FOUNDATIONS

The Foundation for Building Christian Character - part 2

Recognizing the potential for reaching out to our communities through formal Christian education programs, *Foundations* was designed *to provide a strong gospel witness to parents and children who do not know much about the Bible, the Christian faith, or Christian education.* When asked, non-member parents tell us they were drawn to a WELS early childhood program or elementary school by *the product*. They explain that the character of students who graduate from Christian schools is often exemplary—that Christian young people are generally more sensitive to moral (biblical) right and wrong, and, as a rule, are more committed to living a decent life. This article describes three key concepts in the *Foundations'* approach to character development.

What is character, and how is it acquired?

Character is a dynamic core of convictions, emotions, and behaviors in every human being. Good character or bad, we all possess some attributes and traits that form a character that is unique from the mix of character traits that others possess. In simple terms, character is a kind of knowledge about *who I am and what I do.* One expert wrote, "Nothing about my being is more *me* than my character."[*] Yet, contrary to human logic and popular opinion, our entire character is shaped by external influences. You and I can't simply choose the kind of character we wish to become. We rely on others to enter the data that will be used to begin forming (or *informing*) our character. For this reason, Christian education can play a major role in developing the character of young people attending Christian schools.

Who influences the formation of character?

The forming of a human character begins at birth. It is a dramatic and profoundly complex process in which the people who are part of the everyday furniture of a child's early life have the greatest influence (both positive and negative) on the child's emerging character. But there is a part of character formation that is frequently overlooked, especially among unbelievers: God's influence on a young life is also external. For Christians, God's Spirit also plays a major role in shaping a child's character as it is proclaimed, in Word and sacrament, by those who teach and live the life of a sanctified Christian.

Depending on how one is counting, the Bible identifies somewhere between 40 and 50 character traits (*integrity, humility, ambition, courage, chastity, diligence, patience, loyalty, reverence,* etc. *Foundations* discusses some of these in detail.)

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[*] "Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics," Stanley Hauerwas, 1975.

Surprisingly, a list of the virtues unbelievers find desirable for themselves and their children is nearly identical to the biblical list. To complicate matters even more, Christian character and character formed in a secular environment often look very similar. It's the heart's motivation that makes the difference. Christian character is driven by a living heart that beats in rhythm with God's heart of love. A person of godly character wants to bring glory to God by serving others instead of self.

Character Formation and Community Standards

Character formation always involves a process of anchoring (or *attaching*) one's values and virtues to something bigger than the individual. *Foundations* helps parents understand that their child's character will also reflect their child's attachment to a community that extends beyond the family—a town or city, a social community, an association, club, or network, a cultural or ethnic community, a religious community. Communities set the standards for those who chose to remain under their influence. To remain a member in good standing in any community—that is, to be viewed as a person of high character—each individual tries to conform to the community's standards.

Foundations explains to parents that Christian character is best formed within the context of a community of Christians who support and encourage each other to live according to God's will. The term we commonly use to identify this community is *the church.* In the community of the church, the standard for godly character is laid out in the pages of Scripture, where God summarized his will in the legal language of ten non-negotiable commandments. God's people have a distinct advantage over secular communities because the standards for shaping Christian character are absolute. God himself ordained them. People of godly Christian character, young and old, have grown to appreciate and adhere to those standards.