

## **The Grammar of Virtue:**

Ethical anxieties and moral formation in the early Reformed tradition

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According to many observers and critics, various ethical ills plague the Reformed moral tradition. Hyper-Augustinian tendencies are said to encourage a deep-seated skepticism about human nature among the more sober Calvinists.<sup>1</sup> Bouts of philosophical voluntarism are said make it difficult for Puritans and Pascalians alike to articulate any consistent moral theory.<sup>2</sup> So also, the Reformed are said to be allergic to virtue, worried that too much attention to human achievement can only lead to damnable hypocrisy. The Calvinist economy of grace is no meritocracy. Or so the story goes.

In her important work, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices*, Jennifer Herdt describes in some detail what she calls the “Reformed obsession with truthfully unearthing the hidden self.”<sup>3</sup> She notes that in many instances, the Reformed tradition’s emphasis on the pervasiveness of human sin has often led, historically, to “restless anxiety over the possibilities of self-deception; signs of election, evidence of sanctification, could always be manifestations of pride, merely acquired and thus false, virtue.” This entails what Herdt calls the Reformed “paralysis of moral agency.”

If these impressions are true, it would seem that any Reformed moral theology could only function as an ethical *via negativa* – that is, as a negation of human moral actions insofar as they all necessarily fall short of the perfection of Christ’s own salvific work.

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<sup>1</sup> As often claimed by Charles Taylor; cf. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 246.

<sup>2</sup> According to Richard Mouw, an “emphasis on the naked will-to-will character of the central divine-human encounter is necessary for seeing clearly how Calvin was distancing himself from the sort of medieval account associated with, for example, Thomism,” *The God Who Commands: A Study in Divine Command Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 97.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 197.

But is this portrayal true? It certainly raises a number of important questions. Does the Reformed tradition lack a basis for talking positively and constructively about ethical formation? What can Reformed Christians say about the nature and extent of the Spirit's work in the cultivation of virtue in human life? And does the very language of virtue risk undermining the role of God's gracious acts by paying too much attention to matters of *human* moral agency?

My contention in this essay is that the Reformed tradition *does* have historical and theological resources to talk about virtue in a constructive way. In what follows, I cannot deliver a comprehensive Reformed theory of moral formation (if such a task were even possible). Nor will I try to reduce the various early Reformed voices into one monotonous, undifferentiated melodic line. My aims in this paper are quite limited. I want to consider a few prominent voices from among the first generation of Reformed theologians – namely, Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), Martin Bucer (1491-1551), and Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562). I hope to demonstrate some specific ways in which they employed what I am (very loosely) calling a theological grammar of virtue and moral formation to articulate what it means to act faithfully in response to, or in concert with, the gracious movements of God's Spirit. In conclusion, I will raise a few questions about the prospects for a recovery of this traditional grammar of virtue within contemporary Reformed theology.

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For the early (and late) Reformed tradition, gratitude was the archetypal human response to divine grace. Humanity naturally finds itself in a state of sin and guilt. The Spirit quickens our hearts and minds to recognize the gifts provided by Christ. This gracious divine action elicits in us an obligation to piety, gratitude, and obedience. On these terms, any human moral action ought to be understood in terms of a response generated by the preceding divine action. Within this theological framework, representatives of the early Reformed tradition commonly discussed the concept of virtue in relation to the doctrines of creation, fall, and redemption.

In the third series of his pastoral sermons, compiled as the *Decades*, the Swiss theologian Heinrich Bullinger wrote extensively about the nature and relationship of sin and virtue. Like many later Reformed theologians, Bullinger first speaks of moral virtue in the context of God's original covenant with humanity in creation.<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, Bullinger argues that this creational covenant was not merited by humanity. Rather, it arises out of the goodness of God's nature.<sup>5</sup> God is the sort of being who desires fellowship with his creatures. That is to say, humanity was graciously created *in order* to be in a particular sort of relationship with God. For Bullinger, this original relationship with God gave rise to certain moral obligations, which he describes as divine *gifts* for humanity's instruction in virtue. Humanity was created with the capacity to "fall away" or to cling to God's good promises. Living in this condition, Bullinger adds, humanity could learn to account virtuous action as praiseworthy and harmful action as sin. But human virtue was dependent on recognition of the goodness that is Godself. Consequently, human persons did not *independently* merit any reward by their right action even in a world before sin. Virtuous or *meritorious*<sup>6</sup> action, if we wish to use that

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<sup>4</sup> Often, this covenant was referred to as a covenant of works, or sometimes a covenant of nature or life (cf. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, q. 20).

<sup>5</sup> "But to be good of necessity is the proper glory of God, and of none but God. And as God is bountiful and liberal, so also is he just: he doth good to men," *Decades* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press 1850 [1549]), 375. Cf. Bullinger in *De Testamento seu foedere Dei unico et aeterno* (1534): "The ineffable mercy and divine grace of the eternal God are proven, first, in that God offers this covenant not in any way because of the merits of humans but rather out of the sheer goodness which is God's nature.... So whatever we are and whatever things have been created for our use and delight, we owe to the divine goodness and mercy. For created all things for the benefit of humans.... Thus he raised up the faithless and fallen Adam immediately and ordered him to be of good hope (Gen. 3)."

<sup>6</sup> Talk of merit of course evokes a long and complicated theological history, which I cannot fully address in the context of this essay. However, some later scholastic distinctions do touch on the subject matter of Reformed approaches to moral virtue. Catholic and Reformed scholastics alike distinguished between *condign* merit (in which the reward is necessitated by, and directly proportional to, the meritorious act) and *congruent* merit (in which the act is not sufficient to generate the reward, and the reward is disproportionate to the act). Both the Catholics and Reformed identified Christ's obedience as condign merit. The Reformed generally rejected the identification of congruent merit with even sanctified human action (as the Catholics allowed), however many Reformed chose instead to identify a third definition of merit *ex pacto* – action recognized as meritorious according to the terms of the covenantal relationship in which the Spirit graciously translates our imperfections into perfect virtue (a version of this concept is already present in Bullinger, *Decades*, III.10). According to the later Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, "all reward from the side of God originates in grace; no merit, either of condignity or of congruity, is possible. True religion, accordingly, cannot be anything other than a covenant: it has its origin in the condescending goodness and grace of God," *Reformed*

term, was only possible and recognizable in light of the covenantal conditions which are themselves the gift of God.

The cultivation of true virtue was possible in this created state since it is in God's nature to be "bountiful and liberal [and] just" to his creatures.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, what Bullinger calls human "fallability"<sup>8</sup> (from the Latin *labilis*) is the virtue- or vice-producing disposition in which we relate to God, and through which God draws us to a greater resemblance of his own goodness. In the created state, Bullinger writes, Adam was "to declare and show thankfulness and obedience to his good God and benefactor; which occasion [God] offered him by the making of the law." This law was constituted by the terms of the relationship between Adam and God and was therefore considered a gift: "God ordained not that law to be a stumbling-block in Adam's way, but rather to be a staff to stay him from falling." Through this means, God provided a way for instruction in virtue, the end of which was perfect "felicity" and life. The command not to eat from the paradisiacal tree was not just a legal prescription, but "a sacrament or sign" of the good provision of God.<sup>9</sup>

All this concerns virtue in the created paradisiacal state. What of the fall? What does Bullinger say about our pursuit of felicity and our desire for the good once sin has irrupted into the world? At first, the prospects for virtue seem quite dim. After the fall, "all our understanding is dull, blunt, gross, and altogether blind in heavenly things." Quoting 1 Cor 2:14, Bullinger writes that the natural human being cannot perceive, cannot sense, and cannot touch "the things of the Spirit of God." We are turned inward on ourselves, overcome by self-love.<sup>10</sup> We have "no power or ability to

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*Dogmatics* Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004 [1899]), 570. Cf. Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (1679-85), 8.3.17.

<sup>7</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, III.10, 375.

<sup>8</sup> From the 1850 Parker Society English translation; the Latin is *labilis*.

<sup>9</sup> The sacramentality of the tree was a common trope among the early Reformed. E.g. John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis*, 3:22-24; Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium of Christian Theology* (1626); John Owen, *The Greater Catechism* (1645), chapter V, q5. Hermann Witsius would reject the idea that the tree of life was a sacrament *simpliciter*, but still held that it signified the "pleasures of divine love with which the happy man was one day to be fully regaled," *Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, I.6.14.

<sup>10</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, III.10, 393.

do any good.” The image of God, which Bullinger says consists in our “participation in God's own wisdom, justice, and goodness,” is “blotted out” in the fall.<sup>11</sup>

If we were to stop here, we would be left with the sort of *negative* moral theology that I described above. We would have a moral theology in which all human virtue turns out to be a mere semblance of virtue, or perhaps even a damnable vice.

But Bullinger does not stop here. He asks: What should we make of those works done by pagans (and Christians, he later adds) “which have a *show* of virtue and goodness”? Based on what we have just said about the human condition, should we say that these “good works” are in fact instances of hypocrisy and sin?

Intriguingly, Bullinger here points to the examples of certain virtuous gentiles who acted “in remembrance before God” even when did not know God fully in truth. Their virtuous actions, he says, were accounted “faithful” even as they acted in only partial knowledge of the good that is Godself. Later – if they came to know God truly – their faith would be “made fully perfect.”<sup>12</sup> For similar reasons, he argues, Christians must not despise pagan virtues because “they *were not altogether done without God.*” God’s grace is at work in pagan virtues in order that the common goods that we enjoy in society and the civil order might be preserved. According to Bullinger, we have every reason to say that these human virtues, common to pagan and Christian alike, are “temporal gifts” of God.<sup>13</sup> The Spirit is present, “preserving and restoring” the world even when human beings, confounded by sin and lack of faith, remain unconscious of its movements.

But what exactly are the movements of the Spirit? That is, in what ways does the Spirit work to reorder human intentions, desires, habits, and modes of relationality?

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<sup>11</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, III.10, 394.

<sup>12</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, III.10, 418.

<sup>13</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, III.10, 419.

On this question, the Strasbourg reformer Martin Bucer affirmed, again, that it is only in the person of Christ that the fullness of virtue is achieved. At the same time, Bucer writes in his commentary on Romans that the spirit of Christ “thinks fit to use our will and zeal” to restore us “to the divine life, by using our strength and all our members, like instruments, for the life of God.”<sup>14</sup> As human persons are conformed to the image of Christ, the Spirit claims not only their intellectual assent but their volition, habits, practices, and social relationships as well.<sup>15</sup>

For Bucer the human person is fundamentally a social being, and this sociality is itself a condition for the formation of virtue. We learn to love God by ascertaining how to love our neighbor rightly. And to do this, we require instruction that is offered through various communal practices – in family life, the church, and the formation of local communities devoted to the mutual pursuit of holiness.<sup>16</sup> In his commentary on the gospels, Bucer writes on the importance of what he calls “external” ministry, that is, the modes of exhortation and moral training that concern “the outward man.” He acknowledges that these external ministries and practices are fallible and sometimes corrupt. They are not always “joined with ... the operation of the Spirit,” he confesses. And yet, these “external” actions, practices, and ministries remain quite necessary. Take them away, Bucer writes, “and you have taken away piety and every bond of virtue.” The grace of God ordinarily comes to us through these very fallible means of exhortation, discipline, and other communal practices.

Bucer’s account of the acquisition of virtue is paralleled, in a more precise and philosophical manner, in the work of his contemporary, the Italian reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli. In his lecture

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<sup>14</sup> From Bucer’s *Metaphrasim et enarrationem in Epistolam ad Romanos*; quoted in W. Peter Stephens, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Martin Bucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 84n2.

<sup>15</sup> “He also shapes and perfects them, using for this purpose the ministry of his word and sacraments through fitting ministers, in public, at home, and in private, and also by vigilant administration of his discipline, not only of penance, but also of ceremonies and of the entire life,” Bucer, *De Regno Christi in Melancthon and Bucer* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969), 225.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, the parish-centered *Christlichen Gemeinschaften* that Bucer sponsored in Strasbourg. Cf. Gottfried Hamann, “Ecclesiological motifs behind the creation of the ‘Christlichen Gemeinschaften’” in *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 129-43.

notes and commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Vermigli offers a qualified endorsement of the Aristotelian account of how virtues are ordinarily acquired.<sup>17</sup> Following Aristotle, he states that, as a general rule, individuals obtain moral virtue through repeated performance. In other words, whatever virtue we hope to have, we obtain by actually practicing it: by doing just acts we come to be just; by acting courageously, we come to acquire the virtue of courage. And so on.

Vermigli continues to point out, like Bucer, that moral virtues arise from social practices of instruction, correction, and imitation of human (and divine) exemplars. Crucially, Vermigli argues, our pursuit of virtue by these means is *not* autonomous of grace. As with Bullinger and Bucer, the cultivation of virtue is a graced activity. Referring to 1 Corinthians 12:11, Vermigli states that the Spirit is the source of the “graces and free gifts” and moral capacities that belong to all people.<sup>18</sup> At creation, God “ornamented” human persons with the appropriate capacity for moral excellence out of his own good nature. Like Bullinger, Vermigli argues that even after the fall, we can say that human persons are “suited to and capable of” pursuing *certain types* of virtues.

At this point, two critical distinctions must be made. First, Vermigli distinguishes between *moral* virtues – such as justice and fortitude – that are theoretically attainable by habituation and instruction in the course of any human life, and what he calls *charistic* virtues – such as faith, hope and charity – that God “infuses” into individuals often without prior performance.<sup>19</sup> Second, Vermigli clarifies that among the moral species, virtues may be either acquired *or* infused into the human being. That is, Vermigli wants to grant Aristotle’s general rule about acquired virtue: “By

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Emidio Campi and Joseph McLelland (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, 2006), 296.

<sup>18</sup> Vermigli, *Loci Communes* III.1.39. See Mark Beach, “The Idea of a General Grace of God,” in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 97-110.

<sup>19</sup> Vermigli, *Commentary*, 296-7. Vermigli proposed an analogous distinction for human *communio* in Christ. First, all persons enjoy communion with Christ as human creatures, since Christ shares our flesh and blood “by the benefit of his incarnation.” However, this aspect of *communio* is still incomplete. In the second form of *communio* the spiritually regenerate are incited to faith, to reconciliation with God, and are prepared by the Spirit to enjoy immortality (*immortalitatis capacia fiunt*); from a March 8, 1555 letter to Calvin, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera* 15, 492-7.

doing just things, we are made just.” But in addition to this maxim, Vermigli also emphasizes the prodigality of the Spirit in distributing the virtues among various communities and individuals. After all, God “is the primary and most powerful cause of all the virtues,” so we should not let our expectations set up limitations on where virtuous persons might be found. Vermigli quotes St. Paul: “What have you, that you did not receive? If then you receive it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” God always has good reasons for offering gifts, and those reasons may not be what we expected based on our imperfect perception of the good. Vermigli points to the example of the early Christian martyrs: In light of Christian theological commitments, Vermigli says that we rightly ascribe the virtue of courage to those persons who willingly faced death in the coliseum. But let’s suppose there was a particular martyr who had previously led a retiring or even cowardly life. When faced with the prospect of martyrdom, she prayed to God for help, and God graciously granted to her the virtue of courage so that she could stare down death victoriously.

Reflecting on Vermigli’s example, we can see that the divine gift of courage to the martyr manifests the terms of God’s relationship with her. God’s gift, offered through the ministrations of the Spirit, is in some sense the *fulfillment* or *satisfaction* of the terms of the relationship, since God responds to the martyr’s prayer by granting the fortitude necessary to bring the martyr’s final faithful act to its intended end.

Note that both divine and human agency are operative in this instance. Further, both the divine and human agents exhibit the attribute of faithfulness: the martyr, by recognizing her need for extraordinary divine grace, and God, by empowering the martyr to overcome fear and death in her final faithful act. Filled with the Spirit, the martyr’s virtuous action is directed toward, and participates in, the perfection of the faithful love and hope that is displayed in the relationship between God and God’s loved ones.

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In summary, the three representative figures I engaged above were keen to avoid the temptation to fall into a concept of virtue and human agency that operates independently of divine grace. Grace must condition our every response; gratitude ought to govern our every action toward God and fellow human beings. On the other side, Bullinger, Bucer, and Vermigli – each in their own way – emphasize that the grace of God shows up in very concrete places, practices, and personal relations. This indicates that the gift of divine grace does not simply work on *passive* human agents, but *active* ones. That is, God’s grace works to reorder human desires, habits, and acts of will so that individuals might recognize and participate in the good that is Godself.

In turning back to first generation Reformed theologians, I have tried to show how the early tradition held a (perhaps surprisingly) positive view of the prospects for moral formation. In them, we see that the tradition does have resources to overcome what Jennifer Herdt called the paralysis of the Reformed view of moral agency. Following Bullinger, we might talk of pagan virtue in relation to the Spirit’s work in sustaining God’s creation. Following Bucer, we might talk about how the Spirit transforms not only our intellectual assent but our social practices. Following Vermigli, we might want to adopt a non-competitive account of divine and human agency, or his distinction among the various species of virtue.

But the question then stands: If we adopt these traditional views of virtue and moral formation in a contemporary setting, will they always be put to good use? Or could they also have the effect of glossing over the sober realities of human sin and self-deception?

As I see it, the recovery of a more traditional grammar of virtue does not necessarily require us to abandon the characteristically Calvinist suspicion of human sin. The emphasis on human imperfection, on the wayward intentions and weakness of the will, is inimical to the concept of virtue *only* if that virtue is thought to be *autonomous* of divine grace, grounded in self-love and alienated from the covenant that God shares with his creation. Yet, if one believes – much like

Bullinger and Vermigli – that human beings are never completely alienated from the gifts of God, and that the Spirit works to reorder even the most imperfect desires and habits, then one has grounds to reject this notion of autonomous human virtue. Instead, one may have reason to recover something like Bullinger’s account of graced pagan virtue, or Vermigli’s distinction between moral and charistic virtues. Both recognize the fragility of the fallen human condition. Both accounts concede that the pervasiveness of human sin, hypocrisy, and the lust for domination ought to drive us to confession and repentance. But this confession bears fruit – that is, in Pauline terms, the fruit of the Spirit.

Even John Calvin, in his commentary on Psalm 119, wrote that it is precisely in these moments of difficulty and despair that God characteristically entreats us “not to sink into a careless and languid state like soldiers who have been discharged, but seek to be constantly directed by the spirit of prudence, and sustained by the spirit of virtue.”<sup>20</sup> In short, the impediments of sin and human inconstancy need not cause despair, precisely because virtue is often formed not in times of peace, but in times of active and sustained struggle.

A theological project that hopes to recover something of the grammar of virtue for the contemporary Reformed tradition will eventually have to address matters that fall outside the scope of my present essay. Some of these matters (just to name a few) include philosophical questions about intentionality and the weakness of the will, the traditional Reformed distinction between the covenants of creation and redemption, as well as the finer points of difference between acquired moral virtues and infused theological virtues. At present, all I want to suggest is that these sorts of questions indicate that there is still some life left in the old bones of Reformed moral theology. The

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<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 119:10.

examples of Bullinger, Bucer, and Vermigli only scratch the surface, as recent scholarship on the early modern Reformed tradition has begun to uncover.<sup>21</sup>

I hope to have shown how the parameters of a Reformed account of moral formation are more expansive than many would have expected, including a notion of graced human virtue that participates in the perfect good that is Godself. Of course, the Reformed theologian will be keen to insist, on this side of the eschaton, that human virtue will never achieve the perfection that is possessed in Christ. This should rightly humble all human pretensions and animate healthy practices of self-reflective and social criticism. Yet the theological commitments of Bullinger, Bucer, and Vermigli also provide grounds to hope that the God who began a good work in his loved ones will be faithful to bring it to completion. A Reformed ethic re-fashioned in the mold of these early exemplars would, without forgetting our own finitude and fallenness, have the faith to ask, like the rich young ruler in the gospels, “What do I lack?” and to hear the answer, “If you will be perfect, go...”

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<sup>21</sup> See Luca Baschera’s recent survey in “Ethics in Reformed Orthodoxy,” in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 519-52. Cf. Donald Sinnema’s earlier survey, “The Discipline of Ethics in Early Reformed Orthodoxy,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 10-44.