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**Michael R. Young**
**Lecturer Humanities**
**Email: myoung@faulkner.edu**

## What a Character: Leadership and Virtue Formation

### Introduction

Here are a few titles of some of the best-selling books in leadership for the year 2022:

*The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You.*
*Lead the Way in Five Minutes a Day: Sparking High Performance in Yourself and Your Team.*
*8 Keys to Unlocking Your Leadership Potential: A No Nonsense Guide for New and Experienced Leaders.*
*The Leadership Secrets of Nick Saban: How Alabama's Coach Became the Greatest Ever.*

Admittedly, I was biased in my selective criteria so as to highlight the tendency for leadership to be reduced to easy steps, specific laws, sound bites, technique, or even to five minutes as day. I confess I have not read these texts and I am sure there is valid information and encouraging guidance for the role of leading. As well, they may even touch upon some of the content I want to share regarding the formation of the person who leads but notice that the titles do tend toward emphasizing exterior actions or practices, like glue-on attributes, in contrast to the interior challenge of forming one's mind and soul. However, one title (and author) caught my attention; *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle* by Jon Meacham. Meacham, the *NEW YORK TIMES* Bestseller and Pulitzer Prize–winning biographer, chronicles the life of Abraham Lincoln, charting how—and why—he confronted secession, threats to democracy, and the tragedy of slavery to expand the possibilities of America. Abraham Lincoln, what a character. Hear a few of his famous words from the second inaugural address leading our nation out of its darkest and most devastating period of bloody division and grievous strife:

With malice toward none with charity for all with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan ~ to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.[1]

Certainly Lincoln was not beloved by all politically, but he stands in the minds of most Americans as one of our nation's greatest leaders for his given time as say, Churchill was for England in his time. So leading, being a leader, how does one prepare? And what is the ultimate goal in preparing to lead others?

As Keith Stanglin, Director of the Center for Christian Studies,[2] often states and writes, the goal of the Center is "to provide excellent biblical and theological resources for churches and Christian leaders."[3] But an insightful friend hearing him make this oft made statement asked, "To what end?" That is an important and critical question. It refers to the fourth cause of Aristotle's four causes, the *telos*, that is to say, the final cause or end goal of some action.[4] Dr. Stanglin's response to this probing question was, "our greater goal is to help believers better articulate, teach, defend, and live out their faith in a world that desperately needs good news."[5]

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[1] Abraham Lincoln's 2nd Inaugural Address. https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/-with-malice-toward-none-lincoln-s-second-inaugural.htm

[2] Website: http://www.christian-studies.org. For full disclosure, I serve as the Chairman of the Advisory Council for the Center.

[3] Quoted from a recent email to constituents, 11-28-22.
https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#inbox/FMfcgzGrbHwmNlgbFxvHzmzGhmBdzpMT

[4] Aristotle held that the world is logical and explicable by a series of causes and purposes. His doctrine of causality includes the four causes of 1.) Material cause: "that out of which" it is made. 2.) Efficient Cause: the source of the object's principle of change or stability. 3.) Formal Cause: the essence of the object. 4.) Final Cause: the *telos* or end/goal of the object, or what the object is good for. Regrettably, the fourth cause is typically dismissed since it evokes a metaphysical reality that is not verifiable via scientific investigation. For further details see Aristotle, *Physics* 11:3 and *Metaphysics* V:2; *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

[5] The full mission statement of the Center for Christian Studies is stated as follows: "The mission of CCS is to help Christians better understand, practice, and pass on their faith, to train teachers of teachers (2 Tim. 2:2). In addition to mission areas in North America, CCS strives to equip Christians throughout the world, especially in places where educational resources may be limited."

The same teleological question can be and should be asked of leadership preparation; prepare to lead for what end? What is its final or end goal? Surely Christian leadership is more than mere information transformation and career success. Of course, in part, information and successful job performance is to be sought as an important element of our mission as Christian leaders. Yet we sense and long to do more within our given context. This "more" is "fostering moral character" in ourselves and others. For instance, the aim of the Book of Proverbs, Michael Fox claims that, "it is no overstatement to say, [moral or character formation] is at all times the greatest goal of education."[6] More specifically as Christian leaders, this longed for goal is nothing less than the grandiose aim to help those whom we lead and encounter be drawn to and to be formed more into the likeness of Christ to whatever degree we can.

This brief paper seeks to provide a direction and a few suggestions as to how this *telos* of Christian leadership can be exercised via the process of virtue training or more generically referred to as character formation. Classically, the categories of the types of virtues are listed as the intellectual virtues,[7] the Cardinal Virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude and are understood as human virtues, and the Theological Virtues of faith, hope, and love which are considered gifts from God.[8]  The New Testament provides us with several lists of virtues or fruits of the spirit that the faithful should strive to manifest in the lives. See, for example, Rom. 12:9-21; I Cor. 13:4-8, 13; Gal. 5:22; Col. 3:12-16; II Pet 1:5-7. But how are we to develop these virtues within our lives? We are blessed with the power of the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit to aid us in reflecting these attributes in our lives. But are there some practical steps we ca

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[6] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, Anchor Bible Vol. 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 348.

[7] There are various lists of the intellectual virtues starting with Aristotle on. See Jason Baehr's functional list of the intellectual virtues in his, *Deep in Thought: A Practical Guide to Teaching for Intellectual Virtues* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2021).

[8] Nevertheless, one can actively and prayerfully seek to prepare one's heart to desire and receive the grace of faith, hope, and love as will be addressed later in the paper.

n take to make ourselves open to the action of the Spirit and the guidance of the word? Yes, there is prayer and practice and I hope to show what some other practices might look like.

## Theory

First, a concise overview of Aristotle's depiction of virtue formation is provided as drawn from his, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's *telos* for life was happiness or blessedness (*eudaimonia* – literally, well spirited).[9] Living wisely and virtuously was the means of obtaining such happiness, though not necessarily guaranteed due to the vicissitudes of life.  An analysis of how virtues are formed in a person's soul highlights the need to first define the characteristics of a virtue and then to habitually practice such virtuous behavior until it becomes part of one's disposition; part of one's soul. No easy task, but it is achievable, at least in part.

Aristotle makes a concerted effort in attempting to name and describe the various virtues by naming its excess or deficiency of action. Some, however, are difficult to name and pin down exactly, as he readily admits. Yet he does provide us with a pithy statement of not only defining virtues in general but also a step-by-step process of how one is to develop a virtue as part of our character. In Book II of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that "virtue, then, is a habit disposed toward action by deliberate choice, being at the mean relative to us, and defined by reason and as a prudent [*phronesis*] man would define it."[10] **[Draw Virtue Graph]** The mean, or the Golden Mean, as it is classically referred to, is the action of excellence that falls between two actions of vice; an action of either excess or deficiency. To illustrate: a courageous person does not act cowardly by running away from a challenge or crises nor does the person act foolhardy in response to such a challenge. That it is to say, the courageous person acts wisely in knowing first w

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[9] Hippocrates G. Apostle, trans., *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics:* (Grinell, Iowa: The Peripatetic Press, 1984), 1098b15-20.
[10] Ibid., 1106b36-7a27.

hat the courageous action is to be performed and how to enact it without being either cowardly or foolish (it is not necessarily courageous to take on a charging Grizzly bear!).

Aristotle's schema for developing virtues can be summarized as follows:

- **Name and define** the virtue and its excess and deficiency.
- **Habitually practice** the virtue by applying the virtuous action when and where it is appropriate.
- Continue to habituate the virtue until it becomes **part of your disposition**, that is, you no longer must think through what action to take, but rather you act out the virtue because it is part of your character.

**Practice**

Following Aristotle's lead, the work by Jason Baehr wrestles with understanding the distinctions and possible connections between intellectual and moral virtues.[11] Wading through the different theories to distinguish the intellectual moral virtues, Baehr proposes his own criteria for distinguishing the intellectual virtues from the moral. I would simply add that the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love provide a wholeness to virtue or character formation that enables one to understand that both the intellectual and moral virtues are united, or at least overlap, in service to and in practice of the theological virtues.

In his most recent work, Baehr lists nine key intellectual virtues, their definitions, and each with a memorable slogan to help embed them within one's mind and heart. Here are his nine key intellectual virtues with descriptions and attendant slogans:

- **Curiosity:** A disposition to wonder, ponder, and ask why. A thirst for understanding and a desire to explore. **Slogan:** <u>Ask questions!</u>
- **Autonomy:** A capacity for active, self-directed thinking. An ability to think and reason for oneself. **Slogan:** <u>Think for yourself!</u>
- **Humility:** A willingness to own one's intellectual limitations and mistakes. Unconcerned with intellectual status or prestige. **Slogan:** <u>Admit what you don't know!</u>
- **Attentiveness:** A readiness to be "personally present" in the learning process. Keep distractions at bay. Notices important details. **Slogan:** <u>Look and Listen!</u>

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[11] See Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues & Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pgs. 206-18.

- **Carefulness:** A disposition to notice and avoid intellectual pitfalls and mistakes. Strives for accuracy. **Slogan:** <u>Get it right!</u>
- **Thoroughness:** A disposition to seek and provide explanations. Unsatisfied with mere appearances or easy answers. Probes for deeper meaning and understanding. **Slogan:** <u>Go deep!</u>
- **Open-mindedness:** An ability to think outside of the box. Gives a fair and honest hearing to competing perspectives. **Slogan:** <u>Think outside the box!</u>
- **Courage:** A readiness to persist in thinking or communicating in the face of fear, including fear of embarrassment or failure. **Slogan:** <u>Take risks!</u>
- **Tenacity:** A willingness to embrace intellectual challenge and struggle. Keeps its eyes on the prize and doesn't give up. **Slogan:** <u>Embrace struggle!</u>[12]

A useful virtue-based self-assessment tool for each of the nine intellectual virtues is also included in an appendix.[13] Some these virtues and slogans can be enriched with examples and models drawn from figures in the early church. The book, *Cultivating Virtue: Self-Mastery with the Saints* mines the riches of the Church Fathers.[14] For instance, selections are drawn from various early church figures to fill the month of February with admonitions and examples on the virtue of humility.

Then more pointedly directed towards the specific goal of forming one's moral character, the book of Proverbs can serve as a resource to discover what the sages of old understood to be the tools necessary for informing and forming the souls of the young (and old). David Bland's study of the Proverbs explicates the practical advice and practices these ancient ones used to shape a person's life in relationship to the Lordship of God.[15] These formation tools include:

- **Verbal instruction** and reinforcement, both positive and negative. (Prov. 25:11-15; 26:1-9; 27:14-19)
- **Observation of life experiences**, as well as role playing, and discernment. (Prov. 15:13-17; 33-16:9)

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[12] Jason Baehr, *Deep in Thought: A Practical Guide to Teaching for Intellectual Virtues*, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Education Press, 2021), pgs.195-6.
[13] See Baehr, *Deep in* Thought, Appendix B, pgs. 197-200.
[14] See *Cultivating Virtue: Self-Mastery with the Saints*. Trans. by A Member of the Order of Mercy (Naples, Italy: Albatross Pub., 2019).
[15] David Bland, *Proverbs and the Formation of Character* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015).

- **Communal Practice** in the context of specifically defined communities such as a family, neighborhood, town, or cultural group – and in a community like a small office or a business or corporation. (Prov. 22:6; 31:10-31)

The effective use of the Proverb for moral instruction manifests these elements:

- **Memorable**
- **Flexible**
- **Situational**
- **Familiar**
- **Brief and Witty**
- **Universal**[16]

The literary nature and practical function of the proverb is attractive due these characteristics and are well suited for training and even as a creative assignment for employees to create useful proverbs that are pertinent to their work context.

## Implementation

Now for some practical suggestions and exercises for employees or an office staff[17] that can be implemented without any major intrusion upon one's daily tasks. The practical application (Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, prudence or the practical wisdom of the applying the virtue[s]), can be done with minimum workload addition and can serve as a supportive exercise to any daily work endeavor.

The development of the three categories of virtues naturally readily manifests themselves among the various kinds of labor. Accounting or software design more pronouncedly call for some of the intellectual virtues in support of abstract thought or of the scientific method. The service industry naturally calls for an emphasis on moral virtues in providing aid and guidance to

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[16] Bland, pgs. 71-90.

[17] A given office staff can select primary virtues it would want to see developed that are most pertinent to their respective roles and aims that support the overall purpose of a business or service entity.

people. And of course, in all that we do, be it work, serving our family, our church, our world, it evokes the attention to and need for the theological virtues.

Here are a few specific strategies for virtue/character formation that can rather easily be implemented within a work environment without diverting too much time away from the necessary chores of the day:

- **Ask Questions:** Begin a work day by asking yourself these questions, **"Who are you today?"** (As opposed to, "How are you today?"). "What virtue(s) do you desire to further develop as part of your character?" (Provide a list of key virtues applicable to your job role). **"How are you going to try and develop your selected virtue?"** (Keep a brief overview of Aristotle's schema for virtue development with you). Write down your responses and keep them for yourself or better, make a covenant with a trusted colleague in holding each other accountable. Use Baehr's self-assessment tool.[18]
- **Proverbs:** Begin the workday with a passage from Proverbs that underscores wise living.
- **Church Fathers:** Read and savor a selection from the Church Fathers on the development of virtue.[19]
- **Model:** Encourage the reflection upon and practice of your selected course virtues by sharing brief stories that manifest the virtues by individuals in the workplace.
- **Form Small Groups**: Such small groups can tackle the task of developing a selected virtue or virtues for a given function with in the office. The small groups can serve to be mutual encouragers in practicing the virtue and noting individual progress. The small groups could report to the rest of the office mates at various points of their respective strategies, progress, and failures(!).

These are modest and partial attempts at incorporating the task of virtue and character formation into our leading. If nothing else, these suggestions at least call attention to the need and desire to aim toward the Christian leadership *telos* of serving others and helping our employees become more like Christ. We long to do more for our fellow laborers and more for the Kingdom of God through our Christian leadership. Perhaps these suggestions might be a humble (a prized virtue to seek!) aid to fulfilling our *telos* as Christian servants and leaders.

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[18] Baehr, *Deep in Thought*, pgs. 197-200.

[19] Again, see *Cultivating Virtue: Self Mastery with the Saints*.

**Cautionary Note**

I close with a cautionary note, yea unto two. First, as alluded to in my introduction, forming one's character, developing virtues is not a self-help program for creating yourself though I admit what I just suggested can sound like such a program. The current cultural chorus is chock full of such statements as, "Express yourself. Follow your heart. Find your passion. Whatever makes you happy. Dream big. Live your truth. Love yourself first."[20] And the most oft heard is the resounding refrain, "You can be whatever you want to be!" Alan Noble's recent book, *You are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World*[21], turns the music down, if not off. All of the mass media mantras of self-expression and self-improvement ultimately self-destruct by crashing into the hard, craggy rocks of reality. Noble asserts that this reality "reveals that we are not our own, and that the reign of technique and efficiency dehumanizes us at almost every turn."[22] The current cultural claim that you are your own and that you are responsible for self-creation ultimately creates an anxiety-ridden self and society. Noble proclaims "that we are our own" is "the fundamental lie of modernity."[23] Drawing upon the mid-20th century French philosopher, Jacques Ellul, Noble cites his definition of this societal malaise as the, "totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency in every field of human activity."[24] In contrast to this never ending need for more and more technique to make ourselves, Noble offers hope by simply saying: "thank God we are not our own."[25] We are create

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[20] Joshua Pauling, *Culture*. A post from the blog March 1, 2023. A book review, Alan Noble's *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World.*
[21] Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2021).
[22] Josh Pauling, a blog post on *Culture*, March 1, 2023.
[23] Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own*, p. 37.
[24] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (Vintage Books, 1963), p. XXV.
[25] Noble, p. 115.

d by a merciful and loving God. We are fallen and flawed creatures utterly dependent upon His transformation of us through Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The second cautionary note further expands the first. The earlier mentioned Cardinal and Theological Virtues are not entirely divisible. So while we are not our own and dependent upon God for His transforming power, we must also prepare ourselves to receive such transforming work. Faith and works are not separated. Rather the Cardinal Virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude prepare the soul for receiving the gift of the Theological Virtues of faith, hope, and love born in us by the grace of God. Love is the greatest of these virtues and as Thomas Aquinas states, "love is the friendship of God."[26] The Cardinal Virtues are to be understood as preparing the soul for this friendship. The Cardinal Virtues are dispositions we can develop to receive the actions of the Theological Virtues. This second cautionary note depicts the proper relationship of faith and works, of dependency and development. While we are utterly dependent upon God for all good things, it is the case that since He loved us with His loving kindness (*hesed*) and sacrificial love (*agape*), we then earnestly desire to work out this love in our lives through service to Him and all others.

With these two cautionary notes in place, here is the crux of the matter. To be a leader one must develop one's character in light of the gracious gift of God, namely, the gifts of your life, your God-given capacities, and your life circumstances. We are called upon to have nothing less than the very mind (*phronema*)[27] of Christ (I Cor. 2:16). This mind or understanding of life is emphasized in the first nine chapters of the Book of Proverbs. It is practical, it is wise, it is m

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[26] For Thomas Aquinas discussion on love see, *Summa Theologiae*, *II.II,* Question 23, Article 1; Question 25, Article 1; Question 26, Article 3.

[27] The Greek term *phronema* is derived from *phronesis* understood as practical wisdom, a key virtue often translated as prudence, discernment, or insight. Gerhard Kittle, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), p. 225-6.

oral, it is a mind formed knowing what the right thing is to enact toward others and before God. It is the spiritual attitude of sacrificial love as expressed in Christ's attitude of lowering, emptying Himself, even to the point of death (Phil. 2:5-11). Paul calls upon us to have this right mind, this right thinking in Romans 12:3:

> For I say, through the grace given to me, to all who are among you, that each one not be high-minded [*hyperphronien*] concerning himself, more than he ought to think [*phronien*], but to think [*phronein*] in the right-minded manner [*sophronein*], according to the measure of faith as God has apportioned to each.[28]

To conclude, to be a character to lead you have the supreme model, Christ. You are in supreme dependency upon Him for your very life, your place in life, your opportunities to lead, and finally you are utter dependence upon God to develop you by His grace and mercy. And because of such grace extended to you, you should serve Him by developing the intellectual and moral virtues through the rest of your life, according to the measure of faith God has apportioned to you, in preparation to be transformed by the superlative virtues of faith, hope, and love. That is to say, be a friend of God.

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[28] Translation by Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou in *Thinking Orthodox: Understanding and Acquiring the Orthodox Christian Mind* (Chesterton, IND: Ancient Book Publishing, 2020), p. 26.