difference between the Christian gospel and the philosophical tradition of character and virtue. The latter largely failed because it was stunted by the realities of the Fall and, although the renaissance project of the ancient classical world was worthy, it did not have the power to translate its vision fully into reality.

In Christ, however, a renaissance of character and virtue becomes possible. Thanks to God's divine power, humans can receive everything they need to escape the vices and live a life of virtue (2 Pet 1:3–4). Through the atoning work of Christ and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit, the church can bear the fruit of virtue and become a community marked by loving, joyful, peace-bearing, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and temperate individuals (Gal 5:22–23). Indeed, no social institution is as suited as the church to produce virtue, and communities of fruit-bearing, Spirit-transformed, sin-freed, gospel-empowered individuals are the most effective and productive agent of social renaissance (2 Pet 1:5, 8).

III. Virtue in Theological Education

Where, then, can we start? If society needs virtue, and if the church is well-equipped to provide it, what forces can position the church to set off a new renaissance? I contend that theological education is a key player, especially given its business of shaping the church's leaders.

But here we must start again with contrition, for, not unsurprisingly, the story of theological education follows a similar pattern to what we have seen in society and in the church. In the earliest forms of theological education, character and virtue thrived, in terms of both scholarly engage-

32 Judy TenElshof, 'Encouraging the Character Formation of Future Christian Leaders', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 1 (1997): 83.

33 R. P. Meyer, 'Theological Education as Character Formation', *Theological Education*, Supplement 1 (1988): 96, 113.

34 Lausanne Movement, 'The Cape Town Commitment', https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment, IID–3.

35 N. T. Wright, *After You Believe* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 25.

ment and practical training of church leaders. As far back as the fourth century, Chrysostom argued for giving attention to the cultivation of character amongst priests[36] and Ambrose of Milan famously claimed that it was useless to look for a spring (of good church leadership) in the mud (of impure character).[37] Some of the earliest 'training' programmes in the Christian tradition can be seen in the practices of the desert fathers who laid out pathways of struggle against vice as the road to union with Christ—a formational emphasis that carried into the monastic tradition and, to some degree, into the early universities.

But like society and the church, theological education lost this tradition somewhere in modernity and, while still holding on to the intellectual virtues, generally laid aside the broader vision of virtue and character. Theological education became mostly about instruction (passing information from one mind to another) and training (cultivating skills and competencies), and less about providing a holistic education intended to shape students into becoming fully human.

To illustrate where theological education is today, let us compare it to an ancient Roman *quadriga.* The four horses pulling the chariot might be imagined as (1) academic achievement, (2) ministry competence, (3) spiritual formation[38] and (4) character and virtue education. Generally speaking, the horse of academic achievement is well fed and trained, especially as theological institutions pursue formal accreditation and gain status in the secular contexts of higher education. The second horse is also healthy, as most theological schools produce graduates that are skilled in many areas. The third horse, spiritual formation, has an ambivalent role, both because its object and practices are often indeterminate and also because it normally operates in the extra-curricular realm.

But the place occupied by the fourth horse is most worrying. It is often completely vacant or, at best, occupied by a limping, under-nourished horse. This is disturbing because, as in the *quadriga,* this is the horse that holds the inner-left position and is crucial in anchoring the entire chariot as it thunders around the bends of the Circus Maximus. Character and virtue education does not appear explicitly in most mission and vision statements, strategic plans, programme outcomes, credit-bearing curricula or pedagogical practices of theological colleges, and this should be a matter of great concern.

Two practical appeals can be made to redirect theological education towards contributing to a renaissance of character and virtue. The first concerns a theological reformulation of the tradition. Our generation is,

36 Those responsible for the appointment of priests, according to Chrysostom, 'do not all look to the one thing which ought to be the only object kept in view, the excellence of character.' See Richard John Neuhaus, *Theological Education and Moral Formation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 51, 52.

37 'Purity of character enables the priest [to be] the fountain providing the church with the springs of good counsel and the waters of salvation.' Ambrose, *De Officiis*, quoted in Neuhaus, *Theological Education*, 51.

38 For an argument on the difference between spiritual formation and character education, see Marvin Oxenham, 'Why Not Spiritual Formation', in Oxenham, *Character and Virtue*, 27–34.

by and large, illiterate in this regard, and theological institutions are strategically poised to revitalize what we have lost. Doing this should not be difficult, for character and virtue are before the eyes of theologians and need only be uncovered.

We can, in fact, easily find this theme in the biblical theology of creation, fall, redemption and consummation, as man was created for virtue, has fallen from virtue, is redeemed to virtue and is destined to virtue. We can see virtue and vice in the stories of both Old and New Testament, where heroes and villains are put forth for *mimesis* of character. We have entire books in the Bible that are explicitly about virtue, vice and wise living, such as Proverbs and James. The New Testament frequently utilizes the consolidated classical device of 'ethical lists'; it contains at least fourteen lists of virtues (of which the Beatitudes are the best-known) and eight lists of vices.

Moreover, the recurring motif of virtue can be traced through virtually all the New Testament epistles as they outline the realities of the Christian faith. Explicit texts like Romans 6 corroborate the recapitulation theory of the atonement,[39] and 2 Peter 1 tells us that 'adding virtue to our faith' is a central undertaking for those who participate in the divine nature. This first appeal is then a *theological* challenge, to develop a theology of character and virtue alongside systematic theology, dogmatics, historical theology and practical theology, in dialogue with the tradition.[40]

The second appeal is that theological schools should explore and initiate formational practices that will not only teach *about* character and virtue but will also contribute to shaping virtuous character in their students and graduates. There is nothing worse than information about character and virtue that does not lead to transformation. Rather, programme learning outcomes should be intentionally focused on impacting the character of graduates, and pedagogical practices should be aligned with achieving these outcomes. This step will require courage and innovation, and some curricula may need radical change, perhaps even at the expense of some forms of accreditation. It is beyond the scope of this article to enumerate these practices, but there exists a vast body of educational literature related to character and virtue education, and theological education should commit to making use of it.[41]

One objection must be addressed here, lest we be misled. Character and virtue education is not a moralistic return to legalism or prescriptivism. We are not inviting theological institutions to develop and enforce end-

39 When we speak of recapitulation, the key term is *anakephalaiosis* (or *recapitulateo*), meaning the restoration of the image of God. Athanasius spoke of recapitulation, as did Hans Küng in *On Being a Christian*. This vision of the atonement portrays the saving work of Christ not only in terms of forensic forgiveness, but also in terms of the freedom from sin to be righteous. The key term *dikaiosunē* (righteousness) in Romans 6 was also used by classical philosophers to speak about virtue. See Gary Black, Jr., *The Theology of Dallas Willard: Discovering Protoevangelical Faith* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 125.

40 Examples of contemporary theologians involved in this task include Stanley Hauerwas, N. T. Wright and Miroslav Volf.

41 For a detailed treatment of this issue, see Oxenham, *Character and Virtue*, 261–370.

less lists of prescriptive rules and require strict obedience. The goal is not to define and prescribe goodness and virtue, but to shape character. One of Aristotle's most useful metaphors indicates that it takes more than one sparrow to make spring, meaning that only deeply habituated virtue will produce the desired character.[42] In our zeal for what is good, we should avoid the pitfalls of Pharisaism. We should not be in the business of prescribing the occasions when we might pull a donkey out of a ditch; rather, we should aim to nurture individuals of character who will naturally choose what is good.

As a practical example, consider the issue of alcohol consumption. This can be a problem in society, in church and in church leadership. How can a theological school address this? The wrong way would be to meticulously prescribe rules about how much alcohol can be consumed and about what levels of inebriation are appropriate. The approach of character and virtue is to instead identify the virtue that is at work, which in this case is the virtue of moderation. Based on this foundation, the educational emphasis shifts to helping students cultivate the virtue of moderation in all aspects of their lives until it becomes an embedded, 'natural' feature of their character.

The assumption inherent in this approach is that if you are a moderate person, you will make moderate choices, think in moderate ways, make choices in favour of moderation, be emotionally attracted to living in moderation and feel bad when you are not moderate. As this overarching character trait is fostered, the issue of alcohol consumption is effectively addressed not by rules but by virtue.

IV. Renaissance in Theological Education

Theological education has an immense capacity to serve the church and society. But unless the tradition of character and virtue is revitalised, it will fail to deliver its potential. The learning outcomes of theological programmes that involve developing knowledge, understanding and competencies are important and should be retained, but we need to chart new outcomes and supportive pedagogies that will contribute to embedding virtue into the lives of graduates. We are seeking a transformation of character and a renewed emphasis on outcomes that have to do with *being*, alongside those outcomes that relate to *doing* and *knowing*.

As part of this undertaking, a new vision of quality and quality assurance is needed in theological education. In secular higher education, quality encompasses such aspects as enhancing democracy and citizenship through participation, student-centredness, redressing power structures, favouring growth in competencies, contributing to the economic well-being of nation-states, helping humanity to make progress through knowledge and research, and favouring international comparability and mobility. These are all good things, but a vision of quality seen through the *missio dei* has to do with being 'conformed to the image of his Son' (Rom 8:29) so that

42 Virtues can be defined as 'stable dispositional clusters concerned with praiseworthy functioning in a number of significant and distinctive spheres of human life'. James Arthur, *Teaching Character and Virtue in Schools* (London: Routledge, 2017), 28.

our character becomes like that of Jesus. God's purpose is that, through the power of the gospel, the moral, intellectual, civic, personal and theological virtues that were embodied in Jesus will also appear in us. That mission should also define the quality of a theological institution, its accreditation standards, the criteria of its donors and the vision of churches that rely on the school.[43]

Amidst the Babylonian captivity of contemporary higher education, theological education must fight to keep its identity. In his recent book *For the Life of the World,* Miroslav Volf critiques theological education, saying that we have tried to 'recast our discipline so as to acquire a legitimate home in the great edifice of science, but instead we have dug a hole and pitched [ourselves] to its bottom'.[44] In doing so, Volf argues, we stutter to reply to the basic question of what theology can offer in response to the most important question of all: what makes a flourishing life.[45]

The pitfall of scholastic irrelevance is not new. As far back as the first century, the philosopher Seneca was reprimanding fellow philosophers who were falling into this trap, quibbling over syllogisms and over matters of no consequence:

> Do we knit our brows over this sort of problem? Do we let our beards grow long for this reason? Is this the matter which we teach with sour and pale faces? Would you really know what philosophy offers to humanity? Philosophy offers counsel. … Men are stretching out imploring hands to you on all sides; lives ruined and in danger of ruin are begging for some assistance; men's hopes, men's resources, depend upon you. They ask that you deliver them.[46]

Theologians and theological institutions can easily fall into pedantry, offering no counsel, no deliverance and no relief from burdens. They can even bring great harm to graduates. In no other discipline is the cost of scholastic irrelevance so high. But theological education can offer deliverance from vice and introduce its students to a rewarding life of virtue. Given the exponential impact of training high-quality leaders for the church and the church's unique capacity to benefit society, there is no better place to instigate a new renaissance of virtue than in theological education.

43 'We strongly encourage seminaries, and all those who deliver leadership training programs, to focus more on spiritual and character formation, not only on imparting knowledge or grading performance, and we heartily rejoice in those that already do so as part of comprehensive "whole person" leadership development.' Lausanne Movement, 'The Cape Town Commitment', IID–3.

44 Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), 4.

45 Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, 45.

46 Seneca, 'On Quibbling as Unworthy of the Philosopher', *Letters to Lucilius,* XLVIII, https://www.docdroid.net/SpwJztN/seneca-moral-letters-to-lucilius-v8.pdf#page=154.