

# **EXCELLENCE: THE CHARACTER OF GOD AND THE PURSUIT OF SCHOLARLY VIRTUE**

Andreas Köstenberger  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC

## I. INTRODUCTION

As evangelicals, we have too often, in Francis Schaeffer’s words, been “addicted to mediocrity,” and this trend has in many ways become a curse—a curse that has kept us from reaching our personal, creative, and academic potential given to us by God, and has prevented us from impacting other believers and unbelievers for the glory of God and his kingdom. But our God is excellent, and the excellence of our God calls us to excellence in all that we do—including biblical and theological scholarship. I wrote my book on excellence to discharge a burden: pleading with theology students, in particular, not to sacrifice their scholarly integrity for the sake of attaining academic respectability. I urge all of us who sense God’s call to academic work to pursue earnestly, and with God’s help, scholarly virtues that reflect the character of God. Sadly, however, many have already strayed from the narrow path of scholarly integrity and have instead veered off onto the broad road of seeking to win the approval of their academic peers, or at least avoiding their disapproval. I think of one bright young Old Testament student who was a close friend during my M.Div. years at Columbia International University. Later, I went to Trinity to study with Don Carson, while he went to UNC-Chapel Hill to work with some rather critical scholars there. After we graduated with our respective degrees, I was hired at Southeastern, just a few years after the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention, while my friend ended up at a school known for its left-leaning bent both theologically and politically. Since

then, my friend has written several works strongly attacking the truthfulness of Scripture. What happened? Of course matters are always more complex, but at the heart, it seems at least to me that here is a young man who imbibed from the deep well of critical scholarship and got intoxicated with the sweet wine of the approval of his scholarly peers. To quote William Baird's memorable characterization of liberal Enlightenment scholarship in the first volume of his book *History of New Testament Research*, "Having eaten of the tree of *Wissenschaft*, they had become like God, knowing the difference between fact and fable."

Do not buy for a minute the lie that scholarship and faith are mutually exclusive. Contrary to our detractors, "evangelical" and "scholar" can be wonderfully wedded together. In fact, when studying Scripture, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:11–16 that a faith stance is indispensable. Far from being a hindrance, faith is an essential prerequisite for interpreting the Bible. In fact, our faith ought to raise our scholarship to a higher level than that of unbelievers. What is more, because of the *object* of our faith, scholarly excellence in the biblical and theological realms is defined by more than mere *academic* standards; it is defined by how well our scholarly work reflects the character and excellence of God himself. So what is excellence?

## II. EXCELLENCE: A DEFINITION

One possible way to grasp the essence of excellence is to understand it as the quality of standing out or towering above the rest, as being eminent or superior. Clearly, by that token, God pre-eminently qualifies as being excellent. Consider Isaiah 44:6–8, for example, where God says,

I am the first and I am the last;  
 Beside me there is no god.  
 Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.  
 Let him 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.

In this passage in Isaiah, the prophet focuses on God's ability to predict the future. Because God is eternal—he is the first and the last—he, and he alone, knows all things and is able to predict what will happen centuries after Isaiah's time. But God's excellence is in no way limited to his eternality and divine foreknowledge. Everything God is and does is marked by excellence. Wayne Grudem classifies God's attributes of perfection, blessedness, beauty, and glory as "attributes that summarize

his excellence.” Understanding excellence as an all-encompassing attribute of God means that the *concept* of excellence is not exhausted by the *word*. Other characterizations of the uniqueness, greatness, glory, and perfection of God are pertinent as well.

God’s perfect excellence, in turn, sets the standard for us as human beings in our pursuit of excellence. As Peter tells us in 2 Peter 1:3, a passage to which we will shortly return in greater detail, God—who, as we have seen, is himself infinitely excellent and glorious—has “called us to his own glory and excellence.” But what does it mean for us as biblical scholars to stand out and tower above the rest? And how do we know? Should we look to an anthology of quotes by well-known people? Should we consult our favorite business guru, or listen to a celebrated TV talk show host? I submit to you that, as Christians, we should look first and foremost to the character of God. The world may define success in terms of money, power, or prestige. We should pursue excellence because God is excellent and because he deserves no less from his followers. God has called us to pursue excellence—*his* excellence. In turn, that requires and inspires two appropriate responses on our part: proclamation and imitation.

### III. OUR RESPONSE: PROCLAMATION AND IMITATION

#### 1. Proclamation

Our first task in response to God’s excellence is that of proclamation. The 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: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9, citing Exodus 19:6 and other Old Testament passages and alluding to Isaiah 42:16) The very purpose for which God has given us this new identity as his chosen, royal, and holy people is so that we may proclaim his excellence. But God’s excellence calls us to do more than proclaim it—we are to imitate it as well.

#### 2. Imitation

The second task related to God’s excellence is that of imitation. God has created us in his image. In essence, this means that God placed us on this earth to rule it as his representatives. How can we best fulfill this role? Paul, writing to the Ephesian church, urges, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Ephesians 5:1). As God’s redeemed children, we are to strive to be more like God. This 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.” 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. Second Peter 1:3–11 demonstrates how, having been made new creatures in Christ, we as believers should pursue God’s excellence. So let us now take a closer look at one of the most important passages on our topic of excellence, 2 Peter 1:3–11.

#### IV. THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE (2 PETER 1:3-11)

As we pursue excellence, we must not forget that it is God who is at work in us and who provides everything that we need to pursue it. Consider 2 Peter 1:3 and 5:

For His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence (*aretē*; v. 3)

Make every effort to supplement your faith with excellence (*aretē*), excellence (*aretē*) with knowledge ... (v. 5)

Our pursuit of excellence is grounded in God’s glory and is accomplished through God’s power working in us. We do not pursue excellence in our own strength, but trust that God’s power working in us will produce the fruit of excellence in our lives. As we are properly grounded in God’s glory and power, Peter urges us to make every effort to add a series of Christian virtues to our faith. He goes on to say:

For, if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they will keep you from being useless or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 8)

Therefore, brothers, make every effort to confirm your calling and election, because if you do these things you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly supplied to you (vv. 11–12)

There is great blessing in pursuing excellence and grave danger in indulging in sluggishness. Peter is determined to motivate his readers to action: to exert the moral effort that is both required and expected by their divine calling. In view of his impending death, the apostle is resolved to

remind his readers of their need to cultivate these virtues. Peter wants to make sure we do not take God's calling lightly but use it to motivate us to put in an intentional effort to add virtues to our faith.

Perhaps a brief glimpse at the subject of holiness will better help us understand the call to excellence. Similar to excellence, holiness is grounded in the character of God because he is completely holy, set apart from all else. Yet God also calls his people to be holy as he is holy and as in the case of God's call to excellence, his call to holiness is grounded in his grace. It is rooted in the fact that God has *already* set us apart by his grace. In this sense, God has *already* made us holy. Yet in another sense, we are now called to *pursue* holiness. Thus the call to holiness is a call to *become what we already are*. God has *both made* us holy, that is, set us apart for himself, and *is making us* holy, that is, transforming us more and more so that we increasingly resemble his beloved Son. For this reason we do not pursue holiness so that God might deem us holy. Rather, we pursue holiness because God has already *made* us holy and even now is working in us to produce *himself* the holiness for which we strive. So, let us strive all the more to attain greater holiness and excellence because we know that God is at work in us and will certainly accomplish what he sets out to do.

In order to fully conceive and embrace this reality, in turn, we must strive to develop a more robust spirituality. I am not talking about the spirituality of Oprah Winfrey or Eastern mysticism. I am talking about a robust understanding of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. Biblical spirituality involves the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life beginning at conversion and regeneration and continuing on throughout the entire process of sanctification. A vibrant and full-orbed spirituality, as exhibited by Jesus, involves active engagement with the world as we embark on our mission for God and are empowered by the Holy Spirit. For this reason our pursuit of excellence can only succeed if it is grounded in God's work both *for* us and *in* us. Now that we have laid a proper foundation for an understanding of what it means to pursue excellence, biblically defined, we are ready to tackle the question: What does it look like for us to pursue excellence as evangelical scholars?

## V. THE PURSUIT OF SPECIFIC VIRTUES

In my new book, I discuss a total of thirteen virtues in three broad categories: vocational, moral, and relational excellence. For my time here today, I decided to pick one virtue in each category just as an illustration of what it looks like to pursue excellence in each of these areas. I will start with a virtue that is part of pursuing *vocational* excellence, namely, the virtue of courage.

### 1. Courage

When you think about courage, the image of a scholar reading a book or typing away on a computer in a stuffy study does not readily spring to mind. Yet courage is precisely what an evangelical scholar needs to avoid sacrificing his or her integrity for the sake of academic respectability. Pressures abound to go with the flow of the scholarly consensus, and the academy often marginalizes those who buck the system. This calls for conviction, commitment, and courage. Will we hide our faith commitments through carefully chosen language to gain a wider academic audience for our research? Will the doctoral student choose a “safe” topic in order not to sacrifice his or her chances to get a degree? Will the author refrain from speaking out in order not to jeopardize a book contract with a leading publisher? Courage, combined with trust in God, will not choose the path of least resistance.

### 2. Wisdom

A virtue we ought to pursue in the moral realm is wisdom. True wisdom, which is rooted in the fear of God, is more than mere knowledge or erudition. Among other things, it entails discernment, prudence, and sanctified common sense. The wise scholar will know how to weigh the evidence and will not be impractical or merely theoretical. He will appreciate and draw attention to the real-life value and application of his research. Wisdom entails the ability to apply knowledge to a concrete situation with which we are confronted and to choose a biblical, prudent, and advisable course of action.

With regard to research, wisdom is indispensable for excellent scholarship and results in judicious, seasoned, and balanced work. A wise scholar will be able to weigh different sides of an issue and be sensible in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of an argument. With regard to publishing, wise scholars are not impulsive or overly quick to publish. They recognize that publishing is not simply about airing their own opinions, but rather involves interacting discerningly with the available literature and advancing the body of knowledge in a given field. Because our culture prizes speed and wants things instantaneously, there is a built-in bias against wisdom that slows things down. Wisdom, however, will often exercise healthy caution and delay the publication of material in order to gain counsel and feedback (including blogging, tweeting, and sending emails).

### 3. Interdependence

Finally, I have chosen interdependence to represent the category of relational excellence. Interdependence may not seem like the most obvious topic in a book on achieving scholarly excellence. It is certainly

not as self-evident as some of the other virtues. Yet it is just as vital an ingredient for the achievement of true scholarly excellence. The notion of the self-sufficient, autonomous scholar who works in complete isolation from others in producing great works of scholarship is not borne out by the reality of the demands placed on scholars today. Not only is interdependence required for greater excellence and larger influence in our work. It also reflects the reality of the scholarly task: we desperately need one another.

There are many different spheres of interdependence that require us to engage and interact with various people. These include relationships in our family, church, and work, as well as relationships with friends and neighbors. Scholarly excellence depends upon healthy relationships with others in these various communities. Our family relationships are the most important of all. No career is worth the loss of our spouse or children due to busyness and neglect. God makes clear that Christian leaders, in particular, must give proper attention to their families and lead them in a godly manner. Developing a healthy relationship with the local church is also extremely significant for evangelical scholars, whose work ultimately serves to glorify God by edifying the church. Interdependence also means that scholars should pursue collaborative work, which can allow others with expertise in different fields to supplement your expertise. In my own case, *God, Marriage & Family*, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, and *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* are all examples of collaborative work (with an ethicist, a canon specialist, and an Old Testament scholar, respectively).

## VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, God calls us to be excellent because he is excellent. But it is not just that *he* is excellent and that he calls *us* to pursue excellence. He has *given us everything we need* to seek vocational, moral, and relational excellence in the power of the Holy Spirit. The pursuit of excellence is a habit, the pursuit of a lifetime, a commitment that must continually be renewed. Let us strive to be excellent in everything we do, and reflect God's glory in all our work, because he is excellent and worthy of glory, and praise, and honor, forever and ever.

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