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The Westminster Standards and the possibility of a Reformed virtue ethic

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Abstract

The renaissance of virtue ethics in Christian moral discourse has led a handful of Reformed theologians to consider whether or not the Reformed tradition is compatible with classical and medieval concepts of virtue. Barthians, in particular, express doubt regarding the prospect of such a retrieval, arguing that classical notions of virtue compromise the Reformed hallmark of divine sovereignty and Luther's dictum *simul justus et peccator*. This essay counters that the Reformed tradition is broad enough to find more productive ways to engage virtue ethics. In particular, the Westminster Standards provide *both* the formal space for a significant theological exploration of human agency *and* the material content for the development of something like a classical virtue ethic. Barthian concerns regarding divine sovereignty and moral progress are satisfied by a demonstration that Westminster's attention to human agency is always within the context of a greater emphasis on divine agency.

Keywords: Barth, Reformed theology, theological ethics, virtue, Westminster Standards

Introduction

Kirk Nolan's recently published *Reformed Virtue After Barth* makes the provocative suggestion that it is possible to construct a Reformed virtue ethic; that is, so long as one heeds Karl Barth's concerns regarding the *analogia entis* and habitual grace, and follows Barth's insistence on the covenantal context of all human action as determined by the Chalcedonian pattern.[1] A Reformed virtue ethic in this vein will attend to Luther's famous dictum *simul justus et peccator*, preferring the language of 'repetition and renewal' or 'again and again' to the more common 'more and more' language we find in Catholic and Arminian accounts of moral progress. Yet, it is precisely this point that I worry undermines Nolan's case that his is a 'Reformed virtue ethic'. To the extent that he is concerned to meet objections originating in the more Lutheran strains of Barth's thinking, I wonder if Nolan achieves a truly

[1] Kirk J. Nolan, *Reformed Virtue After Barth: Developing Moral Virtue Ethics in the Reformed Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), pp. 37–61.

Reformed virtue ethic. What is more, to the extent that he moves the goal posts from 'more and more' concepts of sanctification to the 'again and again' language of Luther's *simul*, some virtue ethicists might also protest that Nolan has not truly achieved a Reformed *virtue* ethic.[2]

One curious feature of Nolan's argument is a preliminary chapter on virtue in the Reformed tradition. Brief treatments of John Calvin, the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and Jonathan Edwards lead Nolan to conclude that, although each has promising resources for a conversation on Reformed virtue, this side of Barth they are all left wanting. While Nolan's is a valuable contribution to a conversation about whether or not virtue ethics are compatible with Barthian theology, it does not seem so obvious that one need construct a Barthian virtue ethic in order to accomplish a Reformed virtue ethic. Indeed, Nolan has not given Westminster a fair hearing. To that end, I will suggest in this essay that the Anglo-American Reformed tradition already has the resources to construct such an ethic. Specifically, I will argue that the Westminster Standards have both the formal space and the material content to develop a contemporary Reformed virtue ethic.

In section II, I will demonstrate that the Westminster Standards formally open up space and provide the material content for the development of virtue. Then, in section III, I will construct a picture of what a Reformed virtue ethic might look like in Westminster by attending to the manner in which the Decalogue in the Larger Catechism (LC) serves as a training manual for Christians to develop the infused virtue of charity. Finally, I will turn in section IV to common Barthian objections to Westminster in order to determine whether or not we have achieved an account of virtue that is truly Reformed. Before I do all of that, however, it is necessary in section I to qualify my use of the term 'virtue ethic'.

I

In contemporary philosophical discussions, there are three basic approaches to normative ethics: (1) deontological ethics, emphasising duties, obligations and roles, (2) consequentialist ethics, emphasising the consequences or outcomes of actions and (3) virtue ethics. Drawing on the Aristotelian tradition, virtue ethics emphasises that *arête* (virtue) is acquired through *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and has *eudaimonia* (happiness) as its goal. A virtue is a disposition that a person acquires through habituation such that

[2] These concerns are first expressed in David B. Hunsicker, 'Review of *Reformed Virtue After Barth: Developing Moral Virtue Ethics in the Reformed Tradition*, by Kirk J. Nolan', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 10/1 (2016), pp. 97–9.

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her character is formed in a particular way: 'To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person.'[3]

Thomas Aquinas is particularly important in Christian accounts of virtue. Aquinas, following Augustine, recasts virtue as a habit 'which God works in us, without us'.[4] To the Aristotelian account of virtue, Aquinas adds the notion that some moral virtues are infused by God, directing the person beyond *eudaimonia* toward perfect happiness, the beatific vision. These infused moral virtues occur as God infuses the theological virtue of charity. In this regard, charity 'directs the acts of all other virtues to the last end [the beatific vision], and … gives the form to all other acts of virtue'.[5] According to Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, herein lies the difference between Aristotelian and Christian virtue; Greek virtue has no concept of charity. Christian virtue, in contrast, is entirely dependent upon charity because it is a loving response to the God 'who is boundless love' and produces love in us.[6]

Virtue ethics fell out of favor philosophically with the Enlightenment but returned in the twentieth century in the works of Anglo-American philosophers like Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach and Alisdair MacIntyre. Stanley Hauerwas has played a prominent role in reintroducing virtue to Protestant theological discussions. Particularly, Hauerwas critiques divine command ethics (which he characterises as deontological) for failing to account for growth in the Christian life. Virtue ethics, according to Hauerwas, provides the means to account for character formation over time.[7] Because Hauerwas plays such a prominent role in the retrieval of Christian notions of virtue – and because Nolan claims that Hauerwas' work 'marked a tidal change in Protestant thinking on moral virtue' – I will focus specifically on Hauerwas' theological ethics from this point forward.[8]

Central to Hauerwas' ethics are the related themes of narrative, virtue and casuistry. The development of virtue necessarily requires a truthful narrative

[3] Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Virtue Ethics', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2013 edn, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ethics-virtue/; accessed Aug. 2017.

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3 vols, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), 1/2.55.4.

[5] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2/2.23.8.

[6] 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), p. 68.

[7] Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994 [1975]), pp. 1–10.

[8] Nolan, *Reformed Virtue After Barth*, p. 1.

in order to make intelligible which virtues are to be habituated and why. At the same time, casuistry provides the means by which lives of virtue and the narratives that sustain them are 'challenged and renewed'.[9] In this regard, Hauerwas redefines casuistry. Typically, casuistry is described as a form of normative ethics whereby general rules are applied on a case-by-case basis.[10] This 'ethic of doing', as Stanley Grenz calls it, tends to focus on boundary situations and ethical quandaries in order to clarify what a normative ethical response might be to a given situation.[11] This is precisely the sort of thing that Hauerwas rejects. Instead, for Hauerwas, casuistry 'is the process by which a tradition tests whether its practices are consistent … or inconsistent in the light of its basic habits and convictions or whether these convictions require new practices and behavior'.[12] In other words, casuistry is always contextualised within a community whose identity is determined by a particular narrative about reality. Casuistry out of context degrades into legalism.

Hauerwas is a Methodist by upbringing, and Wesleyan notions of sanctification and holiness play a role in his retrieval of virtue ethics. In the forty-plus years since Hauerwas first published his dissertation, the overall landscape of Christian ethics has shifted dramatically in favour of virtue ethics. Reformed theologians and ethicists, however, have been somewhat hesitant to join the fray.

Consider, for example, Richard Mouw's study of command ethics, *The God Who Commands*.[13] Therein, Mouw evaluates the challenge Hauerwas' ethics present to a Reformed command ethic. While Hauerwas rightly critiques command ethics for devolving into situation ethics, virtue ethics remains little more than a corrective for Mouw. This is because virtue ethics have a 'specter of Labadism'. Labadism, according to Mouw, is a divergent stream of Dutch Calvinism that has an Anabaptist-like tendency to overdetermine the righteousness of the believing community and the sinfulness of the unbelieving world. In contrast, Mouw argues that Reformed theology's twofold emphasis on the sinfulness of humanity and the sovereignty of divine grace means that the unbelieving world is not so different to the believing church

[9] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 119.

[10] Brad W. Hooker, 'Casuistry', in Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), pp. 121–2.

[11] Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 27.

[12] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 120.

[13] Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands: A Study in Divine Command Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

when it comes to sin.[14] For Mouw, then, the reason that virtue ethics can never be more than an aspect of command ethics is because to give it centre stage would mean to risk human action overtaking divine grace.

For Mouw, as for Nolan, virtue ethics must be modified in order to fit within an overall theological description of the ethical event that always prioritises divine action and relativises character formation. Failure to do so means to give human agency more determinacy than the Reformed tradition can bear. The name that is often given to this fear is Pelagianism, or salvation by works.

In this regard, Hauerwas' virtue ethics appear to many Reformed theologians to be representative of an Arminian view of sanctification. I want to suggest, however, that this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, I will argue that the Reformed tradition has within its own confessional standards a strong basis for the development of a Reformed virtue ethic. I will focus particularly on the Westminster Standards as the foundation for such an ethic.

II

Nolan and Mouw both insist that a Reformed treatment of virtue ethics must prioritise divine sovereignty. In this section, I will attend to the *ordo salutis* in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) in order to demonstrate that at least this iteration of Reformed theology can both account for concerns about divine sovereignty and accommodate virtue ethics. In this section, I will identify two particular features about the form of the Westminster *ordo* that open up space for discussions of human agency. Then, I will introduce one important way in which the Westminster Standards provide the material content necessary for a Reformed Virtue Ethic.

The *ordo salutis* first appears in the WCF in the third article on God's Eternal Decree:

> As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ; are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.[15]

[14] Ibid., p. 145.

[15] The Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter WCF), art. 3.6, in Philip Schaff (ed.), *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds with Translations*, vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, 6th edn, rev. David S. Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996).

The order of salvation, then, is (1) God's election and redemption, followed by (2) effectual calling, (3) justification, (4) adoption, (5) sanctification, (6) faith and (7) salvation. The pattern is repeated in a truncated form in the eighth article, on Christ the Mediator. There, the confession speaks of Christ as the one who (1) redeems, (2) calls, (3) justifies, (5) sanctifies and (7) glorifies.[16] Finally, this basic pattern is repeated and expanded in the arrangement and treatment of articles 10–18, which unfold as follows: (2) effectual calling, (3) justification, (4) adoption, (5) sanctification, (6) saving faith, (6a) repentance unto life, (6b) good works, (6c) perseverance of the saints and (7) assurance of salvation.

Notice in this expanded version the addition of saving faith, repentance and good works (6a–6c). The addition of these elements to the *ordo* is significant. According to Andrew McGowan, 'in the *ordo salutis* the various doctrines were divided into two groups: those which described the sinner's relationship to God and those which described the renovation and renewal of the human condition'.[17] On this account, those things which pertain to one's standing before God are effectual calling, justification, adoption and sanctification (2–5), while those things which pertain to renewal are saving faith, repentance, good works, perseverance and assurance (6–7). Thus, the addition of articles on saving faith, repentance and good works (6a–6c) increases the amount of space given to the exploration of the second group: those things that pertain to growth in the Christian life.

These additions represent a new development in the confessional history of the English church. Compare Westminster with its predecessors, the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Irish Articles of Religion. In the Thirty-Nine Articles (1571), the *ordo salutis* is addressed in the article on predestination, unfolding as follows: the predestined are called by the Spirit, obey their calling through grace, are justified, adopted, made like the image of Jesus Christ, walk religiously in good works and eventually attain everlasting felicity.[18] Both the order and the wording of the Thirty-Nine Articles are repeated almost verbatim in the Irish Articles (1615).[19] The twofold description of God calling and humans responding with obedience is synonymous with what Westminster calls effectual calling.[20] Effectual calling

[16] WCF, 8.1.

[17] A. T. B. McGowan, 'Justification and the *Ordo Salutis*', in Bruce L. McCormack (ed.), *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), p. 149.

[18] 'The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England', art. 17, in *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*.

[19] 'The Irish Articles of Religion', art. 15, in *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*.

[20] WCF, 10.1–2.

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is followed in all three statements by justification and adoption. Then, the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Irish Articles allude to Romans 8:29, inserting conformity to the image of Christ after adoption before finishing with walking religiously in good works and everlasting felicity. In contrast, the Westminster divines specifically insert sanctification as the last of those works that belong to the first group and subsequently expand the second group to include articles on saving faith, repentance, good works, perseverance and assurance of salvation.

Consider, first, those things which McGowan groups together under the theme of relationship with God. For Westminster, first the elect are *effectually called* by God to grace and salvation. This involves a renewing work of the Holy Spirit such that they are both drawn to Christ and yet come freely. God calls, and the elect respond as enabled by the Holy Spirit.[21] Second, the called are also *justified* through the imputation of Christ's righteousness, which occurs as an act of divine grace when the Holy Spirit subjectively applies Christ's objective righteousness to them.[22] Third, the justified become God's *adopted* children, enjoying all of the 'liberties and privileges of the children of God' in the present and the forthcoming inheritance of eternal salvation.[23] Thus far, a sequence has developed: the effectually called are justified, and the justified are adopted. This is a logical sequence, not necessarily a chronological one.

The next article on sanctification goes back to the beginning of the sequence and ties it all together: 'They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them [effectual calling], are farther sanctified really and personally [sanctification], through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection [justification], by his word and Spirit dwelling in them.'[24] Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian, gradually decreasing the power of sin and death while simultaneously increasing holiness by grace. Such holiness is always imperfect and qualified by human sinfulness; yet, it is a true holiness that grows through practice strengthened by grace.[25]

Two important points must be made. First, the divines are careful to insist that sanctification occurs as a result of justification (i.e. 'Through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection').[26] Here the divines perhaps have in mind certain neo-nomian interlocutors (Catholic, Arminian and Socinian), who

[21] WCF, 10.1–2.
[22] WCF, 11.1–4.
[23] WCF, 12.1.
[24] WCF, 13.1.
[25] WCF, 13.1–3.
[26] WCF, 13.1.

failed to properly distinguish justification and sanctification in a manner that threatened Pelagianism.[27] Second, however, the confession describes sanctification in a manner that does indeed include growth and development in holiness as a practice that is strengthened by grace. Here, the divines are hedging against the antinomian tendency to collapse sanctification into justification.[28] Thus, the article on sanctification summarises the first grouping of the *ordo* as the work of God in the human, calling, renewing, justifying, adopting and empowering growth in holiness. Even as the confession summarises what God has done for his children, it hastens towards the manner in which these actions are experienced from the human point of view.

Consider now those things that belong to the second grouping: saving faith, repentance unto life, good works, perseverance and assurance of salvation. *Saving faith* is an act of the Holy Spirit, which engenders the principal human acts of 'accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life'.[29] Faith as a human act of response to God waxes and wanes, but it is assured by Christ, 'who is both the author and finisher of our faith'.[30]

Repentance, not unlike faith, is a human action enabled by God's grace. In repentance, the sinner becomes aware of both the problematic nature of her sin and Christ's mercy offered to sinners, and subsequently, she turns away from sin and to God with the intent to walk in obedience to God's commandments. Repentance is not a once-and-for-all human action, but an action that requires constant repetition.[31]

Good works follows repentance and is yet another work of the Spirit: 'besides the graces [believers] have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit to work in them to will and to do'. At the same time, however, believers ought not to wait for the Holy Spirit to lead them to good works. Instead, they are charged, 'to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them'.[32] All of this is qualified, of

[27] J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), p. 244.

[28] Among those antinomians the divines might particularly have in mind are: (1) Anabaptists like Thomas Muntzer and Hans Denk; (2) the Family of Love group, based on the teachings of Henry Nichols; and (3) the English antinomians, John Eaton, John Saltmarsh, William Dell and Tobias Crisp. See Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards*, pp. 240–4.

[29] WCF, 14.2.

[30] WCF, 14.3.

[31] WCF, 15.1–5.

[32] WCF, 16.3.

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course, by the reminder that good work is always plagued by sin and never accomplishes salvation.[33] In fact, salvation is entirely dependent upon God's eternal decree and is accomplished by the triune God.

Perseverance of the saints is the promise that the works of the triune God do not fail to accomplish their purpose. The Father's election, the Son's intercession and the Holy Spirit's dwelling in our midst, together ensure that those whom God has called will persevere to eternal salvation, regardless of the ways in which they may fall short of holiness in this world.[34]

Finally, *assurance of salvation* – or, certainty of current state of grace and future glorification – can be obtained by true believers as they are 'enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given … of God'.[35] Such assurance, once received, is infallible; however, it may come after a long and arduous struggle.

The tenor of perseverance and assurance is that Christians might take comfort in their election, with the firm knowledge that they will persevere unto salvation in spite of any number of temporal setbacks and afflictions. But we must not let this strongly predestinarian ending overshadow what occurs just prior with regards to good works. The confession is adamant that good works are the result of grace; however, grace appears at this point in the confession in two different forms. In the first form, the confession speaks of a grace that has already been received by the Christian, and can be stirred up in the believer through her own initiative. In the second form, the confession speaks of a grace that comes anew through the Holy Spirit to empower the Christian towards good works. Both are God-initiated, and neither are efficacious for salvation. Nevertheless, the first form of grace sounds like an infused habit of grace. Indeed, that this is exactly what it is.

J. V. Fesko's recent study of the Westminster Assembly is instructive here. According to Fesko, William Pemble and George Downame forced the question when Pemble argued that sanctification preceded justification in that a universal habit of grace, which includes sanctifying grace, is infused in the believer through effectual calling. Downame countered that Pemble confused effectual calling (or vocation) with sanctification (or regeneration). Into the fray stepped Edward Leigh, who suggested that sanctification might be thought of in two complementary ways. First, sanctification can be construed as the work of the Holy Spirit infusing a habit of holiness in the believer at effectual calling. Second, sanctification can be construed as the human pursuit of holiness subsequent to justification. After

[33] WCF, 16.4–5.
[34] WCF, 17.2.
[35] WCF, 18.3.

a thorough study of the debate, Fesko argues that although the divines never use the term 'infused habit' they clearly have something like this in mind, provided that we remember that a Reformed definition of habit must mean something like a gift from God that cannot be naturally achieved through training.[36]

McGowan's suggestion that the different steps of the *ordo salutis* can be divided into two discrete themes (standing before God and moral progress) helpfully demonstrates that the Westminster marks a distinct shift in the Reformed confessional tradition towards the explication of human agency and the human experience of salvation. To that end, I have suggested that not only does the Westminster have the formal space to develop a Reformed virtue ethic but it also provides the material content for such a move. Let me make that argument more explicit now with three concluding observations. The first two observations relate to the formal space that Westminster creates for accounts of human agency while the final relates to the material content that Westminster might contribute toward a Reformed virtue ethic.

First, notice those things that pertain to human agency include saving faith, repentance and good works. The inclusion of good works in the *ordo* is not unprecedented in the Reformed tradition. We see this, for instance, in the sixteenth-century Reformer Zacharias Ursinus;[37] or, again, in Reformed confessions that precede Westminster, particularly the Scots Confession, the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Irish Articles.[38] What is unique, however, about Westminster is the treatment of faith *after* sanctification. Previously, the Irish Articles specifically associated faith with justification and works with sanctification.[39] I suspect the divines had the Scots Confession in mind here. The latter introduces faith in its article on the Holy Spirit, emphasising that faith is a work of the Spirit. The WCF suggests something similar, speaking of sanctification as a work of the Spirit that enables 'the principal acts of … accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ'.[40] In this regard, Westminster's inclusion of faith in the second part of the *ordo* feels like a deliberate move towards emphasising a real convergence of divine and human action.

Second, consider the placement of the *ordo salutis* in the overall confession. It is bookended on the one end by articles on Christ the Mediator and Free

[36] Fesko, *Theology of the Westminster Standards*, pp. 257–60.

[37] Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), pp. 189–90.

[38] 'The Scots Confession', arts 13–14, in *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*; 'The Thirty-Nine Articles', art. 17; 'The Irish Articles', art. 15.

[39] 'The Irish Articles', art. 34–45.

[40] WCF, 14.2.

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Will, and on the other end by articles on the Law of God and Christian Liberty. The former suggests that Christ accomplishes the whole work of salvation while the latter suggests that the sanctified Christian is liberated to pursue obedience to the law in its third use. Thus, the *ordo* effects a transition in the WCF from a discussion of Christ's action to a discussion of the action of the regenerate believer, who is freed *from* the law of condemnation and freed *for* Christian liberty. Genuinely free human action results from God's saving action.

In this sense, clearly the WCF formally creates space for a theological exploration of human agency. This space is located within the *ordo*'s second grouping, on renewal in the Christian life, and therefore is bracketed off from the question of justification. This means that human agency is formally delineated from God's objective saving action and formally connected to the renewing action of the Holy Spirit. This also means that sanctification includes genuine human action alongside divine action.

Third, the WCF's articles on sanctification and good works provide the material content to develop a Reformed account of virtue. While sanctification is clearly a work of the Spirit, that work is one that decreases the power of sin and death 'more and more' and simultaneously increases growth in saving grace 'more and more'. Such growth in holiness occurs through practice strengthened by grace.[41] Practising holiness is possible because of God's grace in two forms: an infused habit of grace and a new gracious work of the Spirit.[42] In this sense, the WCF presses the point that a Reformed understanding of sanctification permits growth in holiness. The gradualist language of 'more and more' combined with the assertion that growth in grace can occur through practice suggests that Westminster has some concept of human participation in sanctification, so long as sanctification is always subsequent to justification and initiated by God's grace. Further, the very use of 'more and more' language and the appeal to infused grace means that Westminster uses language and concepts that are native to traditional accounts of virtue. Both of these conclusions mean that the WCF seems not only compatible with virtue ethics but that it actually provides the necessary material for the development of a Reformed account of virtue.

III

The next step in the argument is to demonstrate what a Westminster-influenced virtue ethic might look like. Remember that according to

[41] WCF 13.1–3.
[42] WCF, 16.3.

Hauerwas the main ingredients for a Christian virtue ethic are: (1) an infused habit of grace, typically the theological virtue of charity; (2) a determinative narrative that gives charity meaning and context; and (3) a set of practices that function casuistically as the means by which virtues and the narratives that sustain them are habituated in the life of the Christian, and therefore, demonstrably true. I contend that the Westminster Standards provide all of these ingredients.

First, the WCF appeals to charity in two places: the articles on justification and the law of God. When speaking of justification, the divines insist that, 'Faith … [is] not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love'.[43] Here, 'other saving graces' means especially good works, among other things. The divines cite James 2:17 in their annotation, implying the accompaniment of faith by works. Furthermore, this faith accompanied by works obtains in the life of a Christian through charity.

A specific instance of such work is obedience to the law. The article on the law of God comes right after the *ordo salutis*, suggesting the divines have in mind here the third use of the law. The WCF primarily associates the moral law with the Decalogue, which is 'written in two tables; the first four commandments containing our duty towards God, and the other six our duty to man'.[44] The use of the word 'duty' here risks obscuring the divines' intent. The matter is clarified both in the scriptural notation and in the corresponding questions in the Larger Catechism (LC). Note particularly, the answer to the question for the second table: 'The sum of the six commandments which contain our duty to man, is, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to do to others what we would have them do to us.'[45] Thus, by duty the divines mean practising neighbour-love, or charity, as obedience to the second table of the law.

If charity in the WCF is predominantly associated with the second table of the Decalogue, then the second ingredient – narrative – supplies itself readily. The presentation of the Decalogue is always prefaced by the summary, 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery' (Exod 20:2).[46] In this way, it includes its own narrative about the God who makes a covenant with Israel. For the Westminster divines, this is the covenant of grace, which is primarily

[43] WCF, 11.2.
[44] WCF, 19.2.
[45] LC, Q. 122.
[46] LC, Q. 101. Deut 5:1–6 gives even more narrative context, recounting the covenantal relationship between God and Israel that serves as the basis for the Decalogue.

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enacted between God and Jesus Christ on behalf of the elect. The God who saves Israel is the triune God who saves sinners through Jesus Christ and enables to them receive faith and persevere by the power of the Spirit.[47] This basic narrative is the context in which a claim like, 'the Holy Spirit infuses charity into the elect, allowing them to pursue obedience and grow in holiness', makes sense.

The third and final ingredient is a form of casuistry that enables Christians to practise holiness in a manner that demonstrates growth. Again, the Decalogue is a crucial part of Westminster theology. Although it is briefly alluded to in the WCF, the major exposition of the Decalogue comes in the LC where it is treated over the course of questions 98–148. Each commandment is afforded at least three questions, pertaining to: the commandment itself, the duties commanded by it and the sins forbidden by it. Take, for example, the eighth commandment, 'Thou shalt not steal'. The duties required by this commandment in the LC reimagine the nature of commercial, social and personal relationships. The catechumen is instructed to pursue 'truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce', which includes returning lost and stolen property, giving and lending freely, avoiding unnecessary lawsuits and debt, and above all else, to 'endeavor, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others as well as our own'.[48] Conversely, the sins to be avoided are not merely stealing, but benefiting from anything ill-gotten, human trafficking, unjust contracts, manipulating markets, deceiving by use of false weights or manipulated property boundaries, gambling and withholding anything of need from our neighbour, just to name a few.[49]

The rich texture provided by the answers to these questions serves to expand the theological imagination of the catechumen such that she can no longer 'memorise the ten commandments' as if it is a strict formula to be applied. This is not casuistry defined as 'an ethics of doing'; this is a casuistry in the context of a narrative of covenant, and it requires a radical expansion of the definition of neighbour to anyone she might encounter as she conducts her commercial, legal, social and political affairs. In short, everyone in her society is her neighbour, and virtually every action she takes that might come at the expense of another has the potential to become stealing.

When we put all these ingredients together, we have something like this: the Holy Spirit graciously infuses the Christian virtue of charity in a person,

[47] LC, Q. 32.
[48] LC, Q. 141.
[49] LC, Q. 142.

who can stir up this grace that is in her through practising obedience to the second table of the law and concerning herself with love of neighbour. Particularly, this might occur as she discerns that the welfare of another – let's say a refugee – is in jeopardy and she has the means and the mandate to 'further [his] outward estate' – let's say through acts of hospitality. Further, she comes to understand that failure to do so actually means disobedience to the God of Israel who provided abundantly for the Israelites when they were refugees in the desert. Indeed, it is only this narrative of a God who provides abundance in a world of scarcity that can make sense of why anyone should welcome the stranger as a neighbour. The more our Christian trusts God to provide, the more she grows in trusting God and is, therefore, willing to risk greater and greater acts of charity.

IV

Nolan concedes that Westminster affords greater consideration to the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification than other Reformed confessions. Particularly, he draws this out by comparing it to the more Lutheran Heidelberg Catechism; where Heidelberg prioritises mortification, Westminster emphasises vivification. Even so, Westminster, on Nolan's reading, remains a problematic starting point for Reformed virtue ethics. Here, Nolan depends on arguments raised by T. F. Torrance and Karl Barth to make his point. In this sense, Nolan's dismissal of Westminster presupposes his major thesis: that any contemporary account of Reformed virtue must accommodate objections made by Barth. In this section, I hope to show that Westminster can stand up to the concerns raised by Barthians.

For Barth and his students, there are three related problems with Westminster: (1) the Westminster confession is 'pietistic and egotistic', i.e. anthropocentric,[50] (2) the *ordo salutis* locates union with Christ at the end instead of the beginning, suggesting something like a medieval notion of infused grace; and (3) the implication of infused grace results in the sort of legalism and 'casuistic hair-splitting' that occurs in the Larger Catechism.[51]

With the first criticism, Barth means to say that the framing of the *ordo salutis* and, indeed, the whole confession, with the doctrine of double predestination at the head and assurance of salvation as the goal, shifts focus from God to the human. This leads to an unhealthy preoccupation with the human experience of salvation. This move, Barth suggests, is

[50] Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p. 136.

[51] Ibid., p. 143.

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the historical turn toward subjectivity that spawns Schleiermacher and Protestant liberalism.[52]

This objection is the broader concern under which the two subsequent objections make sense. It hinges on Barth's assumption that confessional documents should be about God, not humans. Barth points to the formal role the doctrine of predestination plays in order to illustrate his point. In previous confessions (e.g. the Scots) predestination 'treats of what God does, not what happens to the human person'.[53] For Barth, Westminster uniquely represents a watershed in Protestant Christianity after which theology is increasingly reduced to anthropology.

I do not intend to rebuff this critique entirely. I think it should stand as a challenge to Reformed churches that hold Westminster as their sole confessional standard. Without the breadth of confessional standards held by other Reformed traditions, which draw from sixteenth-century confessions as well as Westminster, these communities will need to be continually challenged to articulate if and how Westminster sufficiently speaks about God.

Barth's criticism that Westminster marks a shift in the Reformed tradition's gradual decline towards anthropocentrism may have merit. The fact that it goes further than any of its predecessors in articulating human agency with regards to moral progress is undeniable. As I argued above, however, the Westminster divines locate the *ordo salutis* at a transition point in the confession so that the *ordo* begins with and presupposes the justifying work of Christ *for* humankind even as it presses on towards an account of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit *with* humankind. This is the crux of the second Barthian criticism, to which we now turn.

With the second criticism, the Barthians T. F. and James Torrance argue that the anthropocentrism of Westminster has problematic soteriological implications.[54] According to T. F. Torrance, the Westminster *ordo salutis* unfolds in a manner such that union with Christ takes place at the end instead of the beginning. Nolan explains: 'In Calvin's conception of the *ordo salutis*, God's love toward us anticipates our justification rather than awaits it. By placing union with Christ at the beginning . . . Calvin emphasizes God's desire to be in the relationship even before we have been justified.'[55] For Torrance, the postponement of union with Christ in Westminster suggests

[52] Ibid., p. 140.
[53] Ibid., p. 133.
[54] T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 128.
[55] Nolan, *Reformed Virtue After Barth*, p. 21.

the sort of gradualism that exists in medieval conceptions of grace. This means that grace is separated from Christ, turning it into an instrument of our salvation instead of identifying it with Jesus Christ himself.[56]

Fesko deftly handles this objection, so I will defer to him. Fesko argues that the Westminster Standards 'embrace both the *ordo salutis* and union with Christ'.[57] It is both true that the confession does not explicitly mention union with Christ, and that the *ordo* unfolds in a manner that suggests progress towards union. This much Fesko concedes; however, this problem is easily remedied by considering the corresponding questions in the LC. There, the *ordo* unfolds in a manner where union with Christ occurs with effectual calling. The catechism asks, 'What is that union which the elect have with Christ?', and then answers, 'The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God's grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband; which is done in their effectual calling.'[58] Thus, the criticism that Westminster defers union with Christ to the end of the *ordo* is demonstrably inaccurate. While the language of the WCF is ambiguous, the instruction of the LC is unmistakably clear. Again, our response to the first criticism is affirmed: Westminster is concerned with the anthropology of salvation, but it is not necessarily anthropocentric. It presupposes and affirms God's divine sovereignty by attending first to God's saving work in Jesus Christ and only subsequently to the Spirit's sanctifying work as the practice of stirring up grace to pursue holiness.

The third and final criticism flows from the second, picking up precisely at the point of the WCF's appeal to infused grace. Addressing the article on Good Works and its appeal to grace 'already received', Barth writes, 'how does this description and its consequence … this doctrine of an "infused grace", get into the Reformed confession?'[59] For Barth, the inclusion of infused grace in Westminster must be the result of the turn to subjectivity. Barth then argues that the *ordo salutis* does not end with assurance of salvation but includes the next two articles on the Law and Christian Liberty. In light of the sections on repentance and good works, the article on law cannot help but '[take] on a moralistic and legalistic appearance'.[60] This is especially true of the LC and its treatment of the Decalogue, which Barth calls 'a book of

[56] James B. Torrance, 'Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology', in Alasdair I. C. Heron (ed.), *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* (Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1982), p. 52.

[57] Fesko, *Theology of the Westminster Standards*, p. 249.

[58] LC, Q. 66.

[59] Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, p. 143.

[60] Ibid., p. 144.

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laws with innumerable sections'.[61] Thus, for Barth, the basic problem with the emphasis on human growth towards sanctification in Westminster is that it fosters legalism in the form of casuistry. In his *Church Dogmatics* Barth explains that casuistry is problematic because it represents the attempt to sit upon the judgement seat of God, distinguishing between good and evil. With it, humankind presumes to master God's command 'and therefore God himself'.[62]

Barth's critique of Westminster had a lasting effect on American Presbyterianism. When the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Presbyterian Church of North American (UPCNA) merged in 1958, a task force determined to drop the LC from the *Book of Confessions* due to its 'legalism and preoccupation with casuistry'.[63] Even though the LC returned to the *Book of Confessions* when the Northern (UPCUSA) and Southern (PCUS) Presbyterian churches reunited in 1983, Barth's concerns remained influential among many Northern Presbyterians. Indeed, Nolan's criticism of Westminster probably originates with the position taken by the old UPCNA in its merger with the Northern church.

But we need not follow Nolan or the 1958 task force in assuming the legalism of Westminster. As John Thompson points out, the LC's treatment of the Decalogue always considers both 'what is forbidden' and 'what is enjoined'. As such, it aims 'at the holistic formation of our character'.[64] In this regard, it is casuistry *not* as application of general rules to specific contexts, but casuistry in the sense that Hauerwas uses it: concrete descriptions of virtuous action that tests our basic understanding of the gospel and the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. Recall the commandment 'Thou shalt not steal'. The list of prohibitions the divines include there may feel to the modern reader like an antiquated laundry list of don'ts. But, Thompson asks, 'In a consumerist culture, is there reason to urge "moderation of the affections" for worldly goods? In a litigious society, is there reason to decry "unnecessary lawsuits"?'[65] Thompson goes on to note a number of similarities between prohibitions listed and contemporary societal ills such as engrossing commodities and the mortgage crisis of 2008, or 'man-stealing' and the current epidemic of human trafficking.

[61] Ibid., p. 146.
[62] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), p. 11.
[63] John L. Thompson, 'Night at the Museum: The Secret Life of an Old Confession', *Theology Matters* 16/5 (Nov./Dec. 2010), p. 3.
[64] Ibid., p. 7.
[65] Ibid.

The point Thompson effectively makes is this: the problem with the LC is not that it is excessively legalistic; the problem is us. We are no longer able to connect the prohibitions and exhortations in the LC to the overarching narrative that the WCF describes: a narrative about the triune God, who calls us to be his children, and justifies, sanctifies and empowers us by his Word and Spirit to practise holiness through the third use of the law. The LC is casuistry indeed; but it is casuistry that belongs in a larger narrative context. Without that context it cannot help but appear legalistic. In context, however, it provides a great deal of texture to the commands of God, and it trains the moral vision of the catechumen to see where the church might proclaim the Word of God to the world. Particularly, as I suggested above, it enlarges the catechumen's conception of 'neighbour' and enjoins her to consider withholding material goods as 'stealing' the life of her neighbour.

The concerns with Westminster expressed by Barth and Torrance are serious concerns. It is not insignificant that Westminster perhaps marks a shift in Reformed thought away from the God who is faithful and towards the faith of humans. I have demonstrated here that where that concern is realised it has less to do with the WCF itself, which always introduces human action within the larger narrative of the God who saves, and more to do with the human preoccupation with ensuring salvation. I continue to agree with Barth that this concern must be raised with each new generation of Reformed Christians who subscribe to Westminster. I take the subsequent concerns about the order of union with Christ and repentance and the so-called legalism of the LC's vision for obedience to the law to be contingent upon similar misinterpretations of the WCF. I have no doubt that generations of Scottish and American Presbyterians reduced the confession to an exercise in parsing out the letter of the law; but I refuse to allow that to be used as a reason to avoid taking Westminster seriously.

Concluding remarks

In this essay, I have demonstrated what a Reformed virtue ethic based on the WCF might look like. At the same time, I have fought off the criticisms that prevent Nolan from considering Westminster on its own terms. Again, I want to note that I have no qualms with Nolan's project itself. I think his is a wonderful exploration of what a Barthian virtue ethic might look like. At the same time, however, I want to dispel the notion that the only Reformed virtue ethic worth consideration must be a post-Barthian one. In that vein, I want to make two final points about why a Reformed virtue ethic grounded in Westminster is a preferable option.

First, the choice to use a confessional document instead of the work of a magisterial Reformer like Calvin or Barth is preferable. To be sure, conciliar

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documents are compromise documents and represent divergent voices and opinions while the work of a singular theological voice represents a greater commitment to theological consistency. Nevertheless, the real litmus test for the possibility of a Reformed virtue ethic is not whether it is compatible with any particular theologian's dogmatic scheme (whether it be Calvin, Edwards or Barth) but whether it can root itself in the Reformed tradition's confessional heritage. The theologians themselves do not stand as authorities to which Reformed Christians subscribe (although they sometimes are appealed to as such); in contrast, the confessions remain authoritative as trustworthy expressions of the faith of the Reformed churches at particular times and places that still guide the church today, debates over the level of subscription required notwithstanding.

Second, to my mind Westminster is preferable to other Reformed confessions. The choice to use Westminster is, I must admit, not wholly unrelated to my own biases. I have chosen Westminster because I am a Presbyterian and the Westminster Standards remain the common confessional standard that unites Presbyterians throughout the world. Thus, the development of a Reformed virtue ethic from this standard proves to be the most beneficial for my own confessional tradition. Should theologians in the Dutch tradition wish to accomplish something similar, I do not doubt that they will face greater obstacles; nevertheless, I feel no obligation to meet the terms of confessional standards to which I do not subscribe.

To that point, however, the decision is not one purely based in personal bias. The Westminster is the single most subscribed Reformed confession worldwide. As such, it has the most potential to contribute to the ongoing project to rehabilitate the notion of virtue in the Reformed tradition. In general, I welcome any contribution to a question about what Reformed virtue ethics is or can and cannot be. And I suspect that we will learn a great deal from the Dutch confessions and the more Barthian Barmen Confession, or the Confession of 1967. The simple point I hope to draw out here is that Westminster has a great deal of promise with regards to its ability to engage classical notions of virtue from a distinctly Reformed perspective. To my mind, this makes it a natural starting point for the discussion.