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Theology, News and Notes

Fuller Theological Seminary

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"If someone were to say to me, 'What is the real crisis affecting American life today, affecting Western civilization, affecting planet Earth?' I would say it is not the possibility of nuclear holocaust, it is not the threat of ecological disaster, it is not the possibility of runaway inflation, it is not the (federal) deficit, it is not the trade deficit. The real crisis is a crisis of the heart, a crisis of character — whether we have the values to live together as a people on this shrinking planet. I am certain of one thing: we cannot survive four or eight years without a restoration of character and values among the American people, and the fundamental question we as Christians — those who profess the name of Christ — have to ask is: What institution can restore character?"

These words were spoken in a stirring address delivered by Charles Colson to the Congress '88 National Festival of Evangelism in Chicago last August. (The title of his address was "The Community of Light in the New Dark Age.") The theme of this Theology, News and Notes was established long before Colson delivered his address, but this issue of TN&N does, in a remarkable way, correspond to the concern expressed by this powerful voice on the nation's horizon.

Dr. Lewis B. Smedes, Fuller's professor of theology and ethics, helps us to understand what we mean when we use the word 'character,' and then goes on to give us valuable perspective on the matrix out of which character is being formed. For his paper, the chaplain of the United States Senate, Dr. Richard C. Halverson, gives us a "global" view as he writes of "The National Character from Capitol Hill." He writes with a wisdom which baptizes long experience in the nation's capital with compassion for the nation, its leaders, and its people.

In the address noted above, Colson went on to pinpoint 1) the family and 2) the church as the only centers in which the national character will be shaped, if it is to be shaped for good. Corresponding to Colson's judgment, the remaining three essays here focus on the family and on the church. Dr. Ray S. Anderson, Fuller's professor of theology and ministry, and a theological mainstay of the seminary's marriage and family programs, reflects on "The Family as Matrix of Character." Ray rightly warns us not to overload the family with expectations that can only be realized in and through the gospel, but also assents to the critical shaping role of the family.

Two essays draw our attention to critical ways in which the church has functioned in the shaping of character. Dr. William H. Willimon, university minister at Duke University, and also professor of the practice of Christian ministry, reflects on "Preaching and Character." He insists that "faithful Christian preaching should be formative of Christian character." If Chaplain Halverson's report is correct, and I am sure that it is, then Christian preaching in this land is in trouble — one way or another — and needs to listen to this voice from Duke University.

Dr. James E. Bradley, associate professor of church history at Fuller Theological Seminary, offers an incisive historical perspective on the way in which theological education has persistently seen itself as having a critical role in the shaping of the character of the Christian church. His article is a clear testimonial to the way in which the church has understood the role of the minister and how the character of ministers (and others) can be shaped.

Appearing during the national presidential election campaign, when the nation is especially called to reflect on its own and its leaders' character, we believe that this issue of Theology, News and Notes is a very timely word.
What Are We Talking About?

by Lewis B. Smedes

Just possibly, the most important shift in the study of ethics, of spiritual formation, and of public philosophy during the past decade is the renewal of concern about character. In ethics, we have rediscovered that people tend to do what they do, not because they have learned ethical theory, but because they are certain sorts of people. In spiritual formation, we have rediscovered that God expects us not merely to enjoy the pleasures of piety, but to put ourselves under the discipline of goodness. And in public philosophy, we have rediscovered that what we need in leadership, besides political savvy, is personal integrity. Character, in fact, has become one of the most pressing items on our several agendas.

No question, then, about the timeliness of this issue.

But there is a question about what we are talking about when we talk about character. We can get almost any group to agree that character is of the essence, but when people get to talking about what character is, they soon begin talking at sixes and sevens because they don't begin with a shared understanding of what the word ‘character’ points to in human life.

We here at Fuller held an annual retreat not long ago on the theme of character and how we can help people have it. It was, in my judgment, a mess—babbled, well-glossed with shared goodwill, but no less babble for all our high spirits. And the reason for our confusion was our devout disinterest in common understanding of what it was we were talking about. So, what, then, is character?

What is it we have when we have character? It is certainly something good to have, something that makes us better persons than we would be without it. But there are lots of positive qualities we could have that are not necessarily qualities of character.

Let’s test some positive things that we appreciate in people we know:

“Jack is a polished, debonair sort, classily dressed, knows his way around.”

“Wendy has a fine back-hand, puts a fantastic spin on her serve, a natural athlete.”

“Frank has an IQ of 150, made Phi Beta Kappa last year.”

“Alice has a healthy self-image, very positive, enough to turn the head of any shrink.”


Not really. You can get A’s in all of them, and flunk character.

But let’s try some negative things we might say about people, and ask whether they indicate lack of character.

“Margaret is depressed most of the time, constantly in therapy.”

“Chuck is illiterate, culturally deprived, a high-school drop-out.”

“Mary is so clumsy she flunked Phys. Ed. three years in a row.”

“Jim has absolutely no class, wears green ties with purple shirts, doesn’t know Mozart from marmalade.”

Too bad for them. They are all missing out on some important sides of human life. But does their loss mean they lack character? Of course not. A person could flunk math, get depressed, and be so clumsy he would miss the floor if he knelt to pray, and have a character that makes God feel good to look on it.

Well then, what sort of personal qualities do we have in mind when we talk about character?

Try these.

“Doris tells the truth to the letter even when it costs her a lot of money.”

“Fred is really self-disciplined, seldom lets his guard down, turns down offers other people can’t refuse when he knows they have a seductive hook in them.”

“You can count on Mary to stand up to her sneaky boss whenever he is doing something crooked, even when she knows it could get her into a lot of trouble, a woman of real courage.”

“Tim always tries to be fair to everybody, do the right thing, even when it hurts business.”

Character? You bet. Something sturdy in these people, gritty, they have what it takes to put their sails against the comfortable breezes. People we can trust. Strong on the moral side.

But what about the spiritual side?

Sherry prays a lot, has great power in prayer, maybe has the gift of healing. Neil loves to sing the praises of God with the people of God. Bill always seeks the guidance of the Spirit before he makes a business decision.

These are qualities God appreciates. But are they what we mean by character? Probably not.

Yet, we don’t want to slice too clean a cut between spiritual gifts and moral character. Certainly spiritual formation must have something to do with character.

There is something missing in a piety that doesn’t lead us to be good people, some parts lacking in a spirituality that leaves us short on character. We all know that. In fact, one could argue that spiritual formation is all about growing in character. More than that, of course, but especially that. It’s more important, for instance, that our prayer life gives us integrity and courage than that it brings us self-esteem.

Still, being spiritual has a scope and an importance of its own, apart from its being a catalyst of character. And character has an importance of its own too. So when we talk character...
"It’s the pattern, the profile, the trend of our regular style of behavior that tells us about our character."

we are thinking about something distinct from spirituality.

Maybe we can say, for starters, that character is about being a good person. Good in the moral sense. That is, it has to do with being the sorts of persons we ought to be. The sorts of persons that God expects and enables us to be. Which is different from being the sorts of persons who have what it takes to be a winner in the wonderful game of getting ahead. Or even being notably pious.

But there is a lot more to be said before we have a bead on that elusive dimension of our personalities that we point to when we use the word character.

What I propose to do here is poke around in the traditional meaning of human character. I will do it the European way, by making some simple, probably obvious statements, and elaborate on each of them a bit. When I’ve finished, if I am lucky, I may help us to keep in focus what most people who have thought about character mean by the word.

1. Character is about the sorts of persons we are.

What is important, old Joe Kennedy said to his sons, is not what you are but what you appear to be. And so the industry of image-making was reborn.

Don’t knock it too cheaply. We all strut our stuff, putting on the best face for the right people. We can’t fool everybody all the time, but we may as well cover our bets.

Appearances count for something. A little creative hypocrisy keeps the social bearings oiled. And looking good could be a catalyst for becoming good; keeping the bad stuff under wraps can be a way of getting rid of it. As C.S. Lewis said, “The distinction between pretending you are better than you are and beginning to be better in reality is finer than moral sleuthhounds conceive.”

Still, if we want to talk character, we have to get beneath appearances. Character is about what a person is, not about what she looks like.

2. Character is what we are at the core.

The biblical sense of the matter suggests that there is an inner self that forms the core or the root of the outer self.

The inner self is where character is born. But what and where is that inner self?

The Bible speaks of it mostly in metaphors. Like heart, for instance. “Out of the heart are the issues of life,” according to the wisdom of Proverbs. Jesus used the same metaphor: “The good man out of the treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man of his evil treasure produces evil” (Matt. 12:35). St. Paul used the metaphor of mind: “Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). And Jesus uses the simile of the good tree that bears good fruit.

What do the metaphors tell us about the inner self?

Probably heart and mind have to do with our intentions. About how we intend to shape our behavior. About the tilt of our wills. About our deeper inclinations. How we are disposed to live. Maybe deeper things than this, but at least this.

So, a good tree that bears good fruit and a good heart that grows into good living are metaphors for the deeper intentions and powerful dispositions that ultimately shape us into good actions.

What we are, then, is what we intend to be and what we are disposed to do.

And the word “character” is about these things.

3. Character is also about what we do.

It would seem odd if I were to say: “I know that Sarah never does anything worthwhile, but at heart she has a fine character.”

It seems obvious that character is about what we do as much as it is about what we intend to do. What we are on the outside as much as what we are at the heart.

But we need to make another distinction. Not what we do once in a while. Some of us luck out and do good things now and then by accident; even a broken clock gets it right twice a day. Character is about the sorts of things we tend to do regularly, predictably, dependably.

If I hear that Larry DenBesten took several hours a week out of his heavy schedule to minister medicine to homeless people, I would say: “Of course, he always does that sort of thing, it’s the kind of person he is.”

And what I would mean is that Larry’s typical or predictable behavior is the sort of person he is — and with that, the sort of character he has.

We’re not talking perfect consistency here. We’re talking tendency — batting .600 or so! Anybody with character can bungle things sometimes and do things inconsistent with their real characters. But, in St. Paul’s words, if a person is “overtaken in a fault” she does not lose her character anymore than a first violin ruins the whole symphony by missing one note.

It’s the pattern, the profile, the trend of our regular style of behavior that tells us about our character.

4. Character is about what we will to be and will to do.

We credit a person with character if he or she makes choices. Real choices, the kind we make freely, against the winds of behavioral conditioning and genetic destiny.

Suppose the consistent behaviorist were right. Suppose that we have, in Skinner’s cheating words, gone “beyond” freedom and dignity, beyond choice and self-determination? Suppose that what we are, through
“Our characters are not like statues. They are more like an unfinished story.”

and through, is only a set of behaviors. Behaviors that are not the results of choice, of intention, nor of anything resembling the biblical “heart.” But only of conditioning from the outside.

Or suppose our genetic computer were in charge of us, that everything we are and did were programmed on a genetic keyboard.

Would it make sense to speak of character? Hardly, not the way moral tradition defines it.

We don’t have to be titans, creating our destinies from scratch, to have character. Each of us is given a certain amount of raw material to work with. Some of us begin with a moral bonanza, others with a budget deficit. But we play the game with the hand we were dealt, and how we play the game with what we’ve been given is what makes for character.

The same would have to be said of the new birth and the work of the Spirit on our characters. The New Testament, as I read it, does not suggest that we are mere putty in the Spirit’s hands. More like co-authors of our life story. So whatever growth in character we credit to the Spirit of Christ he will, in turn, give us a share in the credit. But we play the game with the hand we were dealt, and how we play the game with what we’ve been given is what makes for character.

The definition of character has to include both will and inclination — in unrelieved tension.

5. Character is about the tension between our inclinations and our wills.

When we talk about the sorts of persons we are, we are talking about the sorts of persons we are inclined to be. The bent of the twig. The set of the sails.

Inclination hints at an easy naturalness. As if we enjoyed doing right. As if being good came easy to us. The Bible pins a lot on inclination; the person with character delights in doing the will of God.

But when we talk about will, we are talking about bucking our inclinations. Not sailing with the wind, but tacking against it. Moving against the stream.

And don’t we tend to give credit for character precisely when a person does right regularly when doing it comes hard? It’s not a person who vomits at the smell of whiskey who gets credit for sobriety; it’s the person who says “No” when he hankers for a snort who shows character.

Well, it only shows how sin complicates our lives. It is hard to create character because we have to will it against our inclinations toward greed, violence, hate, and a lot of other malignancies of the heart.

But we also have restored human inclinations — the result of having the “mind” of Christ. And these inclinations grace the will to be a person with character.

So, for now, while flesh wars against spirit, we have to will to fight against the inclinations of the unregenerate “mind” and we can go with the flow of our regenerate “mind.”

The definition of character has to include both will and inclination — in unrelieved tension.

6. Character is about the sorts of persons we are becoming.

Our character at any moment is the beginning of what we can be and, by the grace of God, expect to be.

This is where character fits the old-fashioned concept of virtue. Virtue is, in Josef Pieper’s words, a power that pushes us “to attain the furthest potentiality of [human] nature.” So we could say that our character is what we have it in our created humanity to be, but what for now we can only intend to be.

We are always persons on the way. To becoming in reality what we are potentially. Our characters are not like statues. They are more like an unfinished story.

In fact, writing a story is a splendid metaphor for creating character. The trick is to write a continued story, not a collection of unconnected episodes, but a story with a leading character who is the same person on her way toward the character she and God intend her to become.

So we are not stuck with our character in the middle of a given chapter. We won’t really have our characters until we have written the final chapter of our stories.

7. Character is about the sorts of persons we all ought to become.

Careful here. When we say that Jim Beam is a character, we mean that he is odd, a little eccentric, off the wall. But when we say that Jane Beam has character we mean that she has a better than average share of the qualities common to all humankind. Not eccentric, but like everyone else who has it.

To speak of character is to admit that there is a thing called humankind. We are not simply a huge collection of individuals, each one of his and her own kind. There is a kind of person we all are meant to be. There are some human qualities that God intends every individual member of his great family to share.

Not to undo individuality, of course. There are enough different temperaments, moods, gifts, styles to go around for every person to have his or her own. But there is also a universal moral pattern, a shared character, an image of God, that is meant to filter through the private windows of all of us unique individuals.

Getting a focus on that moral
pattern, recognizing it in the almost infinite mosaic of humanity, knowing the sorts of persons we all ought to be is part of the human quest. But when we get the picture, it will remind us of the Christ; when we have all written our own stories, they will, if written with character, fit congruently into his story.

Enough, then, about what we are talking about when we talk about character.

I have been semantically arrogant, I know. The context that defines character for me is ethical. Psychologists and sociologists have their own neutral, descriptive, unprejudiced way of talking about character, as if it were simply a way of describing without bias the traits of any given individual. But I think they

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SOME YEARS AGO MY DENOMINATION HAD A SERIES OF WORKSHOPS FOR PREAMBLES ON "PREAMBLE FOR DECISION." WHAT IS MORE EVANGELICAL THAN TRYING, THROUGH OUR PREAMBLES, TO GET PEOPLE TO MAKE THE STANDARD "DECISION FOR CHRIST"?

Isn't it interesting that the preening workshop was not called, "Preambling for Character"? Of course we evangelicals have been criticized for emphasizing the first steps of faith at the expense of growth in faith. Many years ago, Colin Morris accused us of producing "stilborn" Christians, people who said an initial "Yes" without much evidence of further spiritual maturity. One reason why decision is such an appealing goal of preening is because Americans have been conditioned to believe that our ability to exercise the maximum amount of control over our lives, through our own "I choose, therefore I am." We assume that true freedom means having the maximum number of options. We moderns enjoy thinking of ourselves as autonomous, independent shapers of our own destinies and futures.

In such a climate, no wonder that not much is said about the need for character. Character implies that our choices are not nearly as interesting as the person who is being produced by those choices. What difference does it make that I am free to choose if I have no basis, no goal, no purpose in life which gives meaning and coherence to my choices? What good is my freedom if it is, in reality, enslavement to the whims or urges of the moment? Much contemporary Christian ethics has mirrored secular ethics in reducing life to a series of moral puzzles. What ought I to do? in the matter of abortion, or premartial sex, or South African apartheid? What should I decide on these perplexing issues? The ethics of character implies that the prior ethical question is, "What sort of person do you want to be at 65?" Our choices have meaning only as they contribute to or detract from the sort of persons we hope to be. I cannot begin to answer the question of, "What ought I to do?" until I first know who I would like to be.

Of course, to discuss what sort of persons we ought to be is usually considered out of bounds in our society, unduly restrictive. We want to keep our options open, to go with the flow, to adapt and adjust. Such a view of the self forgets that personality is not created in the twinkling of an eye, in a moment of decision. Character implies commitment to long-term growth and development. It is an affirmation that human beings take shape over time, that we are as much the result of the gifts and actions of others as the sum of our own choices.

We live in an adolescent, rather superficial culture where everyone wants enlightenment, happiness, even salvation, instantly, with push-button speed. It therefore comes as a shock to hear the testimony of the saints who can lament that after a lifetime of struggle and determination to follow Jesus, they still fall far short of discipleship. It takes time, correction, repentance and forgiveness to grow up into Christ. The preacher is an essential part of that lifetime process.
Character as a test for the validity of the gospel

Sometimes, in seminary courses in homiletics, we present students with lists of "Qualities of a Good Sermon." A good sermon should be biblical. It should be interesting, understandable, and well-organized. While we are drawing up lists of characteristics of good preaching, we ought also to say that faithful Christian preaching should be formative of Christian character. The truthfulness of the Christian message is rightly judged by the sort of people it produces. Our challenge, as preachers, is always "political" in the sense that the gospel intends to engender a people, a holy nation, a gathering of ministers who share in Christ's ministry in the world (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

One reason why we Christians are so excited about the appearance of a Teresa of Calcutta or a Desmond Tutu is that we have the good sense to know that, if we can't produce people whose lives at least resemble Jesus', then we really don't have much to preach. Jesus came preaching not a new philosophy about life, but rather a new way of life. He called people not to simply agree but to join up. He wanted us not to admire him but to dare to follow him, promising us that the disciple would come to resemble the master. We must therefore resist the tendency to reduce the gospel to an intellectual dilemma ("Does this make sense?")—an emotional experience ("How do I feel about this?")—and stick with the political, social, communal and therefore ecclesial claims of the gospel ("What sort of people is being formed through this proclamation?"). Preachers must not become yet another means of the church's evasion of its mandate to form a people who are a sign to the world of God's refusal to abandon his creation.

As Alasdair MacIntyre says, "Where the Christian community is incapable of producing lives such as those of the saints, the premises from which it argues will appear rootless and arbitrary" (Difficulties in Christian Belief, p. 118). The actual, real-life production of Christian character is not only the expectation of the gospel but also its validation. When asked by nonbelievers, "How do we know that your gospel is true?" Christians are in the embarrassing position of having to trot out more than our little arguments. We must trot out our little lives. We must be able to present ourselves and our church as evidence that God really was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

Talk of producing people who not only have but are "characters" ought to sound strange to our contemporary American ears. Our society has convinced itself of the odd proposition that it is possible to have such social virtues as justice, goodness, honesty and self-sacrifice through legislation, government programs, or by balancing competing special interests rather than through the production of good people. Yet, as Luther noted, we don't get apples from a thorn bush. If we want apples, we must plant apple trees. If we want good works, we must have good people. Failing at that, we have more governmental bureaucracy.

In the current political campaign for the presidency, we hear much talk about the need to address "the issues." For most of us modern Americans, that's about all life is—just one puzzling issue after another. We lurch from one ethical dilemma to the next wondering, "What should I do?" But how does one begin to answer, "What should I do?" without first asking, "Who do I want to be?"

Life is nothing more than a string of tough problems when we lose sight of the need for character—for a dependable, coherent personality who confronts the issues. And that is precisely what we lack. We have assumed that somehow we can organize our society around issues, programs, strategies, balanced self-interest and thereby never have to confront the need for character. What we need is some account of life that charts the way for us to live coherently and truly amid the conflicts that circumscribe our existence. We need some story which will enable us to transform our fate into our destiny. Lacking any such story, we will merely get by the best we can.

Aristotle taught that the purpose of government is to make us better people than we would have been if left to our own devices. A polity is to be judged on the basis of the sort of characters it produces. We live in a society which has been organized, not on the basis of the Bible, but on the basis of the presuppositions of the Enlightenment. Liberalism, child of the Enlightenment, assumes that society can be organized without any narrative that is commonly held to be true, that the pursuit of freedom and rationality is enough to give society meaning and coherence. Oddly enough, the founders of our society assumed that it was possible to give power to the people because people of virtue would know how to use their freedom rightly.

But the society which we created lacked any philosophy or means for making virtuous people. In this sense, Richard Neuhaus is right (The Naked Public Square) when he notes that constitutional democracy depends on
survival is not the issue. The issue, as always, is how to live and die as Christ.

virtuous people. Our religious institutions fulfilled an important role as a place for the production of such people. When we lose virtuous people and the institutions which produce them, all we have left is a society which is little more than a vast supermarket of desire. What we call freedom is merely a conglomeration of self-interested consumers who exist to compete, to assert a lengthening list of rights, and to fulfill an ever-expanding array of personal needs. We have thereby demonstrated, in secular society, the tragedy of a people who have tried to sidestep the basic political truth that the most important test of a society is the sort of people it produces.

This is also the test of the society called the church. Our church confronts the world as a people whose common life is ordered around their desire to be faithful to a true story rather than merely to be free to consume more things. That true story is the gospel, and it is the preacher's task to hold it before us on a regular basis. In hearing this story, we begin to attune our lives to what is true (Jesus Christ) rather than what is false. We become different than we would have been if we had been left to our own devices or allowed to do what comes naturally.

Learning to be true to our stories

A Christian is someone who is attempting to be true, in word and deed, to the story of God in Jesus Christ. In fact, a Buddhist and a Christian differ, to a great extent, because they have listened to different stories which teach them to attend to the world in different ways. Upon first encountering a Christian “character,” the uninitiated observer may think that he has come across someone who is strangely “conservative,” or perhaps “radical,” because the Christian does not appear to be in step with the times. Actually, what has happened is that the Christian has been formed by a different account of the way the world is put together.

As Erich Auerbach says, the reading and interpretation of Scripture is not meant “merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure...into it everything that is known about the world...must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan” (Mimesis, p. 48). Our confrontation with Scripture in preaching shapes us into certain sorts of people who are attuned to things in a different way because we have heard a true story whereas the world has not. This accounts for the distinctiveness of the Christian community when it is faithful. Not that Christians enjoy being different. It is rather that anyone who tries to live on the basis of what God wants in the midst of a world that does not know God will appear to be odd.

For example, we recently had a debate on our campus about nuclear weapons. The evening of the debate, the panel was split into two conventional and all-too-familiar points of view. One side argued that nuclear weapons are bad because “we are sitting on a nuclear powder keg. If we don’t get rid of these monsters, we will blow ourselves to bits. The whole earth is in peril.”

The other side argued that, while nuclear weapons are unfortunate, the Russians have them and we have them. “If we don’t have these weapons, we could lose the American way of life. Our survival is at stake.”

I left the meeting thinking that, in regard to the nuclear threat, it was at least good to see that both sides agree — survival was the issue. They may quibble with one another on how best to survive, how best to protect the status quo — one argues for keeping our bombs, the other argues for their disposal — but both agree that survival is the issue. Survival.

My problem was that I am a preacher. In just a few days I had the unpleasant task to preach the gospel. It was the season of Lent, the season of the cross. There we have a story that asserts that survival is not the issue. The issue, as always, is how to live and die as Christ. In Gethsemane, Jesus did not pray, “Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done, just remember — survival is the issue.”

Our story teaches us to honor and to emulate those for whom mere survival was never the issue. Indeed, on the basis of the story of Jesus, it could be argued that we are in the mess we’re in with our nuclear weapons precisely because for us and for the Russians, survival has become the only issue. This life may not be much, but when God is gone, it is all there is, so we will protect what there is rather than dream about what can be. And we have demonstrated, time and again, that we shall protect what we have with murderous intensity.

One can expect some rather peculiar, rather odd, perhaps even rather novel and creative responses to the world’s problems from persons whose characters have been formed by this story. We don’t believe in character for character’s sake; as if character in and of itself is a good thing. There can be evil characters as well as good. That is, there can be people whose lives are coherent, dependable and predictable on the basis of deception and falsehood rather than on the basis of what is true. Our goal is Christian character, that is, character which is correlative of the narrative which is the gospel. In preaching, we are set in conversation...
"Paganism is in the air we breathe, the water we drink. It captures us, it converts our young, it subverts the church."

with that story. We are enabled to examine our lives on the basis of the gospel, to be judged, corrected, forgiven, and thereby to grow. For us preachers, the question becomes, "What sort of people must we be to be a church worthy to listen to these stories which we call Scripture?"

Preaching within a changed world

In fact, I suspect that one reason why we have neglected character formation as a purpose of preaching (contenting ourselves with preaching as pop-psychotherapy, moralizing, self-help strategy, etc.) is that we preachers inwardly fear that we lack the kind of church necessary to sustain the development of people of character. Conservative Christians advance the dubious argument that the gospel is about the inward saving of individual souls. Liberal Christians assert that the gospel is about getting out of our sanctuaries and into secular society to make society in general just a bit more just. Both groups overlook the true political program of the gospel — namely, the creation of a visible polis, a people who show, in their life together, that God, not nations, rules the world and that God makes possible a new people who live by the truth rather than through violence and coercion.

To be that people requires the cultivation of Christian character, now more than ever. I was born into a world where Christians seemed secure, confident and powerful, the United States of the 1950s. My parents worried little about whether or not I would grow up Christian — it was the only game in town. The entire town was closed on Sundays. Everyone went to church. It was the American, accepted, normal thing to do. In that world the church did not have to bother itself too much about Christian formation because, after all, we were fortunate to live in a basically Christian country. It was our world. A few years ago I woke up and realized that, whether or not my parents were justified in believing this, no one believed it today. No one. American Christians, conservative or liberal, Roman Catholic or Protestant, no one believed anymore that we could stay Christian, or that our children would become Christian, simply by living in the "right" neighborhood, drinking the water, and breathing the air. If our children grew into this faith, we would have to put them there. If we would hold to and live out this faith, we would have to do so with care and determination because sometime, sometime between 1950 and 1970, the world shifted. It was no longer "natural" and "American" to be Christian.

My last congregation, in Greenville, South Carolina, was next door to the synagogue.

The rabbi and I would get together for coffee on Monday mornings. One Monday, the rabbi said to me, "You know, it is tough to be a Jew in Greenville." The rabbi explained, "We are always having to tell our children: You are special. You are different. You are a Christian."

My neighbor the rabbi had lived among a people who had never asked the wider society for special favors, props, crutches. His community knew that if they were going to be and stay Jews, they would have to intentionally make themselves to be so.

Paganism is in the air we breathe, the water we drink. It captures us, it converts our young, it subverts the church. For instance, a couple of years ago, on Orientation Sunday, the text assigned to me by the lectionary was Ephesians 5:21-32. My heart sank. "Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ. Wives, obey your husbands." I can't preach that, I thought. Only the most reactionary of conservatives would preach such a text! Especially is it an inappropriate text for a university church. My associate would drag me out of the pulpit and puncture me all over with her spiked heels. Forget Ephesians 5. The word for our day is "Liberation," not "Submission."

But I decided to do something a bit unusual for us Methodists — let the Bible have its say. I began my Orientation Sermon by saying, "You despise this text. No one but some reactionary would like this text. What an ugly word! Submission."

And yet, we know that, taken in the context of the day, this is a radical word. Women had no rights in that day. The writer of Ephesians 5 expends more words giving advice to husbands, telling them about their duties to wives, than words to wives telling them what they are to do for their husbands. Scholars agree that this is not a text about women's submission in marriage; it is a text which urges mutual submission in the church. The tone is set by the opening verse: "Submit yourselves to one another" (5:21).
"...we must gather, on a regular basis, to speak about God in a world that lives as if there is no God."

And that is why we despise this text. Our word is liberation. In our day we have seen the liberation of just about everyone. And the sooner that husbands can be liberated from their wives, parents can be liberated from their children, individuals can be liberated from their community, and we all can be liberated from God, so much the better! Why do you think that we're all here at the university? To get liberated! To stand alone, on our own two feet, autonomous, liberated! And when we finish with you here at the university, and you have your degree, you will not need mother, father, husband, wife, children, God, anybody. We call it "education."

Yet the writer to the Ephesians says that is a way which leads to death, not life.

And I tell you that's odd. In the oddest of ways, the gospel brings about a head-on collision with many of our culture's most widely held and deeply believed values. Being a Christian is not natural nor easy because the call is no less scandalous than to "be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love; as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:1-2).

Thus the writer to the Ephesians says that you had better not go out unarmed (6:10-20). It is tough out there. The world lives by different slogans, different visions, speaks a different language than that of the church. So we must gather to "speak the truth in love" (4:15) that we might grow up in our faith. Weak, childish, immature faith is no match for the world, so we must "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ..." (Eph. 4:15).

So we must gather, on a regular basis, to speak about God in a world that lives as if there is no God. We must speak to one another as beloved brothers and sisters in a world which encourages us to live as strangers. We must pray to God to give us what we cannot have by our own efforts in a world which teaches us that we are self-sufficient. In such a world, what we do on Sunday morning becomes a matter of life and death. Pray that we preachers might speak the gospel boldly (Eph. 6:20).

A couple of years ago, I was invited to preach in a congregation which is located in the heart of one of our great cities. The congregation is composed almost entirely of black people who live in the tenement houses in that part of the city. I arrived at eleven o'clock, expecting to participate in about an hour of worship. But I did not rise to preach until nearly 12:30. There were five or six hymns and gospel songs, a great deal of shouting, handclapping, singing. We did not have the benediction until nearly 1:15. I was exhausted.

"Why do black people stay in church so long?" I asked my friend as we went to lunch. "Our worship never lasts much over an hour."

He smiled. Then he explained, "Unemployment runs nearly 50 percent here. For our youth, the unemployment rate is much higher. That means that when our people go about during the week, everything they see, everything they hear tells them, 'You are a failure. You are nobody. You are nothing because you do not have a good job, you do not have a fine car, you have no money.'"

"So I must gather them here, once a week, and get their heads straight. I get them together, here, in the church, and through the hymns, the prayers, and the preaching say, 'That is a lie. You are somebody. You are royalty! God has bought you with a price and loves you as his Chosen People.'"

"It takes me so long to get them straight because the world perverts them so terribly."

To be and stay Christian, we must cultivate Christian character. The weekly reiteration and proclamation of the gospel which occurs in our preaching and worship is the essential crucible of such formation.
The National Character from Capitol Hill

by Richard C. Halverson

"Current events are filled with accounts of improprieties and lack of ethical behavior in every area of our culture. Accounts range from Watergate to evangelists involved in sexual trysts; from immorality and drugs in our schools to insider trading schemes on Wall Street. These trends represent the values we hold as individuals and collectively as a culture. Our individual values are revealed as we live our daily lives in a series of situations, some difficult and complex, some smooth and easy, some planned, some uncontrolled. The need has never been greater for wisdom and knowledge of right from wrong in our business and professional life, home life, and personal life." (Taken from the Executive Guide to Ethical Decision-Making, published by Executive Leadership Foundation, Inc., Atlanta, GA.)

Pessimism is not popular in our nation today. A popular president with extraordinary communication ability has encouraged optimism. But there are times when bad news is imperative, as for example when medical diagnosis reveals a life-threatening condition. The good news is that there is hope.

Dr. Carl F.H. Henry, in my mind one of the most perceptive, incisive, and brilliant thinkers of our day, has written a new book titled Twilight of a Great Civilization — The Drift Toward Neo-Paganism. Dr. Henry writes, "Only the experimental success of modern science hides from us the dread terminal illness of our increasingly technological civilization." An overstatement? I think not! In a little booklet, "Absolute Ethics, A Proven System for True Profitability," published by the organization which provided the opening paragraph, respected pollster John Gallup is quoted as saying, "The U.S. is facing a moral and ethical crisis of the first dimension."

An evangelical pastor in Washington, D.C. has certain advantages. Because it is the nation's capital, national and international issues are daily fare. Almost any plans to influence public policy by any group or organization from anywhere come to the attention of the Washington pastor. This reality has enabled me over the past 30 years to assess, in simple ways at least, the moral and spiritual climate of the nation. As I look back, I can trace a sense, not always conscious in the process, of almost steady and gradual moral and spiritual decline.

Washington, D.C. is literally a microcosm of the world. People from every state in the nation and every nation of the world live here. World news is local news. An average of three protests or demonstrations daily, some very small, some enormous, keep one alive to the issues which trouble our world and the response, if any, of the church to those issues.

One impression in these past two decades: During the time of what might be called evangelical explosion, social malignancy has been growing epidemically. Somehow, evangelicals have not been a moral force during these past two or three decades, at a time when they had greater visibility and attention than ever. My chief concern as a pastor is that at a time when our national life desperately needed a strong infusion of salty, biblical faith, somehow the evangelical community was being infected by the secularism which it deplores so readily. Rather than benevolently infusing culture with righteousness, she (the evangelical community) has, herself, been tragically infected with the disease of materialism.

A loss of hope

One youth worker's experience indicates that there is a great sense of hopelessness among young people today. One senator, when he speaks to student groups, conducts what he calls a poll. His questions: How many of you feel neutral about the future? How many optimistic? How many pessimistic? Recently, he was speaking to over 200 students from 20 or 30 colleges and universities, representing 20 nations. He conducted his poll. Few hands were raised indicating neutrality toward the future. Few hands indicated optimism. Most of the group indicated pessimism as far as the future is concerned.

According to one statistic, a teenager commits suicide every 30 seconds in America. In his book, America: To Pray or Not To Pray, David Barton gives the following statistics: Premarital sex among 18-year-old women has increased by 238 percent between 1962 and 1981; premarital sex among 15-year-old women increased 274 percent during the same period. The unwed teen birth rate, ages 15 to 19, from 1962 to 1985, was up 334 percent. Teenage suicide for ages 15 to 19 in the same period was up 238 percent. The divorce rate from 1962 to 1983 increased 232 percent. And the rate of violent crime from 1962 to 1986 was up 400 percent.

Chuck Miller of Barnabas, Inc., in his book, Parenting the Adolescent, wrote, "A 1940 survey of public school authorities found their top discipline problems were talking, gum chewing, making noise, running in the halls, getting out of turn in line, dressing improperly and littering. A 1986 poll of educators listed rape, robbery, assault, burglary, arson, bombings, murder, suicide, absenteeism, vandalism, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, gang warfare, pregnancy, abortion and venereal disease."
"Two words seem to characterize our present culture in America: greed and lust."

The president of Johns Hopkins University was quoted in the Nov. 11, 1980 *U.S. News and World Report* as saying, "Our universities are turning out nothing more than highly skilled barbarians."

In the December 1, 1986 issue of *Newsweek*, the front page of the business section told about Ivan Boesky, who had been convicted of insider trading and fined $100 million. Three sentences of a speech he made to the graduates of the School of Business Administration, at the University of California, Berkeley, were as follows: "Greed is all right... I want you to know that I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself." In responding to those three sentences, *Newsweek* said, "The strangest thing, when we come to look back (on this) will be not just that Ivan Boesky could say that at a business school graduation, but that it was greeted with laughter and applause."

Reading that article during a flight to California roused deep concern. At the airport I was met by an executive of an investment bank in San Francisco. We discussed the article. "You would be amazed at how many graduates in business administration think that way today," he said. When I returned to Washington, I had an opportunity to speak with the late Arthur Burns, perhaps the greatest economist of his time. I told him about the experience and asked him to respond. "Recently," he said, "I was at Harvard University, I visited their School of Business Administration. I asked them if they had a chair in ethics. 'No.' Did they have courses in ethics? 'No.' A few weeks later, I was at Stanford University, I visited their School of Business Administration. I asked the same questions; got the same answers." Said Arthur Burns, "Here are two of the finest business administration schools in the nation, and they do not teach ethics."

Forcing ethics out

In our country today, ethics is equated with religion. Ethics is a religious issue. As and the secularization process forces religious faith out of the public sector and into the private ghetto, so it forces ethics out. As a matter of fact, the word 'ethics' has gone out of style. "Values" is the word for today.

Two words seem to characterize our present culture in America: greed and lust. Both greed and lust are insatiable. They cannot be satisfied. They feed on themselves. The more each has, the more each wants. One hears a great deal these days about the growing national debt and the increasing annual federal budget deficit. But one rarely hears that the private sector debt is greater than the national debt, and that the corporate sector debt is twice as much as the national debt. Not only is the federal government living beyond its means, but the people are living beyond their means, as are the corporations. In this consumer culture, we borrow on the future to enjoy the present.

Is there hope? The answer lies with the people of God. God works through his people, he does not bypass them. His people are the agents for his redemptive purpose in history. And only as his people are a redemptive force is the nation benefited. The surest way for the healing of the nation is the healing of the church of Jesus Christ. Always the people of God have their greatest influence in a godless world when they are most other-worldly. The church has its maximum impact on human kingdoms when it conforms most to the Kingdom of God. When Jesus said, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things shall be added unto you," he was referring not simply to personal prosperity and health but to the larger benefits of the presence of the Kingdom in history.

In the last three decades, evangelism has enjoyed unprecedented success as evangelicals have taken seriously mass evangelism, church evangelism and personal evangelism. Probably there have been more books published on how to evangelize than ever before in the history of the church. Tens of thousands have responded to the gospel of Jesus Christ in our nation through these various evangelistic efforts and programs. But moral decay and corruption have increased epidemically during the same period.

During the school prayer breakfast debate, a senator was asked to address the annual men's dinner at a local church. About 450 were present. During the meal, school prayer became a very emotional issue. The senator began by asking asking two questions. "First, how many of you would like to see prayer restored to the public schools?" As far as he could tell, every hand was raised, with many "Amens!" The second question: "How many of you pray with your children every morning at home?" The silence was embarrassing. Finally, a few raised their hands, it seemed reluctantly. What is it with the church that we demand of the public school system and Congress that which we are not doing in our own churches and homes?

A need for righteousness

More than programs are needed! The greatest need is righteousness among the people of God, that wherever there is a believer, there is a righteous force. God has his people everywhere. Daily they penetrate the
Sometimes I am afraid that in our preoccupation with the signs of Pentecost we ignore its substance.

organizations and institutions of the world — in business, finance, education, government; name it, they are everywhere. Multiplied millions of believers daily pervade the subcultures of our world. Why have they not permeated their environment with moral force? Has the salt lost its saltiness? Has the light been put under a bushel?

In Colossians 1 the Apostle Paul refers to a “mystery” which God kept “hidden for ages and generations,” but which now has been revealed to the Gentiles. Paul defined this mystery as “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” He goes on to say that he communicated this message in preaching and teaching to everyone he could with all the energy God gave him, that he might bring everyone to his or her full maturity in Christ. Obviously, full maturity is connected to the indwelling Christ. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

“When the fulness of time was come,” wrote Paul, “God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4). The author of Hebrews opens his Epistle with these words: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.” God’s plan for the fullness of time — for the last days — in which we have been living now for 2000 years, is his Son. God had revealed himself in many ways in the past, but in these final days, God visits the human race in the Son and sends the Son to be in the midst of humanity which he is to redeem. In the words of the prologue to the Gospel of John, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory…” (1:14). God in the midst in human flesh. That is God’s plan for the fullness of time.

During Jesus’ public ministry, he was limited by time and space. He could only be in one place at one time. Yet he is the omnipresent One. Was God’s plan for the fullness of time for the last days limited to this local incarnation — Jesus’ 33 years on earth, 2,000 years ago?

John records in his last discourse (John 14-16) an incident with Philip, who said, “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied” (14:8). One can almost feel the sadness in Jesus’ voice as he responds, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father, how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (14:9).

Jesus continues, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves” (v. 10-11). Jesus argues that when they heard what he said and saw what he did, they were actually hearing and seeing the Father. It was not Jesus himself who did the work. It was the Father in him who did it.

Ponder this amazing claim by the Jewish carpenter. It was not he who was speaking; it was not he who was working. He was simply the vessel, the instrument in which and through which Almighty God the Father spoke and worked.

Jesus’ words become more incredible as he continues. “Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father” (v. 12). He then promises the gift of the Comforter who is to come at Pentecost. It is important to note that Jesus did not say, “the works that I did ye shall do,” but “the works that I do shall (ye) do also; and greater works than these…”

Incarnation continues

Jesus spoke precisely to the disciples, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses…” (Acts 1:8). Not a promise, not a command, but a simple statement of fact. One simple, profound condition to witnessing — the coming upon them of the Holy Spirit. “You shall be my witnesses,” Jesus said categorically, “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” Just as the Holy Spirit had done the work and spoken the Word of the Father in the life of the Jewish carpenter, he was now going to speak the Word and do the deed in the lives, through the bodies of every believer. That is the substance of Pentecost. Sometimes I am afraid that in our preoccupation with the signs of Pentecost we ignore its substance.

The fact is that incarnation was to continue; it did not end with the ascension of Jesus. Incarnation is not simply a historic event 2,000 years old; incarnation is a present reality that Jesus Christ, the Omnipresent One, is literally omnipresent, in the flesh, in the bodies of believers — in home, school, shop, club, office, in government, the professions, industry, business, education, agriculture. Wherever there is a believer, Jesus Christ is literally present.

And he is not idle there! He is continuing the work he began as the Jewish carpenter. Or perhaps it is more correct to say, the Father is continuing the work He began in the life of the carpenter. This is the great unrealized reality of the faith in contemporary evangelicalism. Jesus is literally —
"Is it conceivable that... the people of God have been influenced more and more by the wisdom of the world?"

literally! — present in the body of the believer, wherever that believer is. And Jesus is not idle. He does not wait for the believer to tell him what to do or what to say. He is not "programmed." He is manifesting himself, most of the time unconscious to the believer, in and through his life.

The Scriptures abound with this profound truth. John 7:37 records that "On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink.' " He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' John adds, "Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive..." One simple condition: "Believe." The one who believes will do his work, will speak his Word. The one who believes will be the channel for rivers of living water unto life eternal. Believing is the real work; believing is the real "how to." This is the work of God (John 6:29). And it is hard work.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere" (2:14). God is the subject of that sentence. It is God who leads, and he always leads. Not just sometimes, not just sporadically, but always. As he leads us in the triumph of Christ, he spreads through us the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere. Paul continues, "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life." (vv 15-16).

Christ's presence in us, wherever we are, has two effects, two influences. One is death. One is life. To those who are in the process of being saved, it is life. To those who are in the process of dying, it is death. The same life, Christ's; the same person, the believer; the same fragrance, and yet opposite effects: death and life.

**Competence from God**

In 2 Cor. 4:6 Paul writes, "For it is God who said 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." Here again, God is the subject. The God who spoke light into existence shines in our hearts with the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Significantly, Paul adds, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (v. 7). This recognition of our earthiness is a beautiful corollary to a question Paul asks at the end of his statement in the second chapter, "Who is sufficient for these things?" His answer: "Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit..." (3:5-6). Here it is again, God is the subject. Always in the God-human relationship, always in the word that is spoken, the work that is done, God the Father is the subject.

Is it conceivable that in our pragmatic, technological age, the people of God have been influenced more and more by the wisdom of the world? More and more by the corporate model for leadership, for programs, for organization, for plans, for goals, for measurements? More of the world's way of systems and methods? More of the entrepreneurial syndrome? Is it conceivable that in being so enculturated by this materialism, this naturalism, this non-supernaturalism, we have lost the indispensable central reality of our faith, "Christ in you, the hope of glory?" Is it possible that we assume we can do what Christ himself did not do? Is it possible that we have grown farther and farther away from dependence upon Jesus Christ and his indwelling presence in our preoccupation with human skills?

Do we not have the right to assume that wherever there is one who believes, out of that believer is flowing rivers of living water unto eternal life? That God is leading the believer in Christ's triumph and diffusing through him or her the fragrance of the knowledge? That God who "caused the light to shine out of darkness" is shining in his or her heart to give "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God which is in the face of Jesus Christ?" Must we assume that this incredible, immeasurable, infinite source of power, blessing, grace and love can be improved upon by our methods? In our preoccupation with our own skills, have we lost, for all practical purposes, the reality of this fundamental truth of New Testament witness?

Is it conceivable that in the process of trying to learn how to witness, evangelize, preach, teach or live better, we have replaced God's truth with our tradition? Is it possible that the contemporary evangelical community, at least in large part, would come under the same indictment of Isaiah which Jesus gave to the Pharisees and Sadducees? "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. 'You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men... You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!' " (Mark 7:6-9). Is it possible that at least to some degree we evangelicals have rendered ourselves powerless because we have substituted our own skills for the glorious, transcendent reality of Christ.
"The influence of the power of God in the believer is infinitely beyond what can be seen or measured."

in us, living, working, speaking, loving, caring? Is it conceivable that in our passion for power and effectiveness — in our "striving for excellence" — in our desire to see results which we can measure, we have abandoned the power which is God’s alone?

Two kinds of righteousness

Righteousness is not something God does to us. Christ is our righteousness. Our very carnal struggle to be righteous guarantees failure and defeat. If we succeed in being righteous, we become self-righteous; and if we fail, we despair. One way proud, the other way defeated. Is not this the frustration which Paul describes in his witness in Romans 7. "The good that I would do: but the evil which I would not, that I do... When I would do good, evil is present with me... O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of death?"

He answers his own question: "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." And then Paul moves into the glorious eighth chapter of Romans.

And in Philippians 3.3 Paul writes that "we put no confidence in the flesh." Yet in the very next verse he writes, "If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more." Following this he gives his credentials, describing his religious achievements as a brilliant, dedicated, zealous, proud Jew. He concludes, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith..." (vv. 7-10).

There it is. Two kinds of righteousness. Righteousness earned by the law: righteousness which comes through faith in Jesus Christ, the "righteousness of God." Is it possible, just possible, that with all of our efforts and all of our zeal to impress a godless world with our godliness, our righteousness, our virtue, we have succeeded only in manifesting the best of human effort? Perhaps we manifest only those virtues which many who do not profess faith in Christ — indeed who even profess atheism — manage to exemplify in life. It is almost as if the harder we try, the more we fail. Meanwhile, we rejoice in the tens of thousands who are being won to Jesus Christ and rightly we should, yet ignore our failure to be a moral force where each of us is between Sundays, at home, school, office, job or club.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "The things which are not seen are eternal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4.18). Is it possible that we measure all that God is doing in the world by what we see? And is that measurement primarily quantitative, as in the numbers who are converted? Do we lose sight of another fact, that in counting those who have been saved, we are, in effect, quantifying what God is doing in the world, and in so doing, rejoicing in our success, in the success of our programs, our organizations, our plans, our methods? Do we not have the right to believe that God is doing in the world infinitely more than we can see or touch or measure? What does it mean to "walk by faith and not by sight"? Is it not essential for each believer to understand that wherever he or she is, each hour of each day, Christ present in him or her is speaking his Word, doing his work.

manifesting himself just as the Father did in his Son, the Jewish carpenter. Should not believers be encouraged that even in weakness, in helplessness, God is doing his work through them? Does it not come down to a question of belief?

The influence of the power of God in the believer is infinitely beyond what can be seen or measured. It is the power of holiness, the power of love, the power of a presence! Our sick society desperately needs this influence which no human program or method can produce. Christ-like character is the answer, and Christ alone can produce it.

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Recovering a Protestant Tradition

by James E. Bradley

The history of theological education in the period between the publication of George Herbert’s *A Priest to the Temple* in 1632 and the rise of seminaries in the early 19th century illuminates the meaning of ministerial character and provides a wealth of resources for the contemporary discussion concerning character formation. Ministers and theological educators in this period showed a lively interest in their students’ character, and their writings reveal a surprisingly explicit and intentional approach to formation. Edward Farley has recently suggested that the English tradition of practical theology should be distinguished from the German theological literature in that the English pastors’ manuals did not go through the same narrowing process of becoming a science of the clergy. Research in early English and American theological education confirms the impression of a distinct and viable English tradition. This essay will examine a variety of 17th- and 18th-century English sources that served as the basis for character formation in the American seminary movement of the 19th century. We will then turn to the theological assumptions of this literature, examine the methods of formation, and conclude with several implications for contemporary seminary education.

A perceived decline in character

The most well-known manuals of pastoral care, including George Herbert’s *A Priest to the Temple*, Richard Baxter’s *The Reformed Pastor*, Cotton Mather’s *Student and Pastor*, and Gilbert Burnet’s *A Discourse of Pastoral Care*, were written in response to a perceived decline in ministerial character and a general dereliction of clerical duty. From reading these manuals one would be led to think that the ministry was always in decline. This perception meant that pastoral theology in the English tradition was characterized above all by exhortations to piety and virtue, rather than a detached description and defense of the office. In both structure and content, these texts emphasized the formation of piety and virtue; they carefully distinguished between the clergyman’s character, on the one hand, and his duty, on the other, and they consistently gave the priority to the former. George Herbert put it well, and he spoke for all of his successors, when he said, “The greatest and hardest preparation is within.” Inner preparation was the main focus of the major texts of pastoral theology.

Before the 19th century, most ministers in England and America were trained under the personal direction, and in the home of, a senior pastor. This practice gave rise to and shaped the content of a second literary genre, namely, short letters of advice to students for the ministry. For example, John Mason, Congregationalist minister of Cheshunt, England, educated several ministers in the early 1750s, and in order to give permanence to his exhortations, advice, and direction, he wrote in 1753 *A Letter to a Friend upon His Entrance on the Ministerial Office*. In two years he expanded this letter into a 163-page book that became one of the most well-used manuals in England and America. *The Student and Pastor*, in his own words, was no “mere speculative treatise,” but a “practical *Enchiridion*.” Adam Clarke, the famous Methodist commentator, drew up a short letter of direction for a “young gentleman” in the ministry in London in 1797; by 1812 it had gone through three editions and expanded to 50 small-print pages under nine headings. Clarke’s *A Letter to a Preacher on His Entrance into the Work of the Ministry* was in fact a short pastoral that had enormous currency in Methodist circles. Other widely read letters of advice were written by William Paley, the ethicist, and Richard Cecil, an Anglican evangelical.

In the early 19th century, anthologies of these letters and of the major manuals began to appear. Edward Williams, for example, dedicated his collection of “pastorals” to the students and young ministers who had been under his own care in preparation for the ministry. John Randolph’s *The Clergyman’s Instructor* of 1807 anthologized the whole of Herbert, Burnet, and numerous smaller works. The title of William Innes’ anthology of 1824 is typical: *The Christian Minister; or Excitement and Direction in Ministerial Duties*. At least five of these massive anthologies appeared before 1845. The order, then, of the literature is important: perceived decline of the office, private tutoring of individual pastors, letters of advice, manuals of pastoral theology (though some of these appeared before the letters), anthologies, and, finally, seminaries. Not surprisingly, the structure of individual works, almost without exception, was that of the prayer closet, the study, and parochial duty, in that order. This literature profoundly influenced early seminary training in this country concerning clerical character. It was read by both professors and students; it influenced the very structure of the seminary day; and it informed coursework on pastoral care. This literature also stood behind the professors’ admonitions in their chapel addresses to students, their sermons, and their devotional remarks.
Learning and piety

The language of formation, and specifically the formation of the ministerial or clerical character, was very prevalent in the literature of pastoral theology. As early as 1692 Gilbert Burnet observed that since the greatest good might be done by instructing those youths who had not yet "taken their ply," he wrote, "I will therefore lay down the model upon which a clerk is to be formed." Youth were thus formed, or shaped, or seasoned to the ministry; it was commonly said either that their minds were formed, or their characters were formed. While piety was distinct from learning, it was not separated from it. Indeed, close critical study of any text should result in diligence, humility, and modesty. Job Orton felt that young students for the ministry who neglected the rigors of classical education "have generally turned out ignorant and conceited bigots." Clearly, then, part of the formation entailed acquiring knowledge; but this was always distinguished from the first qualification, which was engaging in a regular and exemplary course of piety and virtue. Piety in this literature was interchangeable with holiness; the priest was, by the very designation of the office, sanctified or separated unto God; and holiness had everything to do with the ministerial character. The phrase "piety and virtue" was the typical way of referring to this character, and the precise meaning was derived from the predictable biblical texts. In all of the manuals, this manner of life is described as entailing humility, self-denial, readiness to bear the cross, contempt of the world, spiritual-mindedness, charity, tenderness for souls, and resignation to the will of God. The minister, moreover, must inwardly conform to these qualities, his heart or soul must have this specific temper, and this sense of spiritual things. Thus piety and virtue were what the exhortations and directives of the manuals were designed to form.

The assumptions behind these ministers’ understanding of formation are important. First, all of the writers assumed that the person preparing for the ministry must have experienced the grace of God himself; formation in theological education presupposed Christian conversion and a distinct sense of call to the ministry; the latter was dependent upon at least modest intellectual and verbal talents. Second, the literature assumed that God, working by the Spirit, was the primary agent of formation. Nevertheless, it was possible, thirdly, to form the ministerial character through education; such subjective, yet vital, ministerial traits as discernment and prudence could be taught. Gifts could, through diligence, be improved. Even motives, complex as they are, could be purified and improved, and the manuals assumed that their exhortations did exactly that. Finally, none of the writers believed this formation could be fully accomplished in the short period of a normal course of study. "An able minister of the New Testament," wrote John Ryland, "is not formed in a day or a year; no, not in seven or ten years; happy is that young man, who arrives to any degree of maturity and strength of mind, in the compass of twenty years."

Proclamation, prayer and piety

The goal in forming the ministerial character was not merely that the cleric would set an example of holy living, though this, of course, was an important aspect of the clergy’s life. Rather, the character of the minister was intimately wrapped up with the nature of the office, so the formation of character had everything to do with the usefulness of the profession. This integrative aspect of the literature gave urgency to the necessity of clerical formation. For example, the authority and power of the proclaimed Word was explicitly tied to the virtue and piety of the minister; "If you would make deep impressions on others," said Richard Cecil, "you must use all means to have them first formed on your own mind." Indeed, some writers related pulpit eloquence to the formation of true sentiments and affections in the minister’s heart; this notion went beyond the well-known dictum that "a good life is the most powerful eloquence." Public prayers in the 18th century were, among Nonconformists, commonly 20 minutes in length, and the minister who lacked a well-developed private life of devotion could scarcely be expected to pray effectively on Sunday. Philip Doddridge advised, "Labour to affect your hearts with a sense of God's mercies to you at all times, and then you will always be in a frame for this [duty of public prayer]."

The same considerations carried over into pastoral counseling. A minister who was ignorant or deceived in the inward workings of his own soul would be ill-equipped to advise others in their trials and temptations. The necessity of a well-formed ministerial character was especially evident in the many difficulties of the ministerial office. Much attention was given to simply warning students to expect difficulties; "In short," wrote Cotton Mather, "you will find yourself entered into a wine-press; and I must give you Austin's advice, Prepara te ad pressuras [prepare yourself for the pressures];" then he added, "But let every one of your pressures fetch good liquor from you." An effort was also made to inculcate the resilience necessary to surmount trials. When the love of people was withdrawn from their priest, or when the minister faced criticism, abuse, or contempt,
"Entire days separated from the business and cares of the world were dedicated to meditation and fasting..."
The paternalistic approach...not only excluded women; its rigidity may have produced some very sour divines.

vocation. As with other aspects of character formation, the emphasis on solitude and the discipline of fasting was characteristic of all the Protestant denominations.

The theological mentor

Besides studying and spiritual exercises, a third method of character formation was the close direction and oversight of the theological mentor. In the intimate training of a single minister that preceded the rise of the academies, the daily personal direction of the senior minister was enormously influential. But this pattern of direction was largely maintained in the academies and early seminaries themselves. The Nonconformist academies were frequently referred to as "families" because of the intimacy of their relationships, and by comparison to modern standards, early seminaries educated very small numbers of students. Thus, a constant process of personal interaction and evaluation between pastor or professor and student was the rule. Everything the student did, from his personal devotions, to the specific books he read, to the evaluation of his sermons, was carefully monitored and evaluated by the tutor.

Corporate worship

Finally, in academies and seminaries, the regularity and rhythm of corporate spiritual exercises was understood as contributing to formation. Both in academies and in seminaries there were daily morning and evening prayers, sometimes in addition to private devotions; the duties of the Sabbath were taken very seriously; Sunday was to be given over entirely to devotional reading and spiritual exercises. In addition, a monthly day of fasting and prayer was recommended, for "special prayer and self-examination in secret." The professors at Princeton were to encourage formation in every way possible. Article Five of the "Plan of the Theological Seminary" states: "The Professors are particularly charged, by all the proper means in their power, to encourage, cherish and promote devotion and personal piety among their pupils, by warning and guarding them, on the one hand, against formality and indifference, and on the other, against ostentation and enthusiasm; by inculcating practical religion in their lectures and recitations; by taking suitable occasions to converse with their pupils privately on this interesting subject, and by all other means, incapable of being minutely specified, by which they may foster true experimental religion, and unre- served devotedness to God." The formation of character was thus not only a major concern of theological educators, it was encouraged in a highly intentional and disciplined manner, beginning with diligent study, extending to personal devotional exercises, with the students' outward behavior under the constant scrutiny of the tutor, and their daily lives conformed to a rigorous institutional structure.

Areas of neglect

Despite this highly intentional approach to character formation, several areas were clearly neglected, and a few were seriously distorted. The tutors at the academies and the seminary professors were uniformly viewed as fathers, and the students as beloved sons; the method of education has therefore rightly been called paternalistic, even patriarchal. In this period women were denied formal education, and this extended to theological education as well, with the exception of self-taught Quaker and Methodist woman teachers and preachers. The paternalistic approach, however, not only excluded women; its rigidity may have produced some very sour divines. The frequency with which the literature warns against a somber, gloomy temper suggests this. Secondly, the polemic against political preaching was pervasive. The enormous influence of an Orton, a Mason, a Cecil, and a Clarke was wielded on the side of avoiding all temporal political concerns in the pulpit; political preaching was, in their words, chaff. That these ministers and teachers were unable to see that silence on the great issues of the day was inevitably a political statement, since it invariably implied support for government and the status quo, is noteworthy. In other words, in both the area of paternalism and politics, these authors were un-self-critical with respect to the connection between piety and power.

Finally, in the English manuals of pastoral care one finds a deep distrust of theological subtleties whose practical implications are not immediately evident. Mason's comment that "Dark debates in divinity are like rocks not only steep and craggy, but barren and fruitless, and not worth the pains of climbing to the top" is typical. While all authors insisted on the unity of piety and learning, in the English and early American traditions of theological education, learning was prized for its utility, rather than its scientific status. In the interest of pragmatic results, this pervasive impatience with theological precision may have sown seeds of anti-intellectualism that in the American tradition would later bear a bitter crop of very destructive weeds.

Lessons for today

The literature on character formation, however, does suggest the need for both educators and students to reconsider several long-neglected themes. These materials point to the widespread and unanimous conviction...
...solitude and self-discipline should give energy, focus, and direction to social engagement.

that character ought to be intentionally formed in the educational process. Historically, both the language and the methods of character formation are the possession of the Protestant as well as the Roman Catholic tradition. Moreover, those Protestant educators today who would suggest that the purposeful cultivation of the inner life in a professional setting is a dubious undertaking must contend with the founders of Protestant theological education, who claimed to have positively influenced the lives of their students.

Self-knowledge is a second area that has suffered neglect. Theological studies characteristically and rightly focus attention upon the primary object of theology, namely, God, but the history of character formation suggests that more attention should be given to the student's cultivation of self-knowledge. In an age of unrestrained materialism and preoccupation with pleasure, and in the midst of a culture of entitlements, a more profound and personal grasp of one's own fallleness and the necessity of the ongoing work of the cross is desperately needed. The literature on character formation uniformly insisted that the personal appropriation of the cross is manifested primarily through the exercise of such spiritual disciplines as prayer, fasting, meditation, and solitude. On the basis of historical evidence, educators and students alike should ponder whether it is possible to attain to a sufficient level of personal maturity apart from the regular exercise of such disciplines. We can also learn valuable lessons from the distortions of these sources.

Biblically, piety is always connected to almsgiving, and any emphasis on interiority and solitude that neglects outward engagement in the cause of social justice cannot be biblical. The two should always be found together, indeed, solitude and self-discipline should give energy, focus, and direction to social engagement. Finally, the evidence gathered in this essay suggests that educators have an obligation to admonish ministerial students concerning the duties, pitfalls, and hazards unique to their profession. This responsibility cannot be left to one division of the theological faculty alone, and students, in their turn, will only give heed to such warnings when they represent the passionate concern of all the doctors of the church.

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James Bradley's essay represents a preliminary report that sketches some of the salient features of his ongoing research on theological education, funded by a grant from the Association of Theological Schools. The themes of this article will later be expanded in a monograph on the topic, but even this initial report shows that the language and methods of character formation are not unique to the Roman Catholic tradition. Seventeenth- and 18th-century Protestant manuals of pastoral theology were dominated by the concern for the character of ministerial students, and the insights and disciplines they encouraged may have relevance for the contemporary discussion.

NOTES


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The Family as Matrix of Character

by Ray S. Anderson

Few contemporary moralists would argue that virtue is the supreme component of moral character, however it is defined. The emphasis today is more on character as a historical description of how people live. And yet questions remain. Is character a quality of human nature which is supposed to be present in each and every instance of human personhood? Can we say in advance what a person’s character ought to be and hold each person accountable regardless of the social and cultural context and conditioning? Or is character more of a communal matrix of values, traditions and ethical norms? And if so, where is this community to be found?

This essay does not intend to resolve this debate. Our discussion of character, however, will need to be understood within this tension. The position taken here is that character is a social matrix of which each person is a representative in the particular network of social relations which define that person’s historical life. From the perspective of a biblical theology, it is clear that the character of human life is of concern to God as Creator and Lord of life. The biblical focus on character is largely described in terms of a “people of God” rather than an individual “virtue.” One person’s moral defect, for example, can affect the character of the entire community. The sin of Achan was a private action, but in this single act “the people broke faith” with regard to God’s command (Josh. 7). On the other hand, “bad company ruins good morals,” admonished Paul (1 Cor. 15:33). So one’s character is also determined to some extent by the character of one’s community.

What then is the “moral horizon” for individual character? Is it society as a whole, or is it the family as the microcosm of society? Some point with alarm to the moral decline of our contemporary Western society as seen in the pattern of corruption in elected government officials, the unethical business practices exposed in corporate offices, the ease with which marriage vows are broken, both overtly and covertly, and the convenience of “abortion on demand.”

Some who see what they perceive as a grievous loss of moral character in society, view the family as the last hope for the recovery of the moral fiber of society. Where the assumption is that the loss of traditional roles and structure of marriage and family life is a contributing factor to the loss of moral character, it will be but a simple step to issue a mandate for a return to traditional forms of the family as a return to morality. When this view is punctuated by biblical texts — where role relationships between men and women and structures of authority between parents and children are defined — a strong case can be made for a “return to the biblical model” of the family as a recovery of moral character for society as a whole.

Where the moral vocabulary is composed of familiar and familial terms, Christian character can be prescribed in terms of obedience, submission and conformity to these role patterns of marriage and family. Those who have already failed at maintaining these patterns, through their own actions or the actions of others, will appear to have less moral character than those who manage to remain intact. Those whose pattern of marriage and family life changes in the face of economic demands and the breaking up of extended family connections through geographical separation will appear to have lost the “moral horizon” which defines the character of their individual lives. We can find much with which to agree in this analysis and emphasis. But there is also cause for critical concern and room for a correction.

In contrast to the view described above, the moral vocabulary of the Bible reflects the social structures which constitute the matrix of both family and individual lives. Justice, peace, forgiveness, love of neighbor, and true worship of God are terms used to describe the character of the people who reflect the moral horizon of the Kingdom of God. It is for this reason that the vocabulary of family cannot alone constitute the moral vocabulary which defines the character of the people of God. The family itself, as Jesus made absolutely clear, must be qualified by the character of the Kingdom of God.

A gospel of the family

At the same time, there is a gospel of the family as well as a gospel of the Kingdom. Jesus expressed this gospel as part of his final words from the cross when he looked to his own mother and then to his beloved disciple, John, calling each to fulfill the responsibility of being “mother and son” to each other. There was an aspect of the character of John that led Jesus to entrust his mother to him and not to others.

Whatever family looks like and however it is defined, every society expects that its members will be socialized into the character of that society. This socialization ordinarily occurs in a domestic setting which involves the rearing of children along with the inculcation of those characteristics which will be expected by the society of its members. For this reason, one cannot consider character as a moral quality of human life without considering the role of family as the matrix in which it is formed and expressed. This certainly must be said about the role of the family in the formation of spirituality, or Christian
character. The spiritual dimension of character, along with the other dimensions, is best acquired and practiced in the domestic setting.

Two things, at least, can be said of the family unit as a matrix of character. First, family is the place where we acquire character and, second, family is the place where we learn to take responsibility for our own character.

*The family is the place where we acquire character*. This assumes that character is something which individuals must learn rather than something which is intrinsic to human nature. By character I mean three things: virtue and the experienced qualities in others that we appreciate; values as the beliefs which influence decisions and actions; and commitment, defined as reliability in the keeping of promises. These three are bound up in a complex web of tradition, rituals and practices which "characterize" individuals as social beings. This mosaic of virtues, values and commitment will be found in some form in every society. This means that the ingredients of character are to some degree relative to each society. Theologically, we would want to say that this relativity is a phenomenon of culture, but that God's created purpose for humans provides a normative content to character as a present ethical guide and as an eschatological goal.

Children need a world to grow into, assert Brigette and Peter Berger. "Socialization is impossible without a strong sense of belonging existing between the child and one or more 'significant' adults. Minimally, therefore, every human society must provide community in the social locale where children are raised." The acquisition of character does not happen merely through participation in the functions of physical, intellectual and emotional development.

To the distress of many parents, some children who develop extraordinarily in every other area of life, when adults, can often betray a lack of character so severe as to be a moral threat to their own parents as well as to society. A highly intelligent liar is probably more dangerous than an ignorant and uneducated one!

The virtues and values that go into the formation of character must be acquired through an intentionality which is expressed through the rituals, vocabulary and praxis of family life. Stanley Hauerwas suggests that studies have shown that the loss of a moral role for older parents is a correlative of the loss of any moral task for younger parents. In matters of moral character, he asserts, there are no "experts," and therefore all parents are charged with this task of character formation. "The refusal to ask our children to believe as we believe, to live as we live, to act as we act is a betrayal that derives from moral cowardice. For to ask this of our children requires that we have the courage to ask ourselves to live truthfully." Indeed! Character is what children perceive in the lives of their parents, not what the parent prescribes as the rule for children.

In turning to the family as the matrix of character formation we are in agreement with the concerns expressed above for the role of the family in the formation of the moral basis for a society, but for a different reason. The character formation which occurs in the family is not due to conformity to the role structures of marriage and family. This implies that character is a pattern of behavior which can be produced by "training" under authoritarian rule, rather than an internalized set of virtues and values, with a practiced reliability in the keeping of promises. The test of character in any person's life is thus a matter of that person's own sense of responsibility for the character that resides beyond the family structure in the larger community's life. This leads us to the second thesis with regard to the family as the matrix of character formation.

*The family is the place where we learn to take responsibility for our own character*. One cannot experience every moral situation within the context of family. Character is not so much a history of moral experience as it is the development of skills in maintaining virtue and discerning values in the context of moral situations as they occur. This is also why character is not simply acquiring "moral habits." For situations will arise as a test of character for which there is no "habit." Many of the crucial tests of character will occur "for the first time." This is what throws many young persons into a moral "tailspin" when confronted by moral decisions for which they have no precedent. This reveals the inadequacy of having moral precedents as the only basis for character. Character is congruence with virtues and values in the context of reliability in keeping promises. To keep a promise blindly when the result is the destruction of a life value for others is a sign of moral duty, but not of moral character. Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not display lack of moral character when he chose to lie while interrogated in prison. He acted so as to preserve the life of others, and thus displayed a "truthful" character when viewed from the perspective of the "responsible" life of the Christian (see Ethics, pp. 224ff.).

In the matrix of family, we acquire character through the moral intention of others by which we are exposed to the virtues and values of life as expressed in the lives of those who
"The values which belong to character include the respect for human life as being the divine image..."
"Character isn't enough. But all things considered, is anything enough without it?"

SMEDES continued

are lousing up a good tradition, and changing the meaning of a very important word — sometimes, I think, because they don't believe in the moral importance of what it stands for in real life. So I haven't bothered with them.

Of course, being a real person is about a lot more than having character. Thank God! It is about loving the Lord. And about loving others. About reading a good novel. About hitting a home run once in a lifetime. About running on the beach. And being beautiful and interesting. And about being ordinary. About having fun, and about hurting, and crying, and wishing we didn't have to die, and then dying anyway sooner or later, a forgiven sinner somewhat short on character.

There is a whole lot more to living on God's green earth than developing character. Character isn't enough. But all things considered, is anything enough without it? •

BRADLEY NOTES continued


9 Cotton Mather, The Student and Preacher, or Directions for a Candidate of the Ministry, preface by John Ryland, London, 1789, pp. vii-viii.

10 Cecil, Works, 3:601.


13 Mather, The Student and Preacher, p. 162.


15 Palmer, Letters to Dissenting Ministers, 1:102-103.

16 Burnet, A Discourse of the Pastoral Care, p. 159.

17 Mather, The Student and Preacher, p. 166.


19 Richard Baxter, The Reformed Pastor, A Discourse of the Pastoral Office... to which is added... some Hints of Advice to Students for the Ministry, ed. Samuel Palmer, London, 1766, pp. 27-28; Herbert, A Priest to the Temple, pp. 5-6.

20 Burnet, A Discourse of the Pastoral Care, pp. 132-33.

21 Mather, The Student and Preacher, p. 63.

22 Orton, Memoirs of Doddridge, p. 88.

23 Whiteburn, 1797, pp. 102-22.

24 Paley, Advice Addressed to the Young Clergy, p. 14.

25 A Brief History of the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church, at Princeton, New Jersey, together with its Constitution, Bye Laws, etc., Princeton, 1838, p. 20.

26 Ibid., pp. 20-21.

27 Mason, The Student and Pastor, p. 66.

The front and back cover photographs are the work of Canadian photographer Debra Classen, whose husband is a student in the School of Psychology.