

N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (HarperOne, 2010), 307 pages, ISBN 978-0061 730559, cloth \$16.92. Reviewed by Frederika Oosterhoff.

“What is expected of me now that I have come to believe? How must I live so that my faith becomes evident in my day-to-day life and indeed shapes it?” This sort of question is often asked today, both by new converts and by long-term believers. Discussions on the topic arouse much interest and books dealing with the nature of a radically Christian lifestyle find eager readers. This interest is to be explained not only by personal concerns, although these play a role. In a post-Christian society belief in God is no longer self-evident, a “matter of course.” More perhaps than ever, Christians feel the need to be assured of their faith by its fruits (to use the language of the Heidelberg Catechism). But in addition there are evangelistic reasons. Our postmodern age wants authenticity; it asks for visible, material proof of the gospel’s life-changing nature before it will even begin to consider its possible truth.

Well-known Bible scholar N.T. Wright, Anglican bishop of Durham, is among those who have written about this issue in the past. In the book now under review he does so again, seeking to describe a manner of Christian living that honours God, helps to assure the believer, and seeks to win others for Christ. As the sub-title already suggests, his focus is not primarily on an enumeration of variegated “good works” or on rule-keeping, but on the development of Christian character.

Wright begins by mentioning two related books he recently published, namely *Simply Christian* (2006) and *Surprised by Hope* (2008). Therein, and especially in the second one, he took issue with the idea that our ultimate destiny is simply “going to heaven.” That view he rejected as far too narrow and therefore unbiblical. True, our souls will go up to heaven when we die, but that is not our ultimate destiny. To think so is to forget that according to God’s plan the earth itself will be renewed and heaven and earth united. Because the completion of that plan has been secured by Christ’s death and resurrection, the final destiny of believers is not an everlasting disembodied existence in a non-physical heaven, but a glorious, bodily resurrection in God’s redeemed creation, the new heaven and the new earth. And this final destiny has implications for the way we are to live here on earth.

In the present book Wright pursues the topic further. He tells us that our final destiny is connected to our original vocation. Humans were created in God’s image. As his vice-regents they were to rule, guard, and develop God’s world and to reflect, as in a mirror, the Creator unto the world and the world back unto the Creator. When humanity fell into sin, Christ came to fulfill God’s plan. He now calls his followers to work with him, assuring them that in his power, and by his grace and Spirit, they are being transformed to become what God originally intended them to be. In the author’s own words, “*Christian life in the present, with its responsibilities and particular callings, is to be understood and shaped in relation to the final goal for which we have been made and redeemed. The better we understand that goal, the better we shall understand the path toward it*” (p. ix). In short, Christians must live and act here and now in such a way that their life becomes an *anticipation* of the life to come. The specific question Wright seeks to answer concerns both the “what” and the “how” of such a life, namely its nature and the way we are to learn to live it. I begin with the latter.

## Character formation

In attempting to answer the “how” question, Wright gives much attention, as mentioned, to the need for deliberate *training* in Christian character (or “virtue”). In that training, he points out, we need the ethical guidelines God has given us, such as the Ten Commandments. These teach us, among other things, not to trust in our own wisdom and “listen to our own hearts,” as is so often suggested today, but to rely on God’s guidance. We should, however, also avoid the opposite error of putting our confidence in a legalistic rule-keeping. The commandments serve as essential signposts, but they do not have the power to renew us and so to equip us for our Christian task. What is needed is an internal change, a transformation of character, so that we act in certain ways not because of external pressure, but because of an inward inclination. And for this we need the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Wright has much to say about the necessity of the Spirit’s work in us. He at the same time, however, stresses the need for an *active* human striving, something that the Spirit makes possible. In fact, he believes that the one implies the other. Doesn’t Scripture tell us to keep working out our salvation *because* God works in us to will and to act (Phil. 2:12f.)?

An important part of our involvement in character formation, Wright says, is constant practice, so that the new behaviour becomes more and more “natural.” There is nothing automatic about the process: Character training takes time, practice, patience, and perseverance. He compares it to learning a new language which, especially at first, can be difficult and frustrating, but with sufficient practice it gets easier, and in the end speaking it becomes almost second nature. It’s an apt comparison, for the goal of moral training is to learn the “language” of the world to come. To show the need for and the beneficial effects of persistent practice, Wright uses the example of pilot Chesley Sullenberger III who in January 2009, because of both his thorough professional training and his long-practiced “virtues of courage, restraint, cool judgment, and determination to do the right thing for others,” managed to land his plane, disabled upon its collision with a flock of Canada geese, on the Hudson River, thereby saving the lives of many.

The need for human effort in the pursuit of virtue is not a specifically Christian insight. As Wright reminds us, the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) already taught it, arguing that character is formed by the conscious and ongoing practice of such virtues as courage, justice, prudence, and temperance (the so-called cardinal virtues). Aristotle was a pagan. He was not particularly interested in *Christian* virtues like faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13), and certainly not in those of meekness and humility. Nor did he realize the depth of our depravity and our need of divine grace. There is a profound difference between the Aristotelian teachings on character training and those of the Bible. Yet Aristotle was right in stressing that virtuous behaviour must be deliberately taught and rigorously practiced. Wright therefore regrets that fear of Pelagianism (“work-righteousness”) has caused many Christians – especially in the churches of the Reformation, he believes – to shy away from intentional character education. Working out our salvation (Phil. 2:12) is not, however, a violation of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

## What brain science tells us

The Christian view of character formation encompasses all that was worthwhile in Aristotle’s scheme, but it does not work the other way around, and Wright devotes by far the larger part of

his book to the description of the biblical model. Before he turns to that topic, however, he briefly refers to some findings of modern brain science which suggest that consistent patterns of behaviour result in physical changes in the brain. Should this indeed be so (and Wright reminds us that the research is still in an early stage), it would serve as a scientific confirmation of the habit-forming nature of the moral and other choices we make. According to neuroscientists our brain is wired, metaphorically speaking, and our choices and practices make “electronic pathways.” This is both encouraging and frightening: If positive actions have that effect, then the same must be true for negative ones. In Wright’s words, “. . . *Supposing a decision to cheat on my tax return leaves an electronic pathway in the brain which makes it easier to cheat on other things – or people – as well? Or supposing the decision to restrain my irritation with a boring neighbor on the train. . . leaves a pathway which makes it easier to be patient when someone subsequently behaves in a truly offensive manner?*” (p. 39). To ask these questions, as Aristotle already knew and as biblical wisdom teaches (see for example the Book of Proverbs), is to answer them.

### **The life defined**

Turning to the “what” question, Wright condenses the concept of a truly Christian lifestyle into the word “discipleship,” a following of Christ, which implies a daily dying unto self and a daily training in the virtues of faith, hope, and love. The greatest of these virtues, we read in 1 Corinthians 13, is love, namely the tough, self-giving, Christ-like love that Paul describes in this chapter – a love that is patient, kind, not envious, or boastful, or proud, or rude, or self-seeking. . . and so on. A life guided by such love is cruciform, cross-shaped. It must be so. Nature is not simply to be reformed, it must be put to death in order “*to come to life on the other side*” (p. 239). Therefore, whereas the Aristotelian method led to pride in human achievement, the biblical one cultivates a spirit of humility and self-denial.

This self-denial is constant and eschews all pride. In Wright’s words, “. . . *Christian virtue isn’t about you – your happiness, your fulfillment, your self-realization. It’s about God and God’s kingdom, and your discovery of a genuine humane existence by the paradoxical route – the route God himself took in Jesus Christ! – of giving yourself away, of generous love which constantly refuses to take center stage*” (p. 70). The message that the *crucified* Jesus is the world’s true Lord is to be made known “*precisely through the church’s following in his footsteps*” (1 Pet. 2:21-23 – Wright p. 86). Suffering as an essential part of the Christian life must therefore be actively embraced, as Christ teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount, a teaching that is repeated throughout the New Testament. It is also an element in the development of character. Suffering, Paul writes in Romans 5, produces perseverance, and perseverance character, and character hope.

Wright then turns once again to the “how” question, namely to the means of developing such a character. He makes clear throughout that the Christian life is possible only because Christ accomplished it for us and grants us his Spirit who imparts to us Christ’s benefits. Among the steps to be taken, therefore, are prayer, as well as the study of Scripture (and an *immersing* oneself in the biblical narrative), worship, both individually and corporately, and the active pursuit of holiness. Involved in all this, Wright points out (pp. 148-59), is the *renewal of the mind*, as Paul mentions it in Romans 12:2. Paul is not referring here to a believer’s academic ability (not all believers have that sort of mind), but to the need to think not in a worldly, but in a new, a Christian manner. Such a renewal is necessary to “test and approve what God’s will is” and to

serve as a necessary antidote to the “pattern of this world” – that is, to the world’s practices, assumptions, desires, and ways of thinking. And since Romans 1 defined the *darkening* of the mind as central to the problem of idolatry, dehumanization, and sin, the renewal of the mind is central to the renewal of the entire human being (p. 152).

Much more could be said, but I hope that those interested turn to the book itself. It is richly instructive, balanced, and geared to the common reader. I strongly recommend it, even though I do have a couple of questions. Firstly, I appreciate that Wright stresses the ongoing nature of character training. It is not a matter of a one-time conversion but a life-long process, one that must begin anew every morning. In view of the enormous challenge, it is good to remember that one may count on the help of other believers, for character formation is an individual but certainly also a corporate project. In the communion of saints we must bear each other’s burden and assume mutual responsibility. I believe that this mutuality deserved more emphasis than it got, although it is true that Wright does not ignore it altogether. And secondly, while reading the book I kept wondering if more could not have been said about the various areas in which deliberate character training can and should be practised. The church, of course, has a primary role to play – the Christian life is to be lived in community and must find its strength in worship. But shouldn’t we think also of other agencies, such as the family, and even the Christian school?

As to the latter, I hear that the topic is in fact receiving attention in Reformed educational circles. It was discussed at the latest International Conference for Reformed Education (Lunteren, 2010). My question is if we should not continue the discussion. I realize that before we even begin to make plans for formal education in “virtue ethics,” questions about both theory and practice would have to be answered (such as, in the practical realm, the choice of a proper “methodology”). But if we should decide to discuss the matter, Wright’s book, although it does not address formal character education, could serve as a helpful preliminary guide. I suggest, however, that it be read first of all for its primary goal, which is not tell us how to teach virtue ethics to others, but simply to remind us as believers, both individually and communally, of the way we ourselves should live while on this earth.