

God Is Making His People Good: Counseling and Virtue Formation



by MICHAEL GEMBOLA

There is an old hymn that says,
He died that we might be forgiven
He died to make us good
That we might go at last to heaven
Saved by his precious blood.¹

I first heard it from David Powlison and it's been provocative and inspiring for me ever since.² The provocative element is buried in the second line. It says Jesus died not only to forgive us for our sins but also *to make us good*. This is unusual for evangelical spirituality. Although as Christians we believe we are being sanctified or being made more holy, we don't often talk about becoming good. It is rhetorically powerful to preach the opposite: Christianity is not about becoming good; it is about knowing the one who is good.

1. Cecil Frances Alexander, "There Is a Green Hill Far Away," (1848).

2. David Powlison was a long-time faculty member, counselor, and writer at CCEF. He was also the senior editor of this journal from 1992 until he passed away in 2019.

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So, the emphasis on being or becoming *good* is unusual or even taboo. Jesus said, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18). There is a transcendent good that belongs only to God. And even in heaven, we’ll never be good in exactly the way God is. But the hymn summarizes the truth that as Jesus unites us to himself, and re-creates us in him, we become good. The theological terms for this include definitive and progressive sanctification. And the biblical principle is simple: God saves us and changes us, and he doesn’t stop changing us. He replaces the heart of stone with a heart of flesh (Ezek 36:26). And this new heart beats back against old desires and qualities of life and brings new ones. We’re new branches grafted into the family tree (Rom 11:23), and the fruit of the Spirit start to grow (Gal 5:16–26).

And he who called us is faithful to bring this about.³ Though all of us have gone astray and have no untainted good within us, those who have found refuge in Jesus will follow him to a place of all good, and he will make us fit to be there. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). He counts us as good and then makes us good. This Christian hope is captured in a line from another of David Powlison’s favorite hymns, the one he wanted sung first at his funeral: “love to the loveless, shown that they might lovely be.”⁴ We have been loveless, but God is making us “lovely,” beautiful and good. This is a consistent theme running through Scripture and Christian hymns. God is making his people good.

As Jesus unites us
to himself, and
re-creates us in him,
we become good.

In what follows, I want to capture this vision for the good that God is cultivating within his people, exploring how it shapes the work of believers who provide care and counseling. This is important because counseling traditionally focuses on problems, so it can easily lose sight

3. “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess 5:23–24).

4. Samuel Crossman, “My Song Is Love Unknown,” (1664).

of this larger, positive goal that God is bringing real goodness to his people. Secular critiques of counseling have also highlighted the deficiency of not being oriented toward the good. Specifically, positive psychology's critique of problem-centered approaches to counseling provides an analogue for a positive vision for Christian growth in goodness, which I'll describe in terms of *virtue formation*.⁵ We'll see that though a problem-centered approach to counseling understandably takes precedence in some contexts of care, we must never let it be our greatest interest. To that end, I'll suggest an alternative approach that borrows from the tradition of Christian virtue ethics, brought into dialogue with several theological perspectives on sanctification.⁶ While not making a full case for a virtue formation framework or even a full presentation of it, I will lay the groundwork for applying its contributions to counseling. What will emerge is a vision of pastoral care and counseling as a positive and constructive task, centered on the work of the church, but broadly applicable for other contexts. I want to invite you to think about the problems of life without those problems being the primary points of reference. I believe this vision makes a significant difference for how counseling unfolds, ennobling and inspiring people to pursue Christian maturity. A powerful sense of dignity and motivation in counseling emerges when counselors and pastors lay hold of this positive vision. When counselors have the good of the people they serve close to the forefront of their minds, good things happen.

5. Positive psychology may be defined as “the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play.” The Positive Psychology Center of the University of Pennsylvania. <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu>. Accessed on November 5, 2020.

6. Although many of the patristic writers engage classical Greek teaching on virtue, here I am drawing most from the traditions that move from Evagrius, Cassian, and Gregory the Great on and to Aquinas and Dominican traditions especially (though not absent from the interests of the Reformers and Puritans), which have experienced a resurgence in the works of Alasdair McIntyre, among many others. There is also a more recent trend in evangelical scholarship toward appreciating this tradition as part of the church's pre-Reformation resources. See, e.g., Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019). Other noteworthy examples are Kent Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue: Beyond the Models of Disease and Choice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011) and Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

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