

Whose Character?

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Which Virtues?

BY MARK CARR

Any effort to teach character must address these questions: Whose character do we uphold, and What virtues do we teach?

Recently, while thumbing through a popular magazine, I found an article in which a number of famous American artists and entertainers gave their opinions on virtues and character. Most interesting was the essay by Howard Stern. If you are not acquainted with Mr. Stern, let me assure you that you would not want this vulgar radio-show host lecturing your class on human character and virtue. Yet his inclusion in a discussion of virtues is revealing.

Given the 20th century's "hall of shame" with its numerous wars and genocides, torture and repression, as well as drug abuse, divorce, child pornography, abortion, media glorifying of violence, and rising teenage homicide rates, people are realizing that something must be done to counteract the moral decline. In the United States, the popular press is producing a flood of material on virtue and character, such as Bill Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, which made the best-seller list for 88 weeks. Thousands of schools across the nation are beginning to focus on character education. But any effort to teach character must address these questions: Whose character do we uphold, and What virtues do we teach?

What does it mean to be a virtuous person? It means practicing excellence in all matters relating to human character. Over centuries, many lists of virtues have circulated. Among Christians, seven have been considered of utmost importance. They

are *wisdom, temperance, courage, justice, faith, hope, and love*. Others might be included: *integrity, truthfulness, humility, kindness, and compassion*.¹ Christian emphasis on the virtuous life does not focus only on human excellence, however. We desire to have Christ's love within us so that our excellence is His and brings honor to Him. For us, focus on character and human virtue must ask, "What kind of a person will I be?" not simply, "What should I *do* as a Christian?"

Seventh-day Adventists' focus on character development has a rich history, replete with lively debate. But does our educational curriculum reflect our concern about personal character? How do we focus on the Christian virtues that build the moral character of our students? How do we make them the salt that adds savor to an unsavory society? What if anything, can we do to instill Christian virtues in our students?

A Historical Overview

The great sources of Western civilization have all shown concern for personal character. Greek society paid particular attention to personal virtues in the formation of moral character. Personal virtues were seen as a way to improve the life of the *polis* or public square. Greek philosophers sought to understand what it meant to live a good life and how personal character made a difference. While their concern for character growth did not focus on Christlike perfection, it nonetheless

extolled a set of laudable personal virtues.

When Christianity entered the stream of Western civilization, it took the best ideas from these philosophers and pointed out that God was behind them. Augustine, in particular, showed that for the Christian, living virtuously is not merely a way to have a good life, as in secular philosophy, but a means of bringing honor and glory to God.

As the Enlightenment began to flower, both secular and Christian philosophers moved more toward universal principles to govern societal behavior. But of late, the virtues are enjoying a return to prominence.² This renewed interest is not limited to ivory-tower academicians. Bennett's book on virtues and its follow-up, *The Moral Compass*, have enjoyed huge success. Lately, in the secular and political realm, the book *Seedbeds of Virtue* calls for a return to personal character for the good of society.

Church and Character

Seventh-day Adventists need not sit back and watch as the rest of the world catches on. We have known and taught for decades that personal moral character is essential for life in society.

This emphasis on character has biblical roots. During Old Testament times, Micah called for justice and mercy among God's people. This call also needs to be heard today. Our walk must be humble, and it must be with God.

However, our character emphasis has often focused on notions of end-time sinless perfection rather than present-day uprightness of character. We have been more concerned with our vertical relationship with God than our horizontal relationship with our neighbor. Jesus' command to love our neighbor must be seen as being as strong and binding as His command to love God.

At times, our attitude toward issues of social and political import has been "hands off." We do assert our sociopolitical right to religious freedom and at times, we fight for the right to operate schools. Yet other issues of justice such as child labor, pornography, birth control and abortion, gender and ethnic violence, and military oppression—to name just a few—are often considered someone else's problems. Christian love demands our at-

tention to these basic issues of justice.

These issues are not limited to North American "Christian" society. Every society in which we teach, be it based on Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, or animist religion, has some concept of justice and love. Additionally, with the increasing emphasis on universal human rights, which are inextricably tied to religious rights, we cannot avoid dealing with the moral issues that grow from Christ's command to love our neighbor. As we teach Christian principles within our respective societies, we must also *live* lives that illustrate our commitment to these principles of love and justice.

Ellen White, calling on the example of our Saviour, charges us to show the world that we are not "selfishly absorbed in our own interests," and that our religious focus is not "unsympathetic or exacting."³ With Christ's transformative power behind our efforts, we must move ahead with explicit efforts to instill virtues in our student body. Not only the home and church, but also schools must teach personal virtue and commitment to moral principles.⁴

Can Virtue Be Taught?

But how does one teach virtue to another? Simply calling people to personal excellence is not enough. Principles such as the Ten Commandments must be combined with virtues. We must both "do" the right things and "be" people of character and virtue.

Ellen White called for our educational institutions to be places of firmness, order, and justice. But, she said, "compassion, mercy, and forbearance should be mingled with the firmness."⁵ These virtues are difficult concepts to illustrate on the chalkboard or in a school policy book. Yet they are the very traits of character that our students must carry into the greater society. These values must be modeled by school staff and taught throughout the curriculum.

Our concern for justice, compassion, and mercy cannot be limited to our families, churches, and schools. Instruction in moral character must embrace an expanded view of our world and our place in it. It requires not only commitment but also action to implement these principles.

Rules are descriptions of appropriate

behavior that come from outside oneself. We all hope that the law of Christ will be written on the hearts of our students. But unfortunately, we often need the strength of an external rule to win the day in moral conflicts. While virtue and principle must go together,⁶ principles are easier to teach. Virtues can be difficult to define in actual circumstances. Though we generally tag them with particular names such as *temperance, hope, courage, wisdom*, and the like, they must all work together to guide students' choices from within. A Christian expressing the virtue of love shows kindness to neighbors not because God commands this but because he or she genuinely desires to do so.

Students must be able to recognize in their instructors and school staff members this genuine desire to be people of character. Students are quick to realize when the personal behavior of their instructors does not match the principles upheld in class instruction. It is essential, therefore, for moral character to be modeled in the classroom. As Seventh-day Adventist teachers, we must live the principles we teach.

From Birth to Death

Every level of education must include the teaching and modeling of both principles and virtues. The presentation may vary with the maturity of the student, but both virtues and principles need to be taught explicitly and to be incorporated into the curriculum early in life. Materials need to be age-appropriate, as shown by Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development theory coupled with Carol Gilligan's corrective critique⁷ regarding the differences between male and female development.

Describing virtues as concepts of excellence will be more understandable to mature students. For younger pupils, stories told by teachers can focus on virtuous people whom we seek to emulate. At any age and in every society, exemplary role models help provide the internal motivation to act morally.

To help students understand the link between behavior and virtue, it is helpful to list on placards the virtues or character traits expected of your students and faculty, along with the specific rules of conduct in your school policy book. See box for additional ideas.

IDEAS

Bible stories remain excellent sources for teaching virtues. Here are some suggestions:

COURAGE:

The three Hebrew boys and Nebuchadnezzar:

- Don't: talk about how hot the furnace was or how brave they were to stand up to the political authorities.
- Do: talk about their *courage* and *faith* in God.

David and Goliath:

- Don't: talk about how tall Goliath was or how large his shield was or how many rocks David picked up.
- Do: talk about the *courage* it took for David to go before the enemy, and his *faith*, which bolstered his courage.

JUSTICE:

Zaccheus:

- Don't: talk about how short he was or that he was a cheat.
- Do: talk about how he was driven to practice *justice* in a way he had not been doing prior to his conversion.

HOPE:

Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac:

- Don't: talk about how Sarah laughed, or how Abraham would have killed Isaac because God commanded him to.
- Do: talk about Abraham and Sarah's *faith* in God's promise, their *patience* or lack thereof, and Abraham's *hope* that God would provide both a son and, later, an animal for the sacrifice.

COMPASSION:

Jesus and the woman caught in adultery:

- Don't: talk about the laws of adultery that the woman broke, or what Jesus may have written in the sand.
- Do: talk about the *compassion* Jesus showed in His response to all parties involved and how we might show that same compassion today.

TEMPERANCE:

Daniel and his companions:

- Don't: talk about their obedience to the laws of diet, what they did or did not eat.
- Do: talk about their disposition to treat their bodies with *respect* concerning food and of their *courage* and *faith* in the face of such a challenge.

LESSON MATERIALS

Ethics courses that explore issues of character in terms of principles, rules, and virtues are well established at the university level. We can begin to add similar courses or units at the secondary level as well. The new North American Division Bible textbook for 11th and 12th graders will include a section on life philosophy and moral issues.

Many materials are available through Christian publishers that focus on youth ministry. Much of this centers on case studies that serve as a springboard into the issues of character. Remember to keep the focus away from "What should I do?" but rather on "What sort of a person am I going to be?"

Andrews and La Sierra universities can provide a wealth of material. At Andrews, contact Ron Whitehead at the Office of Youth Evangelism. At La Sierra, either Stuart Tyner or Bailey Gillespie at the John Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry.

ROLE PLAYING

Role playing can be adopted to any age group. Again, don't simply focus on the details of the story, or the mechanisms of decision making. Focus on the person who has been enabled by God to bring Him glory, even in particularly difficult situations.

Adventist Contributions

In a world grown increasingly callous to external rules, we must seek to foster internal motivation for showing kindness to our neighbor. This is as true in North America as in Rwanda. In the civil-rights struggle of North American blacks, the voice of the movement, Martin Luther King, Jr, called for a society that would judge people not by external characteristics, but by the "content of their character." Perhaps his American society has not yet attained this goal, but we must ever hold it up as an ideal. Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions can do a tremendous service for their society by helping our students develop virtuous characters. ✍

REFERENCES

1. The list that Bill Bennett settled on in his text includes: *self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty, and faith.*
2. This return in philosophical circles has benefitted by the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, and Annette Baier. Stanley Hauerwas is the prominent Christian author to focus on virtue and character.
3. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1898), p. 152.
4. For a good text on how virtues may or may not be taught, see Barbara Darling-Smith, ed., *Can Virtue Be Taught?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).
5. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 5, p. 559.
6. For a discussion of how principles and virtues might work together, see William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 2nd ed., chapter four. Also Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles in Biomedical Ethics* (New York: Oxford, 1994) 4th ed., chapter 8; and Robert C. Roberts, "Virtues and Rules," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LI: 2 (June 1991), pp. 325-343.
7. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

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