

Session One: The Spiritual Power of Habit for Christians

Practice Makes Perfect

By J. Robert Douglass*

Introduction

Around thirty years ago, much of the American Christian merchandise culture centered around four letters, WWJD. There were bracelets, books, t-shirts, and albums to buy with those four letters. In case you are unaware, WWJD is the acronym for the question first introduced in Charles Sheldon's book from the 1800s, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* On one level, I am completely supportive of the call to consider what Jesus would do. It is a decent first question of discipleship, but I believe it is also an indication of the thin understanding of discipleship that plagues much of American Christianity today. If we must stop and ponder what Jesus would do, are we not demonstrating how little our nature has been conformed to his?

The goal of Christian discipleship ought not to be to get people to stop and deliberate about what Jesus would do in every situation and then act accordingly. Rather, the goal should be to be people who instinctively know what Jesus would do. I believe that the less we must give intentional thought to being like Jesus, the more being like him is second nature to us. The process of developing a second nature is what we call habit. Allow me to illustrate what I mean.

March 30, 1981 is a date that changed the lives of many people, including me. It was the day that Ronald Reagan was nearly killed. I had not lived

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through the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. or the Kennedys, so as a young person, I was shocked that this could happen. After that day, my world seemed a little less innocent and safe.

While the assassination attempt unsettled me, it also fascinated me. At the time, I was enamored by badges, blinking lights, and sirens. I remember watching the video on the news that evening and being amazed at the speed with which several of the men in suits near Reagan suddenly had automatic weapons in their hands. The guns seemed to appear out of thin air. As exciting as that was, with the passing of time the focus of my interest about that day has shifted from the men with the guns to the ones who did not draw theirs.

Tim McCarthy was a 31-year-old Secret Service agent at the time. When the gunfire began, Tim stretched out his arms and legs to make himself into the largest barrier he could. Tim's actions to shield the President resulted in Tim being shot in the chest.

Agent Jerry Parr was there that day too. He and Agent Ray Shaddick were the ones who pushed Reagan into the limousine. Jerry then dove on top of the President to protect him as the car sped away. Tim, Jerry and the other agents not only saved Ronald Reagan; they also demonstrated what was possible through practice.

One of the most basic of human instincts is self-preservation. When we feel anxious and threatened, our bodies constrict. Every six months, I leave fingernail marks in my dentist's examination chair demonstrating this point. This instinct to constrict is what causes us to duck at sudden loud noises. When the gunfire started on March 30, nearly everyone ducked, including the DC Metro Police officers who were present.

There is nothing wrong with ducking. Ducking at gunfire is not a sign of cowardice. It is what all humans who are not frozen in fear and confusion instinctively do. The question is not why weren't those who ducked brave? The much more intriguing question is, why didn't everyone duck? How is it possible that people can be trained to overcome the most natural reaction to the most dangerous situation? How can someone be trained to do something that is not merely contrary to our most basic instinct but diametrically opposed to it?

Not only were the actions of McCarthy and Parr contrary to the most basic human response; it was as if their natural instinct for self-preservation

was replaced with a new instinct. John Hinckley fired his gun six times in 1.7 seconds. This means that there was no time to consult a Standard Operating Procedure manual or to check-in with their supervisor (What Would Boss Do?). In fact, from the moment the first shot was fired, only .4 seconds elapsed before Jerry Parr began pushing the President into the car. Jerry Parr and Tim McCarthy were able to act as selflessly and quickly as they did because months and years before that day, they had made their response to this kind of situation second nature.¹ The process of making a particular way of acting second nature is called habit.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of habit from a theological perspective and to discern ways that a more robust understanding of habit may contribute to our becoming more like Christ. Prior to beginning our task in earnest, we should be clear on a few matters. The first is the relationship between habit and salvation. Given the attention that this paper gives to the human effort of cooperating with God, it would be possible to make a wrong inference about a connection of habit to the initial stage of salvation, what we often call justification. This study offers no suggestion that a person can be made right with God by human effort or apart from God's grace. Rather, this paper is addressing the second stage of salvation, or what Christians often refer to as sanctification. The last issue to note before we begin is to understand that in the pursuit of a theology of habit, this study relies significantly on the thought of Thomas Aquinas. This is because no one in church history has examined habit as thoroughly or as theologically as he has. Let us see what we can glean from Aquinas.

Introduction to Aquinas²

Aquinas is worthy of our attention for numerous reasons. The first is the sheer volume of his creative productivity. Someone with too much time on their hands has calculated that “in terms of a sheet of today's printer paper, Aquinas was writing an average of nearly twelve and a half pages of words

¹ Those who rushed towards Hinckley in spite of the gunfire could be remembered here as well.

² A few additional notes as we begin. 1) Unless otherwise noted, the quotations from Aquinas are from his *Summa Theologica*, *ST* hereafter. 2) I am using an old edition of that text which means that many quotations in this paper from Aquinas do not employ gender-inclusive language. 3) Much of Aquinas's thought on habit is based on Aristotle. I will not be continually making reference to the points on which they agree.

a day, every day, all year long.”³ It is one thing to be writing as much as he did; it is quite another to have written things that people continue to find worthwhile after 800 years.

The second reason Aquinas deserves our attention is the depth and intricacy of his thought, but this also means that Aquinas can be perplexing. When one combines our unfamiliarity with his work with the amount that he wrote and the profundity of his thinking, the task of unraveling his thinking on habit so that we may benefit is challenging. The first step in this endeavor is to begin with a survey of the key terms he employs in his understanding of human beings.

Elements of Aquinas’s thought

1. Telos

The first term that is important if we hope to understand Aquinas on habit is the concept of telos. Telos is the idea upon which Aquinas’s entire system of habit is based and is one of the most promising for our purposes here. Telos is the Greek word for end, purpose, or goal. As we look to Aquinas for assistance for a theology of habit, it is important to realize the necessity of telos. No theology of habit is possible if there is no telos. The significance of this concept for our study is difficult to overstate.

It is important to realize that for the Greeks, an object’s telos is part of its createdness. It is the end towards which it was made or the purpose for its existence. A person may decide for him/herself that the goal or purpose of his/her life is to become a doctor or to be famous on social media, but that is not what is meant by telos, because telos is chosen by the creator or is imposed upon the creature. An example of a telos-oriented or teleological question is “what are humans for”?

For reasons that will become apparent, it is also important to note that the telos of an object is connected to its nature. Stated another way, there is a relationship between an object’s nature and its purpose. An example of this is that the telos or end of a race car is not when it is abandoned in a junkyard but when it goes fast in a race.

³ Ezra Sullivan, *Heroic Habits: Discovering the Soul’s Potential for Greatness* (Gastonia, NC: TAN Books, 2021), 11-12.

Not only do creatures have their own telos that aligns with their nature, but actions have their own telos as well. The fact that we as humans have a telos means that we do things for reasons. For example, we get into our car in order to drive somewhere. We drive to the pharmacy in order to pick up a prescription. We take medicine in order to address some health issue. Aquinas believes that if one follows all of the “why” questions back, there must be a final end or ultimate reason for acting. Aquinas notes that “if there were no last end, nothing would be desired, nor would any action have its term, nor would the intention of the agent be at rest.”⁴ According to Aquinas, not only does every human act have a final end, we all share the same end. This is because he is convinced that all people share the same nature.⁵ If this is true, and if, as we have noted previously, telos arises from an object’s nature, then humans share both the same nature and the same telos. DeYoung, McClusky, and Van Dyke note this when they write that “for Aquinas, not only is every action aimed at an end, which the agent [the one doing the acting] regards as a good, but, in the final analysis, every action is aimed at an ultimate end, of which Aquinas argues there is only one.”⁶

2. *Capacities, Imago Dei, and Quality*

Another important concept for Aquinas is capacity, which he sometimes refers to as a power to do something. All living things have been created with capacities. Both Aristotle and Aquinas understand that humans are animals, which means we share some capacity with other animals. For our purposes, the primary capacity that we share with other animals is the sense capacity or sense appetite. Animals and humans know certain things through their senses and desire things through them as well. Examples of this sense-desire are hunger and thirst. While both Aristotle and Aquinas agree that humans are animals, they also agree that we are not merely animals. Rather, we are rational animals.⁷

⁴ *ST*, Ia IIae 4, 1.

⁵ Christopher Shields and Robert Pasnua, *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 247.

⁶ Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Colleen McCluskey, and Christina Van Dyke, *Aquinas’s Ethics: Metaphysical Foundations, Moral Theory, and Theological Context* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 73.

⁷ Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, c. 2, n. 9.

It is our capacity to reason that separates humans from what Aristotle and Aquinas would refer to as “lower animals.” This means, among other things, that we are embodied, rational souls. Consequently, Aristotle understands that a life that is lived to its fullest potential is a “life of activity expressing reason well.”⁸

The central capacities that are unique to humans and comprise the rational soul are the rational power (or capacity) and the appetitive power. The rational power is our capacity for cognition, or the ability to know and understand. It is also referred to as intellect. The appetitive power is what moves the body to action. It is sometimes referred to as the will, but it can also be understood as desire.

In comparing the sense appetite to the rational appetite, Stephen Pope observes that “senses orient us to concrete goods that can satisfy specific needs.”⁹ He continues, “the will as ‘rational appetite’ differs radically from sense appetite in its orientation to the universal good.”¹⁰ In other words, sense appetite is good at determining the goods in particular situations, while the rational appetite (the will informed by the intellect), is designed to direct us toward what is ultimately good. Nicholas Lombardo observes, “all created being tends towards its telos by appetite implanted by God.”¹¹

Our capacities are neutral. They are potency waiting to be activated. A helpful way to understand this is by considering children. Every child with typical developmental and physiological abilities is born with the capacity to learn and use language. However, this obviously does not mean that children are born speaking. Language must be acquired over time through practice. Aquinas would say that our other capacities are similar. The ability is present, but effort must be made to activate or actualize the potential of the capacity.

Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that our ability to reason distinguishes us from other animals but argues that it is not the only way we are different.

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.7.

⁹ Stephen J. Pope, ed., *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington DC: George Washington University Press, 2002), 33.

¹⁰ Pope, 33.

¹¹ Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 229.

Aquinas believes that humans have been made in the image of God, which means that we are intellectual beings who possess free choice and power over our individual actions.¹² This means that for Aquinas, forming habit (which requires free choice) is a uniquely human undertaking. Habit forming, therefore, is part of Aquinas' understanding of *imago Dei*. This departure from Aristotle also results in a different understanding of human flourishing. Where Aristotle understood happiness to be an active life governed by reason or a life of contemplation, Aquinas believes that “we flourish most when our likeness is closest to that image—that is, when we most closely resemble God in the ways appropriate to human beings.”¹³

Our capacities play an integral role in us either becoming who we were created to be or impeding us from ever being truly human as God intended. We will eventually consider how our capacities contribute to our good, but for now allow me to note their potential for causing chaos. The first way, according to Aquinas, is that the capacities are naturally undetermined. Again, let us consider children. A small child will put everything in his/her mouth. The objects a child puts into her/his mouth at this stage are undetermined. Growth and maturity involve determining the rightness, goodness, and appropriateness of things such as the objects that are right, good, and appropriate to put into one's mouth.

A second way these capacities create havoc is when they do not function in the way they were designed, or according to their nature. Not only do the sense appetite, reason, and the rational appetite (will) each need to be functioning correctly for human flourishing, but they all need to be functioning together as they were designed.¹⁴ The degree to which this is occurring is what Aquinas refers to as “quality.” As Romanus Cessario explains, “Quality derives from an actual internal ordering or arrangement of the substance's parts.”¹⁵ When we consider the issue of quality regarding a person, we are asking, “What kind of person is this?” Quality is the difference between a racecar that is out of gas with flat tires on the side of

¹² DeYoung, McCluskey, and Van Dyke, *Aquinas's Ethics*, 6.

¹³ DeYoung, McCluskey, and Van Dyke, 4.

¹⁴ Aquinas' notion of original sin is relevant here, but it would take us beyond our present task.

¹⁵ Romanus Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 40.

the track and one that is performing exactly as it was designed—roaring down the track.¹⁶

3. *Happiness and Goodness*

We desire the things we do because we find them desirable. Stated another way, the reason we pursue what we do is because we value those things as good.¹⁷ According to Aquinas, only God is pure good. Creation derives its goodness from God, and therefore shares in goodness only in a derivative way and to varying degrees. This means that created things lack pure and complete goodness. As a result of this secondary and partial goodness of creation, no created thing can ultimately satisfy our desires and thereby provide true happiness.

Following Aristotle's philosophy, Aquinas understands that each person seeks to have his/her desires satisfied. It is what ultimately drives us as humans. He states, "What we want above all . . . is the satisfaction of all our desires. Once those desires are all satisfied, there is nothing left for us to want."¹⁸ Stated somewhat more poetically, when our desires are satisfied, we want no more. The term we give to the experience of our needs or desires being satisfied is happiness.

It is what Aristotle called *eudaimonia*, what Aquinas called *felicitas* and *beatitudo*. While "happiness" is the closest English equivalent, it falls considerably short since what is being referenced is much more profound than mere emotion or euphoria. *Eudaimonia* is better understood as a state of being rather than an emotion. It should be thought of as flourishing or the "good life"—life as it is meant to be lived. In spite of the shortcomings of the term happiness to adequately convey the meaning of *eudaimonia*, I will be employing it for this study.

While Aquinas acknowledges that people can experience flourishing in this life, he believes that humans are only able to experience happiness in its fullness in the next life. The happiness that is possible in this life is

¹⁶ Cessario, 40.

¹⁷ For something to be good in the truest sense, it must be complete or fulfilled according to its nature. As we will note, Aquinas understands that only God completely fits this definition of good.

¹⁸ DeYoung, McCluskey, and Van Dyke, *Aquinas's Ethics*, 74.

genuine happiness, but Aquinas understands it as imperfect happiness.¹⁹ In referring to human happiness on this side of the grave, Aquinas uses the term *felicitas*. One of the reasons for the imperfection is the fact that it is possible to lose one's happiness in this life. However, humans desire to not lose their happiness. If humans desire to not lose their happiness but happiness can be lost in this life, then happiness cannot be completely satisfied in this life. This means that humans are in a dilemma of desiring what we cannot naturally attain or keep.²⁰ This dynamic is part of our built-in desire for God. Paul Wadell elaborates on this when he writes,

There is one way we are not finite: we have unlimited desire. We are limited in every way but one—we have unlimited desire—unlimited longing. Our desire is the one thing about us that is not restricted and we know this. We feel the ongoing hunger for something infinitely good, we are stalked by the longing for something perfectly blessed and precious. Though we are limited, we want unlimited good, though we are restricted, we want to love unrestrictedly. . . . We seek the infinite through the openness of desire, and only something indefectibly good will satisfy this desire. . . . We shall never find lasting joy if we remain restless of heart. We seek the good which heals our restlessness, and that is what joy is—it is longing, searching, hungering, desiring come to rest. For Thomas such peace is found only in God. God is our happiness because in God we want no more.²¹

Aquinas states that humanity's "last end is the uncreated good, namely, God, who alone by His infinite goodness can perfectly satisfy man's will."²² By locating the perfect experience of happiness beyond the grave, Aquinas is departing from Aristotle in a subtle yet significant way. Aquinas sees the personal, unmediated encounter with God (the beatific vision) to be a state that is not simply happiness but blessedness, or *beatitudo*. According to Aquinas, *beatitudo* is the perfect good "which satisfies the appetite altogether, else it would not be the last end, if something yet remained to be desired."²³

¹⁹ *ST Ia IIae* 3, 3.

²⁰ Stephen Wang, "Aquinas on Human Happiness and the Natural Desire for God," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1015 (May 2007): 332.

²¹ Paul Wadell, *The Primacy of Love* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 61.

²² *ST Ia IIae*, 3, 1.

²³ *ST Ia IIae*, 2, 8.

Before we move to habit specifically, let us attempt to assemble some of these fragments together. For Aquinas, the intellect presents an object to the will as a good and provides the will either a way or multiple ways to achieve the good it has identified. Many times, there are multiple goods and multiple paths to obtaining them that are presented by the intellect to the will. The will, which is the center of desire, determines what it wants and begins to pursue it.

This means that the human will is always pointing in the direction of good. It is like a compass that cannot help but point to the north. If our will is always pointing us toward the good, then one might think that we do not sin. However, Aquinas is fully aware of the reality of human sin,²⁴ but from his perspective, he understands that our intentional sins are a result of our pursuing apparent goods rather than the true good.²⁵

The end of humanity is happiness, which can be experienced in this physical life but will reach its fullness in what Roman Catholics refer to as the beatific vision—an unmediated encounter with God. This encounter can be anticipated by those who have rightly ordered intellects that understand God as True and rightly ordered wills who desire God as Love. Having explored the conceptual foundation of Aquinas's thought on habit, we are now ready to turn to habit itself.

Aquinas on habit

The English word “habit” comes from the Latin word, *habitus*. This is hardly shocking as the similarities are obvious. What is less apparent is the fact observed by Aquinas that *habitus* is derived from the Latin verb *habere*, which means “to have.”²⁶ In fact, both the Latin and Greek words for habit are based on forms of the respective verbs “to have.” Therefore, we can deduce that whatever is meant by habit, it is connected to having or holding something as a possession.

²⁴ *ST Ia IIae*, 18, 1.

²⁵ One way that this commonly happens is the human tendency to confuse means and ends. Even though it is addressing Aristotle and not Aquinas, a helpful study of these issues can be found in Jessica Moss, *Aristotle on the Apparent Good: Perception, Phantasia, Thought, and Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁶ *ST Ia IIae*, 49, a. 1.

In our modern use of the term, habit often refers to actions that are done repeatedly, usually with little reflection or deliberation connected to them. As we consider Aquinas on habit, it is important to realize that this relatively mindless pattern is only a rough approximation of what Aquinas meant by the term.

Throughout his writings, Aquinas offers several definitions of habit. Ezra Sullivan offers a helpful summary that integrates a number of Aquinas's notions when he writes that "for Aquinas, a habit is a stable inclination, a quality of the soul, that impels us to respond to some stimulus in a regular way."²⁷ The various aspects of this definition require some unpacking.

First, we must observe the fact that a habit is an inclination. We tend to think about habit as repeated action, but habits are not actions. This is a more important point than it might first appear. Bonnie Kent explains that "habit is a durable characteristic of the agent inclining to certain kind of actions and emotional reactions, not the actions and reactions themselves. Acquired over time, habits grow to become 'second nature' for the individual."²⁸ Habits have to do with qualities of actions, not specific actions. In order to illustrate this, let us imagine a habitual liar who has surprisingly told the truth, perhaps even a number of times in a row. The act of telling the truth does not immediately make one an honest person. For Aquinas, the repeated action forms a tendency, inclination, or state of being which is ultimately what we call habit.

Some scholars prefer to use the term disposition to interpret the way Aquinas uses habitus. Disposition is somewhat helpful as it helps to convey the concept of a state of being; however, it can also be confusing for our purposes as Aquinas makes a distinction between habit and disposition. For Aquinas, all habits are dispositions, but not all dispositions are habits.

The difference between them is the ease with which they can be broken. Aquinas believes that a habit is more enduring or more difficult to break than a mere disposition.²⁹

²⁷ Ezra Sullivan, *Heroic Habits: Discovering the Soul's Potential for Greatness* (Gastonia, NC: TAN Books, 2021), 25.

²⁸ Bonnie Kent, "Habits and Virtues," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope, (Washington DC: George Washington University Press, 2002), 116.

²⁹ *ST Ia IIae*, 49. a. 2 ad. 3

Returning to Sullivan's definition, next we ought to observe the stability of the inclination. We just observed that habit is not simply repeated action, but the stability of the habit is a result of the repeated action. An action done twice does not form a habit. Habits form steadily over time, and the more times an act is repeated, the stronger the inclination grows.

The next part of Sullivan's definition is that habit is a "quality of the soul." When addressing capacities, we noted that quality is an important concept for Aquinas. We have observed how all humans have the same nature and the same capacities or powers, but we also know that all humans are different. The issue of quality is asking about "kind." Thus, when habit is identified as a quality of the soul, it means that it is a determining factor in the kind of person the individual is and is becoming.

The last part of Sullivan's definition is that habit "impels us to respond to some stimulus in a regular way." The matter of the "regular way" was touched on previously with the stability of the inclination. The significant part here is that habit impels us. There is something about habit that exerts pressure on us to act in a particular way. Habit has been called "the coiled spring of interior strength."³⁰ Yet, we must also realize that although we are disposed through habit to act in particular ways, Aquinas believed that humans had both the freedom and ability to act in any number of ways. Our habits can make certain actions easier, but we are never bound by them.³¹ As Bonnie Kent observes, "Thomas argues that we can always refuse to act in accordance with our habits and can even choose to act against our habits."³²

How our habits affect us

The idea that something as mundane as habit could play a pivotal role in our spiritual formation may at first appear to be far-fetched. But if we think about human life in general and how we normally change, this becomes less surprising. Timothy Wilson, a psychologist at the University of Virginia, estimates that only about five percent of what we do in an average day is

³⁰ Sullivan, *Heroic Habits*, 12.

³¹ One could also say habit can make certain actions harder if we are trying to break bad habits.

³² Kent, "Habits and Virtues," 119.

the result of deliberate, conscious choices.³³ Most of what we do is a result of habits. Habit is important because most New Year's resolutions do not work. It is important because there is no magical pill to take that will satisfy all human desires.

At one level we know this. Steven Covey has convincingly suggested that highly effective people share seven habits. We all know that the only way that agents McCarthy and Parr were able to act so selflessly and quickly was through practice or what we could call habituation. Therefore, why would we ever expect the process of spiritual formation and transformation to not involve habit? And yet, when have we really focused on habit in our discipleship efforts? Sure, we know about spiritual disciplines, but have we understood them to be the normal paths of transformation or extraordinary ones?

I suspect that part of the reason for our neglect of habit has been the tendency in the evangelical end of the Church to emphasize the “be” over the “do” of the faith. For instance, we have all been warned about the need to avoid “works righteousness” where we are trying to deserve God's grace and mercy in some way. Another reason why I believe we emphasize character is because it seems to be the Bible's emphasis. We see this when Jesus warns that it is not the external things but what comes out of one's heart that defiles a person (Mark 7.15). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus very clearly indicates that the kind of trees our lives are, whether good or bad, is more fundamental than concentrating on the fruit our lives produce (Matt. 7.15-20). So, we are right to focus on character, and yet we have often failed to grasp how character is actually formed.

Aquinas understood and is willing to teach us that our actions are the raw material of our character. We are building our character by our actions; this truth demands that we give greater attention to our actions. It means that my actions are not primarily an issue of whether they cause me to feel guilty or whether they cause God to smile at me. My actions are determining the kind of person I am now and the course of my life into the future.

³³ Timothy Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 6-7.

As we repeat an action especially as a result of similar stimuli, something beyond the action itself is occurring. We may be starting to create new good habits, continuing to reinforce present good habits, or deconstructing present bad habits. Alternatively, we may also be deconstructing present good habits, continuing to reinforce present bad habits, or starting to create new bad habits. We are at every moment determining who we are becoming.

Consequently, the first way that habit participates in our transformation is by contributing to the formation of our character. The Greek word for character, *χαρακτήρας*, is derived from the verb that means to cut furrows or to engrave. Thus, character is the result of the repeated action of forming or cutting into a substance. As we proceed, it is wise to remember that habit is not merely a repeated action. It is what is created or comes forth by the repeated action.³⁴

Virtue (and vice)

It was noted earlier that all habits are dispositions, but not all dispositions are habits. In a similar way, all virtues are habits, but not all habits are virtues. For Aquinas, habit is either good or bad, never neutral. Habits are either helping us reach our *telos* or interfering with us reaching it. When our lives are arranged in such a way that we are living the life we are created for, we have virtue. The Latin *virtu* comes from the Greek word, *αρετή* (*arete*) meaning “excellence.” Returning to our silly example, the racecar is virtuous when all of its constitutive parts are performing as they were intended, both individually and as they relate to one another (it doesn’t matter how well a piston is working if the tires are flat). Good habits or virtues are what it takes to live excellent lives excellently. When someone’s life is characterized by habits that are directed away from his/her nature and the fulfillment of *telos*, that life is full of vice, or is vicious.

Aristotle and Aquinas understood there to be four basic types of people. This is helpful for understanding the connection between virtue and spiritual maturity. The first kind of person is the one who is controlled

³⁴ While it is far beyond the parameters of this study, Kent Dunnington has written an important study connecting habits to addiction. See Kent Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue: Beyond the Models of Disease and Choice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

by vice. A vice is a habit that rather than inclining a person to what is truly good, is directing to some lesser good such as a sense pleasure or being focused on some created good like money. A person controlled by their vices is someone who desires the bad and acts to acquire it. He/she has satisfied both the desire and him/herself because what was desired was obtained, but what was desired cannot ultimately satisfy.

The second kind of person is called incontinent. Incontinence has a particular meaning in the medical community that is informative here. Rather than failing to have control of one's bodily functions because of some physiological weakness as is the case in the practice of medicine, the morally incontinent person is inclined to act wrongly out of weakness. While this person has satisfied her/his desire for something even though it is not good, he/she is dissatisfied with him/herself for having done so.

The third kind of person on this spectrum is the continent person. He/she is also inclined to act wrongly but has some will power. Despite sharing the inclination to do wrong with the other groups, the continent person acts rightly. He/she is satisfied with him/herself for having done the right thing but cannot be fully satisfied because his/her desires have been left unsatisfied.

Lastly, the virtuous person is someone who can satisfy both her/his inclinations and her/his desires because they are rightly aligned or rightly ordered. The virtuous person wants to do what is right and does it, and so she/he derives pleasure from doing it. While being virtuous brings pleasure, it does not mean that it is easy. As Ezra Sullivan notes, "All personal habits come at a personal cost. The ones you acquire are at the cost of your disciplined efforts, and even the habits given by God cost your cooperation with his grace."³⁵

The issue of virtue and vice is a topic where Aquinas departs from Aristotle significantly. First, Aristotle understood there to be four basic virtues. They are prudence (practical wisdom), temperance (self-control), courage, and justice. For Aristotle, prudence (*phronesis* in Greek) is the foundational virtue upon which all others are based.³⁶ Philosophers will

³⁵ Sullivan, *Heroic Habits*, 17.

³⁶ Dorothy Bass, *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 4-5.

eventually refer these four virtues as cardinal virtues, deriving from the Latin, *cardo* for “hinge.” It was understood that all other virtues and the virtuous life itself pivoted one way or another on these four virtues.

While Aquinas agrees with this list and the centrality of prudence, he tends to refer to them as “acquired virtues.” More significantly, Aquinas adds three virtues to the list that he understands to be even more important. Rather than being naturally acquired, Aquinas’s additional three virtues are divine gifts, which means that humans cannot possess them by right actions, regardless of the number times actions are repeated. Instead, they are an expression of God’s grace. Aquinas refers to them as the theological virtues or infused virtues. They are faith, hope, and love (Aquinas’s term is charity).³⁷

The second way in which Aquinas departed from Aristotle was Aristotle’s idea that once a person became either truly virtuous or vicious, that person could not change their state.³⁸ The truly virtuous person could not fall from her/his state nor could the vicious improve her/his state. In opposition to this idea, Aquinas would argue that “habits make it harder, but never impossible, for the virtuous among us to degenerate and the vicious to improve.”³⁹

Aquinas views virtue working in two ways. The first is in the perfecting of our nature by perfecting our capacities or powers. The second way that virtue works is in the inspiring of action.⁴⁰ As DeYoung notes, “Virtues are the sorts of habits that both perfect human nature and in so doing properly order their actions to their ultimate end.”⁴¹ It may be easier to understand this in a concrete situation. A person with the virtue of honesty is both an honest person (nature) and a person we can expect to tell the truth

³⁷ Aquinas’s introduction of love into the topic of virtue is another way that Aquinas connects virtue to spiritual maturity. He notes three kinds of virtues: wholly imperfect, partly imperfect, and perfect virtue. The first is virtue without prudence or charity, the second is virtue with prudence but without charity, and the third is virtue with both prudence and charity. See Ezra Sullivan, *Habits and Holiness: Ethics, Theology, and Biopsychology* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 105.

³⁸ Kent, “Habits and Virtues,” 119.

³⁹ Kent, 119.

⁴⁰ *ST Ia IIae* 55, 1.

⁴¹ DeYoung, McCluskey, and Van Dyke, *Aquinas’s Ethics*, 132.

(action).⁴² Virtue indicates something about both nature and action.

Some of the beauty of Aquinas's system is in its intricacy. Allow me to unpack some of the subtle implications of how he understands habit to perfect our nature, which I believe is equivalent to forming character. The primary way that this happens is that habit rightly orders our capacities. We noted earlier three of the central capacities that Aquinas understands humans to have. They are the sense-appetite that we share with other animals, our reason or intellect, and our will, which Aquinas also refers to as rational appetite or desire. We also noted that in our natural state, our powers suffer from being undetermined (we are born with the capacity to speak language but not the fluency). The powers are not fully trained to behave as they are able to after they are perfected. Fortunately, through the process of cultivating virtue they are put right.⁴³ All three of these powers can and must be habituated in order to live an excellent life. Cessario indicates, "This means that how a person knows (by the exercise of the mind or the intellect), how a person loves (by the exercise of a free will or rational appetite), and how a person tempers sense-urges (which arise out of the emotion or sense appetites), in short, all characteristically human abilities require diverse habitus in order to function properly."⁴⁴

It is at this point that I find myself most drawn to Aquinas. The greatest impact habit has on our capacities is on our desire. If someone has a habit of overeating, the habit is about the untempered desire for food. The habit both emerges from and continues to form the desire. According to Aquinas, good habit, or virtue perfects the will or desire.⁴⁵ This is profound in its implications, because to say that habit perfects our desire is to say that it perfects what we love. This means that habit has a way of refining, reshaping, and reorienting our love.

This is important because our loves are not just what we find fascinating or alluring; our loves are what we want and what we direct our actions and

⁴² DeYoung, McCluskey, and Van Dyke, 132.

⁴³ As Cessario notes, "progress in virtue or growth of vice depends on how successfully an individual can modify these indeterminacies into qualities of existence." Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 37.

⁴⁴ Cessario 42.

⁴⁵ A deep but dry resource on this is Jean Porter, *The Perfection of Desire: Habit, Reason, and Virtue in Aquinas's Summa Theologica* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2018).

lives towards. In his book, *The Primacy of Love*, Paul Wadell writes,

For Aquinas, the great beauty and promise of the moral life is also perhaps its greatest fear: we do become what we most love. There is no way to escape this. We cannot avoid the influence of our sovereign desire because it abides as the primary intention of all our behavior. It expresses itself in all we do, it is the power behind our activity. What we love most gets spoken through our actions, and through those actions returns to us in a further defining of ourselves. There is grand hope in this because it means we can and do become the kind of people we wish to become; action is efficacious, most notably in the character it produces in us.⁴⁶

We have thus far observed that habit forms either good or bad character and that good habits perfect our capacities, particularly our desire. We have also noted previously that habit is a disposition. Since habit causes us to be predisposed to respond to certain stimuli by acting in regular ways, this inclination offers us and those who encounter us a degree of stability. Habit, therefore, provides us a path to greater consistency that would either not be possible or would be considerably more difficult without it.

The fact that living an excellent life consistently is difficult is another way in which habit contributes to our transformation. Since a good habit inclines us to make good choices and do good actions, we are more likely to do what we ought. Cessario writes, “*habitus* provides the whole person with settled capacities for action which surpass the simple ability to exercise will power.”⁴⁷ Virtue means that our will does not have to exert itself as fiercely to move us to do the right thing. In addition, the assistance that a good habit provides in doing the right thing increases the likelihood of success in completing the action. This is because virtue confers on the agent the ability to do good with ease, promptness, facility, and delight.⁴⁸

This was evident in Tim McCarthy’s action. As a result of his good habit (good training), he was able to react with speed, ease, and nimbleness. One

⁴⁶ Wadell, *The Primacy of Love*, 35. On this point, I also recommend James K. A. Smith’s *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2016).

⁴⁷ Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 43.

⁴⁸ Nicholas Austin, *Aquinas on Virtue* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017), 192.

might argue that getting shot could not be described as a delight. However, Tim undoubtedly felt some profound satisfaction for having done his job and taken a bullet for the President that day.

The last way habit impacts our transformation that will be addressed here is how habit causes us to emphasize *telos*.⁴⁹ We have already noted the relationship between *telos* and habit. They are so connected that it is impossible to think of habit as Aquinas did and not maintain a focus on the end to which we were created. *Telos* provides a unifying vision that enables us to evaluate the degree to which the diverse parts of our lives are working together towards our ultimate perfection.

When we forget about *telos*, our actions lose their purpose. The habits that we have, even if they are good, become anemic. For example, most Christians know that we should have a habit of prayer and Bible reading. These and similar acts are things that we certainly ought to do, but apart from *telos*, the reason for doing them is little more than duty, obedience, or tradition. These may be sufficient reasons for doing something, but they are hardly inspiring.

The ultimate end of humanity according to Aquinas is God, but not God as an abstract concept. The virtues that God gives to assist us in living an excellent life are faith, hope, and love, or what Aquinas refers to as charity.⁵⁰ Charity is love of God. In charity we do not simply love for our benefit; rather, we love God for God's own sake. Charity is the greatest of the three theological virtues because faith and hope will end when we see God, but charity will continue into eternity. Aquinas's entire system of the virtues is radical because it is based on his notion of humanity's ultimate end being friendship with God.

It is necessary for us to realize that a part of friendship with God means loving what God loves. This means that we ought to pursue a virtuous life not merely because of what the virtues produce in us but because God loves things like wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. Moreover, friendship with God is not just loving what God loves but who God loves. Thus, a

⁴⁹ Another promising area is the connection between habit and addiction. The topic is beyond the scope of this paper but is profoundly important. See Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue*.

⁵⁰ It is important that we allow Aquinas to define his own terms. Charity is love of God not alms-giving to the poor. *Aquinas's Summa Theologica* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2018).

Christian vision of the “good life” is one that is characterized by excellence in our relationships with God and our neighbors. In a world that has lost interest in and has largely dismissed truth claims, I believe this view of the “good life” can be appealing and convincing.

Lastly, when we remember telos, we have the opportunity to reverse-engineer our lives to an extent. This happens when we continue to ask ourselves, “How do I live my relationships with excellence?” In answering that question, we must also ask, “What kind of person do I want to become?” With those questions in mind, we are ready to begin to contemplate the practices or habits that we need to introduce into, reinforce, or extinguish from our lives.

Some implications of habit for our communal life

We have examined the profound ability that habits have to change our lives in both positive and negative ways. We now have to ask ourselves if corporate habit functions in a similar way? Do corporate habits have comparable impact on our lives individually and our life together?

The first thing we should understand is that regardless of the group, we do not tend to talk about our social life in terms of habit. This is just as true for followers of Jesus as any other group. The fact that habit is not part of our ecclesiological vocabulary does not mean that the concept is absent. Instead, we often talk about our corporate habits as “practices.”

In his important work on virtue, Alister MacIntyre offers the following definition of practice. Admittedly, this definition is conceptually thick and will not be unpacked here, but it demonstrates the connections between practice and the ideas that have been discussed in this study previously regarding habit. He states that practice is

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve the standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.⁵¹

⁵¹ Alister MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 187.

The only part of this definition I will comment upon is the “complex form of socially established cooperative human activity.” If basketball is the practice (the “complex form of socially established cooperative human activity”), this means that there are any number of component parts that must also take place if one wants to play basketball with excellence. A short sampling includes countless hours of dribbling, thousands of free-throws, and running plays over and over again. Dribbling is not playing basketball, but it is a necessary part of the complex form. However, even if all of the individual skills are mastered, a number of individual acts must be combined with the acts of others for something to qualify as a practice in this sense.

Having made the connection between habit and practice, we also ought to observe that our practices form both who we are as individuals and who we are as a group. It is not just our personal actions and habits that influence us. I am also personally formed by the practices of the group(s) to which I belong. Among the ways that this occurs is by impacting the way we see things and think about things. Some of the manifestations of this are peer pressure, herd mentality, and group think. But the social dimension of the virtuous life extends beyond this.

Community is not merely able to contribute to our formation as individuals; we actually need others if we want to be virtuous.⁵² Among those in this community are those who are able to serve as models for us to imitate. This means paying attention to the giants of the faith. Ezra Sullivan notes, “The nature of a thing is most apparent when it is in optimal form, and the saints are those who have reached an optimal human condition because of their habits. They lived out their habits heroically.”⁵³

We also need those who are closer to us. We need our friends. Aquinas believes that there are at least three reasons we need friends in the pursuit of happiness. We need friends so that we may do good to them, so that we may delight in seeing them do good, and so that we may be helped by them in our good work. He states, “For in order that man may do well, whether

⁵² John Fitzmaurice, *Virtue Ecclesiology: An Exploration in The Good Church* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 76.

⁵³ J. Sullivan, *Heroic Habits*, 16.

in the works of the active life, or in those of the contemplative life, he needs the fellowship of friends.”⁵⁴

If this is true, it may follow that we are experiencing the effects of lives without virtue not only because we have failed to attend to the role of habit but because we have failed to make and maintain friends. Virtue and friendship seem to be inextricably linked. They rise or fall together. Philosopher John Cuddeback asks, “Why do we not have true friendships? The answer is startlingly simple. We cannot have true friendships if we are not striving to be virtuous. The kind of life required for friendship is a virtuous life.”⁵⁵

Beginning with the end

Prior to considering the practices of the church, I think it is important to consider the *telos* of the Church. Simon Chan begins his book *Liturgical Theology* by stating that “critical to any ecclesiology is the question of how the church is to be understood in relation to creation.”⁵⁶ At first this seems like a typically boring question by a theologian, but the question is really one about *telos*: what is the Church for? As Chan lays out what is behind and underneath his question, new significance emerges.

Chan states that the standard view of the Christian Church today is what he calls an instrumental view. In this view, God’s ultimate purpose is to save souls, and the Church exists because it is God’s main tool that he uses to accomplish that end. According to this view, the end is personal salvation, and the means is the Church.⁵⁷ Chan believes that in spite of it being the dominant view in the West presently, the instrumental view is incorrect. In its place, he proposes an ontological understanding of the Church, which he believes is a more ancient understanding.⁵⁸ Since the question is essentially, “What is the Church for?” we are discussing purpose, and the

⁵⁴ *ST Ia IIae*, 4 8.

⁵⁵ John Cuddeback, *True Friendship: Where Virtue Becomes Happiness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021), 19.

⁵⁶ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 21.

⁵⁷ I am not suggesting that the Church saves. It is clearly Christ who does that, but God uses the Church to share the news of what Christ has done.

⁵⁸ Ontology is the fancy philosophical term for being or essence.

topic is actually *telos*. For this reason, I am going to refer to his view as a teleological view of the Church, since it is based on the idea of *telos*.

In this teleological view, Chan suggests that God's ultimate purpose is to form a people for himself, and salvation, while still essential, is the means to that end. In its most simplified form, Chan has really only swapped the means and the ends, but the implications of this move are enormous. Let me offer just one example.

To state it crudely, in the instrumental view, the Church is basically a fire insurance agent. People need to stay out of hell, and we have something for them that accomplishes that. Some buy it (salvation), and some don't. As time passes, many of those we sold our insurance policy to leave, and we never see them again. But why should we expect anything else? They simply bought what we were selling. We told them, "All you need to do is believe," and that is all they are doing. Why do we find this strange? How many of us have a personal relationship with our insurance agent if we aren't related to him/her?

In the instrumental view of the Church, there is no great answer to the question, "Why go to worship on Sunday morning?" The answer will typically be some version of obedience or tradition. We go because Christians should. But what if we have it wrong? What if salvation is not the end but the means? What if God's ultimate purpose is not even my personal salvation? Yes, of course I still need to be personally saved, but it is because my personal salvation is the only way that I can fit into or take my place in the People of God. Why go to church in the teleological view? We go because that is what God's people do. We gather because we are a people! We gather because it is the only way for our lives to be properly ordered to function as they are designed.

If Chan is correct that the Christian faith is much more fundamentally corporate than individual, then everything that has been discussed previously about personal formation is a necessary component of our life together. If our *telos* is primarily corporate or social, and we live our life together excellently (with virtue) then we have something unique to offer the world that is in stark contrast to the largely fragmented world that many in the West experience today.

Not only does *telos* provide a unifying vision, we also observed that

it makes a reverse engineering of the Christian life possible.⁵⁹ I previously asked, “What kind of person do I want to be?” Now we must ask, “What kind of people do we want to be?” In answering this question, we must ask, “What practices we need to introduce into, reinforce, and extinguish from our life together in order for us to live all of our relationships with excellence?”⁶⁰

Practices

If we are going to pursue virtuous living together, then we must begin to prayerfully examine what this looks like for our various practices. To make the present exercise more manageable, I will not be addressing specific practices. The practices of the People of God can be divided into five areas: witness, discipleship, fellowship, worship, and service. I am going to direct our thoughts to discipleship, witness, and worship, but this exercise could be done for each practice area and for each individual practice.

James K. A. Smith’s *Desiring the Kingdom* asks some probing questions about our practices of discipleship/education when he writes,

What is education for? And more specifically, what is at stake in a distinctively Christian education? . . . It is usually understood that education is about ideas and information. . . . And so distinctively Christian education is understood to be about Christian ideas. . . .

But what if this line of thinking gets off on the wrong foot? What if education, including higher education, is not primarily about the absorption of ideas and information, but about the formation of hearts and desires? . . . What if education was primarily concerned with shaping our hopes and passions—our visions of “the good life”—and not merely about the dissemination of data and information as inputs to our thinking? What if the primary work

⁵⁹ In some ways it seems inappropriate or at least odd to talk about reverse-engineering the life of faith, but I do not see a real difference between describing the reverse engineering of the Christian life as opposed to beginning to live in the light of the reality of the inaugurated but not yet consummated Kingdom of God.

⁶⁰ A number of years ago, Ellen Charry coined a term that may be helpful - “aretegenic,” meaning conducive to or producing virtue. How do we live our life together in a way that is aretegenic? Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16.

of education was the transformation of our imagination rather than the saturation of our intellect? . . .

What if education wasn't first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love?⁶¹

If I am honest, I get tired just thinking about being a part of a ministry that tries to get children to sit somewhat quietly for an hour in order to tell them a Bible story and then to convince them to memorize a Bible verse by the next week.

What if we changed our fundamental understanding of humanity? What if we understood ourselves, as Smith suggests we should, as desiring creature first and not just thinking creatures? What if we did not merely embrace habit as a possible path but actually reconceived our concept of discipleship around habit? What if real prayer, effort, contemplation, and collaboration were given to determining how we can help children become hungry for the right things? What kind of character do we want to see beginning to emerge in our children? How do we help them develop qualities like the fruit of the Spirit, or the cardinal virtues, or acceptance, openness, vulnerability, compassion, trust, truthfulness, stillness, generosity, presence, humility, gratitude, hope, forgiveness, patience? How might this not only assist them individually but also be a form of leadership development for future generations of the church? What would it look like to be regularly painting a picture for them of the "good life" so that when they are older and out in the world, they continue to find the Christian vision of a well-lived life enthralling?

What does witness look like in light of our telos? How do we show ourselves to be God's friends, and how do we live so that people are convinced that they are invited into this friendship too? Do we actually have practices (a complex form as defined here) in the area of witness, or do we merely have sporadic, disjointed actions that could not really qualify as a practice or habit? Moreover, if we are honest, do we even have disjointed actions in this area? What practices do we need to introduce into, reinforce, or extinguish from our lives so that we are living these relationships excellently?

⁶¹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 17-18. This is essentially what C. S. Lewis was arguing for a generation earlier in *The Abolition of Man*.

How does our worship continue to refocus our attention on our telos? How does it remind us of our friendship with God? How does it reinforce the call to be friends with our neighbors? Worship seems to be primarily an expression of our love. If this is true, then how should we understand our current worship practices in light of Smith's statement above? Are we reinforcing the idea that humans are essentially thinking creatures rather than essentially desiring/loving creatures? What parts of our being are being employed in worship beyond our intellect? How might we grow in worship as a greater expression of a deeper love? What actions do we need to start doing, stop doing, or keep doing in order to form the dispositions of people who love God excellently? If Chan is correct and the Christian life is more corporate than individual, how do we need to reconceive our worship to remind us of the centrality of our corporate life? What practices in worship might help us remember that the Christian life is about Christ's body? What practices might help us be re-membered to that body?

Habit and holiness

So far in this journey we have explored the elements of a theology of habit. We have also endeavored to understand how habit operates for our transformation both individually and corporately. As we conclude, I would like to change the direction of the focus somewhat.

I want to propose that habit has something to offer current Brethren in Christ thinking on sanctification. Specifically, I believe that attending to habit can serve as a corrective to past and present trends regarding sanctification. Let me begin by identifying the present trend.

I do not know when it began, and I do not know how or if it will end, but there is an observable gradual movement away from a more typical Wesleyan view of sanctification to one more consistent with Augustine. I would like to point out three signposts by which we can discern the direction of the tide. The first is whether sanctification is viewed as simply a process or more than just a process. The second is the degree to which Christians ought to expect to sin in this life. Another way of understanding this second signpost is whether or not Christians continue to have a sin nature after conversion. The third signpost is related to the second. It is the amount or degree of sanctification the view believes is possible in this life.

Both Augustinian and historic Wesleyan views understand sanctifica-

tion to begin at the point of conversion/justification/regeneration. Both views understand sanctification to be a process that lasts throughout an individual's physical life. It may be helpful to think of sanctification as a building with multiple floors. The ground floor is when Christ begins his work of regeneration, which coincides with our conversion. The top floor is when we are completely conformed to the image of Christ, what theologians refer to as glorification. We understand that our glorification will occur after our physical death.

Throughout the physical life of a Christian, God is working through the Holy Spirit, gradually taking us from one floor to another. We are essentially on a never-ending ramp or staircase to higher and higher floors. As Paul writes, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6, NIV).

In an Augustinian understanding, sanctification is simply a lifelong process. One of the reasons that it is a process is the belief that prior to being completely conformed to Christ in glorification, we will continue to have a sin nature in this life. We have been delivered from the guilt of our sin, but we are still overcoming the sin nature.⁶² Since sanctification is a lifelong process and since we are continually contending with a sin nature, the amount of victory over sin one should expect to experience before death is somewhat limited. Augustinians are not sure how many floors you can ascend before death, but one should expect that a number of floors will be remaining when one dies.

As I indicated, Wesley certainly and plainly thought that sanctification was a process. However, where those following Augustine see only ramps or stairs, Wesley believed that there were some elevators that could be experienced. While I cannot unpack Wesley's hope for Christian perfection here, he believed there was a "second work of grace" available to Christians. This is an experience, most commonly subsequent to salvation, where a person yields him/herself to God. It is typically a sudden crisis experience that results in a dramatic change in the person's character. Prior

⁶² For example, in commenting on 2 Peter 1:15, Calvin states, "it is an arduous work and of immense labour, to put off the corruption which is in us, he [Peter] bids us to strive and make every effort for this purpose." John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 22:372.

to that moment, one thing is true and real about that person and after that moment, it is as if everything is (or at least some significant things are) different. The doors of the elevator open, and suddenly the person is no longer on the same floor.

Wesley agreed that we could still sin after conversion; he simply did not think that it was inevitable or a foregone conclusion. While we may still sin, we have been delivered from the dominion of sin. In other words, we do not sin because we are sinners, as was formerly the case; we sin because we freely choose to sin. Sin remains an ongoing reality that we must contend with because it is present in the world until Christ returns, but having experienced the new birth, we are not bound to sin or bound by sin according to Wesley.

When these aspects of Wesley's view are considered together, I believe they result in a greater optimism regarding sanctification. The possibility of a second work of grace that brings about significant change, combined with the sense that we are no longer slaves to sin means that those who follow Wesley ought to have a greater hope of the amount of sanctification someone can experience in this life. Returning to our building image, Wesleyans believe that by cooperating with the Holy Spirit, one can reach higher floors in this life than Augustinians believe is possible. While I am sure that many Augustinians would reject my assessment of their view as being less optimistic regarding sanctification, one need only discuss with them the possibility of Wesley's notion of Christian perfection to understand that this is accurate.

This greater hope for sanctification is one of the fundamental reasons that I believe that we must maintain a Wesleyan view of sanctification, particularly in light of current trend to an Augustinian perspective on sanctification within the Brethren in Christ. Yet, as I indicated it is not only the current trend that needs correction. Some past Brethren in Christ thought on sanctification ought to be addressed as well.

Many in past generations of the Brethren in Christ have suffered unnecessarily because of an unhealthy expectation for a particular kind of experience of entire sanctification. I know folks who have had post-conversion experiences that changed their lives forever, and I know others who have felt like second-class Christians because they did not. I believe a Brethren in Christ view of sanctification must hold out that hope and

possibility for a second work of grace without an expectation that it looks a particular way. I do not want to give up the idea that there are elevators in this building, but perhaps there are not as many as we thought.

Returning to the current status of sanctification in the Brethren in Christ, if my recollection is correct, the vast majority of Doctrinal Questionnaires (DQs) I have read in the last few years have addressed sanctification only as if it were stairs or a ramp, with no expressions of hope for possible elevators. Most described the ongoing presence of sin nature and the lifelong struggle with sin. I cannot recall any DQs that celebrated the idea of being freed from the dominion of sin or expressed any real optimism about the heights one may obtain before the grave if we would but cooperate with God's grace. I find it noteworthy and profoundly sad that when we talk about sanctification, we focus on how much sanctification has not happened and will not happen in this life rather than on how much has occurred or could yet.

I am convinced that we need to retain a Wesleyan view of sanctification, not simply because we believe in the validity of a particular kind of experience but because we believe that we are actually changed by the grace of God. Instead of focusing on how many elevators there are or how one goes about encountering them, the more important issue is, "How high can we go?" I believe that we must have hope for real progress and genuine transformation in this life as we walk in step with the Holy Spirit. This is where I believe habit has much to offer.

Rather than waiting for some experience that may or may not happen, perhaps holiness ought to be reconceived as being intimately connected to habit. What might it be like to believe in the hope of entire sanctification that is a result of an experience or a result of a process (habit)? I do not mean habit in a legalistic sense where we have a list of deeds we have to do, but habit that is focused on our telos. We return once again to our teleological questions. What kind of people do we want to be? What are the practices that we need to introduce into, reinforce, and extinguish from our personal lives and common life together?

The Secret Service illustration at the beginning of this study confronts me with the question, what is actually possible in this life? If the most basic human desire (self-preservation) can be habituated into the background with no obvious assistance from God, if we can be trained so that our

instinctive response is for another rather than ourselves and our response is for the good of that person even at grave risk to ourselves, what amount of sanctification is possible for us who claim to have the power and presence of the Holy Spirit ready to assist? I am reminded of G. K. Chesterton's haunting challenge: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."⁶³

How many floors can we put behind us while we are breathing? I do not have an answer, nor do I think there is a uniform one for every person, but I suspect that we are able to experience greater sanctification than most of us expect. Ultimately, we are confronted not merely by the actions of two Secret Service agents over forty years ago but by our own failure to be changed more substantially by the mystery of friendship with God.

When we view sanctification in terms of a lifelong struggle that we do not expect to be completed in this lifetime, we are setting our expectations too low. Rather, let us dare to dream of the progress that may be accomplished. It seems that one of the wonderful and dreadful things that Christ and the Holy Spirit came to accomplish was to deliver us from our excuses. Maybe rather than staying on the stairs or looking for elevators, maybe we should be locating the escalators—the individual habits and communal practices that God has provided to assist in our transformation.

Sanctification is not about trying harder to be nicer versions of ourselves. The formation of virtue is not about something as mundane as behavior modification. Rather, it is about Christian maturity. It is about being the people God desires us to be. We need to focus on habit because we are habit-forming creatures who are formed by our habits. Through virtue and the enabling of the Holy Spirit, each of us has a path to becoming the person we want to be. Perhaps more importantly, as we strive together and cooperate with the Holy Spirit, we are corporately becoming the people that God has desired for himself from the beginning of creation.

When we focus with laser precision on the human telos of being friends of God, we have a vision of the "good life" that helps form us and motivate us. I believe it will also capture the attention of the cynical, fragmented world

⁶³ G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World?*, 57, Kindle.

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
HISTORY & LIFE

in which we now live. When we focus on the power of habit and virtue, our desires are perfected. As a result, we have an effective, albeit challenging means to becoming more like Jesus in this life. In the words of N. T. Wright, “The key to it all . . . is that the Christian vision of virtue, of character that has become second nature, is precisely all about discovering what it means to be truly human—human in a way most of us never imagine.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ N. T. Wright, *After You Believe* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 2010), 25.