



Reviving the Virtues, Part 2: When Character Counts

Chuck Colson | First Published: May 16, 1995

<http://www.breakpoint.org/commentaries/3839-when-character-counts>

The latest trend in education is a bold plunge back to the past: educating for virtue. Last summer two hundred educators met for a White House conference called "Character Building for a Democratic, Civil Society." The message was that public schools should start teaching character and virtue.

But which virtues should we teach? Can a pluralistic society agree on the subject? During one session at the White House conference, a man shouted out, "We don't have a consensus" on moral issues.

Yet, surprisingly, Americans do agree—more than we may realize. Where character education has been tried, local communities have reached a consensus with relative ease. The movement is spearheaded by the Character Counts Coalition, a large group including more than 50 member organizations that have all agreed on six character traits, including respect, responsibility, and trustworthiness.

The fact is that people of every place and historical period have agreed on the basic virtues. As C. S. Lewis says in his book *The Abolition of Man*, there is an objective moral law recognized by all cultures, simply because we all share the same human nature. Where cultures differ is in their detailed prescriptions for carrying out the moral law.

At the dawn of Western culture, the ancient Greeks and Romans reached a consensus not only on what the virtues are but even on a system for ranking them. Four of the virtues—prudence, justice, courage, and temperance—they ranked as the cardinal virtues, meaning that they are foundational to all the others. For example, courage is a cardinal virtue because doing the right thing—practicing any of the virtues—under pressure takes moral courage.

Christian society adopted the cardinal virtues but taught that they must be sanctified by the biblical virtues of faith, hope, and love. These seven virtues—the four cardinal virtues crowned by the three Christian virtues—became central to all Western teaching on this subject.

Modern people still revere the same virtues, with one crucial difference: We no longer believe that they represent an objective moral law. And so we don't talk about virtues but values. The difference is crucial: A value is simply whatever an individual happens to value. It's nothing but a personal preference.

But virtue refers to an objective order for human nature. In his book *Back to Virtue*, Peter Kreeft explains the objective view by comparing our souls to our physical bodies. Just as there are laws we must follow for physical health, so too there are laws we must follow for the health of the soul. That's what virtues are: laws for a healthy soul. And healthy souls are a prerequisite for a healthy civilization.

Don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that being virtuous will save anyone. The only thing that saves us is faith in Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. But once we have come to faith, the virtues are necessary guides to a whole and healthy life.

There is enormous public concern right now over the subject of virtue. But as the White House conference illustrates, most people don't understand it. Why not use this special "BreakPoint" series to equip yourself and your church groups to understand virtue. Then we may begin to teach our society what it really means.



the Chuck
Colson Center
for Christian Worldview

www.ColsonCenter.org