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After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters

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Wright, N. T. (2010). *After you believe: Why Christian character matters.*

New York, NY: HarperOne.

Reviewed by Tim C. McCarthy

Abstract

N. T. Wright's *After you believe: Why Christian character matters* is reviewed as a resource for the work of spiritual formation in university ministry. In his book, Wright develops a framework for Christian virtue formation that goes beyond Aristotelian ethics and aims for a superior *telos* captured in the biblical threads of *worship* and *ruling*. Wright's book provides a strong foundation for helping students understand the significance of character in their ongoing faith journey and vocation in the world. It could benefit from greater attention to the work of the Holy Spirit, the role of suffering, and the role of the principalities and powers in the formation of Christian persons.

In *After you believe: Why Christian character matters* (2010), Bishop N. T. Wright articulates a thorough theological basis for the formation of "virtue" based on the rich biblical vision that he has already developed in his other works. According to Wright, God's fundamental purposes for humanity, revealed throughout the Scriptural narrative, are (a) representing creation in *worship* toward God as *priests*, and (b) representing God in *ruling* over creation as *kings*. On the basis of this biblical vision, Wright argues, humanity has a clear *telos* to aim for, and an indication of the kinds of practices that would be coherent with that *telos*, anticipating now what God intends to do with creation in the future. Wright's book offers profound insight for anyone who is struggling with why "good" behavior matters, and how Christian beliefs translate into Christian behaviors that have eternal significance.

Wright begins by contrasting two common ways of looking at virtue, ones which we would be familiar with from our own discussions with students, parents, and colleagues. Many people view rules and their accompanying positive and negative consequences as the only way to ensure that people will be "good" and "moral." Conversely, especially in the postmodern world, being "true to yourself" is often identified as the best way to achieve one's human potential. Yet history and personal reflection prove these to be inadequate means for achieving true virtue.

As described by Wright, Aristotle's classical view of virtue formation was marked by three characteristics: having a worthy goal (in this case, personal moral achievement), determining the steps that are necessary to achieve that goal, and practicing those steps until they become second nature. Wright argues that this view could only hint at the reality; the biblical vision fulfills what Aristotle could only envision, by empowering humanity to become the redemptive kings and priests that God created them to be, bringing justice, beauty, and love to every corner of the cosmos. God works this transformation through habits of mind, heart, and body that anticipate and cooperate with God's already-unfolding renewing work in the world, producing the virtues of

faith, hope, and love, the fruit of the Spirit, and Christian unity. Wright concludes by describing what he describes as a “virtuous circle”: the particular habits that, compounded together, have proven to be useful to the church in the formation of character throughout the centuries.

Early in the book, Wright points to how many global events point to our world’s desperate need for people of true character. He states, “In the wider world, the challenge we face is to grow and develop a fresh generation of leaders, in all walks of life, whose character has been formed in wisdom and public service, not in greed for money or power” (Wright, 2010, p. 26). This burden of character formation for the sake of the world is clearly one that student development professionals share.

Wright’s rich understanding of the biblical narrative, of the *telos* of all creation, and of humanity’s role within that *telos*, is a needed corrective to some of the predominant evangelical theologies that drive evangelism and discipleship. Superficial gospels that merely guarantee rescue from hell and a secure berth in an other-worldly heaven do not readily provide an explanation for why our public and private moral behavior matters. In response, Wright explains a biblical framework that weaves the personally transforming elements of the gospel with the redemptive destiny of all creation, the destiny with which our lives can anticipate and cooperate now through the habits and practices that we adopt. Those of us who disciple students can encourage them that today’s choices are important because of the way that they contribute to their formation as the worshippers and rulers in the world that God created them to be.

Students in today’s generation often speak about “being true to yourself,” which means, most often, being true to what you feel or crave. According to Wright, Jesus teaches that “The authenticity that really matters is living in accordance with the genuine human being God is calling you to become” (Wright, 2010, p. 108). Students need to hear Christ’s invitation to aim for this kind of authenticity, not just for a cheap authenticity that excuses them from changing the potentially destructive patterns of their lives.

Depending on the tradition our ministries hail from, worship may emphasized to the neglect of mission, or vice versa. Wright’s simple biblical matrix of *worship* and *mission* should provoke us to consider the structure and efforts of our ministries. On the one hand, we need to ask, *How are we giving opportunity for students to make a habit of gathering up the praises, laments, and requests of creation and all nations and offering them to God?* On the other hand, we must ask, *How are we giving opportunity for students to make a habit of bringing God’s love, justice, beauty, and truth into the greatest needs and opportunities of our moment in history?*

Wright’s “virtuous circle” is a helpful matrix for evaluating the ways in which our ministries invite students into a more faithful discipleship. Wright affirms the importance of locating ourselves in the drama of Scripture, of learning from illustrative stories from Scripture and other sources, of surrounding ourselves with worthy examples of virtuous people, both historical and present to us, and of participating meaningfully in a community of faith, in particular its various practices of worship and mission, eventually leading us back to Scripture. This is a worthy description of what ought to characterize our work with students.

Wright gives little attention to the Holy Spirit's sovereign work over and above the habits and practices he describes. I would have appreciated a more detailed explanation of the interplay between human and divine agency in the formation of people in the image of Christ. I found myself asking, as many students often do, "What can we *expect* in our transformation, and what is left to the mystery of God's sovereign work in our lives?"

In explaining the role of suffering in our transformation, Wright gave the most attention to persecution – the inevitable result of faithful discipleship in a hostile world. Yet many of us also struggle deeply with why godly people seem to experience suffering that is not tied to persecution. It would be helpful to have a more nuanced understanding of how and why God permits suffering in our spiritual formation.

Finally, Wright also gives very little attention to the influence of the "principalities and powers" in spiritual formation. In the ministry of Jesus, the apostles, and the early church, the first act of discipleship in the lives of those who came to them was often to release them from spiritual bondage. Many of our students are dealing with significant spiritual baggage and even demonic influence that may stand in the way of forming the kinds of habits that point them toward their destiny as kings and priests in God's world, and this aspect of formation needs to be addressed in more detail.

Overall, Tom Wright has provided a deeply meaningful, highly readable explanation of how God forms people into the likeness of Christ for the good of the world. Wright is a master of helpful illustrations that explain deep theological concepts, and is obviously aware of the challenges that "normal" Christians face. *After you believe* is best read in concert with his previous two books, *Simply Christian* (2006) and *Surprised by hope* (2008), so that one has a clear understanding of his theological underpinnings. Whether read by practitioners, or studied together with students in a small group, Wright's books continue to be valuable resources for understanding the depth of our faith and its implications for our lives.

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