

Christian Practices and the Cultivation of Virtue

Learnings from Psychological Science and Character Education

Brittany M. Tausen and Allison M. Alford

Baylor University

ABSTRACT

Christian tradition has long held that participation in Christian practices cultivates the virtues of a Christlike life. The empirical literature offers modest but real support for that claim – yet a growing body of evidence suggests that practice does not automatically close the gap between who Christians want to be and the virtues they embody. Drawing on Positive Psychology, the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, Character Education, and preliminary data from the Science of Virtues lab at Baylor University, this paper argues that Christian virtue is cultivated much the way muscle strength is cultivated: through a varied training program, tailored to the individual, and sustained by a compelling ‘why.’ We organize what we have learned into three working principles, identify a few promising and underexplored practices, and close with implications for practitioners and researchers who endeavor to grow and help others grow in their likeness to Christ.

I. The Problem of Nontransformation

Christian churches, schools, and families wonder how to mend broken relationships, strengthen the social fabric of their communities, and animate faith into meaningful, loving action. Many look to familiar practices like prayer, worship, Scripture, hospitality, service and Sabbath (to name but a few), to form people into the character of Christ. Beyond helping us emulate Christ’s way of life, these practices are also tied to reflection on what character is, what a good life requires of us, and how grace meets human effort (Bass, 1997; Dykstra & Bass, 2002; Pelser & Cleveland, 2021; Krause et al., 2019). Such practices are also increasingly the subject of empirical interest in Positive Psychology, Virtue Science, and Character Education at religious institutions. For psychologists, this work often centers questions about whether Christian practices reliably cultivate virtue, what virtues are cultivated by what practice, and what conditions of a person’s heart (individual differences) or environment (the ecosystem in which practices are undertaken) might facilitate or dampen the potentially transformative power of practices.

Of course, we long to see that Christians ‘look different’, that they are uniquely responsive to the very circumstances plaguing our nation that require character. We hope that Christians have humanity across difference, hospitality for the stranger, courage in the face of manufactured fear and a radically generous compassion for the poor. But how might we begin to evaluate the reality of these longings? If Christian practices are a substantive mechanism for change and character formation, it is tempting to think that evidence ‘should’ show that practicing Christians are demonstrably more virtuous than their unchurched or non-practicing peers. Consistent with this line of thinking, one study of over twenty thousand participants demonstrated that those who were religious and practicing their religion scored higher on several self-reported character strengths including kindness, love, gratitude, hope, forgiveness, and spirituality than those who are religious but not practicing and those who are non-religious (Berthold & Ruch, 2014). Methodologically, however, these cross-group comparisons are fraught with limitations. We cannot compare religious to non-religious individuals to point to the causal (or transformative) power of Christian practices. These types of comparisons (referred to

as cross-sectional studies) do not help us rule out alternative explanations for difference. For example, it is possible that more virtuous people are the ones more likely to be religiously affiliated; it is possible that Christian practices like service attendance promote virtue; it is also possible some other factor entirely – like a desire for character growth or a purpose-driven life – drive both virtue growth and religious participation. For more robust empirical evidence that can lend credence to the notion that Christian practices cultivate virtue, we need more sophisticated approaches. Studies that probe individual differences, track people longitudinally, or afford random assignment to condition are necessary to paint a more complete picture of when, how, and for whom Christian practices uniquely contribute to formation.

Even where there is evidence that Christian practices can help produce virtue (Ratchford et al., 2023; Krause et al., 2019), we have to grapple seriously with empirical and theological reflections on what Simeon Zahl calls the problem of nontransformation – the reality that practices do not impact everyone equally and do not (as reliably or robustly as one might hope) produce disciples that embody the character of Christ. One powerful example of this comes from Seattle Pacific University where, as an extension of their Christian mission, the school was committed to engaging with and caring for individuals experiencing homelessness through an act of hospitality. On two separate occasions, the school hosted Tent City 3 (TC3) – a government sanctioned homeless encampment – on its campus. If Christian practices like hospitality reliably enhance virtue, one might expect that students grew in love for their unhoused neighbors over the course of time that TC3 resided on campus. The results of a study tracking these potential changes in students’ perceptions, however, demonstrated that students did not reliably walk away with less dehumanizing perceptions of their unhoused neighbors. Instead, some (those who interacted the least with TC3 members) appeared to walk away with slightly enhanced perceptions of the humanity of individuals experiencing homelessness whereas those who had the most contact with TC3 members actually reported an enhancement in the extent to which they dehumanized those experiencing homelessness. What this study helps to underscore is that we can attempt to love our neighbors in ways that ultimately sustain, rather than disrupt, psychological barriers that ultimately fuel othering, avoidance, and even harm. The implications for Christian practice are important. The right motivations are not sufficient and engaging in Christian practices does not always result in the intended outcome or impact, at least for some of our constituents.

The TC3 study also raises an empirical question for our theory of change, that Christian practice should produce Christlike character. Is the issue that the practices simply are not being practiced enough - a frequency problem? Or is something about how, where, or by whom the practices are being engaged that is limiting their formative power? The answer is likely a both/and. Frequency can help, as we will see, but the most significant growth requires nuanced attention to how practices are varied, tailored to the individual (as seems to be needed in the TC3 example), and tethered to a deeper meaning. Practices can foster transformation under specific conditions, for particular people, through identifiable mechanisms. Rather than asking “Do Christian practices help?”, this paper asks: “Which practices help whom, under what conditions, and toward which virtues?” These more precise questions reveal evidence that is thinner, messier, and yet, more practically significant.

The mental-health cost of nontransformation

Pursuing practices that more actively form people into Christlikeness matters not only because Christlikeness is the hallmark of a Christian life. It also matters because setting moral standards for people without giving them tools or paths to meet those standards effectively can actively harm them, even when we mean well. Stiehl and colleagues (2025) report what they call moral self-discrepancy – the gap between the moral self a person actually is and the moral self they

want to be. In a sample of 2,426 U.S. college students, religiosity was associated with a wider gap, while spirituality was associated with a narrower one. Critically, the gap itself was associated with higher anxiety and depression. People who have internalized the moral vision of the Christian life are often the most aware they are not yet living it. That awareness does not appear to be positively forming, but rather psychologically costly. Importantly, however, people with a secure attachment to God seemed to be buffered from some of the psychological costs. This is hopeful. If we offer practical steps towards a more moral life whilst helping individuals develop a more secure attachment to God, we may facilitate transformation while also protecting people from the emotional consequences of being aware that we are falling short of the lives we want to live and the people we want to be. Like good parenting strategies that help children to develop secure attachments, the mantra of churches and Christian institutions should likely be to pair high expectations with high levels of support to meet the expectations.

II. Framing: Virtue, Practice, and the Limits of Evidence

Distinguishing virtue and practice

Scripture does not hand us a single systematic list of virtues or a neat and tidy definition of character. It hands us a person – the person of Christ – as the exemplar of the virtuous life. To understand and emulate the character of Christ requires probing the constellation of virtues (and absence of vices) that were the hallmark of His life. This theological approach resonates with a philosophical one that identifies virtues as excellences that are known or recognized when they are witnessed. From a psychological perspective, virtues are a particular kind of trait: reliable patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that show up consistently across settings (home, work, church, school), and are oriented toward a morally good end. They are also malleable, which is to say there is an inherent assumption that they can be developed. A useful analogy, to which we will regularly return, is that virtues behave like muscles. They take effort. They strengthen with repetition and atrophy without conditioning. They need time under tension to develop, which is to say they are cultivated in the very moments of challenge we instinctively try to avoid. They develop best through varied practice rather than one isolated exercise and they need each other. Courage, humility, and love, for example, must be balanced to avoid the extremes of arrogant impulsivity or conflict-avoidant niceness in the same way that it takes several muscles working in concert to lift a coffee cup or hold a pencil. It is possible (and spiritually problematic) to become the moral equivalent of the gym junkie for whom it is always arms day and never legs day if we do not balance our training and approach character formation from a holistic and integrated perspective.

Practices, by contrast, are the repeated, intentional mental and physical activities Christians undertake in response to God and in pursuit of emulating Christ. Some might conceptualize practices as primarily vertical, connecting us to God (worship, Scripture reading, fasting) whereas others are primarily horizontal, connecting us to the Body of Christ (almsgiving, hospitality, table fellowship, service). Dykstra and Bass (2002) underscore the communal nature of practices and highlight their contribution to spiritual rhythms and a way of life oriented toward God. Where virtues are enduring dispositions (akin to someone's general fitness level), practices are often conceptualized as the mental and physical activities that both express and cultivate those dispositions (akin to someone's lifestyle). Put differently, practices are generally thought of as means and virtues as a kind of end – though, as we argue below, it is important to remember that the causal arrow can run in both directions.

The virtue–practice cycle: finding the on-ramp

Christian practices and Christlike virtues are probably most usefully conceptualized as circularly, not linearly, related. Practices cultivate virtues, and virtues help people keep showing up to the practices. One clear example, especially in our age of polarization, is the character it takes to stay in community when community gets hard. Sustained communal relationship is the true training ground for Christlike character, and yet some level of virtue is required to remain in it. This bidirectional relationship has practical consequences for our approach to virtue formation. The question morphs from “where does the causal chain start?” to “where is this person’s on-ramp?” Someone already strong in the practice of hospitality may find an on-ramp by reframing welcome as a sacred practice of loving the stranger, and grow in love and justice as a result. Someone burnt out may find an on-ramp in the practice of Sabbath, giving them permission to embrace the sacred nature of rest and grow in temperance. But, virtue strengths or a desire to eliminate vices can also be on-ramps. Someone strong in courage may be guided to use that strength to set healthy boundaries at work, modeling Sabbath for others. A person who is committed to growing in justice may harness that as a catalyst to begin a prayer and process group or engage in the practice of hospitality alongside those who are historically marginalized or oppressed. We should not assume everyone has the same on-ramp; we should consider how current strengths can be leveraged, how desires for growth can sustain or catalyze Christian practices, and how familiar practices can be reframed or sanctified to cultivate richer, thicker theological dispositions. Figure 1 depicts the cycle with some proposed entry points.

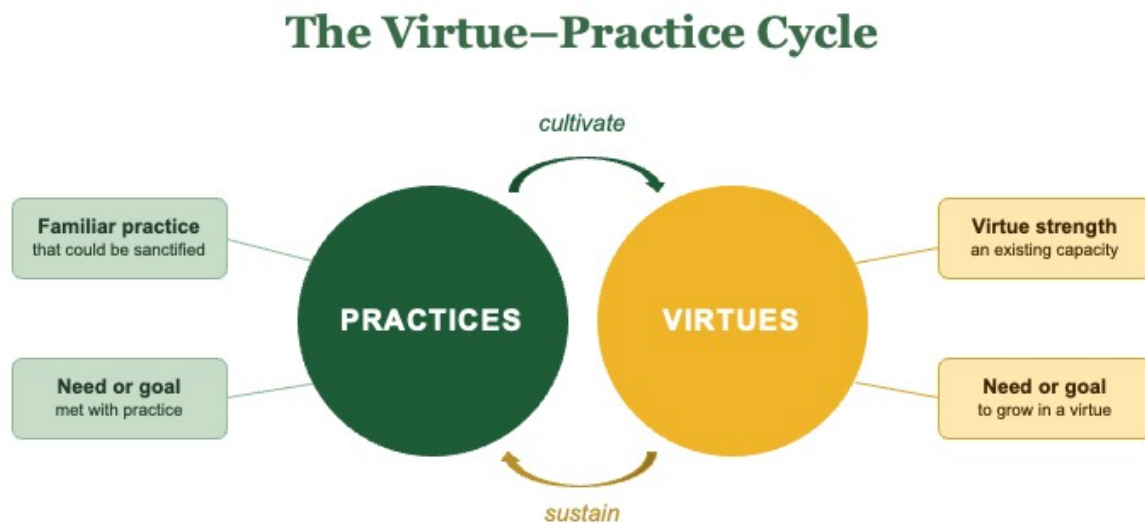


Figure 1. The virtue–practice cycle. Practices cultivate virtues; virtues sustain practices. Different people may enter the cycle at via different onramps related to strengths or needs.

Philosophers have long argued that an action only counts as virtuous when done with the right motivations. This rightly calls into question behaviors that look virtuous on the surface but are driven by selfish ends (e.g., giving to someone in need to look generous in front of friends). We cannot assume every behavior that serves a greater good is a virtuous behavior. At the same time, the psychological literature suggests that actions repeated over time can change dispositions, which in turn can change motivations. Put differently, attitudes can drive behavior and behavior can drive attitudes. The same bidirectionality plausibly extends to virtue. Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is not yet virtue, but doing the right thing over time can change one’s heart in ways that change one’s reasons.

Limits of empirical evidence and contextually appropriate definitions

Empirical work on virtue and Christian practice is growing rapidly, but the measurements and methods remain an area in need of growth. Most studies are correlational and cross-sectional, which means they offer clues rather than conclusions about the impact of practices on virtue formation. Self-report also predominates empirical investigations, but it is limited. People are better at reporting on some things than others, and we all fall prey to self-enhancement bias, which means we tend to report we are better than we actually are, particularly for traits our culture values. Even the best-designed studies make compromises about which virtues to measure, how to define those virtues, and how to measure them in a way that is logistically viable, contextually appropriate, and conceptually robust.

Definitional differences matter even within traditions that affirm a shared list of valued virtues. One of the most widely used measures, the Values in Action Inventory (VIA; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), defines the virtue of humanity (often treated as an analogue of love) in ways that are spiritually thin and do not reflect the agape love embodied by Christ. Likewise, many measures of hope reduce it to optimism rather than capturing a theologically grounded hope: a steadfast anticipation of God's good future that sustains joyful participation and guards against despair (Tausen et al., in press). Drawing on richer theological accounts of virtue, along with measures designed to reflect them – such as the Eschatological Hope scale (vanOyen-Witvliet et al., 2022) and the Sacred Seven scale (Erickson et al., in prep), which integrates the theological virtues (faith, hope, love) and the cardinal virtues (courage, justice, wisdom, temperance) – will improve the chances that research findings translate meaningfully into Christian contexts. It is also important to triangulate these measures with those that assess behavior and motivation in order to more accurately capture virtue rather than self-perceptions of how good one is or is not.

Humility is another instructive case. Different studies operationalize it differently. Baehr (2021) distinguishes humility-as-low-concern-for-status (a posture toward self) from intellectual humility (an honest reckoning with the limits of one's own knowledge). These disparate definitions can help us to make sense of seemingly discrepant findings in the literature. Studies that measure status humility can make church attendance look helpful (Krause & Hayward, 2014); studies that measure intellectual humility can make the same attendance look harmful (as our recent work, covered below, suggests). Both findings can be valid if they rely on different operational definitions. The lesson: whenever we read or report findings about humility (or any other virtue) we should ask how the virtue is being defined and interrogate whether that definition is a true or accurate reflection of Christ's embodiment of that particular virtue or character trait.

The same logic of interrogating definitions and operationalizations applies to “Christian practice.” A practice richly defined is not a one-off behavior but a sustained, embodied way of being formed in the company of others toward a particular end. Defining the practice well (what counts and what does not) is a core area of work that would benefit from interdisciplinary conversations. To date, most virtue research either fails to engage religious practices framed in this sustained and communal way or strips them of their theological richness (e.g., gratitude lists for the sake of growing in personal happiness). Within the psychology of religion and spirituality literature, many of the most-studied religious practices tend to be the easiest to measure (frequency of prayer, service attendance, Bible reading). That convenience has shaped what we think we know and may also help us to more accurately interpret what has been found.

III. Three Learnings from Virtue Science and Character Education

What follows is three learnings drawn primarily from virtue science, character education, and our own ongoing research from the Science of Virtues lab at Baylor University. They are

working principles offered as fodder for a conversation about what we know and how we might approach formation differently. Each is anchored by one or more research case studies that locates the learning in empirical evidence. Read together, the learnings respond to a core question of Section I: how should we think about practices that close, rather than widen, the gap between the moral self people want to be and the moral self they are?

LEARNING 1 · MULTIPLE MODALITIES

Stretching practices across modalities grows more virtues, more deeply.

Many are familiar with pop psychology and theology discussions about learning styles or love languages, but less familiar with research that shows a lack of evidence for the efficacy of a particular learning style (Kirschner, 2017) or love language (Impett et al., 2024). In short, the evidence suggests that we are multi-modal learners. We all need a variety of modalities to truly help us learn. Similarly, we are all multi-linguistic lovers. Relationally, we all need a variety of expressions of love to feel fully seen and known. The neat and tidy package of one love language or one learning style per person may feel compelling (and manageable), but an overly myopic focus on a particular learning style or love language is unlikely to maximize desired outcomes. The literature points to a similar insight when it comes to virtue growth or character formation.

Synthesizing research on personality and behavior change points to five pathways or potential avenues by which people grow and develop. These include: Situational, the environments, contexts, and cues people encounter; Cognitive, thoughts, interpretations, beliefs, and memories; Emotional and somatic, feelings and bodily experiences; Behavioral, actions and habits; Incentives and identity, the motivations for an action, intrinsic (personal satisfaction, a felt purpose beyond one's self) or extrinsic (social reward or sanction). Some combination of these levers are used (knowingly or unknowingly) in classrooms, churches, counseling sessions (and beyond) to help people learn and grow. Notably, these are not cleanly orthogonal dimensions which is to say there is often overlap between the modalities and changing one will often change others. Many historic Christian practices engage several modalities at once. Corporate worship, for instance, often layers the environment of a gathered community, the physical practice of tithing, the cognitive engagement of hearing Scripture and teaching, the emotional experience of lament or joy and the somatic experience of breath prayer, and a shared identity as the body of Christ. Other practices, like independent Bible reading, may be more one dimensional at least in praxis, primarily grounded in the cognitive modality unless intentionally instructed or modeled in ways that activate several modalities. Even in practices with a variety of potential modal domains, some modalities may be more clearly emphasized while others fade into the background. Notwithstanding the limitations of the five modality taxonomy, some level of categorical distinction can be useful as we think about programming across modalities in the service of more holistic and potent transformation.

The extent to which a Christian life is marked by a compilation of practices that activate multiple modalities for multiple virtues, can help to cultivate or enhance virtue substantially. In our own research, we have found evidence that this notion plays out in Christian classrooms (Tausen et al., under review). Typically, when professors construct classes and assignments they tend to over-rely on the cognitive modality and under-rely on the others even with the goal of virtue cultivation in mind (Tausen et al., in press). Somatic/affective modalities are particularly absent, likely reflecting the remnants of dualism and Gnosticism that leave us forgetting about the importance of engaging the body and one's emotions for holistic transformation and growth. Importantly, however, once trained on the five modalities, professors can use this framework to redesign or reimagine assignments to the benefit of their students and engage them as whole persons. When we get professors to stretch their assignments in ways that intentionally tap into a

greater variety of modalities, we see that students grow more in virtues like faith, courage, justice, temperance and wisdom than they do in the exact same classes before their professors are taught about the five modalities and ways to stretch their assignments to incorporate a greater variety (Tausen et al., under review). While explicit empirical extensions to Christian practices are an important area for future research, many of the professors who have implemented this strategy teach required theology classes or classes with a strong underlying faith component suggesting a similar approach could translate well into other Christian spaces.

The Five Modalities of Virtue Formation

Any durable change in a person moves through one or more of these doors.

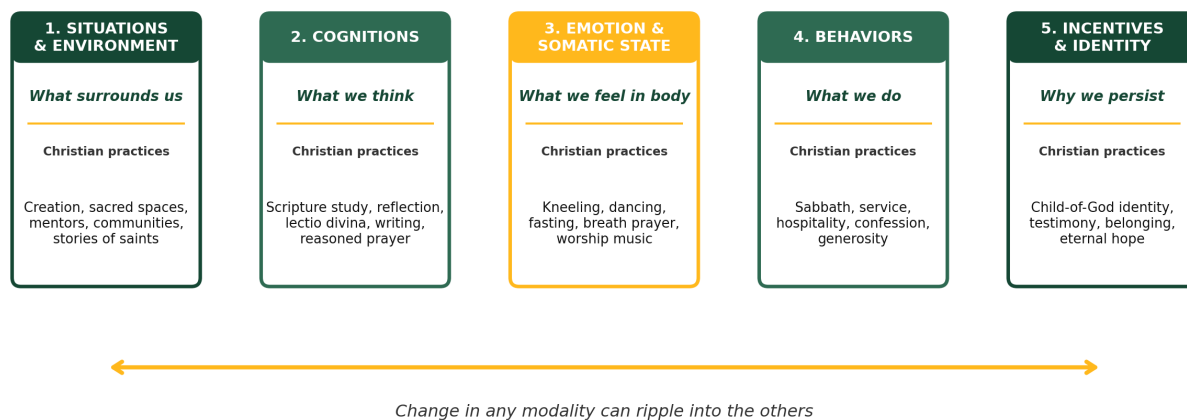


Figure 2. The five modalities or pathways of formation. Many rich Christian practices traditionally engage several modalities, but may be flattened in practice or modeling in ways that make them more one dimensional.

CASE STUDY 1

Engaging in Conversations Across Difference

One professor who went through our “Classrooms that Cultivate Character” training workshop implemented a “hard conversations” assignment into a required philosophy course. Students were introduced to the assignment as an opportunity to practice humility, love, and temperance by regulating their own emotions while listening to hear rather than listening to respond. After engaging in a hard conversation, students reflected on how it went, how it made them feel, and if they would engage in a similar activity again and why. Students in these courses reported growth in courage, temperance, and faith, with a marginal increase in love. Qualitative reflections reinforced that the growth in faith was likely largely related to the topics students chose to engage in their hard conversations and also revealed students’ willingness to engage in future hard conversations because with the framing and goals given, the conversations tended to go better than anticipated.

CASE STUDY 2

Stretching a Bible Reading Practice

One professor who went through our “Classrooms that Cultivate Character” training workshop decided to stretch a Bible reading assignment in their introduction to theology course. Instead of simply having students read Biblical passages, they engaged in a “virtue spotting” exercise where students were instructed to look for and explicitly identify the virtues that Biblical figures portrayed. This helped to amplify their awareness of virtues and moral exemplars in the content they were reading. While the size of these classes did not afford robust analyses on their own, students in these modified Bible reading courses were included in larger analyses that showed growth in several virtues (including faith) as a result of stretching assignments to incorporate multiple modalities. At the end of the quarter, one student reported, “I liked when in the, first quarter, in most of the assignments the last question would be about the virtues. We would have to choose which virtues we thought showcased in the Bible verses we read. It helped us get to know the virtues more as well as getting to know the bible in a deeper level.”

To move beyond virtue literacy, this practice could be stretched to require (or challenge) constituents to practice modeling the virtues they spot in their own life and to reflect on their experience of enacting the virtuous behavior. Integrating emotion by asking people to consciously label how it made them feel to emulate the virtuous actions and how the action or mental activity aligned with their own goals, values, or role in a greater story beyond themselves could add even more depth to the practice.

In light of this work, the orienting practical question may not be “are we doing enough?” but “are we doing it in enough different ways?” If you imagined the Christian practices an individual engages with as a pie chart, what fraction would fall into a purely cognitive slice? This is where people are being asked to remember, think about, or reflect and likely makes up a large portion of several organized and relatively common Christian practices like Church services, Bible studies, Bible reading and prayer. Which modalities are underrepresented and how can practices be faithfully stretched or interwoven to ensure a more equal distribution of the modalities by which we are engaging the very people we are trying to help form. Think of this as the equivalent of doing several different types of arm exercise to cultivate bicep growth. Even when targeting one virtue muscle, multiple modalities are necessary.

LEARNING 2 · NO PERFECT PRACTICE

No single practice grows every virtue for every person.

Just like we need a variety of modalities to cultivate a single virtue, we also need a variety of different types of practices. In part this is beneficial because various practices will naturally enhance the variety of modalities. In part, it is beneficial because different practices are connected to different virtues. We cannot expect a single practice, like prayer or talking to friends about religion and spirituality to sufficiently enhance the vast array of virtues Christ exemplified throughout His life any more than we could expect doing bicep curls over and over again would give us great calves. We need different exercises for different virtue muscles.

Simultaneously, there is not a simplistic one to one mapping where each traditional practice maps onto a singular or particular virtue. Some map onto several and others, as they are currently practiced, do not appear to be notably connected to any. Our own early analyses from a research study that tracked thousands of students across the country over a two-year period demonstrated that there was not a single practice that predicted growth across every (or even

most) virtues we measured. Some of the practices we measured that appear to be multi-modal on the surface did not significantly predict any specific virtue growth at all¹.

To be clear, the approach here was not simply looking at whether virtues correlated with practices (they did, as they often do), it was to see if the frequency with which individuals engaged in practices uniquely predicted growth in the virtue over a set time period. Specifically, we measured the self-reported frequency of six distinct Christian practices: prayer, Bible reading, church attendance, parachurch attendance, talking to a friend about religion, and mission trip participation. We also tracked several self-reported virtues (e.g., intellectual humility, interpersonal generosity, gratitude, gratitude toward God, patience, self-control, courage). Our preliminary analyses demonstrated that the value of religious practices to predict growth above and beyond base-level virtue was strikingly virtue-specific. Prayer was the most consistently beneficial private practice, predicting growth in intellectual humility and gratitude toward God (but not in other virtues). Parachurch involvement was the most consistently beneficial public practice, predicting growth in courage and gratitude toward God. Church attendance was the only practice to negatively predict virtue growth, suppressing intellectual humility while showing no significant effects on other virtues. Bible reading, on its own, did not predict growth in any virtue measured. Discussing religion or spirituality with friends uniquely predicted gratitude. Mission trip attendance did not uniquely predict growth in any particular virtue. Notably, however, it was also the least frequently reported practice.

We share these preliminary results to provide some longitudinal evidence that the frequency of common Christian practices does appear to enhance particular virtues above and beyond baseline levels of virtue. At the same time, our findings underscore the very real concern about potential nontransformation or malformation introduced at the beginning of this paper, suggesting it is important to hold both realities in tension. Adding to the complexity, when you look closer at the data to see if there were certain people for whom the practices were most beneficial or most likely to be harmful, we saw indications that general patterns of connection between Christian practices and virtue masked important individual nuance. The very same practice can result in virtue gains for some and the atrophying of the same virtue for others.

CASE STUDY 1

Courage for the More Introverted

Looking across our entire sample, parachurch attendance (defined as: attendance at worship meetings, Bible studies or other activities with a parachurch organization like Young Life, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, etc.) predicted growth in courage even when controlling for baseline courage. Upon closer inspection, however, the relationship between parachurch involvement and courage in our own preliminary analyses looks different for people higher and lower in extraversion. In particular, those that are more introverted showed greater courage growth, suggesting parachurch contexts may be an ideal environment or training ground for more introverted folks. It may also be a practice that is shied away from by the very people who would benefit the most. Reminding congregants that those who feel most introverted are most likely to grow in courage may help nudge them towards taking on the risk knowing the potential gains. For those who are already high in extraversion that are looking to grow in courage, extensions beyond parachurch involvement or more scaffolding within parachurch activities may be needed to enhance growth.

¹ This is perhaps because of the diffusion of virtues focused on in Church spaces across the participants. Just like in classrooms, if every professor emphasizes different virtues and there isn't a concentrated focus on a certain number of virtues, then it diffuses the chances of finding any substantial change in one particular area.

CASE STUDY 2

Humility for the More Dogmatic

Across our entire sample, church attendance appeared to dampen intellectual humility (e.g., I question my own opinions, positions, and viewpoints because they could be wrong). Upon closer inspection, we see evidence for a more nuanced relationship. Church attendance actually predicted growth in intellectual humility for those highest in dogmatic intolerance (e.g., How I feel about religious issues is the truth; People who hold different religious beliefs scare me) but a reduction in intellectual humility for those lowest in dogmatic intolerance. Something about being in the room with a sustained tradition appears to challenge the most dogmatic and embolden the middling. Knowing this, what would it look like to reinforce humility, an openness to diverse perspectives, and the recognition that one might be wrong as a core goal or value of a congregation? Such an approach might help to limit the loss of humility for less dogmatic, but it might also raise the suspicion of those who are more dogmatic. Future research will be necessary to better understand how to navigate this tension for churches or institutions looking to help their constituents grow in intellectual humility.

CASE STUDY 3

Reducing Dehumanization Without Enhancing Justice Falls Flat

Just like different personality traits and religious ideologies can shape the efficacy of Christian practices to produce growth in virtue, so too can variance in the virtue strengths people already bring to the table. Contact interventions aimed at reducing the dehumanization of outgroup members can improve perceptions of marginalized populations and still fail to translate into an enhanced willingness to engage with or help those outgroup members, unless someone has strong social justice motivations. For individuals low in social justice motivations the reduced prejudice or dehumanization doesn't seem to matter in that it does not readily translate to action. For those high in social justice motivations, the reductions in dehumanization are more readily translated into positive interactions (Tausen et al., 2023).

We may be myopically focused on enhancing love, but if it is not rightly balanced with justice concerns, it may never become an active or self-sacrificial love. The problem of nontransformation may be, at least in part, a result of what virtue strengths and weaknesses people currently possess or any overly myopic approach to character formation that focuses on one virtue at a time. This learning can help us to think carefully about whether we are programming in such a way that overemphasizes some virtues and underemphasizes others, not recognizing that the virtues need one another to generate an active faith.

Pastorally, that the efficacy of Christian practices is influenced by individual differences is both good and bad news: a practice that fails to bear fruit in one person's life is not necessarily an indictment of the person or the practice, it may simply be a mismatch or a practice that won't take root until the person has been spiritually strengthened in other ways. We might consider pastoring or teaching with the goal of developing Christlike character akin to leading a group fitness class: a trainer who prescribes the same regimen for everyone produces a small number who thrive, a larger number who plateau, and a non-trivial number who get hurt. The work of formation includes some discernment about which practice fits whom, and at what season. It may also be about naming and defining virtues clearly, providing the examples of those virtues in Christ's life and emphasizing the extent to which those are goals of or intended outcomes of a practice. It might also be about asking people to meaningfully engage in their own reflections or self-assessments of growth in these particular areas (while noting that there is grace where we

fall short and progress is the goal) and empowering them to modify practices in ways that create the appropriate challenge when they sense they are plateauing or losing (virtue) strength.

LEARNING 3 · MEANING MATTERS

Sanctifying a practice amplifies its formative power, and the cost of failure.

Practices form virtue most powerfully when participants understand what the practice is for - when meaning is made explicit. This is connected to the fifth modality (incentives/identity) introduced in learning one. Incentives and identity matter to make practices stick and to motivate the persistence necessary for virtue formation. One way to imbue practices with meaning is to more explicitly attach them to a transcendent narrative identity. Transcendent narrative identities are generally defined as an identity that shapes a personal understanding of the self as connected to a broader story or something bigger than one's self. Importantly, this means an overarching narrative that weaves together past and future conceptualizations of one's self in addition to an understanding of the integral part one's life plays in a larger story or purpose – a greater good beyond one's self. For Christians, these transcendent narratives might be interwoven with an understanding that one's life is an opportunity to participate in God's work on earth to redeem and restore creatures and all of creation to God's self. Where pastors, educators and others can help individuals articulate their why for growth and its alignment to the unique role they play in God's story, the more likely they are to maintain the motivation necessary to grow even through challenging circumstances. This line of reasoning is well supported by theoretical perspectives (Kristjansson, 2013; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Schnitker et al., 2019), while still needing to be more fully developed empirically.

Sanctifying a goal is another, increasingly well-studied, way to enhance meaning and attach a particular concrete action to a larger and more intrinsically motivating identity (Mahoney et al., 2005). To sanctify a goal is to frame it as something God cares about, and doing so has been shown to amplify the benefits of engaging in particular practices (Ratchford et al., 2023). Imbuing a practice or rhythm with sacred meaning may be a particularly easy on-ramp to the virtue–practice cycle for those who are already engaged in particular habits or rhythms of daily life that mirror (in some capacity) Christian practices. In other words, helping people to connect their everyday practices to a larger why or sacred meaning could help to ensure the practice more substantially enhances corresponding virtue growth.

CASE STUDY 1

Thicker Gratitude Practices

In much the same way that sanctifying goals can enhance goal pursuit, tying secular practices to a Christian telos can strengthen their potency. Reframing gratitude as prayer and thanksgiving to God, for example, can result in a thicker and more transformative practice. Schnitker and Richardson (2019), for example, demonstrated that a simple gratitude intervention, listing three positive things from the day, can be tailored for congregants by asking them to write down three things for which they are grateful to God. Framing gratitude journaling as prayer led to greater enhancements in gratitude among religious participants.

Reintegrating relationality or explaining the importance of keeping relational practices relational might be helpful for congregants and students who have a clear religious identity. This emphasis on the relational nature of Christian practices may help to respond to Ted Smith and others who have argued about the risks of personal spirituality becoming a form of autonomous individualism, disconnected from community.

CASE STUDY 2

Sacred Movements

Another powerful example of the importance of meaning making comes from an experiment where participants were asked to engage in a series of arm movements either with or without a sacred framing (Freeburg et al. 2023). Specifically, participants were either told to associate sacred or nonsacred meaning with the instructed arm movements. Results demonstrated that when participants ascribed sacred meaning to the arm movements, they resulted in more positive and transcendent emotions than when they were not imbued with sacred meaning. This is interesting not only because of the potential benefits of attributing sacred meaning to something like raising one's arms or gesturing during a worship service, but also because prior work by Van Cappellen and colleagues (2016) has associated enhanced transcendent emotions with more virtuous behaviors like generosity. While speculative, what this suggests is that amplifying the sacred meaning of movement may have the potential to indirectly impact virtuous behavior by directly amplifying transcendent emotions.

Many congregants are looking beyond the walls of the church to help them improve their mental health and well-being. As practices like gratitude lists have become secularized or Christian practices are coopted in ways that look for the benefits of community stripped from the depth of tradition (they have become ahistorical), they have also been gutted of their relational richness and their formative power. Understanding the costs of these more anemic approaches to spiritual practices may reinvigorate a practical appreciation for the benefits to character formation and well-being that can be associated with richer theological counterparts.

It is worth noting that the same mechanism of sanctifying goals can backfire when a sanctified goal fails. This is where the moral self-discrepancy framing of Section I matters most concretely. Sanctified striving without sanctified grace can widen the gap between the moral ideal and real self rather than close it. There is a deep resonance with moral self-discrepancy research. Meaning, attached well can close the gap. Meaning, attached badly, can widen it, and as a result the associated mental health consequences of self-discrepancy (Stiehl et al., 2025).

IV. Promising, Empirically Underexplored Practices and Approaches

Context and Culture Matters

From a social psychological perspective and in light of the communal nature of Christian practices (Dykstra & Bass, 2002) it is important to note that much of the current work on virtue formation is incredibly individualistic in nature. We focus on the individual and the practices they are (or are not) engaging in as if their environment or surroundings do not matter. But we know that the interaction between a person and their environment is a core driver of behavior and growth. If Christian practices aren't cultivating character, it might be because they are not potent enough to overcome the environment in which they are being practiced. Fertile soil and social norms matter. Considering how to help people cultivate moral ecologies of formation where behavior that promotes a greater good is the norm and character is readily modeled is a critical step. We are laying the groundwork for some of this by creating a measurement of 'Character Climate' that looks at perceptions of the moral ecology of college institutions (Tausen et al., invited revision). Such an instrument could be readily adapted to fit the different stakeholders in a church or non-profit organization. Not only could this serve as an indicator of communal climate as a snapshot, but also communal growth over time and whether certain practices produce more growth in certain environments.

Table fellowship

Eating is an intimate practice that is bonding and important for psychological well-being in many ways (Woolley & Lim, 2023). It is also a practice of great psychological interest that could be more clearly informed by its potential theological depth. In one mixed-methods study (Tausen et al., 2022), we explored how sharing a meal with a member of a marginalized group at a free community dinner hosted by a local church (a theologically resonant practice) shaped college students' perceptions of their unhoused neighbors. Students recognized human-like traits in the specific individual they ate with, but the encounters did not significantly reduce dehumanization of individuals experiencing homelessness as a group, relative to a no-dinner control. A single shared meal can improve perceptions of an individual, but rarely transforms perceptions of an entire group. Sustained, repeated practice that provides opportunities to interact with multiple outgroup members over time may have the potential to improve perceptions across an entire group. Future research should explore table fellowship as a richly communal Christian practice with great potential for virtue cultivation.

Sabbath

Sabbath has received remarkably little empirical attention as a virtue-forming practice, despite its centrality in Scripture and the desperate need in our merit-based, individualistic, and capitalistic societies for rest. There is (ironically) real work to do here including whether sanctifying the meaning of rest changes its formative effect, how Sabbath rhythms may produce or interact with virtues like patience, gratitude, and humility in the productivity-saturated worlds of school, work, and ministry. Partnerships between colleges and congregations may be a particularly useful way to approach answering nuanced questions about what virtues Sabbath has the potential to cultivate and individual differences might amplify or dampen these effects.

V. Practical Implications

For practitioners

For pastors, educators, and parents, the most direct practical implication of the learnings listed here is to build an ecosystem of practices rather than rely on a narrow subset of practices. No one practice grows every virtue, and no one practice fits every person. Helping individuals choose practices strategically, but also with variety in mind can help to spread out the potential benefits while also minimizing the costs. For schools and universities specifically, it may be important to embed virtue through rhythms, relationships, and service inside the required curriculum, and accept the pedagogical paradox that the most formative classes can be poorly rated by students. Active, disruptive, effortful pedagogy produces more growth than the passive lectures students prefer. The same tensions are likely to arise in Church settings when people are most comfortable being passive consumers rather than active participants in their congregations.

For researchers

For researchers, the priorities are longitudinal and experimental designs, behavioral outcomes (not only self-report), more diverse traditions and populations, and more studies that examine person and practice interactions rather than main effects alone. Our preliminary moderation findings suggest those interactions are practically consequential, with the potential to completely alter the direction of the practice outcome (e.g., growth vs. decline in humility). The field also needs definitional clarity and rich theological definitions that lend themselves to measurement to ensure that Christian practices are being measured by a theologically relevant metric. Two empirically underdeveloped but theologically relevant frontiers warrant particular attention going

forward: table fellowship across difference, and Sabbath, though myriad Christian practices will benefit from more detailed empirical investigation.

VI. Conclusion

If you are looking for evidence that a particular practice is connected to virtue, there is a good chance you will find something. The questions, however, about the reliability of those effects, particularly as transformative (and not just associative) as well as their definitional relevance, and individual nuance remain. Future work in Positive Psychology, the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, and Character Education in Christian university settings will continue to speak into and inform these important questions. The latter may be especially important for those in church contexts because the focus on cultivating Christlike character in sustained classroom and campus communities closely parallels the work of pastors and congregations in their shared way of life together. It also focuses largely on emerging adults, a key population that is rapidly leaving the church (Keuss, 2024), deeply impacted by the joint epidemics of loneliness and poor mental health (Kirwan et al., 2025), and, like us all, in desperate need of transformative and life-giving encounters with Jesus. Ultimately, we hope the insights offered in this paper provide a sort of meta-framework for interpretation, integration, and application as new research and trends emerge – tethering us to a program of formation that recognizes the need for variety in modality and practice, attentiveness to individual persons, and deep connections to meaning, so that individuals are supported as fully as possible in their journey toward becoming more like Christ.

Selected References and Additional Readings

- Bass, D. C. (Ed.). (1997). *Practicing our faith: A way of life for a searching people*. Jossey-Bass.
- Baehr, J. (2021). Two Concepts of Intellectual Humility. In *Faith and virtue formation : Christian philosophy in aid of becoming good* / (pp. 236–256). Oxford University Press,. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192895349.003.0011>
- Berthold A and Ruch W (2014) Satisfaction with life and character strengths of non-religious and religious people: it's practicing one's religion that makes the difference. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, 876. <https://10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00876>
- Dykstra, C., & Bass, D. C. (2002). A theological understanding of Christian practices. In M. Volf & D. C. Bass (Eds.), *Practicing theology: Beliefs and practices in Christian life* (pp. 13–32). Eerdmans.
- Erickson, T. M., Tausen, B. M., Fossum, J., Jalalian-Chursky, K., Dunham, M., & Valkren, R. (in prep). The Sacred Seven: Developing a measure of cardinal and theological virtues
- Freeburg, P. A., Van Cappellen, P., Ratchford, J. L., & Schnitker, S. A. (2023). Meaning behind the movement: Attributing sacred meaning to fluid and nonfluid arm movements increases self-transcendent positive emotions and buffers the effects of nonfluidity on positive emotions. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 15(3), 425-436. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000463>
- Impett, E. A., Park, H. G., & Muise, A. (2024). Popular psychology through a scientific lens: Evaluating love languages from a relationship science perspective. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 33(2), 87-92.
- Keuss, J. (2024). *Defiant Hope, Active Love: What young adults are seeking in places of work, faith and community*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- King, P. E. (2008). Spirituality as fertile ground for positive youth development. In R. Lerner et al. (Eds.), *Positive youth development and spirituality*. Templeton Foundation Press.
- Kirschner, P. A. (2017). Stop propagating the learning styles myth. *Computers & Education*, 106, 166-171.
- Kirwan, E.M., Burns, A., O'Súilleabháin, P.S. *et al.* Loneliness in Emerging Adulthood: A Scoping Review. *Adolescent Research Review*, 10, 47–67 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-024-00240-4>
- Krause, N., & Hayward, R. D. (2014). Religious involvement and humility. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 9(3), 208–219.
- Krause, N., Hill, P. C., & Ironson, G. (2019). Evaluating the relationships among religion, social virtues, and meaning in life. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 41(1), 53–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F0084672419839797>
- Kristjánsson, K. (2013). Ten Myths About Character, Virtue and Virtue Education – Plus Three Well-Founded Misgivings. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 61(3), 269–287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2013.778386>
- Mahoney, A., Pargament, K. I., et al. (2005). A higher purpose: The sanctification of strivings. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 15(3), 239–262.
- Mahoney, A., Pargament, K. I., Cole, B., Jewell, T., Magyar, G. M., Tarakeshwar, N., Murray-Swank, N. A., & Phillips, R. (2005). A higher purpose: The sanctification of strivings in a

- community sample. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 15(3), 239–262. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr1503_4
- McAdams, D. P. (2006). The redemptive self: Generativity and the stories Americans live by. *Research in Human Development*, 3, 81–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2006.9683363>
- McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative Identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(3), 233–238.
- Pargament, K. I., et al. (2005). The sacred and the search for significance: Religion as a unique process. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(4), 665–687.
- Pelser, A. C., & Cleveland, W. S. (Eds.). (2021). *Faith and virtue formation: Christian philosophy in aid of becoming good*. Oxford University Press.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford University Press / American Psychological Association.
- Ratchford, J., Ming, M. S., Schnitker, S. A. (2023). Virtues in positive psychology and the psychology of religion and spirituality. In the Handbook of Positive Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality Eds (E. B. Davis, E. L. Worthington Jr., & S. A. Schnitker).
- Roberts, B. W., et al. (2017). A systematic review of personality trait change through intervention. *Psychological Bulletin*, 143(2), 117–141.
- Schnitker, S. A., King, P. E., & Houlberg, B. (2019). Religion, spirituality, and thriving: Transcendent narrative, virtue, and telos. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 29(2), 276–290. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12443>
- Schnitker, S. A., & Richardson, K. L. (2019). Framing gratitude journaling as prayer amplifies its hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, but not health, benefits. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 14(4), 427–439.
- Schwartz, S. H., Cieciuch, J., Vecchione, M., Davidov, E., Fischer, R., Beierlein, C., & Dirilen-Gumus, O. (2012). Refining the theory of basic individual values. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103(4), 663–688.
- Stiehl, M. M., Ridder, R. J., Bounds, E. M., Melton, K. K., Glanzer, P. L., & Schnitker, S. A. (2025). Not as good as I would like to be: Moral self-discrepancy, religiosity, spirituality, and mental health. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*.
- Tausen, B. M., Erickson, T., Neinhuis, D., & Jalalian-Chursky, K. (in press). Classrooms that Cultivate Character? Charting an institution-wide approach to Christian virtue formation. *Christian Higher Education*.
- Tausen, B. M., Lee, J. H., Dischinger, A. S., & Dennis, I. A. (2023). When dehumanization does (and does not) matter. Exploring the relationship between social justice, avoidant behaviors, and intentions to help individuals experiencing homelessness. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12971>
- Tausen, B. M. & Funabashi, A. (2023). Faith in Action? Exploring the relationship between public and private religiosity, race, and social justice importance among Christian college students. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471221149123>
- Tausen, B. M., Douglass, K. M., Hodges, R., Rivera, I., & Thomas, C. (2022). Dining against dehumanization: A mixed-methods and interdisciplinary approach to assessing the

- humanizing effects of sharing a meal with individuals experiencing homelessness. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471221130325>
- Tausen, B. M., Charleson, M., & Fingerhut, L. (2021). Proximity with limited humanity: How hosting a tent city can reduce, but not eliminate, dehumanization. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 49, 2853-2873. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22630>
- Van Cappellen, P., Saroglou, V., & Toth-Gauthier, M. (2016). Religiosity and prosocial behavior among churchgoers: Exploring underlying mechanisms. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 26(1), 19–30.
- Woolley, K., & Lim, S. (2023). Interpersonal consequences of joint food consumption for connection and conflict. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 17(6), e12748. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12748>
- Zahl, S. (2020). *The Holy Spirit and Christian experience*. Oxford University Press.