

After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters, by N. T. Wright  
Review by Keith McNamar  
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### Quick Summary

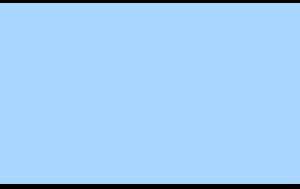
N. T. Wright identifies two competing streams of thought on the development of Christian character and then seeks to find a middle way between the two. On the one hand is obedience to rules imposed from the outside, and on the other hand is the idea that you find what your heart really desires and stay true to that. Instead, Wright proposes that we think about developing a virtuous character that would make us more fully human.

### Key Insights

- Wright makes comparisons between ancient Greek philosophers (Aristotle and Plato particularly) and their writings regarding virtue with both Jesus' words and Paul's words, finding some key similarities but also significant differences. They all agree that the aim of virtue is a flourishing human being, but Jesus and Paul place that human into a more global, relational context. They agree on the ends (for the most part), but disagree on the practices involved.
- God's design for human beings as expressed to Israel, through Jesus, and eventually the church, is for us to be a kingdom of priests – we are meant to be priests and rulers, and our fullest expression of humanity is wrapped up in those twin callings. This is where humanity began with Adam and Eve, and where God is going with human history in restoring us to steward creation and call the world to worship its creator.
- Jesus comes to announce the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven, and to invite our participation in this kingdom. Through his death and resurrection Jesus has inaugurated a new people of God – the priests and rulers who would live in alignment with his character.
- Paul's vision of Christian virtue is centered on the character of faith, hope and love which are the habits that belong to the kingdom that is now and is to come. In developing these, we are moving towards the goal of becoming complete (*teleios*) which is the same word Aristotle used to describe his perfect man. Paul appropriates the language, but transforms it into something distinctly kingdom.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Holiness in this view of virtue and character does not become a matter of adherence to the proper rules, but a necessity for men and women who hope to be kings and priests in the kingdom of God – the virtues of faith, hope, and love along with the fruit of the Spirit in our lives are the expression of holiness which makes us more alive, more fully human than license to “do as we please”.</li> <li>▪ The virtuous circle consists of five elements that lead us towards a more fully human life: Scripture, stories, examples, community, and practices. Through these we develop the kind of “second nature” thinking that allows us to act in a moment the way we have spent a lifetime preparing to act.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Action Items</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think through how the “virtuous circle” can be applied to our discipleship and character focus</li> <li>• Possibly a sermon series or teaching on the kingdom of priests concept</li> </ul>
<p><b>Quotes</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “...the New Testament’s vision of a genuinely ‘good’ human life [is] a life of <i>character formed by God’s promised future</i>, [is] a life with that future-shaped character <i>lived within the ongoing story of God’s people</i>, and with that , a freshly worked notion of virtue.” (p. 57)</li> <li>▪ “Worship and stewardship, generating justice and beauty: these are the primary vocations of God’s redeemed people. And the habits of heart, mind, and life to which we are called are designed to form us, gradually and bit by bit, into people who can, with the hard-won ‘second nature’ that we call virtue, freely and gladly take forward these tasks.” (p. 83)</li> <li>▪ “The mind that is in rebellion against God, that refuses to worship him, becomes ‘unfit’ – that is, incapable of thinking straight about what constitutes appropriate human behavior – whereas the mind that is renewed will learn the habit of clear, wise thinking and approval...the failure to <i>worship</i> the one true God leads to a failure to <i>think</i>, and thence to a failure to <i>act</i> as a fully human being ought.” (p. 153)</li> <li>▪ “Part of the problem in contemporary Christianity, I believe, is that talk about the freedom of the Spirit, about the grace which sweeps us off our feet and heals and transforms our lives, has been taken over</li> </ul>

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surreptitiously by a kind of low-grade romanticism, colluding with an anti-intellectual streak in our culture, generating the assumption that the more spiritual you are, the less you need to think.” (p. 158)

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