We are called to excellence in all activities of life, not least in our scholarship and ministry. Outlining virtues directly related to vocation and scholarship, Andreas Köstenberger tells us there is a way to be a better person and a better scholar—without needing to sacrifice our faith at the altar of academic respectability. Here is a call to a life of virtue lived out in excellence.

"An excellent, searching, full-length study on the moral and spiritual requirements of being a professional, evangelical, biblical scholar. This book will do great good to those of us who ply this trade."

J. I. PACKER, Professor of Theology, Regent College

"Sadly, Christian scholarship often has more prima donnas than the New York ballet, and more mediocrity than a Cuban car-making factory! In an age when scholars sometimes think of themselves as celebrities rather than as servants of the church, along comes Andreas Köstenberger with a great book on the virtues of the Christian academic. Köstenberger provides engaging reflections on how to turn your utmost scholarship to the highest ends of all: the glory of God. It is rebuking, moving, and inspiring!"

MICHAEL F. BIRD, Lecturer in Theology and New Testament, Crossway College, Brisbane, Australia

"Grounded in the biblical text and balanced by the realities of life, this clear, compelling, and convicting work points the scholar to the more excellent way, where conduct in scholarship weighs as important as the content of scholarship. For those who long to see Christian graces and civility permeate the world of scholarship, this book deserves careful attention."

BRUCE A. LITTLE, Professor of Philosophy of Religion and Director of the Center for Faith and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

ANDREAS J. KÖSTENBERGER (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is senior professor of New Testament and biblical theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, a prolific author, and a distinguished scholar. His many books include God, Marriage, and Family and The Heresy of Orthodoxy.
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Introduction: Called to Excellence

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Most of my other books, in keeping with proper academic etiquette, keep my personal pilgrimage at arm’s length. After all, the academy trains scholars to pursue their work on the basis of a judicious assessment of the available evidence, and, if anything, a scholar’s personal background and presuppositions—including, and especially, his or her faith—are to remain unobtrusively in the background. But this is a different kind of book, more personal in nature, which is why I would like to start out by telling you about my spiritual conversion and religious pilgrimage to date. Too often today, pressures mount to drive a wedge between faith and scholarship—as if it were possible to separate these two areas of life—and those of us who pursue our scholarly calling as believers are frequently embarrassed by our faith, concealing it beneath an objective, critical, scholarly veneer. For me, at least, my faith and my scholarship are utterly inseparable.
My Life before and after Christ

Conversion

“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:36–38). When I first heard this verse with an open heart in the spring of 1983, I was a freshly minted Christian listening to a sermon in the pews of the Vienna International Chapel, an English-speaking congregation in Vienna, Austria, the city where I grew up. The verse pricked my heart, and I knew there would be no turning back. I would get baptized and publicly identify with Christ. The prospect of Jesus’s being ashamed of me at his return terrified me and convicted me not to hold back on identifying with the Crucified One. Compromise was not an option.

This Spirit-induced resolve compelled me to forsake my past, and, as Paul reminisced, “whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Phil. 3:7–9). As an economics major, I could certainly appreciate the financial accounting language Paul used in this passage.

One of the books that made a deep impact on me as a young Christian was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Cost of Discipleship*. In his inimitable, uncompromising style, this German theologian and leader in the Hitler-resistance movement penned the following memorable words:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call.”

1
In my case, it was death to my family. My father, Hannes Köstenberger, upon hearing that I had turned my back on a lucrative career in management consulting and chosen to follow Christ—I had already signed a contract with a firm and was to start September 1 after graduating from university—rejected me. It would be ten years before I would see him again. When I came home for lunch after attending the Vienna International Chapel on Sundays, my mother and sister met me with icy silence, and we often ate almost the entire meal without uttering a single word. As far as my family was concerned, for all practical purposes I had died—died as the person they knew. Not that the person they had known didn’t deserve to die; far to the contrary.

Though the realization was slow and painful, my life had been sinful, and I had strayed far from God. Yet he sought me and found me. It happened one cold winter day on a night train from Vienna to Venice, where I traveled to enjoy the scenic beauty of this unique northern Italian city. A young lady by the name of Joan Zimmerman, an American opera student from Rockford, Illinois—who had herself become a believer only a year prior to our encounter through the witness of a fellow American, Madeline Pfister, while taking a German language course at the Vienna Goethe Institute—shared with me her newfound faith in Christ. “All those old people sitting on park benches in Vienna,” she queried. “What are they waiting for? Hasn’t Jesus already done everything that must be done for them to be saved?” Somehow, her words penetrated into my innermost being, and I wondered what I was waiting for when Jesus had already done everything that needed to be done for me.

Joan also read a portion of Galatians 5 that night, the verses listing the fruits of the Spirit (vv. 19–21), and these attributes—love, joy, peace—too, struck a profound chord in my longing, lonely, desperate heart. My parents’ marriage had ended in divorce, and my own relationships were fragile and, more often than not, broken. I deeply longed for love, joy, and peace—as well as for freedom, about which the Galatians passage also spoke (even though I was still unaware that it was freedom from sin that I needed the most)—and here God was reaching out his hand to me and inviting me to enter into his love, his joy, and his peace in the Lord Jesus Christ. Over the course of the months that followed, his invitation proved irresistible.

Once back in Vienna, I eagerly bought an English Bible, devouring it as a man close to starvation might ravenously gulp down a meal. My pent-up
spiritual hunger for truth and for a word from God was overwhelming, almost unbearable. In six months’ time, I read through the entire Bible twice, gradually realizing that I was not merely in need of moral reform but desperately needed a Savior. This realization did not come easily, however. Between what you might call my spiritual “conception” on that night train from Vienna to Venice and my spiritual new birth were agonizing months of trying to reform myself. I went back to church, the Roman Catholic Church where I had grown up. But what I learned during these distressing times is that you never know how sinful you are until you try really hard to be good. As a result, I temporarily sank into a serious depression during which I desperately struggled to come to terms with my own sinfulness and need for Christ.

At one point during this process, I had some sort of vision while eating my lunch during a break from work, sitting at the side of the Danube channel (I was completing my “civil service,” a substitute for military service, by working at the Lutheran Hospital located in Vienna’s 9th district). At that moment, I felt immobilized on one side of a vast, unbridgeable gulf, desperately wanting to cross over to the other side yet being completely unable to do so. Who would take me across the river? I knew I couldn’t do it on my own; it took me several months before I realized that it must be Jesus. Finally, I gave up all resistance, intellectual and otherwise, and abandoned myself completely to my Lord, who took me and brought me safely to the other side by virtue of what he had done for me on the cross.

One of the issues that caused me particular agony was the notion of God’s sovereignty. How could God allow me to grow up in a family of parents whose marriage ended up in divorce? How could God conceivably redeem not just my future but also my past which, I increasingly came to realize, I had wasted in empty, godless pursuits? Only gradually did God’s Spirit fix my spiritual gaze on the cross of Christ where God’s sovereignty had turned evil into good, allowing his Son to be subjected to brutal, excruciating torture in order to accomplish our—my—salvation. I also had a very hard time conceiving of a personal relationship with God through Christ apart from any human mediation, whether through a Roman Catholic priest or someone else.

Then, one night, in the presence of a friend named Jerry Pfister, a trumpet player and American missionary to Vienna, all my defenses broke down, my intellectual resistance melted, and my persistent objections vanished. The floodgates opened, and God’s bright light of salvation
entered my soul as I prayed, asking him to forgive my sins and pleading with Christ to be my Savior. And so I gave my life to Christ, to paraphrase one of my favorite authors, C. S. Lewis, “the most dejected convert in all of Austria.”² A few Sundays later, sitting in the pews of the Vienna International Chapel, I suddenly felt almost physically as if an enormous load had been lifted from my shoulders—my sins, which I no longer needed to bear on my own but which my Savior had borne for me. And as I wept uncontrollably in my seat, the congregation sang the familiar hymn:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior’s blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain—
For me, who Him to death pursued?

Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
He left His Father’s throne above
So free, so infinite His grace—
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam’s helpless race:
’Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th’eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.³

By the time the congregational singing had reached the line “No condemnation now I dread,” an overwhelming peace had come over me, and I knew that God’s judgment for sin had fallen on Christ. Even though I had sinned against God in many ways, his judicial verdict regarding me
was “not guilty” because of what Christ had done for me. I had blessed assurance of salvation, and though I had no idea of what God might have in store for me, at that moment it did not matter. Having been justified with God, I had peace with him in the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1).

My New Life in Christ
Then, quickly, like a series of falling dominoes, the Spirit did his convicting work in me. I gradually examined and severed several relationships with members of the opposite sex that I came to see did not honor God. I gave away most of my books and records (including some cherished Genesis, Supertramp, and Jethro Tull albums), and even my beloved ARP synthesizer on which I had played in a band (called “Stonehenge”) during my college years. I completed my doctoral studies in economics and social sciences at the University of Vienna (with a major in nonprofit management) and sought advice from some of the men at the Chapel (including my mentor, Hans Finzel) on pursuing theological training. Fearing the theological liberalism at many German universities, and feeling inadequate at my young spiritual age to judge which schools were theologically solid, I decided to attend seminary in the United States. In order to pay for my education, I sold an apartment (near the university) I had been given by my grandfather Hans, providing me with the funds needed to enter the United States as a foreign student (what at the time seemed to be a whopping amount—about $25,000). I wept most of the way when my sister Dorice took me to the Vienna airport as I left my native country of Austria, knowing I would never return to live there. Eight hours later, I arrived, close to midnight, at the Columbia (South Carolina) International Airport, with two suitcases carrying all of my earthly possessions. I was ready to start over and to begin my new life in Christ in earnest pursuit of “knowing Him and making Him known,” per the school motto of Columbia Bible College and Graduate School of Missions where I had enrolled. I was twenty-seven years old.

In the three years that followed, I studied Greek and Hebrew with men such as Drs. Paul Fowler, Paul Wright, William Larkin, Paul Ferris, and Alex Luc. I took courses in systematic theology and church history with Igou Hodges and Bill Davidson, among others. I received instruction in hermeneutics and ethics (Robertson McQuilkin), Old and New Testament survey (Terry Hulbert), and a variety of other subjects. Above all, during my third and final year of MDiv study, I met my future wife, Marny. The first time we talked was one Sunday afternoon while I was working
at the seminary switchboard for the then-minimum wage of $3.35 an hour. Later, we reconnected at an open women’s dorm, followed by a Valentine’s Day date (my level of interest in Marny can be gauged by the fact that I asked her to go out with me six weeks in advance; fortunately, that didn’t scare her off!).

After a year of courtship, we were engaged in the spring of 1989, and less than nine months later, we married in Scarborough, Canada, a suburb of Toronto, Ontario, where Marny had grown up. Hans Finzel, who had discipled me in Vienna during the two years following my conversion prior to my move to the United States, officiated at the wedding. Half a year later, it was off to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, where I felt irresistibly drawn to study under the tutelage of the accomplished scholar D. A. Carson. Having read his book *Exegetical Fallacies* during my seminary years in Columbia, I knew I wanted to pursue doctoral work with him, and God graciously made it possible for me to do so.

My years at Trinity (1990–1993) were among the best years of my life. While Marny selflessly and sacrificially worked as a nurse so I could go to school and earn my doctoral degree full-time, I devoured the New Testament scholarly literature with a voracity comparable to my thirst for Scripture in the early days of my faith. I had always been on a quest for learning, and now this craving zeroed in like a laser on this particular object of spiritual and scholarly interest. D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, Grant Osborne, and Scot McKnight provided me with tremendous role models of serious scholarship, and Nigel Cameron, the program director, exhibited an uncanny ability to administer, care for students, and nurture a community of learners in pursuit of academic excellence. In addition, I benefited from the wisdom of Kenneth Kantzer (who taught the Integrative Seminar), Thomas McComiskey, and Carl F. H. Henry (from a distance). I also developed a friendship with Harold O. J. (“Joe”) Brown, whose impeccable grasp of German and whose jovial nature, coupled with his intellectual rigor, made a deep impact on me.4

Part of me wished my time at Trinity and in the doctoral program would never come to an end. But after a little over three years, I had completed my dissertation (on the mission motif in John), and it was time to secure a position teaching the New Testament. I spent the next two years at Briercrest Bible College, a surprisingly large school in the Saskatchewan prairies. Those were years of preparing lecture notes on
New Testament survey, hermeneutics, and various Bible classes, as well as initial forays into publishing. Then, the opportunity presented itself to take D. A. Carson’s place at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School during one of his sabbaticals in Cambridge during the 1995–1996 academic year. So it was back to Trinity for another wonderful year, this time teaching the classes of my esteemed mentor. Knowing that I had but a one-year appointment, I actively looked for another position and was hired by Dr. Paige Patterson to teach New Testament at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, a Southern Baptist school that had only recently taken a conservative turn. With two young children in tow, we packed the moving van and made the long trek from Saskatchewan to Wake Forest, hoping for a measure of permanence that had eluded us in the years up to that point during which we had moved close to ten times in as many years.

Our Wake Forest years (which continue to this day) have been years of personal growth and ministry. About four years into my tenure at Southeastern, the position of director of PhD studies opened up when the director, Dr. David Puckett, decided to devote himself to serving as the full-time founding principal of Trinity Academy, a Christian school in Raleigh, North Carolina (he later became the PhD director at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, a position he still holds). In short order, I was appointed associate director and then director of these programs, a post I have now occupied for over ten years. My wife, Marny, besides giving birth to two more children and seeing to her many other duties, also managed to complete a ThD (doctor of theology) in systematic theology at UNISA (with a dissertation topic on feminist hermeneutics). Apart from homeschooling our children, she is teaching adjunctively as professor of women’s studies at Southeastern and serving in the women’s ministry at our local church.

The Plan and Purpose for This Book

Why This Book?

Why did I want to write this book? Essentially, it was to discharge a burden: pleading with zealous young theological students not to sacrifice their scholarly integrity for the sake of attaining academic respectability. My message to these individuals is that believing scholarship is not only possible but in fact is more virtuous than critical, unbelieving, or supposedly objective academic work. To this end, I urge all of us who sense
God’s call to scholarly labor to pursue earnestly, and with God’s help, the scholarly virtues discussed in this book. Again, Jesus’s words come to mind: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Yet, I fear that some have already strayed from the narrow path of a scholarship of integrity—dedicated to the glory of God and undergirded by a love and respect for his inspired Scriptures—having instead veered off onto the broad road of seeking to win the approval of their academic peers, or at least avoiding their disapproval. Some may, chameleon-like, have chosen “safe” topics that do not require them to reveal their true spiritual colors. Others may have caved in to prevailing paradigms that are en vogue among the current scholarly elite—though they may be here today and be replaced by another, new paradigm tomorrow. Yet others have moved from conservative to liberal to agnostic or have slid at least part of the way on this slippery slope.

Academic and social approval is not worth the loss of integrity. To be sure, some detractors may contend that “evangelical scholarship” is an oxymoron and that the truly enlightened scholar will cast off all constraints of doctrine and pursue his or her scholarship once freed from such confessionalism. Other detractors may be disturbed by the exclusivity of the gospel and succumb to the pressures of religious pluralism in a religiously diverse culture. To both sets of detractors, I say that “evangelical” and “scholarship” can in fact be wonderfully wedded together.

Similar to the realm of science, where faith in God may fuel a joy of wonder and discovery of the world God made, the biblical scholar, once liberated from his or her unbelief and skeptical mindset and grounded in the fear of God and his Word, will be open to explore God’s revelation in history as recorded in Scripture. In this, he or she will gladly follow Anselm of Canterbury’s famous dicta, credo ut intellegam (“I believe so that I may understand,” based on a saying by Augustine of Hippo) and fides quaerens intellectum (“faith seeking understanding”). As the apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians almost two millennia ago,

For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the
Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:11–16)

In this passage, Paul bears telling testimony to the fact that it is only by the Spirit that the person interpreting Scripture is able to understand the thoughts of God. Far from being a hindrance, faith is thus an essential prerequisite for the interpretation of Scripture.

The Plan for This Book

In the following pages, I will take you on a journey in the pursuit of personal and academic excellence. In the opening chapter, I will first raise the question, “Why excellence?” As we will see, the answer is bound up with the nature and character of God. In chapter 2, I will present 2 Peter 1:3–11 as the inspiration, model, and scriptural foundation for the pursuit of excellence discussed throughout this book. On the basis of God’s excellence and grace, and employing a rhetorical zeugma, Peter exhorts believers to add various godly virtues to their faith. The presence and increase of these godly virtues, in turn, will result in effective ministry.

In addition, chapter 2 discusses two important concepts: virtue and vocation. In recent years, evangelicals have at times neglected discussions of virtue, perhaps because we have been too busy with pragmatic activism to take the time to ponder the deeper aspects and implications of our faith. Yet this neglect of virtue has been to our detriment, because growth in godly virtues is central to our pursuit of excellence. In the same vein, we must recapture a proper understanding of vocation. As Christians, we do not merely have jobs or careers but rather vocations. Each Christian has been called by God to serve in a particular way. God’s calling invests our day-by-day duties with transcendent significance and provides the motivation necessary to pursue excellence in whatever task we find ourselves engaged.

Chapter 3 takes up the relationship between holiness and excellence, engages in a brief biblical-theological analysis of holiness and sanctification, and discusses what it means for a scholar to be holy. Both Testaments bear witness to the fact that God’s people are holy because they are the
special people of the holy God and yet must pursue holiness because God is characteristically and eternally holy. As Christians, and as Christian scholars, we are therefore already holy as God’s set-apart people yet must still continually pursue holiness, striving to grow in conformity to our holy God in our thoughts, words, and actions, and in our research, writing, and teaching. Being set apart unto God as a scholar also entails a rejection of the false modernist dichotomy between faith and scholarship, a wholehearted pursuit of truth, complete dependence on the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, a balanced life that does not turn our scholarship into an idol, an awareness that the primary orientation of our work is to be missional, and an engagement in spiritual warfare through faithful witness to the truth.

In chapter 4 I will explore genuine, biblical spirituality. The necessity of spirituality for our pursuit of excellence becomes abundantly clear as we begin to put the insights discussed in the previous chapters into practice and pursue holiness and growth in godly virtues in our day-to-day living. The presence, activity, and work of the Spirit are presented in Scripture as necessary for both sanctification and growth in virtue. Without the Spirit’s empowerment, our pursuit of holiness and excellence through growth in godly virtues will devolve into mere human self-effort that invariably results in pride and failure.

Biblical spirituality, at its core, entails the presence, activity, and work of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life, beginning at conversion with regeneration and continuing throughout the entire process of sanctification. What is more, Scripture ties spirituality closely to active obedience and an engagement of the world in one’s mission for God. Biblical spirituality does not consist primarily of mystical, emotional experience, inward impressions and feelings, introspective meditation, or a monastic withdrawal from the world. The primary spiritual disciplines advocated by Scripture are prayer and the obedient study of God’s Word.

These four initial chapters in part 1 lay the foundation for the discussion of the particular virtues necessary for academic excellence in parts 2 through 4. Each chapter in these latter three sections is structured in a similar manner so you can easily follow the discussion and refer back to relevant sections at a later time (though some variation is unavoidable due to the uniqueness of each virtue). Typically, each chapter begins with an initial discussion or definition of the respective virtue, followed by a more or less thorough biblical-theological investigation (depending
on factors such as the availability of material and the required degree of
detail). After this, I make specific application of the respective virtue to
the vocation of the Christian scholar.

While I take my cue from the list of virtues in 2 Peter 1:3–11, the
specific virtues selected for discussion are not identical to that list but
specific to the scholarly calling. Though these distinctions are not hard
and fast, part 2 focuses on virtues more related to vocational excellence
(diligence, courage, passion, restraint, creativity, eloquence); part 3 is
concerned with moral excellence (integrity, fidelity, wisdom); and part 4
is devoted to a discussion of relational excellence (grace, humility, inter-
dependence, and love). Undergirded by the grace of God, we will make
progress in our pursuit of excellence as we add to our faith the various
virtues discussed throughout this book. To adapt 2 Peter 1:5–7, therefore,
“Make every effort to add to your faith excellence, diligence, courage,
passion, restraint, creativity, eloquence, integrity, fidelity, wisdom, grace,
humility, interdependence, and love.”

How to Read This Book
This is a book you will want to read with both your head and your heart.
Come ready to evaluate the path you have taken and, if needed, reassess
the direction in which you are headed. Be open to see how God might use
some of the Scripture passages and personal examples cited in this book to
urge you on to greater fidelity and integrity as a person and as a scholar.
Be impressed by the fact that your identity and vocation are rooted in
God’s calling and commission, and be prepared to affirm, embrace, and
act on the realization that vocational, moral, and relational excellence
are inextricably wedded together.

Be impressed also by the fact that God’s call to scholarship, like any
divine calling, entails a call to die to self—which, in the case of scholars,
might particularly manifest itself in the form of aspirations to fame and
fortune, which, as mentioned, might lead to sacrificing doctrinal fidelity for
the sake of academic respectability. God’s call to scholarship also involves
dying to self-seeking arrogance and forsaking the allure of power, position,
and prestige, as well as steadfastly and resolutely resisting temptations to
sexual immorality and moral compromise.

You won’t want to be a fine scholar but a terrible, or even mediocre,
husband and father. You won’t want to excel in scholarship but fail as a
wife and mother. Neither should your calling as mother or father, and wife
or husband, necessarily induce you to engage in mediocre scholarship if
you are called to an academic career. If God is excellent—which he is—and if he has called you to pursue excellence in everything you do, then you should strive to excel both as a husband and father, or wife and mother, and as a scholar. Join me, then, on a journey of discovering some of the virtues that, if pursued diligently and consistently, will make you both a better person and a better scholar—without needing to sacrifice your faith at the altar of academic respectability.
Part One

FOUNDATIONS
FOR EXCELLENCE
The Excellence of God

The character of God is the grounds of all human excellence.

Why pursue excellence? Many young seminarians or doctoral students who are considering a career in the academic world find themselves pulled in a thousand different directions. They must find a way to support their spouse and children while still having enough money for tuition and books. They have exams for which to study, papers to research and write, sermons to prepare, and the yard to mow. Wouldn’t a book on simply surviving the process of becoming a scholar be more appropriate? Why focus on excellence when it is nearly impossible to keep your head above water from one assignment and deadline to the next?

Why Excellence?

Excellence is particularly important in such a context where the pressures toward sheer survival and mediocrity are particularly intense. Why? The primary reason for this is bound up with the nature and character of God. God is the grounds of all true excellence. He is the one who
fills any definition of excellence with meaning, and he is the reason why we cannot be content with lackluster mediocrity, halfhearted effort, or substandard scholarship. Excellence starts and ends with God and is first and foremost a hallmark and attribute of God. Without God as our starting point and continual frame of reference, our discussion of excellence would be hopelessly inadequate.

Systematic theologies generally do not list “excellence” as one of God’s attributes. For this reason it may appear at first glance that excellence is not all that important. This conclusion would be premature, however, for excellence can be viewed as an overarching divine attribute that encompasses all the others. *Everything God is and does is marked by excellence.* Wayne Grudem discusses God’s summary attributes of perfection, blessedness, beauty, and glory as “attributes that summarize his excellence.” Perfection indicates that “God lacks nothing in his excellence.” Blessedness points to the fact that “God takes pleasure in everything in creation that mirrors his own excellence.” Beauty is a reflection of God’s excellence, and “God’s glory is something that belongs to him alone and is the appropriate outward expression of his own excellence.” Understanding excellence as an all-encompassing attribute of God also means that the concept is not exhausted by the word “excellence.” Other descriptions of the uniqueness, greatness, glory, or perfection of God are pertinent as well.
On a basic level, we may think of excellence as the quality of standing out or towering above the rest, being eminent or superior (though not feeling superior, which is the essence of pride), and distinguishing oneself in some extraordinary or special way. As mentioned, God’s excellence is the ultimate point of reference for all true human excellence. Perhaps God’s attribute of perfection is most closely related to his excellence. God excels and is so far superior to all other beings in every way that perfection becomes the appropriate word to describe his excellence. In the book of Isaiah, God declares his own excellence, superiority, and preeminence as follows:

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
“I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.
Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.
Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people.
Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.
Fear not, nor be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
And you are my witnesses!
Is there a God besides me?
There is no Rock; I know not any.” (Isa. 44:6–8)

God lodges a similar claim concerning himself in the book of Jeremiah: “I will appoint over her whomever I choose. For who is like me? Who will summon me? What shepherd can stand before me?” (Jer. 49:19). God embodies true, unmatched excellence.

God’s perfect excellence, then, sets his communicable attributes apart from humanity’s possession and exercise of them. Humans, in their character and dealings with one another, may be marked by holiness, justice, love, mercy, and goodness to varying degrees, but God alone excels in all of these and does so to a perfect degree. Complete excellence characterizes everything God is and does. He is holiness, justice, and love, and he is holy, just, and loving in all that he does. This excellence of God rightly and frequently becomes the grounds of praise for God in Scripture. Peter, in his first epistle, notes how our change in status—the fact that we are now God’s own people—should result in praise, “that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous
light” (1 Pet. 2:9). We praise God, in part, because he is excellent, and the declaration of his excellent characteristics forms the content of our praise.

Apart from offering God praise, how should we respond to God’s excellence? In short, we should seek to imitate and emulate it. In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul issues a simple command that encapsulates the logic undergirding much of the exhortation found in Scripture: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph. 5:1). As God’s redeemed children, we are to strive to be like God. This, it appears, includes striving for excellence. As Millard Erickson writes:

God’s perfection is the standard for our moral character and the motivation for religious practice. The whole moral code follows from his holiness. . . . Because of God’s flawlessness, a similar quality is expected of those objects or persons set apart unto him.10

Also, many of the exhortations in the Sermon on the Mount are built on Jesus’s statement, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). We are called to emulate our perfect heavenly Father. In no way am I trying to blur the line between the divine and the human elements here. There is a clear sense in which God is God and we are not. We are not called to emulate what scholars call God’s “incommunicable attributes”—yet we are to strive to emulate those qualities that are communicable.11 To be sure, we will never become completely like God in his eternal, infinite excellence and perfection, but we must make every effort to grow in the virtues we are called to share. In the following pages, we will look at several of these attributes one by one and ponder how we can pursue various dimensions of excellence in our lives and especially in our scholarly pursuits for him.

Created in God’s Image

Not only should we strive for excellence because God himself is excellent, but also we ought to pursue excellence because we were each created in God’s image. What does it mean for humanity, both male and female, to have been made in the image of God? As I have written elsewhere:

Popular notions of what it means to be created in God’s image have often been unduly influenced by Greek concepts of personality. Thus, God’s image in the man and the woman has frequently been identified in terms of their possession of intelligence, a will, or emotions. While this may be
presupposed or implied to some extent in Genesis 1:27, the immediate context develops the notion of the divine image in the man and the woman in terms of representative rule (cf. Ps. 8:6–8). . . . While substantive elements of the divine image in man (that is, an analogy between the nature of God and characteristics of humans) cannot be ruled out, a functional understanding (humans exercising the function of ruling the earth for God) seems to reflect most accurately the emphasis in the biblical record.  

Our creation in God’s image, therefore, primarily relates to the fact that God placed humanity on the earth to rule it as his representatives. How can we best fulfill this role? It stands to reason that as beings created in God’s image, creatures who are called to exercise representative rule over his creation, we must do so with excellence. This is true even more so in a world that is fallen and because of sin falls short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23). The world desperately needs to see a display of what God is like. This extends to everything we are and do—our own personal lives, our marriages and families, our moral and ethical standards, and the pursuit of our calling, including scholarship.

As we have seen, God truly excels in the sense that he stands out from all the rest. His excellence is evident in his unmatched superiority to everyone and everything else. Because God is the proper standard of excellence, we should not measure our achievements by comparing ourselves with others. Our pursuit of excellence should not take place in the kind of competitive spirit according to which only few can participate and where in the end there is only one winner. Since we are all created in God’s image, everyone can be truly excellent. God is unique, and we are made uniquely in his image as distinct creatures. We can each achieve excellence as we are increasingly fulfilling the potential God has built into us.

The New Testament discussion of spiritual gifts emphasizes this uniqueness. We are not all the same; if we were, what would become of the body of Christ, the church (1 Cor. 12:19)? While this truth can liberate us from a sense of inferiority caused by improper comparison with others, it must not turn into an excuse for mediocrity and for failing to pursue the excellence for which God has created us. As God’s children made in his image, we should live our lives grounded in the conviction that excellence, while requiring considerable and consistent effort, is nonetheless within our reach. This includes the vocational, moral, and relational realms, all of which we will explore in some detail later on in this volume.
Since excellence, then, is an all-encompassing attribute of God, and since we are exhorted in Scripture to imitate God, having been made in his likeness, excellence should mark our lives as his children, extending both to who we are (our character and our relationships) and what we do (our work or vocation). Excellence should characterize every thought we have, every paper we write, every relationship we pursue, every assignment we undertake, and every word we speak (see, e.g., Matt. 12:36–37; Eph. 4:29; James 3:1–12). 

*Excellence should describe our lives in their totality and encompass every area of our lives, no matter how large or small.*

At this point, the difference between ideal and reality becomes glaringly obvious. Far too often, we evangelicals are *not* characterized by excellence in our character and pursuits. On a moral level, the divorce rate of Christian marriages differs little from that of non-Christian ones. When others think of Christianity, they frequently think of scandals in the lives of religious leaders, whether financial or sexual (no doubt influenced to some degree by media attention). When it comes to evangelical scholarship, the situation is not all that different. Although the past few decades have witnessed a remarkable rise in the quality of evangelical scholarship, we are still not at a place where scholars in the field would readily associate “evangelical” with “excellence,” especially when scholarship is defined as advancing knowledge in a given field.

**Rest**

One (perhaps surprising) way to increase excellence in our work is to imitate God in his “rest.” In the creation narrative, we learn that God, after creating the universe, set aside a special day of rest (Gen. 2:2–3). Subsequently, God’s people were to keep the Sabbath as a day on which they refrained from work (Ex. 20:8–11). The same principle is also operative in the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:1–22). Later, it was made clear that the Israelites’ entry into the Promised Land serves as a symbol of the rest God’s people can look forward to enjoying one day in heaven (Heb. 3:7–4:13). Therefore, as the writer of Hebrews states, “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his” (Heb. 4:9–10).

In the meantime, the psalmist calls God’s people to “be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). We are to rest in the peaceful assurance that we have a God who loves us and provides for us and who will never let
us down. Even in our spiritual battles, we can know that the battle is won “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit” (Zech. 4:6). Make no mistake about it: we will still have to fight the battles; but as we do so, it will not be our strength (or lack thereof) that carries the day, but God’s power working for us, in us, and through us. In our work, therefore, we should rest in God and rely on his power in us. As the apostle Paul wrote regarding his goal of presenting everyone mature in Christ, “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Col. 1:28–29).

In the midst of our busy lives, we need to learn to look to the Lord in faith and to wait for him to act on our behalf, accomplishing his good purposes in and through us. In other words, we must learn to value God’s grace and live by it—relying on it each and every day. As scholars, likewise, we need to be still before God and await his direction. What are the topics he wants us to research? What is the contribution he wants us to make to the academy and to the church in light of the natural and spiritual gifts and abilities he has bestowed on us?

Scripture teaches that God cares intimately for every detail of our lives. Can we not also expect him to guide us in specific steps of research and in the writing process? Too often, we are overworked and frantically try to meet deadlines and juggle family and work responsibilities while leaving God out of the picture. We need to cultivate the discipline of rest, of regular time set aside for reflection, planning, and relaxation. In the long run, this will ensure that we will be at our most productive. I often find that after a week or two away from the office, I return invigorated, sharper, and more focused and alert.

This is true even more in the case of that most wonderful of all academic privileges—the sabbatical leave. Inevitably, we will get worn down if not burnt out after teaching Sunday school or preaching in the pulpit Sunday after Sunday. We give out week after week, only to find that we end up depleted and in desperate need of a tune-up. That’s where a sabbatical can work wonders. Not only can we catch up on those pent-up writing projects, and perhaps engage in various other professional development activities, but we can also recharge our batteries by traveling to other places, spending extra time with family and friends, and engaging in stimulating conversations with colleagues or other scholarly peers.

Well-planned and profitably spent sabbaticals are truly in the best interest of the institution where we serve, of the students we teach, and of
our own personal and professional pilgrimage. Blessed are those schools and faculty members—and churches and pastors!—who have a sabbatical policy. The principle, then, is this: rest in God’s grace, look to him for guidance, and then do the work (in that order!). Don’t put self-effort and striving ahead of listening to God. And balance hard work with regular rest and relaxation (which means don’t forget to take a vacation once in a while, or take a day off on your son’s or daughter’s birthday or on your anniversary).

In Pursuit of Excellence

In this spirit, therefore, let us pursue excellence. As we have seen, far from being optional, excellence is in fact a divine mandate that applies to every aspect of our lives, for God himself is characterized by excellence. Mediocrity, sloppy workmanship, and a half-hearted effort do not bring glory to God or advance his kingdom. How do we move from mediocrity to excellence? How do we advance from “good” to “great”? This book represents an attempt to probe the nature of scholarly excellence and to suggest ways in which we can make progress in our quest to achieve it.

Yet this is not another self-help book! The message here is not simply to try harder, to put in more effort, and to make things happen through sheer force of will. Salvation is entirely by God’s grace (Eph. 2:8–9), and sanctification is by grace as well (Eph. 2:10). This means that the pursuit of scholarly excellence must be undergirded by a keen sense of God’s continual grace in the personal and professional spheres of our lives and that we should pursue scholarly excellence in an environment of grace, not in a spirit of self-effort or unhealthy competition.

In a remarkable and highly pertinent passage in his letter to the Philippian, the apostle Paul holds human striving and divine enablement in proper tension when he writes, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13; cf. Phil. 1:6). God is at work within us to develop excellence for his own glory, and at the same time we must also make every effort to pursue the excellence to which God has called us.

In this regard, we will do well to appreciate the vital importance of mentoring. How will we be able to pursue scholarly excellence if we have not been taught how to do so and if we have not seen the pursuit of excellence consistently lived out in the lives of others? Paul and Timothy provide a well-known biblical example of this dynamic: “You, however,
The Excellence of God

have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me” (2 Tim. 3:10–11). Just as Paul called God’s people to be imitators of God as his beloved children (Eph. 5:1), he also wrote, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). The pattern of imitation is thus to proceed from God to Christ to the mentor and to the mentee.

Jesus, likewise, exhibited a similar dynamic in relationship to his Father: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” (John 5:19). At another occasion, Jesus observed that “everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). Jesus’s calling and training of the Twelve constituted a central part of his earthly ministry. This book cannot substitute for a flesh-and-blood mentor, but perhaps it can help you follow the calling of God in your life and inspire you to pursue greater excellence in your fulfillment of that call.
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