

Education for the Kingdom of God
“Toward Christian Character”
For the *Chalcedon Report*, February 2002

Ronald Kirk
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Modified March 2, 2012

Holiness, from the idea of *clean* in both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, essentially means *whole*. In the Biblical languages and English alike, holiness applied to men is a state of *moral* wholeness, integrity, and purity, as opposed to brokenness, damage, compromise, or pollution.

The Importance of Character

Individual morality requires structural integrity to maintain wholeness. *Character* identifies the quality of structural integrity in both moral beings and physical things. Originally, *character* denoted writing made by cutting or engraving a mark in a medium. Permanence, then, is a key feature of real character. Variable or pliable internal qualities characterize substances lacking structural integrity. The Bible speaks of a man whose character is “unstable as water” (*Gen. 49:4*). A young child bears such a pliable character, except that his natural disposition inclines toward sinfulness, which uncorrected will harden thereunto. Human character speaks of the qualities, resulting from nature and habit that distinguish a person from other persons. Among objects and even the lower creatures, God imposes character. Rocks act like rocks. Dogs act like dogs.

Among men, character may be of either a pure or a damaged quality. Man’s natural character is damaged due to the Fall. The Scriptures clearly teach that man’s native character consists in qualities of rebellion and wickedness, leading to death (*Gal. 5:17-21*). Our natural character offends our Creator. Our natural character, separated as it is from God’s providence and grace, thus leads to self-destruction, somewhat like genetic mutations in living things. Sin has fatally marred mankind. The potential for ultimate wickedness certainly lies in the natural character of man, as we more frequently observe in the world. For this reason, neglected sin in ourselves and manifest sin and rebellion in our children amounts to great evil.

Sin is infectious, and evil is virulent. Sin never stays put, but spreads by contagion because man’s natural moral immune system is fatally weak. Between God’s providence to claim a people for Himself for eternity, and the natural sinfulness of the world at large, a great moral battle wages.

Cultures resist change due to a moral inertia God planted in man’s heart. Man resists change. This is good news and bad news. The good news is that once a degree of righteousness is established, it tends to last. Righteousness passes from generation to generation through parental influence on the children, and through community influences. Early America’s profound Biblical Christian orientation established the most free and prosperous nation of the modern era. Many aspects of character — such as love of God and godly liberty, self-restraint, and forbearance, toughness of mind, industriousness, charity, and generosity — served to build America. Many of the practices of Biblical government, ably codified in the United States Constitution, have lasted for a good two centuries. This is so though we have often lacked a general, self-conscious determination to maintain and expand the Constitution’s principles. The peaceful periodic transfer of power effected by election speaks to the enduring quality of the principle of the priesthood of believers, to cite just one example.

The bad news is that entropy — the force of decline, disorder, and energy dispersion — remains one of the most fundamental rules of physical and human nature. Except where a source of external energy intelligently counters it, entropy rules the universe. And there is a spiritual analogy to physical entropy. Throughout early history, God interjected Himself directly to infuse new life into declining morality. The lives of Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Paul typify God’s hand in the affairs of men. In the Christian era, God ordinarily provides this intelligent energy by His providence in nature and through

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men by His Holy Spirit. In entropy, we discern God’s unwillingness that His people rest on the accomplishment of past generations. Instead, every generation and each individual must oppose spiritual entropy, participating in the establishment and maintenance of the gospel.

We thus see the essential battle for the kingdom of God laid out. A purer character among God’s people is necessary to battle the evil natural character of the world and its influence. Christians must actively exert a benign influence on the character of our communities both to check evil and to help cultivate in our neighbors’ hearts a love of righteousness and goodness in anticipation of redemption. God has made us minor partners. Christians must be salt and light. We must inculcate in ourselves a character that resists temptation within and without, one that stands upon principle in any circumstance. Evil exerts its power. Character for good must be stronger.

Godly character provides the moral structural integrity required to maintain holiness while standing fast in the battle. What defines the character God intends for man? It is the character of Christ (*2 Cor. 3:18*). Such character consists in particular attributes needed to support the ability to resist sin, to take courage through difficulty, and to walk by faith.

Acquiring Christian Character

Historically, the church calls the process by which godly character is acquired *sanctification*. God saves sinful man by His grace. He sanctifies man by His grace. Sanctification is a sovereign act of God (*Jn. 17:17; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:13*). Yet, the Scriptures clearly teach that sanctification also comes by acts of faith (*Ac. 26:18*). Faith imposes a standard for conduct that contradicts the natural human disposition and will. The authoritative Word of God defines the godly standard of conduct that will produce Christ-like character as men respond to God by faith.

The Scriptures declare that the great hope of Christ requires a *proven* character. In Romans 5:1-5, Paul rejoices in the hope of our salvation by God’s grace. He then rejoices in tribulations, because there is a necessary connection between our hope of grace and the character necessary to bear that grace. “Tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope.” The Greek word *dokime*, translated *experience*, suggests *proven character*, as if *assayed*. God providentially trains character through the trials of life. He moreover provides to parents the more closely governed home in which to train childhood character. “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 23:6). In such child rearing, we find the original meaning of the word *education*. A true and Biblical education should produce proven character.

Education fills up that which lacks, and *corrects* that which is wrong. In Ephesians 6:4, Paul commands fathers to bring up their children in the *nurture* and *admonition* of the Lord. *Admonition* is the *content* of education. On the other hand, *nurture* is the Greek word *paideia*. *Paideia* speaks of education from the disciplinary point of view, that is, of directed practice or training, and correction. *Paideia* finds its root in the New Testament word *paideuo*. *Paideuo* also speaks of training, but adds an emphasis on *chastening*, the infliction of pain for reclaiming an offender. Pontius Pilate curiously applies *paideuo* to Christ’s scourging (*Lk. 23:16*). In 1 Corinthians 11:31 and 32, Paul says we ought to be tough on ourselves so that the Lord need not chasten (*paideuo*) us. In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul speaks of his own chastening to prepare his character for a life of service. In verse 9, he cries out “as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed.” In verse 10, Paul speaks of his rejoicing in adversity, an important aspect of character. In 1 Timothy 1:20, Paul tells Timothy to turn Hymeneus and Alexander

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over to Satan that they may *learn (paideuo)* not to blaspheme. (In this sense Satan is the headmaster of God’s reform school, for education on the streets, where the home has failed. Clearly, the relatively gentle discipline of loving parents and teachers is preferable to Satan’s hateful and death-oriented punishment. See 1 Cor. 5:5.) From Hebrews 12:6, “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth (*paideuo*), and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening (*paideio*), God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth (*paideuo*) not?”

Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance says *paideuo* likely derives from *pais*. *Pais*, in the New Testament, is a child, especially a servant. A servant to a king, as Strong suggests, would be subject to fairly demanding discipline to inculcate the character and skills needed to serve a great superior. Feudal history reflects the Biblical pattern. As well as enjoying certain largess, a feudal noble lord suffered the burdens of leadership in the oversight of his people. At its best, feudalism saw authority as a holy trust before God. In order to fulfill that trust, the lord necessarily prepared a son to succeed him. Therefore, the son of a nobleman received the stricter educational discipline. The son rigorously learned war — both personal skills and general strategy — diplomacy, social manners, and economics, geography, law, and foreign and domestic politics. He hardened his body and toughened his mind. The classic children’s story *Men of Iron*, by Howard Pyle, graphically illustrates the point. Similar responsibility generally rests upon Christians, since we are His vice-regents, His noblemen in the earth.

In a word, God disciplines His children according to perfect knowledge — to be as tough as necessary, as gentle as He may be, and still achieve His high ends in us. Parents and teachers rightly follow the Biblical and best historical examples in training and correcting our children as a holy trust in their preparation for a life of service. A life of faith requires obedience. Faith and obedience require a disciplined and sturdy character to support them — in adults and children alike.

Undertaking Enterprise toward Character

God provided a principle means for acquiring character in overcoming the difficulty and trials associated with economic enterprise. God commanded men to take dominion over the earth. In the Fall, He commanded men to pursue their livelihood in adversity. Here then is God’s plan for economic enterprise. Economic advancement results from the bold investment and hazard of raw materials to make objects that are more useful. As raw materials are worked — whether time, food seed, or minerals from the earth — their raw value is destroyed. Thus, risk is a fundamental aspect of God’s economy. Poor skill or external factors may cause an investment to fail. The risk is real and may be fatal. God expects men to trust His providence in an evil, fallen world.

Often, investment requires a great patience as one waits for the growth of the fragile crop, or bores through the ground to find the valuable mineral resource. Setbacks, such as poor weather destroying the crop, producing an unpopular product, or failed research and development cause pain and trouble that must be absorbed. In naturally impatient human beings, the character for patience, and for enduring the pain and trouble of economic setback accrues only through practice. Enterprise simply requires a sturdy character, able to support faith and accomplishment.

Furthermore, finding one’s way through the difficulties of life, and particularly those of bold enterprise tends to produce humility as it becomes increasingly clear that God’s economy of difficulty seems subjectively more an economy of impossibility apart from His providence. Speculative knowledge not honed by experience puffs up. Humbling discipline tends to produce charity.

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As an important by-product, enterprise thus produces strength of character as difficulty yields to faithful workmanship. In turn, proven character provides the foundation for greater enterprise. Enterprise and character necessarily form a reciprocal relationship. Thus, as a primary means to character, bold enterprise should be a way of life for the Christian. Enterprise upon a self-consciously Biblical viewpoint in any discipline should produce fruit for the gospel — salt and light that exerts influence on our neighbors in the world.

Formal Education

God provides the sheltered and heavily governed epoch of childhood to train the basic character, upon which God will build throughout life. This basic character will act as a vessel prepared to receive and carry the grace of God. Proven character of increasing degree becomes the foundation for future growth in character and accomplishment. Faith requires several particular aspects of character. We have mentioned only a few. The Christian educator should minutely identify the qualities of character of Christ for reproduction in the student. In the enterprise of learning, the teacher must then enforce the practice and habit of conduct appropriate to the child’s present development that will produce the desired character in due season. The teacher introduces a measured difficulty that the child must learn to attempt by faith. The teacher then guides the child in appropriate responses to this difficulty, particularly to trust Jesus.

Apart from providing opportunities to overcome difficulty in a hardy spirit of enterprise, education cannot be counted truly Christian.