

Chapter One

The Journey of Character Formation

Our culture has a fascination with technology. Several years ago David Wells, author of *No Place for Truth* (1993), spoke about his father, born in 1898, who fought with a sword in the cavalry during the First World War.¹ Though his father is deceased, Wells reasoned it is quite possible that within the living memory of some is contained the shift from fighting with swords to fighting with drones and high-tech weaponry.

We have duplicated that kind of advancement in technology in every corner of life. For example, life expectancy has almost doubled in the last century. Science has eradicated many of the diseases that used to cut life short. In his lecture, Wells observed, “We are no longer cold in winter nor hot in summer. We have food from around the world any time of season.”²

This wildfire of technological advance is not in itself a cause of concern. The extraordinary conquest of the outward world does, however, cause us to believe that we can duplicate that success in the inward world of the psyche by similar means. Whatever the experience—anxiety, guilt, unhappiness, depression, or lack of motivation—a therapeutic cure exists.

In his address, Wells identified three phases our culture has experienced to arrive at a therapeutic state of mind.³ First, we have moved from emphasizing virtue to stressing value. The former focuses on normative qualities such as integrity, humility, faithfulness, and self-control. The latter focuses on what is important to me in my life. “Value” emphasizes personal

1. Wells, “The Weightlessness of God.”

2. Ibid.

3. Wells develops these in more detail in his book *Losing Our Virtue*.

preferences.⁴ Second, our culture has moved from identifying individuals as created in the image of God, and thus bound together in community, to identifying individuals by the self, unique from all others and each at the center of her own little world. Third, North American culture has moved from accentuating character to highlighting personality. This transition shifts the focus from internal qualities to external appearances. When specific virtues become habits in a person's life, character results. In contrast personality is defined as "image making," a concern with creating the right impressions.⁵

We have moved from a moral to a therapeutic culture, one that gives primacy to feelings and to finding relief from tension, emotional discomfort, and frustration. The problem with all of this is Christianity's response. Rather than setting out to influence or change culture, Christianity frequently succumbs to imitating the therapeutic mindset. As Robert Wuthnow observes, spirituality now primarily concerns itself with providing therapy. No longer do we look to the church to tell us what choices to make but to confirm for us the choices we already have made.⁶ The church in general no longer offers guidance in making daily moral decisions about Christian conduct. Instead religion helps individuals to relieve anxieties or frustrations. We view our relationship with God as a way of enabling us to feel better about the decisions we make and about the lifestyle we choose to live.⁷ Wuthnow reaches the following conclusion: "Religious convictions seem to operate at the level of moods and feelings, more so than at the level of morals and behavior."⁸

There is, thankfully, a biblical corrective for this trend. Specifically, the aphoristic sayings which give the book of Proverbs its name are an enduring challenge to a therapeutic mindset that is primarily concerned with making us feel good rather than equipping us to be good. Through these proverbs

4. Though making a distinction between "virtue" and "value" can be helpful in understanding our culture's shift in perspective, in later chapters I use the two terms interchangeably. I do, however, make distinctions between "core values" and "personal values."

5. Stephen Covey discovered that for the first 150 years of this country, the key to being successful centered around the development of character. For the past seventy-five years it has shifted to a focus on methods and strategies. Covey, "Seven Habits."

6. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, 5.

7. James Davison Hunter makes the observation that when public or private schools want expert advice about moral education, they call on psychologists, psychiatrists, or social workers. The perspective of these professionals is therapeutic; the point of reference out of which they operate is the autonomous self (85–86). Hunter, *The Death of Character*.

8. *Ibid.*, 133.

we enter into the world of the sage and are led on a journey where wisdom⁹ is both our guide and our goal. The whole process is one of character formation. Wisdom is not content to leave us as we are but insists that we allow ourselves to be transformed by the power of God.

Character, that cluster of virtues that forms into habits, is a product of one's relationship with God and with other fellow humans. In as much as this character is the natural outgrowth of wisdom, it is important to realize that wisdom, as expressed in Proverbs, is relational. In coming into relationship with God and becoming involved in the lives of others, character takes shape. Character, being shaped by these relationships, in turn rejuvenates them, continually refreshing our love for God and for others. Wisdom engenders character that is both shaped by and shapes community.

THE PROLOGUE

It is necessary that this overarching plan of wisdom should be rooted primarily and overtly in God. The introductory poem of Proverbs 1:2–7 makes this clear:

For learning about wisdom and instruction,
 for understanding words of insight,
 for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
 righteousness, justice, and equity;
 to teach shrewdness to the simple,
 knowledge and prudence to the young—
 Let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
 and the discerning acquire skill,
 to understand a proverb and a figure,
 the words of the wise and their riddles.
 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
 fools despise wisdom and instruction.¹⁰

9. The idea of wisdom defies any single definition. But speaking in broad terms, wisdom embraces the task of learning how to live successfully. It involves the ability to cope with life's realities, not in the sense of dominating them, but in the sense of navigating the difficulties and assuming responsibility. Wisdom offers direction in connecting individuals to others and ultimately to God. Wisdom knows its limits. God ordered life in a certain way, building moral laws into its scheme. Wisdom seeks to live within those constraints.

10. Unless otherwise indicated, I quote from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Generally speaking, this translation faithfully conveys the thought of the Hebrew text in understandable and contemporary language. However, there are occasions where I offer my own translation because important subtleties in the Hebrew text are not conveyed by the NRSV.

Wisdom grounds moral education in a knowledge of God. The poem discloses this substructure, quoting one of the most repeated lines in the book: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.”¹¹ That the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom means that without this relationship one will never acquire true wisdom. This “beginning” is not in the *horizontal* sense of missing the first tire in an obstacle course and just skipping to the next. Rather it is in the *vertical* sense of a ladder. If the student misses the first step of the ladder then progress cannot be made to the next step.¹² What the letters of the alphabet are to reading and notes to music, the fear of the Lord is to wisdom.¹³

In our modern spirituality, “fear” is not typically a stance toward God which is advocated regularly from the pulpits. Nevertheless, Proverbs makes clear that the fear of the Lord is the essence of wisdom. At its most basic level, fearing the Lord means that the center of life is not our world; it is located beyond.¹⁴ To fear God is to realize that there is a moral locus outside of the self—a message which ought to be sounded from the pulpits. The beginning of wisdom is to come to the realization that fulfillment and satisfaction are outside our own power. What we are looking for cannot be bought, sold, accumulated, or invested on Wall Street. Fulfillment is found somewhere else, in Someone else. It is found in pursuing wisdom that comes from God.¹⁵ When we develop the attitude of an inquirer, we are open to receiving God’s wisdom, which in turn shapes the character of our life.

This character-forming wisdom, rooted in God, is experienced in community. In studying sapiential instruction, I have discovered the ubiquitous presence of conversation and conflict. Character development flourishes only in a community where healthy confrontation exists. Without the rigors of such an environment, individual character becomes undisciplined. The sages believed strongly in the principle that “iron sharpens iron” when it came to human interaction. Growth comes through struggle, and struggle is manifested as constructive conflict in healthy relationships.

The sages built this concept of conflict and contradiction into the very text of Proverbs. One moment may demand a specific word of advice, but a different moment may demand just the opposite piece of advice. For example, sometimes one must refrain from answering a foolish person (26:4), but

11. “Knowledge” and “wisdom” in Proverbs are parallel concepts, and the terms are often used synonymously.

12. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, 181.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Allen, “Wisdom of the World and God’s,” 197.

15. *Ibid.*

sometimes one must respond to a fool (26:5). Sometimes wealth is viewed as unequivocally good (10:15) but sometimes it is a detriment (11:4). In addition, the sages live with the tension that exists between the sovereign Lord on the one hand and the exercise of human freedom on the other (16:1–9). Humans plan their way but the Lord has the final word (16:1). The sages incorporate tension into the very process of instruction itself, often placing contradictory proverbs side-by-side, requiring students to work through the issues for themselves. Character needs a rigorous climate in which to grow.

This hard won wisdom is essentially available to all who are willing to seek it out. The introductory poem does mention two groups specifically, however, that are the intended audience of the instruction in Proverbs. The first group is the “simple” or the “youth” (v. 4).¹⁶ The terms are used interchangeably to describe the inexperienced, the impressionable ones, the ones open to learning. The “simple” include the pliable ones and those easily influenced, but their naiveté leaves them vulnerable to influences from both good and bad sources. That is why in Proverbs the simple are sometimes associated with the fool. They have succumbed to the persuasion of the wrong group.

A second group also receives moral instruction. This group, “the wise” and “the discerning,” are those who already possess a level of experience and understanding (v. 5). The “wise” are those who continue to open themselves to constructive reproof and who continue to grow and learn (see 9:8b–9a). In wisdom’s world, no one is ever too old to learn. It is true that the older a person gets the less the desire to change due to set patterns established over the years. Still, age is not the most important factor in the ability to grow. According to behavioral scientists, “As long as there is an environment surrounding the person—and always there is that—he or she can change.”¹⁷ An increasing number of educators, in fact, are coming to speak of “intelligence” not in terms of IQ, a fixed intelligence quotient set at birth, but rather intelligence defined as the ability to adapt. Life is a long series of adaptations, moves, changes, beginnings and endings, and the wise are those who can make the appropriate adaptations necessary for lifelong learning.

Not only is wisdom open to people of all ages, it is also available to both male and female. True, the social context of Proverbs is a male dominated

16. The social context of Proverbs is the world of the young adult (15–25 years of age). This is evidenced in the kind of advice given. Youth are to stay away from gang related activities (1:8–19); they are to avoid the temptress (2:16–19; 5:1–23; 6:20–35; 7:6–27); they are to avoid the overuse of wine (23:29–35); they are to live a disciplined life and not yield to the temptation to slothfulness (6:6–11; 24:30–34). This advice is blunt and graphic, the kind given to young adults, not grade school children!

17. Cited in Clouse, *Teaching for Moral Growth*, 185.

society. The sages in chapters 1–9 address the son. As I have just mentioned, however, an important quality of wisdom is its ability to adapt to different times and contexts. One must read Proverbs with a perspective that sees the sage using the father/son relationship as an example of how wisdom is imparted in a particular transitional setting of life to a particular type of person, the young adult male. Wisdom calls on the reader to implement these educational principles into other settings and transitional moments, for example, between older and younger women or between mothers and sons or fathers and daughters.¹⁸ Wisdom is available to all who possess open hearts and minds and a desire to learn.

The introductory poem also identifies a third group, but, surprisingly, this group lies beyond hope of receiving instruction. Proverbs calls this group “fools.” The final line of the poem proclaims, “fools despise wisdom and instruction” (v. 7b). The fool in Wisdom Literature is not inept, clumsy, or slow-witted. Rather in Proverbs the fool is a moral category, one who lacks character.¹⁹ Obstinance and closed-mindedness characterize the “fool” (1:7). The “fool” is “wise in his own eyes” (26:5). That is, the fool does not rely on the counsel or advice of others. The “fool” creates his own world apart from the faith community. All through Proverbs the fool serves as a foil against which the sage offers instruction directed toward the youth and toward all who cultivate open-mindedness.

In a sense, the category of “the fool” is the most important of all. By showing readers that the only true characteristic that makes one irredeemable is a stance of obstinance towards God and others, the sage throws wisdom open to the rest of us. The primary qualifications for receiving wisdom are not related to age, gender, IQ, or socio-economic status. What allows us to pursue the character-forming power of wisdom is openness toward God and the wisdom which can be gleaned from the community. So the truly wise ones humbly submit themselves to God. They reflect on and learn from their own mistakes. They make themselves vulnerable to the instructions, observations, and reproofs of others. They see life as a journey in which God’s discipline molds them into his image (3:11–12).

In short, the truly wise one is the person who lives life focused not on self but on seeking God (Prov. 3:5–7). This quest naturally generates character, certain wisdom virtues like prudence, self-control, righteousness, and justice (1:3).²⁰ In turn, these virtues orient and order life in community.

18. See chapter 2 under the heading “Educational Process and Context” for further development of this.

19. See Pemberton, “It’s A Fool’s Life.”

20. As Tremper Longman notes, “wisdom in Proverbs is an ethical quality.” See Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 17.

They enable us to manifest right behavior toward others. While these principles are introduced in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, it is only later in the sentence literature of chapters 10–29 that the sages will attempt to flesh out these virtues into concrete behavior. The sentence literature is the sages' attempt to put righteousness in working clothes.²¹ This is what wisdom offers moral education.

This book is designed to help the reader participate in that journey. The intention is to introduce the reader to the world of wisdom, to the process and content of moral instruction, and to the resources available for the formation of character. The interest in the development of moral character in Wisdom Literature,²² and specifically in Proverbs, has received little attention among scholars. This should not surprise us since many scholars marginalize the book of Proverbs.²³ Contrary to popular opinion, however, Wisdom Literature plays a vital role in the theology of the Old Testament.²⁴ One of my goals for this book is to highlight the contribution Proverbs makes to the task of character formation in individuals open to a lifelong process of learning. I work at presenting the nuances of the theology of character from the sentence literature in Proverbs chapters 10–29.

Studies on Proverbs frequently gravitate more toward the first nine chapters and the last chapter, known as instruction literature. In reality, however, these chapters primarily serve as the narrative introduction and conclusion to the sentence literature that nestles in-between (10:1–22:16; 25–29).²⁵ The sentence literature contains the specific instructions upon

21. Kidner, *The Proverbs*, 35.

22. Wisdom Literature generally includes the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.

23. There are a number of reasons why previous scholarship made the book marginal: 1) Canonically, it appears in the third and least authoritative section of the Hebrew Scriptures. 2) Theologically, wisdom does not seem to fit into the frame of the rest of the Old Testament. Gerhard von Rad's emphasis on *heilsgeschichte* and Walter Eichrodt's use of covenant marginalized the Wisdom Literature. Wisdom Literature is deemed anthropocentric. It is centered on human achievement and ability. In the opinion of some, Proverbs is too secular for the rest of the biblical neighborhood. 3) Formally, wisdom is not narrative as is many parts of the Old Testament. How one deals with what appears to be random collections of proverbs is an enigma. The self-contained proverbs have no literary context. They thus give the appearance of moralistic platitudes.

24. Of late the theological tide has shifted and more and more scholars like William Brown, Walter Brueggemann, James Crenshaw, Ellen Davis, Tremper Longman, Leo Perdue, and others have brought Wisdom Literature into the mainstream of study.

25. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, 179–208. Michael Fox refers to chapters 1–9 as the “hermeneutical preamble to the rest of the book” (346). Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*. The term “sentence literature” refers to the pithy two-line sentence proverbs located mainly in chapters 10–29.

which Woman Wisdom invites her guests to feast. Yet chapters 10–29 typically have not been taken seriously. The popular consensus labels them as pedantic, secular, and lightweight. William Willimon expresses the sentiments of many when he says, “Generally, I dislike the book of Proverbs with its lack of theological content, its long lists of platitudinous advice, its ‘do this’ and ‘don’t do that.’ Pick up your socks. Be nice to salesclerks. It doesn’t hurt to be nice. Proverbs is something like being trapped on a long road trip with your mother, or at least with William Bennett.”²⁶ The proverbs contain little that deserves serious reflection.

That perspective, however, remains far from true. The reader who earnestly wrestles with these aphorisms, not releasing them until they divulge at least some of their rhetorical power and theological insight will not leave disappointed. They remain an untapped resource for those engaged in the acquisition of wisdom and in the development of character. Consequently this book attempts to usher the sentence literature back into the mainstream of discussion and to show their vitality as a resource in the process of character education. I intend to demonstrate the power of the proverb for character formation both for the individual and for the various faith communities to which we as individuals belong.

PROVERB CLUSTERS

To that end, I approach the sentence literature intending to expand the reader’s understanding of how they are edited and collected in the book. It is true that many of the proverbs stand on their own, like words in a dictionary, independent of a surrounding context.²⁷ Certain pockets of proverbs, however, appear to be intentionally grouped together. I want to highlight some of these proverb clusters. For example, Chapter Five in this book centers on Proverbs 27:14–19. Chapter Six focuses on Proverbs 25:11–15 and 26:1–9. Chapter Seven takes its cue from 15:13–17 as well as other proverb pairs located in the sentence literature sections. Chapter Eight keys in on Proverbs 16:1–9. In these texts it appears that the sages intentionally

26. Willimon, *Pastor*, 255–56. Also quoted in his *Proclamation and Theology*, 28.

27. Tremper Longman argues against the current trend to see an intentional organization to the sentence literature. Longman maintains that the sentence literature is more or less random with a few isolated collections here and there. There is, in his opinion, no overarching systematic structure to the book. He observes, “. . . a systematic collection of proverbs may give the wrong impression . . . that life is systematic and that Proverbs was a ‘how-to’ fix-it book” (p. 40). The lack of structure is intentional and “reflects the messiness of life” (p. 40). He believes the trend to see structure and clusters is imposed rather than discovered. See Longman, *Proverbs*.

grouped together proverbs of like mind. I do not hold to the conviction of Duane Garrett²⁸ and, to a lesser degree, R. N. Whybray²⁹ who see almost every proverb in the sentence literature woven into a larger context.³⁰ But there are occasions in the collections where proverbs are intentionally clustered in larger units. Where a reasonable case can be made for such a context, I want to mine those proverb pockets for what they reveal about the nature and content of sapiential instruction.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

What follows are eight chapters that introduce the reader to the goal, process, context, content, and resources of wisdom's instruction. In wisdom tradition, all of these components work together synergistically. By their nature each depends on the other. Even though at times in this volume one of these dimensions is highlighted over the other, none exists independently.

Chapter Two briefly identifies the goal and process of wisdom's instruction. The development of character did not ultimately exist for the sake of personal success. Rather it was in order to prepare youth on the brink of adulthood, as well as those with teachable spirits, to serve the larger community and to live in harmony with self and God. In order to accomplish this goal, the sages had at their disposal a number of instructional tools to assist in the process. These tools included, among other things, verbal instruction, negative and positive reinforcement, observation of life experiences, role-playing, and the art of discernment. The process of instruction was initiated within the context of the family.

With Chapter Three, the focus shifts away from the process and more toward the content of sapiential instruction. In contrast to a "values-clarification" approach, which leaves the choice of values to each individual, the sage engages in the practice of teaching specific core values to impressionable minds that in turn help to shape the life of the faith community.

The remaining chapters, Four through Nine, highlight fundamental resources the sages rely on in the educational process. Chapter Four describes the dynamic qualities of the primary oral tool the sages used in their instruction: the proverb. The chapter uses paremiological, rhetorical, and biblical disciplines to probe the inner forces at work in the proverb. The

28. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*.

29. Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs*.

30. Bruce Waltke in his two-volume commentary seeks to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the individual proverbs throughout the sentence literature. See Waltke *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* and *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*.

proverb possesses qualities that enable it to penetrate heart and mind and do its work in the process of forming character. Such qualities continue to make the proverb a viable tool in the education process.

Chapter Five highlights another key resource in the process: human dialogue. In order to challenge students to grow, the sages engage in the process of verbal exchange between individuals. Wisdom does not believe the formation of character occurs in a vacuum. Wisdom teachers do not give pat answers to perplexing issues of life. Rather students engage in dialogue with the community and out of that exchange make decisions, carry out actions, and create moral order. Students are not shaped in a cookie-cutter fashion. Character is formed in conversation.

Chapter Six explores the role language and speech play in the development of character. In Proverbs, the wise have more to say about the use and abuse of language than any other subject. This should come as no surprise considering the oral culture in which the sages worked. The wise believe that language not only shapes character, it also reveals character.

Chapter Seven accents the theme of material possessions and poverty. The sages were keenly interested in the proper use of wealth. More than any other book in Scripture, Proverbs projects an ambivalent attitude toward wealth and poverty. In and of itself the wise did not view wealth as either good or bad. Rather, it depended on the character of the one using it. Like language, the way one handles wealth not only forms character but also exposes character.

Chapter Eight identifies God as the most fundamental resource for character formation. This chapter highlights what is referred to as the “Yahweh proverbs” in order to better understand the sages’ perspective on God’s involvement in human life. Yahweh is the ever-present, underlying force at work that initiates and sustains the educational process. The God of the sages does not remain aloof, watching from a distance as events unfold in the life of people. God does not sporadically intervene with a miracle here or there. Nor does the Lord display a cloud by day or a pillar of fire by night so that the people know which direction to go. Instead, the sages’ God is involved in the details of daily living, working behind the scenes in the experiences and actions of creation. Yahweh works through human thoughts and decisions, all the while honoring the choices individuals make for themselves. Through such intricate and lovingly patient work, God shapes the character and will of those who remain open to learning.

Finally, I conclude with Chapter Nine and a reminder of the essential role community plays in the whole process, even though I reference its roll throughout the book. Chapter Nine offers a word of exhortation to the faith community to take responsibility for the moral education of its members.

No one party possesses sole responsibility. Rather, parents, families, friends, and the larger community all share a voice in molding individuals into responsible members in God's kingdom.

CONCLUSION

Wisdom as understood throughout Proverbs is not understood as an inherent quality or an object which can be obtained. Wisdom is a trajectory along which the wise grow as they proceed through life. Thus, the wise embark on a fascinating and often unpredictable adventure. Intrigue, disappointment, joy, suffering, conflict, dialogue, and satisfaction accompany every step. It is a journey initiated within the context of the family and perpetuated by the faith community. Wisdom offers no guarantees along the way regarding rewards or financial security or physical well-being, but it does guarantee the kind of character that enables individuals to live responsibly in community and that reflects the very nature of the God they serve. For this reason the wisdom of the aphorisms in Proverbs 10–29 demand a place of critical importance in contemporary discussions of character formation.