
Calvinists among the Virtues: Reformed Theological Contributions to Contemporary Virtue Ethics¹

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Abstract

Since virtue and the virtues have been important in Reformed theology for most of its history, this essay is devoted to the question of how this tradition may contribute to and interact with contemporary virtue ethics (MacIntyre, Hauerwas). Reformed concepts of sanctification as open to moral growth, covenant as a narrative context of divine commandments, and *unio cum Christo* as defining human teleology and virtuousness provide valuable contributions to the development of such an ethics. On the other hand, Reformed conceptions of (social) reform, natural law, common grace (Calvin) and christological eschatology (Barth) offer theological arguments for overcoming Hauerwas's problematic overemphasis on the distinctiveness of the church's ethic.

Keywords

Reformed theology, virtue ethics, moral growth, grace, natural virtues

It is commonly held that Reformed ethics is basically accomplished as an ethics of divine commandments, creational orders and—to a lesser extent—(human) rights, whereas theological virtue ethics is in particular developed in the Roman Catholic tradition. However, since Elizabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre and others initiated a revival of

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virtue ethics in philosophy² and Stanley Hauerwas and others started to think of the Christian moral life in terms of character, community and narrative,³ Reformed ethicists have shown growing interest in an ethics of virtue. Moreover, historically the virtues were not absent in Reformed theology and were even regarded by most of its representatives as a substantial part of the Christian life. While Reformation's *sola fide* led to a de-emphasising of the characterisation of Christian life in terms of virtue, seemingly replacing an ethics of virtue by an ethics of divine commandments and obligation, virtue ethics was not abandoned.

In this essay I briefly sketch what role virtue and virtue ethics have played in the tradition of Reformed theology and go on to demonstrate how this tradition can contribute fruitfully to some pivotal issues in contemporary virtue ethics.

Virtues in Reformed Tradition and Theology

A short overview may show that virtue and the virtues have been important in Reformed theology for most of its history.

Although John Calvin chooses to outline the Christian moral life from the perspective of divine commandments, this choice is not by principle but practical. He explicitly states his full agreement with the old church fathers, who wrote so well and profoundly about the virtues, suggesting that he could also have taken the virtues as his starting point. It is for the sake of brevity that he chooses to outline the Christian life from the perspective of the Decalogue.⁴ Virtues receive their proper place and quality when the human life is entirely redirected *coram Deo*.

Reformed orthodoxy also shows a rather positive attitude towards the virtues. Amandus Polanus interpreted virtue exclusively in terms of a divine gift at the moment

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2. G. Elizabeth M. Anscombe's essay 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33 (1958), reprinted in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 1–5, is generally considered to have initiated modern virtue ethics, whereas Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981 [2nd rev. edn 1984]) had greater impact.
 3. Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1975)—notably some years before MacIntyre published *After Virtue*; Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).
 4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), III.6.1; see for analyses of virtue ethical traces in Calvin: Pieter Vos, 'After Duty: The Need for Virtue Ethics in Moral Formation', in Bram de Muynck, Johan Hegeman and Pieter Vos (eds), *Bridging the Gap: Connecting Christian Faith and Professional Practice in a Pluralistic Society* (Sioux Center, IA: Dorth Press, 2011), pp. 143–58, and Pieter Vos, 'Breakdown of the Teleological View of Life? Reinvestigating Law, *Telos* and Virtue in Calvinistic Ethics' (forthcoming).

of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, Lambert Daneau complemented his treatment of the Ten Commandments with an examination of the various vices and virtues that correspond to the second table of the Decalogue, whereas Antonius Walaeus treated them more independently in a rather Aristotelian fashion.⁵ The sixteenth-century Reformed theologian Peter Martyr Vermigli also considered virtue to be central and compatible with grace.⁶ In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritanism, John Owen made use of a metaphysics of goodness in which the human person becomes godlike, and Jonathan Edwards devoted a whole study to the virtues: *The Nature of True Virtue*.⁷

Though Friedrich Schleiermacher's influence and relevance reach much further than the Reformed tradition, his philosophical ethics consisting of a comprehensive theory of duty, of the good and of virtue, and his Christian ethics centring around Christian virtues⁸ influenced a virtue-ethical understanding of ethics in Reformed theological discourse. Throughout the nineteenth century 'Christian and societal virtues' belonged to the standard educational and theological-ethical vocabulary in Reformed circles in the Netherlands, albeit not without contestation.⁹

The most critical stance towards virtue ethics within the Reformed tradition can be detected in the first half of the twentieth century. At that time the interest in virtue ethics was replaced by a rather hostile attitude, especially among neo-Calvinists and dialectical theologians, who rejected the anthropological scope in nineteenth-century liberal theology and regarded the Reformation's doctrine of justification not just as prior but also as opposed to the concept of virtue. In particular the implied element of the selfishness of virtue as focused on perfection and its capacity for meritorious action, as well as the anthropological presupposition of autonomous existence independent from God were criticised.¹⁰

After World War II only a few isolated studies appeared devoted to a reassessment of the relation between Reformed theology and virtue. In the 1950s Dutch Reformed ethicist Gerrit Brillenburg Wurth took up the challenge of Max Scheler's plea *Zur Rehabilitierung der Tugend* in a book on the virtues from a neo-Calvinistic perspective, without finding many followers.¹¹ In 1947 Paul Ramsey had already developed a Reformed theological

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5. Luca Baschera, 'Ethics in Reformed Orthodoxy', in Herman J. Selderhuis (ed.), *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 519–52.
 6. Sebastian Rehnman, 'Virtue and Grace', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 25 (2012), pp. 473–93.
 7. Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).
 8. Cf. Heleen Zorgdrager, 'Mapping the Christian Character: Calvin and Schleiermacher on Virtue, Law and Sanctification', in Pieter Vos and Onno Zijlstra (eds), *The Law of God: Exploring God and Civilization* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 256–81.
 9. Nelleke Bakker (ed.), *Tot burgerschap en deugd: Volkopvoeding in de negentiende eeuw (For Citizenship and Virtue: People's Education in the Nineteenth Century)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2006).
 10. Eilert Herms, 'Virtue: A Neglected Concept in Protestant Ethics', in idem, *Offenbarung und Glaube: Zur Bildung des Christlichen Lebens* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992), pp. 124–37.
 11. Gerrit Brillenburg Wurth, *Eerherstel van de deugd (Rehabilitation of Virtue)* (Kampen: Kok, 1958).

concept of the virtues as an alternative to Aristotelian, Augustinian and Thomistic views on the unity and source of the virtues.¹²

New and more influential Reformed (and Lutheran) interest in the virtues consisted of responses to MacIntyre's and Hauerwas's studies. Richard Mouw initiated a profound dialogue between divine command ethics and MacIntyrian virtue ethics,¹³ Gilbert Meilaender offered an account of the virtues in a study from 1984¹⁴ and Eilert Herms responded to the criticism of dialectical theologians.¹⁵ Most of these studies in one way or another addressed the common conviction that Protestants have no place or only a limited place for the virtues because of the centrality of the doctrine of salvation.

Rather than defending the Reformation against these claims, recent Reformed theological studies are devoted to positive explorations of virtue ethics. They provide profound examinations of the virtue-ethical content of outstanding Reformed theologians' ethics such as Calvin's,¹⁶ Edwards's,¹⁷ and Barth's.¹⁸ Somewhat related is the new interest in natural law accounts in Calvinism¹⁹ and the development of the so-called 'normative practice model' in Reformed philosophy, in which a MacIntyrian concept of practice and virtue is enriched with a Dooyeweerdian concept of modal aspects representing irreducible ways of being, founded in God's creational order.²⁰

Encountering Neo-Aristotelianism

These recent developments are challenging, not because the Reformed tradition offers a fully-fledged alternative theory of virtue and the virtues—rather this tradition is reread

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12. Paul Ramsey, 'A Theory of Virtue according to the Principles of the Reformation', *Journal of Religion* 27.3 (1947), pp. 178–96, which became part of his widely read introduction *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Scribner's, 1950), pp. 191–233.
 13. Richard J. Mouw, *The God who Commands: A Study in Divine Command Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).
 14. Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
 15. Herms, 'Virtue: A Neglected Concept'.
 16. Kirk J. Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth: Developing Moral Virtue Ethics within the Reformed Theological Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), pp. 11–32; Vos, 'Breakdown of the Teleological View of Life?' In the 1970s, Raymond K. Anderson already wrote a monograph on virtue in Calvin: *Love and Order: The Life-Structuring Dynamics of Grace and Virtue in Calvin's Ethical Thought* (Chambersburg, PA: Wilson College, 1973).
 17. Stephen A. Wilson, *Virtue Reformed: Rereading Jonathan Edwards's Ethics* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, *Receptive Human Virtues: A New Reading of Jonathan Edwards's Ethics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).
 18. William Werpehowski, *Karl Barth and Christian Ethics: Living in Truth* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth*.
 19. Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).
 20. Henk Jochemsen and Gerrit Glas, *Verantwoord medisch handelen: Proeve van een christelijke medische ethiek (Responsible Medical Acting: A Sample of a Christian Medical Ethics)* (Amsterdam: Buijten and Schipperheijn, 1997), pp. 64–99.

through the lens of virtue ethics—but because it may contribute to particular aspects of contemporary virtue ethics. The starting point of my reflection is MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics and the way it has been adopted in theology.

MacIntyre claims that a reappraisal of virtue ethics cannot be achieved without a teleological conception of life. Because we can no longer adopt Aristotle’s metaphysical-biological teleology, MacIntyre redefines virtue and *telos* in terms of practice, narrative and tradition. A practice is primarily determined by the good or *telos* internal to the social activity characteristic of that practice. Virtues are acquired human qualities that ‘enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices’.²¹ As an alternative to Aristotle’s essentialist conception of human nature, MacIntyre envisions life as a narrative unity in which various (conflicting) practices can be integrated in relation to the *telos* of human life as a whole. Searching for the good for one’s own life, one asks at the same time: what is the good for humanity as such? The good of his life is related to and defined by a concept of the good for man in general as this is articulated in traditions.²² Theologians have adopted these concepts by applying them to one particular tradition: the Christian tradition, which can be defined as a socially expanding movement called ‘the kingdom of God’. Its formative texts and narratives define the practices and virtues constitutive of the community of the church.²³

The application of MacIntyrian concepts to Christian ethics has proven to be very fruitful. Still, some core issues call for further reflection and criticism. In the next sections of this essay, I will address three of these closely connected issues and relate them to Reformed theological core themes.

First, virtue ethics presupposes that virtue can be cultivated and that gradual improvement and moral growth are possible. Christian theology has been reluctant to fully adopt the Aristotelian idea of growth and human perfectibility. The Reformation even seems to have rejected the whole idea of moral excellence. Yet, the question remains how Christian virtuous life may develop and grow. I will clarify how the Calvinistic doctrine of sanctification and the concept of character mutually enrich each other in thinking through growth in virtuousness in the Christian life.

Second, if MacIntyre’s claim that virtue ethics has to be teleological in nature is correct, the question is whether a Reformed ethics is also structured by a teleological conception and how its reasonableness can be perceived. When it comes to these questions, the narrative character of the Reformed concept of covenant, the function of reason in the application of divine commands and the concepts of participation and *unio cum Christo* provide relevant arguments.

Third, a more critical issue concerns the centrality of the church as constitutive of the virtuous life in the theological virtue ethics of Hauerwas and others. My critical question is: does the emphasis on the church not lead to an exclusivist conception of virtue and, as a consequence, to the abandonment of the natural virtues that also seek for the good that is internal to practices in the MacIntyrian sense? How can the ‘natural’ and the virtuousness

21. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 191.

22. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 181–225.

23. See for a broad overview Nancy Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg and Mark Thiessen Nation (eds), *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

of those outside the church be valued *theologically*? On this point, Reformed theology offers at least two possible ‘solutions’ that I will explore: Calvin’s moderate account of natural law and Barth’s christological eschatology with universal implications.

Virtues and Sanctification: Moral Growth as Reform

In his early study *Character and the Christian Life*, Hauerwas criticises Reformed command ethics for being inherently occasionalistic in understanding the self as passive and atomistic without any duration and growth. As an alternative, he develops a concept of character as the way to understand the unity and continuity of the moral self. Notwithstanding this criticism, it is precisely the doctrine of sanctification in the Reformed theology of Calvin and Edwards (and Wesley’s Methodist theology), which helps Hauerwas to construct a positive relation between Christian morality and an ethics of character, without falling into the trap of ‘work righteousness’. Christ’s work of both justification and sanctification, as God’s objective act for humankind and the subjective effect that it has for the believer respectively, means that the life of the believer is reoriented radically.²⁴ Works do not perfect faith, but are intimately bound up with faith; by God’s grace these works, too, are justified. This gives space to moral growth in the sense of a continued working out of the reality of Christ in the life of the believer.

Calvin’s, Wesley’s and Edwards’s emphasis on the change of the ‘person’ and the transformation of the ‘heart’ and its integrity are good starting points, but these theologians lacked the instruments to think through the actual meaning of these concepts in the life of the believer. Hauerwas tries to overcome this inability to characterise the human side of the union with Christ and to understand the nature of the *self* that is graced by interpreting sanctification in terms of the formation of character.²⁵

Ten years after *Character and the Christian Life*, Hauerwas comments that ‘character’ and ‘command’ are not most appropriate for outlining the different approaches in Christian ethics. Following Meilaender, Hauerwas now takes ‘journey’ and ‘dialogue’ as the two basic metaphors for understanding the Christian life. The latter interprets the Christian life as a back and forth between the two voices with which God speaks: the accusing voice of the law and the accepting voice of the gospel. Journey, on the other hand, implies a process in which people gradually and graciously are transformed by the pilgrimage to which they have been called. According to Hauerwas, the metaphor of journey is and should be the primary one,²⁶ whereas Meilaender—as a Lutheran—argues that the two metaphors should be kept in tension because a one-sided emphasis on journey and pilgrimage would cause doubt and distress when we see little progress, or may create unwarranted self-confidence when we concentrate on the progress towards the goal of pilgrimage.²⁷

This controversy not only raises the question of how Calvinism values the idea of moral growth and human excellence, but also whether the metaphors of ‘journey’ and ‘dialogue’ are the only options for thinking about growth in the Christian life.

24. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, p. 187.

25. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, pp. 193–94.

26. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, p. xxvii.

27. Gilbert Meilaender, ‘The Place of Ethics in the Theological Task’, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 6 (1979), p. 210, quoted by Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, p. xxix.

Without doubt the contrast between the holy God and the sinful human plays an important role in Reformed theology and its ethics. In Calvin's theology, the consequence is that virtues are first of all conceived as *God's* perfections and not as human moral excellences. A preoccupation with human excellence, as in the ancient thinkers, gets in the way of proper knowledge of God and ourselves. Proper self-knowledge requires acquaintance with God's perfections: beside God's wisdom, human wisdom looks shortsighted; alongside God's justice, human justice pales.²⁸ If this were the dominant line of thought, the dialogue metaphor would take precedence over the journey metaphor. However, in my view the function of such oppositions between divine and human qualities is to get the appropriate theological starting point and they should not be considered definite in Calvin's theology. They open, so to speak, the door to a distinctive Christian journey.

Christian virtues get their proper place in sanctified life. On this point, Hauerwas's examination of Calvin and others is in line with the so-called 'new approach to Calvin' in which participation of God and man and the *unio cum Christo* are explored. J. Todd Billings points at Calvin's theology of 'participation', which emerges from a soteriology that affirms a union of God and humanity in creation and redemption. Central is Calvin's concept of *duplex gratia*: the first grace of justification is God's act wherein by imputation believers come to participate in Christ's righteousness; in the second grace of sanctification the believers become partakers in Christ's righteousness, which begin 'the slow process of moral transformation'.²⁹ Instead of contrasting the holy God with unworthy sinners and the continual back and forth that this opposition causes, 'participation in Christ' points to the unity of the believer with Christ and the Spirit's empowerment to live a life of active gratitude. Here the language of growth is even more present than Hauerwas suggests: 'restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year' and God renews the minds of the believers throughout their lives.³⁰ As Todd Billings concludes, one side of double grace is that '[b]y the Spirit, believers are also engrafted on to Christ—receiving him as nourishment for gradual transformation and growth'.³¹

I agree with Hauerwas and others that the concepts of character and narrative (journey) are needed in addition to the traditional Reformed concept of sanctification to spell out the nature and development of the Christian moral life. At the same time, I think that Reformed theology provides an alternative to the opposition between journey and dialogue, namely in its very notion of 'reform'. In reform the back and forth of 'dialogue' can be combined with growth towards a destination implied in 'journey'. Rather than by (natural) progress, virtue is marked by reform, in the sense that individual virtue follows a pattern of continuous renewal rather than quantitative improvement. Even in Karl Barth's seemingly critical evaluation of virtue ethics and his preference for a command ethics, growth in the Christian life is possible, as Werpehowski and Nolan claim, so long

28. Calvin, *Institutes* I.1.2; Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth*, p. 12.

29. J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 107.

30. Calvin, *Institutes* II.3.9. Cf. Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth*, p. 22.

31. Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, p. 108; cf. Calvin, *Institutes* III.14.4; IV.17.1.

as we acknowledge that such growth is marked by ‘repetition and renewal’.³² Moreover, reform can do justice both to the natural in character formation (we have got a certain ‘form’ by nature) and to radical renewal from God’s side (re-form) in which believers actively take part. From a Reformed concept of *semper reformanda*, development of the human subject and growth in the Christian life are acknowledged, but in a moderate sense, namely as a continuous renewal or a renewing in continuity.

Another advantage of the notion of reform—probably this takes us beyond virtue ethics—is that it is more open to the reformation of societal structures than the metaphors of journey (character formation in the community of the church) and dialogue (dialectic of the individual as *simul justus et peccator*). Nolan rightly emphasises that ‘reform’ also designates a commitment to social justice, including a prophetic role full of commitment to challenge and influence current and future social arrangements in a non-utopian and realistic way.³³

Law and Covenant: Teleological and Virtue-Ethical Traces

However, Hauerwas’s main concern in choosing ‘journey’ above ‘dialogue’ is that the moral life requires a *teleological* conception of human existence that ‘gets somewhere’. Without a teleological conception of life it is possible neither to spell out the purpose of the journey to which Christians are called nor to point out how it would shape one’s life concretely.³⁴ Hauerwas refers to MacIntyre’s contention that ‘unless there is a *telos* ... constituting the good of a whole human life ..., it will *both* be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life *and* that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately’.³⁵

Moreover, according to MacIntyre, it is precisely the Reformation that is to be blamed for the gradual breakdown of the teleological view on life in modernity,³⁶ a claim Brad Gregory recently redeveloped in his widely read study *The Unintended Reformation*.³⁷ Due to the Reformers’ insistence on God’s sovereignty, divine commands tended to become arbitrary dictates without rational justification. According to MacIntyre, Calvin does not interpret God’s commandments as designed to bring us to the *telos* to which our own reason points. Since human reason is enslaved by sin, only God and his commandments reveal to us the true end of moral life, asking only for human obedience.

Though this criticism partly presupposes a reading of Calvin that I have criticised in the previous section, the question remains what the status is of teleology and reason in Reformed views on the moral life.

32. Werpehowski, *Karl Barth and Christian Ethics*, p. 33; Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth*, pp. 7–8.

33. Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth*, pp. viii, 8, referring to the Barmen declaration.

34. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, pp. xxx–xxxii.

35. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 203.

36. Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century*, 4th edn (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 121–27; idem, *After Virtue*, pp. 53–54.

37. Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

In response to MacIntyre's criticism, I would argue that it may be correct that Calvin justifies obedience to God's commandments as a matter of pleasing the divine lawgiver, but that this is to be understood as the response of the human subject to what God has already done and to whom He is. The human being obeys God's legislative demands because he has come to know God as just, as the good Creator who wants us to flourish.³⁸ Obedience is embedded in a narrative context, in particular in the covenantal and relational story of God with his people, as is indicated by the prologue of the Decalogue. Thus, covenant is a factor that holds the Calvinistic voluntarist impulse in check. The covenant theme manages 'to surround God's sovereign will with a divine character in which fidelity is a prominent feature'.³⁹ A Reformed theocentric bias is not necessarily in contradiction with what is regarded as the 'good' of the good life.

Furthermore, for Calvin reason and human will are still active in the way human beings respond to God. When Calvin deals with the Decalogue, he proposes that attention be directed to the reason and purpose of each commandment.⁴⁰ This means that for each commandment we should ponder *why* it was given to us and *how* it should be adapted to concrete situations and demands. Karl Barth's interpretation of the law in terms of 'direction' (*Weisung*) points to a similar feature. God's commandments do not dictate exactly how to act, but provide general directions and imply human freedom and reasonability in personal response to God's command and the very situation in which one has responsibility.⁴¹

To be sure, Reformed ethics and practice have also shown an overemphasis on duty, discipline, regulation, moral rules and prohibitions. Therefore, we should distinguish between what Nolan calls a *restrictive* conception of law and an *expansive* conception. Whereas the Westminster Confession, for instance, has a rather limited conception of morality that focuses on actions that are permissible or those that are prohibited, excluding *de facto* an ethics of virtue, the more expansive conception of law—a line followed by both Calvin and Barth—allows for human action that involves choice and reasonableness, and for the promotion of virtue.⁴² Calvin recognises the literary device of *synecdoche*, where the part is used to signify the whole: while the commandments prescribe or forbid particular acts, there are broader implications for their practice. In pointing out these implications, Reformed theologians often return to the virtues. The implication is that the fullness of the divine will cannot be discovered without using our reason in interpreting God's revealed commandments. At the same time, reason is not autonomous but has become part of 'the renewal of our mind', as Paul puts it in Rom. 12:2.

These characteristics oppose the alleged arbitrariness of divine commands and also point to a kind of teleology. Cochran has analysed how faith actually functions as the core virtue in Reformation theology, directing human beings toward the purpose for which God created them: glorifying God.⁴³ The *telos* of the Christian life is the restoration of the

38. Mouw, *The God who Commands*, pp. 28–29.

39. Mouw, *The God who Commands*, p. 100.

40. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.8.8.

41. Cf. Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 44–45.

42. Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth*, pp. 11–36.

43. Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, 'Faith, Love, and Stoic Assent: Reconsidering Virtue in the Reformed Tradition', *Journal of Moral Theology* 3.1 (2014), pp. 199–227, at p. 225.

imago Dei in union with Christ, whose life is set as an example and whose death and resurrection are set as patterns of both mortification and vivification. Defined by this *telos*, not only do the commandments get their proper meaning in the Christian moral life, but also characteristic Calvinistic virtues are articulated such as justice, frugality, temperance, humility, generosity, gratitude, simplicity, purity and neighbour love.

Natural Law and/or Eschatology: Virtues outside the Church

The final and most critical issue to address concerns the centrality of the church in contemporary virtue ethics such as those of Hauerwas. Is a Christian conception of virtue and human *telos* as sketched in the previous sections not too exclusivist, resting on revelation without openness to ‘the natural’ and to those who are ‘outside’ the church?

In contemporary theological virtue ethics a robust Christian conception of virtue is indeed adopted, in which dependency of human on divine agency is affirmed, as we have seen. In such a Christian conception one still feels uneasy about the traditional language of virtue as self-cultivation and self-possession. As Jennifer Herdt sets out, a primary way of dealing with this discomfort is to draw a sharp distinction between one understanding of the virtues (alternately designated pagan, secular or modern) which is subject to the critique of self-cultivation and self-possession, and another, Christian understanding, which is not. In Hauerwas’s and others’ accounts, this distinction is often related to another distinction derived from MacIntyre: virtue ethics as an alternative to and critique of modernity and modern ethics. As Jeffrey Stout has argued, in these accounts there is a slide from the meta-ethical claim that virtue ethics offers a vocabulary that allows Christians to articulate what is distinctive about the Christian life to the moral claim that the virtues are truly sustained only within the church.⁴⁴

Although Hauerwas’s distinction between church and world is not univocal—Hauerwas acknowledges that his radically anti-world stance is not an assumption of the church’s superiority, that non-Christians may manifest God’s peace better than Christians and that Christians do not have the right to determine the boundaries of God’s kingdom⁴⁵—still there is a real temptation to falsely idealise the church and to denounce secular modernity.⁴⁶ I think that Reformed theology can offer us both an alternative theological evaluation of the natural and a more chastened conception of the distinctiveness of the Christian community.

A first locus for an alternative approach can be found in the Calvinistic concepts of *triplex usus legis* and natural law. In its three uses—the *usus politicus*, *usus elenchticus* and *usus didacticus*—the law functions in different ways, but is still one law revealed by God. In the 1960s, the Dutch Reformed ethicist Gerard Rothuizen already argued that according to Calvin the first use of the law (in the *Institutes* labelled as *secundus*) is

44. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 148–49, 154, quoted from Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 346.

45. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, pp. 97, 101.

46. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, pp. 346–47.

relatively independent, but not isolated from the other uses of the law (it is connected with God as the one lawgiver).⁴⁷ Therefore, the recognition of nature has different implications in the *primus usus legis* and the other *usus*. What is ‘virtue’ in the first case is ‘need’ in the second use of the law. In Rothuizen’s formulation, the *usus elenchticus* convinces man of sin (in his being man, man is *peccator*), the *usus didacticus* imposes the requirement of holiness (in his being *peccator* man must be holy), and the *usus politicus* confronts sinner and man (in his being *peccator* man remains man).⁴⁸

Honouring the relatively independent status of the *primus usus* makes it possible for Calvin and other Reformed theologians to recognise in the Decalogue a proclamation of natural law while not separating this notion from the theological meaning of the second use, the *usus elenchticus*: ‘The purpose of natural law ... is to render man inexcusable’.⁴⁹ At the same time, Calvin positively expresses the *primus usus* in terms of natural law. This double evaluation can also be understood from the perspective of the doctrine of the two kingdoms: through natural law even ‘pagans’ form good laws and produce other social goods in the civil kingdom, but are incapable of producing true spiritual good in the realm of the spiritual kingdom.⁵⁰ On the one hand, Calvin acknowledges ‘persons, who, guided by nature, have striven toward virtue throughout life’.⁵¹ There is really a difference between the justice, moderation and equity of Titus and Trajan, and the madness, intemperance and savagery of Caligula or Nero or Domitian.⁵² On the other hand, these general human features do not contradict the *corruptio totalis* of human nature and the need for God’s grace. By his graceful providence God bridles this perversity of nature. Natural human goodness is valued, but not independently of God’s (common) grace.

Surprisingly, a second approach to the challenge of valuing natural human virtuousness can be found in the theology of Barth. To be sure, Barth rejects natural theology, *analogia entis* and habitual grace because it is only God’s revelation to us rather than our natural capacities that offers the basis for ethics, including virtue ethics. Although Barth himself does not develop a virtue-ethical account of the moral life, Werpehowski, Nolan and others have demonstrated how Barth’s theology is more open to virtue and the virtues than many assume.⁵³

As Nolan states, while Barth’s rejection of natural theology would seem to shut the door completely on the acquisition of natural virtue, he in fact offers another possibility. First, Barth takes a radical christological stance that is, however, not exclusivist. In his doctrine of the incarnation Barth affirms that the humanity of Christ is also our humanity, with the effect that not only Jesus’ particular human nature but all human nature is

47. Gerard Th. Rothuizen, *Primus usus legis: Studie over het burgerlijk gebruik van de wet (Primus Usus Legis: Study of the Civil Use of the Law)* (Kanpen: Kok, 1962), pp. 24–29, 58–59.

48. Rothuizen, *Primus usus legis*, p. 23.

49. Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.22.

50. VanDrunen, *Natural Law*, pp. 110–14.

51. Calvin, *Institutes* II.3.3.

52. Calvin, *Institutes* III.14.2.

53. Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits*, pp. 131–33; Werpehowski, *Karl Barth and Christian Ethics*, pp. 49–55; 105–18, 135–50; Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth*, pp. 34–82.

exalted.⁵⁴ Second, the ethical implication of Barth's christological concentration becomes clear from his doctrine on election. The logic of Barth's understanding of the triune God, who from eternity chooses to be God for us, points to universal salvation, 'to a reality in which all humankind is drawn into a relationship with God, where true moral virtue is available to everyone'.⁵⁵ Third, Barth's reflections on the role of the church and of the state reveal that he does not narrowly identify God's revelation with the church and distinguishes between the church as an institution and the church as the body of Christ. God's revelation comes to us in many contexts and communities, including the state. As a consequence, 'natural virtue' too can be explained as a human response to God's command as it reaches the world outside of the church. Nolan rightly concludes that while Hauerwas's view of the church makes natural virtue difficult to explain, Barth's view leaves more space for it.⁵⁶

Conclusion

MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelianism has proven to be very fruitful in developing Christian virtue ethics. Reformed concepts of sanctification as open to moral growth, covenant as a narrative context for human response to divine commands, and union with Christ as defining human teleology and virtuousness provide valuable contributions to the development of such an ethics. On the other hand, Reformed theology offers arguments for overcoming Hauerwas's problematic overemphasis on the distinctiveness of the church's ethic.

First, 'reform' not only enables us to resolve the dilemma between 'journey' and 'dialogue' as images of the Christian life, but may also serve as a correction of a fixation on a particular identification of this life, including a neglect of the implications of sanctification for social justice. How the notion of social reform is related to virtue ethics is a question that calls for further investigation.

Second, Calvin's relatively independent account of the *primus usus legis* and his conceptions of common grace and natural law offer the possibility of a chastened valuation of natural virtues, and Barth's eschatological account of election in Christ that in principle extends to humanity as a whole leaves space for virtue outside the church that God's revelation can reach. The brief exploration of these two strands of Reformed thought demonstrates that this tradition indeed offers viable alternatives to an overstated opposition between Christian virtuousness and natural, modern or secularist virtuousness and to an overemphasis on the distinctiveness of the church's ethic. This opens up the possibility of broader *theological* virtue-ethical explorations in domains such as work, politics, care and environment, without directly and exclusively relating them to a distinctive ethic of the church.

54. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, § 64.2.

55. Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth*, p. 6.

56. Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth*, p. 102; cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2, § 67 and 'The Christian Community and Civil Community', in Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968).