

Out of Character! Preaching Biblical Wisdom in a Secular Age

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A suburban mother at a town meeting a few years ago made this comment, “No one today lives by the rules we were raised on. What happened to decency and respect?”¹ Her question epitomizes the current consensus in some quarters that America has run “out of character.” It is a view fueled by the perceived loss of civility in public behavior and compounded by the recent misbehavior of high public officials. Critics of our society say “we have become a nation of individualists, obsessed with our jobs, our bank accounts, our feelings—our selves. We live in anonymous places, jealously protecting our personal privacy...”² At the same time our national psyche is still graced by themes of responsibility toward family and community and concerns about ethics and personal morality. Evidence from sociological surveys and interviews depicts us as a nation that yearns for community, yet distrusts institutions, that yearns for norms of ethical direction, yet prizes diversity.

As we prepare to set foot in a new century and a new millennium, we Americans are craving character, a quality that has everything to do with what the Bible calls wisdom. Theories vary as to what has caused our current character shortage. Most agree it has much to do with a weakening of the parental vocation of wisdom teaching in the home. Some blame its erosion on changing family patterns since the Second World War. Others cite the corrupting influence of television and public officials behaving badly. Some Generation Xers blame their boomer parents for being too preoccupied with pursuing their careers to be home enough to inculcate much character.³

The Atrophied American Character

It is only natural to seek a scapegoat from our short-term memory files to account for our sense that we are “out of character” as we face a new millennium. But in reality, our condition can be charted by the gradual atrophy of the American dream from the ideal of civic virtue of the Puritans and our nation’s founders to the contemporary goal of owning a home in the suburbs. A picture speaks a thousand words. A billboard on the Interstate showing a luxury home in the suburbs sports the caption: “Live the Dream!”

Have we bought the billboard’s version of our American character? If so, we must face the fact that we are better equipped to teach our young the rules of academic and athletic excellence than we are the reasons. We are better equipped to teach them technical competence than we are to teach them the wisdom that is the wellspring of character.⁴

Out of Character! An Immediate Prescription

In the early nineties a group of educators and philosophers met in the mountains of Colorado and produced the Aspen Declaration. It listed “Six Core Elements of Character” that should be inculcated by all “youth-influencing institutions.” They are

trustworthiness (including honesty and loyalty), respect, responsibility, (including self-discipline and hard work), fairness, caring (compassion), and citizenship (including “obeying laws, staying informed and voting”).⁵

A few years later a group of political and civic leaders formed Character Counts!—a nonprofit, nonpartisan consortium of 260 educational organizations whose purpose is to strengthen the American character.⁶

In the meantime, book store shelves are bulging with secular wisdom instruction manuals with titles like *The Book of Virtues*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, *Life's Little Instruction Book*, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, and *Life 101*. Rather than focusing on personality, how to win friends and influence people, much of this literature focuses on character, inculcating the basics of being a decent human being.

The presence of such literature is nothing new or noteworthy. Indeed, these contemporary self-help manuals, do's and don'ts lists, and memoirs have a biblical ancestry. The Book of Proverbs is replete with a genre called wisdom instruction which consists of admonitions (imperative do's and don'ts), and proverbs (indicative sayings that the proverb-user must set in appropriate contexts), as are the teachings of Jesus. Ecclesiastes is an example of the reflection genre, in which a sage takes up various topics as touchstones for wisdom commentary. The genre of autobiographical narrative or memoir has biblical roots as well. What is noteworthy about contemporary wisdom works is not their novelty, but their proliferation and the voracity with which contemporary Americans are devouring them.⁷

Character: Wisdom (Phronesis) Is Its Wellspring

The contemporary search for character draws upon the Greek philosophers' articulation of four classic virtues. They are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Recent moral philosophy has sought to recover positive understandings of these virtues over against their superficial contemporary definitions as what one refrains from doing.⁸

Justice, as the Greeks thought of it, includes fairness, honesty and keeping promises. Fortitude means courage, not just in battle, but in pursuit of justice against all odds. Temperance means far more than not drinking too much. It is the control of the will, the appetites, the temper, and the tongue, thematic to much ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, including the Book of Proverbs.⁹

We think of prudence as caution, but Aristotle understood it as practical wisdom (phronesis) that helps us get clear about why we're doing what we're doing in a given situation and what we ought to be doing instead. It helps us prioritize virtues in specific settings. Phronesis is the master virtue that makes all others possible. According to Aristotle, a chief motivation for living a virtuous life is to benefit the larger society.¹⁰

Biblical Wisdom: A Pulpit Prescription

With all this character-craving going on in our culture, you would think we pastors would preach more often on texts from our biblical wisdom literature. Contemporary Americans crave not just character, but community, with the support, service opportunities, and identity-shaping functions that it provides. With all this community-craving going on, you would think we would preach more often on biblical wisdom texts.¹¹

Biblical wisdom is concentrated in the Book of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and in sayings attributed to Jesus in the gospels. There are also echoes of wisdom in the so-called wisdom psalms, Deuteronomy, and the Song of Songs.¹² Wisdom in biblical literature has three referents. It is a body of teachings, it is a lifelong journey, and its substance is a relationship- between humans and God. Wisdom literature in the Hebrew Scriptures represents a pool of advice offered to the young by those older and wiser on how to be faithful to God in both good fortune and adversity. Its goal was to shape the character of the younger generation for the benefit of the community. Whether in king's court, school, or home, the sages' teachings sought to inculcate habits of self-discipline, moderation, fidelity to the marital relationship, control of the tongue, respect for the poor, and hard work.

Wisdom is more than a body of teachings. It is also a lifelong journey. By eschewing folly and making wise decisions, "the highway of the upright avoids evil" (Proverbs 16:17a). The metaphor of "the way" depicts wisdom as unfolding a smooth, level, well-lit path beneath one's feet (Proverbs 4:11). In biblical terms, the path of folly leads to death. (Proverbs 1:20-3:18). By contrast, the path of wisdom leads to life, understood both as inward peace, but also as outward signs of thriving such as health, longevity, and many offspring.

A key difference between biblical wisdom and the contemporary search for character is that the former views wisdom not as a human accomplishment, but as a gift from God that instigates a lifelong search. The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hokmah* which means order. God has placed a discernible order in nature and human relationships such that wise actions often lead to fortunate outcomes.

Wisdom's relational quality is conveyed in terms of a personal metaphor. She is imaged as an architectural presence at creation (Proverbs 3:19-20; 8:22-36). She is imaged as a wise woman, who invites followers to become members of her just and gracious household (Proverbs 31:10-31). She is also depicted as a prophetess who stands at the intersections of life calling the young onto the path of wisdom. The task of one who would be wise is to acknowledge God as the source of all wisdom ("The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" Proverbs 1:7) and to be alert to the patterns of God's workings in the world. In short, accept the gift, and begin the lifelong search!

Wisdom refers not just to the relationship between individuals and God. That relationship results in a wisdom community united by a common goal. A distinguishing mark of biblical wisdom is its emphasis on community. The goal of wisdom is shalom, the peace and justice of the community (Proverbs 3:17). Since wisdom is a community-based process, a respect for diversity of interpretation is key. Within the Book of Proverbs there are sayings recommending varying stances on viewing the poor (10:4; 14:31), on speaking versus remaining silent (10:10; 15:1), and on how to treat fools (26:4,5). The proverbial genre requires wisdom to place sayings in appropriate contexts.

The communal component of wisdom is largely missing from contemporary wisdom that emphasizes personality and techniques for influencing others and reaching personal goals by avoiding the untidy demands of others. Even in contemporary works that emphasize inward character and the need to contribute to the community, a driving motivation for altruism seems to be a higher level of self-satisfaction.

Character for the Days We Can't Explain

Unlike much contemporary wisdom, biblical wisdom takes account of situations of tragedy and injustice, which overturn its own orderly rules. Even the optimistic book of Proverbs acknowledges that life is unpredictable, that God is inscrutable, and that human knowledge has its limits.¹⁴ This acknowledgment is largely missing from much self-help literature, which preaches that “attitude is everything.” Through the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, biblical wisdom offers us wisdom for the days no one can explain.

Contemporary self-help writings often imply that any kind of prolonged engagement with sorrow over unjust suffering is a weakness that springs from improper thinking. Job’s wisdom is for those times when our sufferings experienced or observed go much deeper than peppy dictums can probe. When depression takes you all the way down, when a professional betrayal robs you of your most cherished goals, when biopsy results reveal that you have no more time left to manage, then biblical wisdom offers the Book of Job.

Job puts us in our place, depicting the limits of our human understanding in confronting unjust suffering. It reveals the mystery of a God who does not justify himself to us, but who promises to abide by us when our level path is rutted with suffering and twisted by tragedy. Job lifts up the possibility of loving this God for God’s sake alone, not for fear of punishment or hope of protection.¹⁵

The author of Ecclesiastes’ brand of faithful resignation mingled with cautious joy is not the substance of a best-selling self-help manual, but there are days when it is exactly what the doctor ordered. The author of Ecclesiastes was a sage trained in the traditional wisdom of Proverbs who found that its optimism could not withstand the cruel realities of life. He reflected on the unpredictability of life, the inevitability of death for wise and well as fool, and the inscrutability of God in the face of the sufferings of the just (4:1).

While he doesn’t call God on the carpet as Job does, he views God as distant and nonresponsive to our desire to discern the why’s of these what’s. At the same time, Qohelet views God as the giver of our portion, that small corner of this big world that belongs to us in all its beauty and joy and in all its sorrow and ugliness. His advice to us is don’t waste time being angry with God, envying someone else, or wishing life were different. Take joy in your portion, however fleeting and fragile it may be.

Biblical wisdom literature also embraces the subversive sayings of Jesus, many of which are proverbial in form. Traditional wisdom most often trains the young in preserving the harmony of the status quo. The wisdom set out in Jesus’ teachings was a subversive wisdom for which he paid dearly at his crucifixion. It was a wisdom which was vindicated by his resurrection.¹⁶ It often began not with “Listen to your elders,” but “You have heard it said, but I say unto you....” He does not advise us to live in a way that avoids sacrificial risks and increases our chances of earning a good living and a good reputation. Nor does he advise us to live in a self-aggrandizing way, categorizing others as either obstacles or rungs in our upward climb. Rather he says things like “Love your enemy,” “Go the second mile,” and “Blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” And then there is his central, paradoxical saying, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, and anyone who loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will find it.” In short, his wisdom teaches a double entendre: live out of character!

Do's and Don'ts of Biblical Wisdom

What follows is an articulation of themes from biblical wisdom expressed in the form of choice of much biblical and contemporary wisdom: admonitions. In some cases, they sound similar to contemporary wisdom themes. Others sound out of character with contemporary wisdom.

Biblical Wisdom's Goal: accept and seek God's gift of Wisdom for your own, but, more importantly, for the community's good:

Exercise impulse-control in food, drink, and speech. Be willing to learn from respected others. (Proverbs)

Ask for directions from the wise ones when you're lost. (Proverbs)

Don't oversimplify life. Respect its painful, mysterious quality. Life is unpredictable. Don't take credit for all your good fortune, or blame for all your misfortune. (Job, Qohelet, Jesus)

Don't oversimplify God. Respect the Creator's mystery and sovereignty. (Job/Qohelet)

In light of the mystery of God and the limitations of human knowledge, respect other people's right to diversity of views. (Proverbs, Job)

Give God the benefit of the doubt. When misfortune strikes, don't assume God is long gone. (Job)

Live in the present, grateful for the joys, however fragile or fleeting, that grace your life. (Jesus, Qohelet)

Be on the lookout for idolatry and oppression. Speak out against any body of advice that perpetuates an unjust status quo. (Jesus; Job; Qohelet)

Love God for God's own sake, not for hope of reward or fear of punishment. (Job)

Out of Character: The Sermon as Wisdom Teaching

In our preaching do we ever send out abstract reassurances to hover over concrete congregational chaos? Do we ever prescribe tidy solutions to messy, ongoing issues? In our pastoral care, does our focus on church growth and marketing to the thirty-somethings relegate our seniors to a list of names to be checked off each time we take them communion? Do our illustrations either ignore or caricature the experience of youth and pre-teens?

Are we uncomfortable claiming the wisdom we have gleaned from our own personal university of adversity and expressing it from the pulpit? Do we preach a therapeutic God and a utilitarian faith that implies that "God exists to comfort us, and faith is a tool for successful living?" Do we condemn the world in sweeping terms without bothering to notice what may be helpful about secular wisdom and going the second mile of setting its Christian context for our listeners? Do we shy away from preaching the Bible's wisdom texts?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then biblical wisdom calls us to step "out of character" in our preaching. It calls us to consider the sermon as wisdom teaching, a vital avenue of guidance and grace in our contemporary setting replete with other options.

Qualities of the Sermon as Wisdom Teaching

Theologically, the sermon as wisdom teaching will affirm that wisdom is a lifelong search that begins as a gift from God. Wisdom is not a self-fueled human

achievement.

Christologically, it will point to Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Sage, Wisdom-in-Person, present in our midst to guide us as we follow the path of wisdom that leads to life.

It will offer strategies for living in the here and now in specific arenas of life.

It will both appropriate and reject aspects of secular wisdom reflection contained in contemporary wisdom genres.

It will offer the wisdom of the preacher's experience and that of other wise ones of the congregation and the culture as a resource.

It will, like the wisdom literature itself, be brimming with stories, proverbs, imagery and metaphors from daily life.

It will incorporate the insights of against-the-grain thinkers and activists of this day and days past.

It will be intergenerational in its sources and its destination. It will put the fresh, often challenging wisdom of youth in conversation with the seasoned wisdom of middle and golden age.

It will be supplemented by opportunities for the congregation to share and cultivate wisdom beyond the worship service through intentional prayer, study, and community involvement.

It will offer ethical guidelines for responsible living, without oversimplifying the complexity of life. It will respect the diversity of faithful reflection in the community of faith. It will respect the wisdom insights of other religions.

It will assure worshipers of God's presence amid their suffering and nurture them in how to respond in healing ways to the sufferings of others.(Job)

It will equip worshipers to take joy in their portion in life while maintaining a sensitive conscience to the unjust suffering of the oppressed. (Qohelet)

We would be surprised if we learned that Howard Stern had enrolled in rabbinical school. We would be surprised if we went to lunch at Martha Stewart's house and she served us canned soup. When people act out of character, it always surprises us. Biblical wisdom calls congregations and us preachers to surprise ourselves by living out of character with our culture—by embarking on a costly lifelong search that begins with the acceptance of a beckoning gift. Wisdom invites preachers, in varying ways, in specific settings, to preach out of character. Standing at all our daily crossroads, she summons us to preach sermons that are God-centered, concrete, this-worldly, counter-cultural, and intergenerational. She prods us to preach sermons sturdy enough to withstand seasons of unspeakable tragedy. Wisdom's sober yet grace-filled warning sounds in the preacher's ears at the portal of a new millennium: "Whoever finds me, finds life... but those who miss me injure themselves" (Proverbs 9:35, 36).

Notes

1 Howard Fineman, "The Virtuecrats," *Newsweek*, 13 June 1994, 31.

2 Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty- First Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 32.

3 William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi, *A Generation Alone: Xers Making a Place in the World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 17-21.

4 Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Random House, 1992). See the section entitled "Making Sense of Our Lives," 43-51. The authors argue that our made-in-America brand of utilitarian individualism forms

the mold in which many middle class American families socialize their young. Middle class youth soon get the message that the primary value in their education is technical competence. The secondary value is the ability to deal effectively with other people.

5 William Bennett, author of *The Book of Virtues*, adds courage and faith to the list. He describes faith in general terms as "reverence." Bennett commends the character-shaping value of morality stories drawn from history and the examples of virtuous people in "Virtuecrats," 33.

6 The organization offers resources including workbooks, videos and multi-day training sessions for use in school systems and community organizations. Their efforts have led to the third week of each October being designated by Congress as "Character Counts" Week ("The Power of Caring," *People Magazine*, 8 June 1998, 70).

7 The proliferation of this type of secular wisdom instruction is an example of what Stephen Covey calls the "popcorn phenomenon," when the increasing heat and pressure of the culture creates a rapidly exploding body of literature to address a pressing concern. He uses this term to refer to the proliferation of time management books and tools over the past several decades. *First Things First* (New York: Simon and Schuster: 1994), 21. Editor and religion commentator Phyllis Tickle Steady points to the steady, dramatic increase in religious booksales beginning in the late 1980's and continuing into the 1990's as evidence of "the religion and theology ferment that is growing in this country." *God-Talk in America* (New York: CrossRoad Publishing Company, 1997), 16.

8 Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts, eds. *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1987), 2. A prominent name in recent moral philosophy is Alasdair MacIntyre, who employs the insight of Aristotle to ground our definitions of the good person and the good life. His book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) was the most widely read American book of moral philosophy of the decade of the 1980's. He and other philosophers have become less concerned with theoretical questions about the foundation of moral rules and language and more focused on the nature and traits of the moral person. Other contributors to this field of reflection are James Q. Wilson, Martha Nussbaum, Charles Taylor and Bernard Williams.

9 Kenneth L. Woodward "What is Virtue?", *Newsweek*, 13 June 1994, 39.

10 Kruschwitz and Roberts, 10.

11 Wuthnow, *Christianity in the 21st Century*, 6-7. The term community has become a buzz word that calls for cautious, well defined use. Studies of people's motivations for affiliating with religious institutions reveal that faith communities provide support in difficult times, opportunities for service, and an identity-shaping sense of belonging.

12 The apocryphal books of The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon are also wisdom books. In addition, scholars have discerned wisdom influences in a number of psalms. Still other scholars have claimed much of the Hebrew Scriptures for the sage (Genesis 1-11), the Joseph story, Deuteronomy, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Jonah, Habakkuk, Esther, and the succession narratives in 2 Sam 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2.

13 Ecclesiastes, Job and Jesus' wisdom challenge this connection between wisdom and outward flourishing.

14 See the so-called "limit proverbs": 16:1,2,9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30-31.

15 Job may well represent the suffering post exilic community. The interchange between Job and his three friends functions as a kind of cautionary tale, instructing us in how *not* to respond to communities and individuals who are suffering.

16 The cross, as Paul points out, by conventional standards appears as folly. Paul baptizes it the "wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:8-31). Early Christian reflection on Jesus' identity viewed him first as emissary of Wisdom, then as Wisdom- in- Person.