

An Early Christian Approach to Virtue Formation

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One distinctive element of classical Christian education is its focus on virtue formation. However, many educators and administrators in the movement, myself included, came into their work with only a foggy sense of how ideas about virtue developed in classical antiquity, were incorporated into the Christian tradition, and can still be applied in the classroom today. Thankfully, a second distinctive element of classical Christian education — the principle of *ad fontes* — provides the solution, expanding our imaginations for how we conceive of virtue formation within the Great Tradition of our faith for the sake of cultivating truth, goodness, and beauty in ourselves and in our students.

The world of classical antiquity, as evidenced by figures such as Aristotle, understood virtues to encompass habits of right action, including attributes such as temperance, justice, fortitude, and prudence — attributes which would in fact become the four cardinal virtues of Christianity. In the wake of the conversion of Constantine, as Christians increasingly sought to appropriate the philosophical and literary heritage of Greece and Rome under the lordship of Christ, the Church Fathers of the fourth century naturally engaged with pagan teaching on virtue. One of the most outstanding early treatments of a Christian approach to virtue is found in Basil of Caesarea's "Address to Young Men, on How They Might Derive Benefit from Greek Literature."¹ Basil's insights as he wrestled with the place of traditional pagan literature within Christian education can generate powerful insights for our own approach to teaching and learning today.

After warning Christian teachers against exposing their students to the kind of pagan

literature that is irredeemably immoral or scandalous, Basil sets out his first justification for the use of pagan literature in a Christian course of study: that it can act as an invitation to virtue. As we will see below, while Basil is careful to recast virtue (and, conversely, vice) according to the Christian gospel, it is nevertheless his contention that Christian virtues have some meaningful points of connection with classical ones. Thus, the classical literature of antiquity, insofar as it promotes virtues that align with the teachings of the Bible, should be set before students in order to form their souls:

*"For it is no small advantage that a certain intimacy and familiarity with virtue should be engendered in the souls of the young, seeing that the lessons learned by such are likely, in the nature of the case, to be indelible, having been deeply impressed in them by reason of the tenderness of their souls."*²

Training in virtue is difficult, Basil acknowledges, and yet the virtuous life will ultimately be eternally worthwhile and truly satisfying. After all, he explains, unlike any earthly possessions, virtue cannot be stolen away by others and will endure into the next life.

By the nature of the examples from classical literature to which he appeals, Basil indicates that the texts he has in mind are not so much abstract, philosophical treatises on the nature of the good. Rather, it is those stories or narratives that celebrate the concept of virtue that are to be placed before students. Basil, therefore, helps us to see the power of story for stirring our souls to pursue something good, beautiful, and true beyond

1. All references to and quotations of this work are taken from the edition of Deferrari and McGuire, Basil: Letters 249–368, On Greek Literature (LCL 270; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934).

2. Basil, "To Young Men," 5.



ourselves. Many of our most powerful cultural phenomena tap into our deepest desires to live lives of purpose, meaning, and adventure. We can easily imagine ourselves as Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*, gazing up at the twin suns of Tatooine, yearning to explore the larger galaxy, or as Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, who unexpectedly receives the One Ring from Gandalf and now has to contemplate a dangerous journey from the Shire to Mordor. We connect powerfully with the very human struggles and redemption arcs of characters such as Jean Valjean or Dmitri Karamazov. Such stories resonate so powerfully in our culture precisely because there seems to be in all of us a

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longing for a call to adventure that will enable us to take our first steps into a larger world, to plunge us into a battle between good and evil that transcends our otherwise seemingly mundane existence and challenges us to embrace our best, most virtuous selves. Even if it is the movies of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and not the epic poems of Homer that fire our students' imagination, the underlying principle is the same: to the extent that good stories inspire our students to a life of virtue and meaning, Basil reminds us that Christian educators need not wholly reject every aspect of culture around us but can identify within it accessible starting points for conversations about virtue and meaning. And we can, time and again, point our students back to God's story of creating, redeeming, and restoring our world as the most

true and beautiful story of them all, a story within which we are invited to find our ultimate identity and purpose.

Basil goes on to identify a second, related justification for Christians studying pagan texts: that they can give students virtuous deeds to emulate. The particular examples Basil selects, along with his means of interpreting them for a Christian context, reveal much about his understanding of how Christians can engage pagan literature. While Basil draws his examples from pagan authors, he defines the virtues in light of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Thus, for instance, Basil suggests that Socrates' willingness to let a drunk man repeatedly strike him without resistance or physical retaliation is akin to Jesus' teachings not to resist an evildoer and to turn the other cheek (cf. Matt 5:38–42). The appeal of such examples, Basil argues, is that such positive examples can be "recalled to memory" by the student in pivotal moments of decision-making, "for whoever has been instructed in these examples beforehand cannot after that distrust those precepts as utterly impossible to obey."³ Such positive role models thus inspire students to make virtuous choices in their own lives.

From Basil's approach to pagan literature we can extrapolate an approach to how Christian educators can point their students to virtue in their engagement with non-Christian materials across all aspects of the curriculum. Teachers can, for example, help their students identify those places where the values of this world do not align with those of the Christian faith and push them towards understanding and then embracing Christian virtue. To illustrate this approach, consider the following lesson I have taught a U.S. History class on the effects of industrialization on Gilded Age America.

At the outset of this lesson, I task students with reading and analyzing texts by Andrew Carnegie and Russell Conwell, who each in his own way sought to justify the extreme levels of economic



inequality resulting from industrialization. In his 1889 essay “Wealth,” Carnegie, the famous steel magnate and philanthropist, drew on the ideas of Social Darwinism to argue that the widening gap between rich and poor was actually a positive thing. Carnegie actually suggests, directly against the historic Christian practice of almsgiving, that the rich should only help those who are willing to help themselves. Carnegie’s articulation of the good life depends on the application of Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” to human society, and this often causes my students to stop and question if this is in fact “gospel,” as Carnegie puts it.

Likewise, in his famous 1890 lecture “Acres of Diamonds,” Baptist minister Russell Conwell makes explicit his contention that God wants us to get rich; given that the poor are being punished by God for their sins, we should only help those who are truly deserving. With his nauseatingly self-congratulatory dialogue and exaggerated language, Conwell’s vision of the good life offends my students. Rooted in consumerism and materialism, the *telos* is hardly different from that of modern society, and this sets it up nicely for further interrogation with my students. After all, I probe, does human flourishing not consist of going to the best college, getting a marketable degree, making a lot of money, and enjoying all the comforts of this world – all while giving back to the truly needy only out of one’s “surplus”?

After having had students ascertain the view of human flourishing undergirding the approach to wealth found in Gilded Age America, I then have my students identify what the Bible and even the broader Christian tradition have to say about

the subject. Beginning with the account of Jesus and the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–22 pars.), we find that Jesus never promises material wealth as a reward for obedience, and that Jesus is very clear that costly economic stewardship is an essential aspect of Christian discipleship, as it demonstrates that the believer’s true master is God and not Mammon (cf. Matt 6:24). *Contra* Carnegie and Conwell, Christians must be sacrificially generous and not proud, refusing to lord their wealth over the poor or claim moral superiority over them.

Students conclude the lesson by reading portions of Basil’s powerful homily “To the Rich”, which features a sharp yet beautiful call to economic justice that challenges them to reflect on their own attitudes towards money. While not losing sight of differences in historical context and interpretive challenges, this activity nevertheless provides an opportunity to challenge students’ natural inclinations as Americans towards materialism and consumerism. Basil himself serves as a powerful example of virtuous living in this regard; after his baptism, Basil sold some of the inheritance he had received and distributed the proceeds to the poor.

It is not just in the humanities that teachers can use their curriculum to invite students to a life of virtue. In a society that continues to experience rapid cultural and technological change, it will be exceedingly important to train Christians who are able to engage these difficult topics from the perspective of biblical truth. Let us, then, following the example of St. Basil, boldly train our students to pursue virtue as they grow into the full measure of Christ’s likeness.