ARETĒ

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Second Peter 1:5 reads: "Make every effort to supply for your faith virtue, and for your virtue knowledge." In English translation this text may seem quite banal, but a quick trip to your neighborhood Greek lexicon will show it to be remarkable. The word I have translated "virtue," conforming with most translations, is the word *aretē*, the most cherished quality of Greek culture. It was the quintessence of Homeric aristocratic education, the primary subject of Sophistic debates. Plato's Socrates argued it was an unteachable knowledge. Aristotle thought it was that virtuous state midway between excess and deficiency, the "golden mean." Stoics claimed it was the property of the sage from which issued all right action. But no matter how Greeks defined it, *aretē* was generally considered the highest quality of all excellences, the most cherished goal of Greek education, or *paideia*.

In light of this ubiquitous Hellenistic usage, it is amazing that *aretē* appears so seldom in early Christian writings. It appears in the New Testament only 5 times, twice in Second Peter, and only in our text for the morning as a human property. Of course, the New Testament lists various virtues, such as humility, endurance, and faithfulness, but only here are readers told to pursue *aretē*, or virtue, itself.[1]

The cause of its absence in the New Testament is clear. There is no corresponding concept in Hebrew or Aramaic. *Aretē* appears in the Greek Bible as a translation word only 8 times, and here it simply means "glory." It does appear in Jewish sources roughly contemporaneous with the New Testament, but in books with a decidedly Hellenistic attraction: *The Wisdom of Solomon, Fourth Maccabbees*, and especially Josephus and Philo. The Jewish notion of human perfection is not *aretē*, but *tzedekah*, in Greek *dikaiosynē*, in English "righteousness." Whereas *aretē* is decidedly anthropocentric, *dikaiosynē* is theocentric. Righteousness is "right conduct . . . which follows the will of God . . . the relationship with God is always in view."[2] This Jewish understanding of the human good pervades the New Testament. *Dikaiosynē* and its cognates appear in the New Testament a whopping 222 times.

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The reference to *aretē* in Second Peter, therefore, is most curious and demands an explanation. I shall suggest the author reveals by her or his use of *aretē* its emergence in moral discourse in Greek Christian schools. It now is certain that the book was not written by the apostle Peter but by someone else. In fact, most scholars concur that, if we were to arrange the writings of the New Testament chronologically, Second Peter would appear last. It is never cited or mentioned until almost 250 when Origen writes: "Peter left one epistle which is acknowledged, but there is also a second one. This one however is doubtful."[3] The doubtful status of Second Peter continued until the fourth century and it was not considered canonical in Syria until the sixth. Most scholars date the letter to around 140-150, but it could easily be as late as 200.

The second half of the second century witnessed the rise of the first Christian schools and of philosophically oriented intellectuals: Athanagoras, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus, Pantaenus, Clement of Alexandria, and the Gnostics Marcus, Valentinus, Basilides, and Marcion. Everywhere Second Peter bears traces of such Christian *paideia*. Pseudonymity itself, the practice of writing in the name of another, was an accepted academic exercise. The Greek of the book is pretentiously elevated, a real brute even for advanced students of Greek. In these 61 verses we find 48 hapax legomena (words that appear only here in the entire New Testament). Furthermore, the author knows early Christian literature intimately. He or she knows at least one synoptic gospel, probably the Gospel of John, First Peter, Jude, and a collection of Paul's letters. The author also knows the Greek Bible well and distinguishes between canonical and extra-canonical Jewish writings. Words for cognition appear 28 times in these three short chapters. The opponents debunked in the book seem to be Christian-Gnostic teachers, called "false teachers," who are accused of justifying libertine conduct, of teaching only for pay, and of illegitimately exegeting sacred texts. More than any book of the New Testament, Second Peter bears the marks of Christian *paideia*.

The word *aretē* was quite at home in such academic environments. In his *Paidagogos*, or "Christ the Educator," Clement of Alexandria, the head of the city's catechetical school, says "*aretē* is a will in conformity to God."[4] Here *aretē* is a quality not of the human as such but in relationship to God. In other words, it is similar to *dikaiosynē* or "righteousness." Clement in fact says of *dikaiosynē*: "righteousness and virtue are identical."[5] From the second century until the twentieth *aretē* has taken its place of honor along side *dikaiosynē* in Christian ethical discourse among Eastern Orthodox Christians. Not so in the West.

A speech by Basil the Great (Homily 22) provides us with an amazing glimpse at ethical discourse in a Christian school in the fourth century. Basil is teaching young men how to read classical Greek literature for spiritual advantage. The intention of pagan Greek authors, says Basil, was to inspire the young to *aretē*, which also is the height of Christian character: "of all possessions, *aretē* is the only one that cannot be taken away, for it endures in both life and death." *Aretē* appears 17 times; *dikaiosynē* never. The great Cappadocian gives several examples of *aretē* from Hesiod, Pythagoras, Plato, Euripides, and other authors, but my favorite example comes from Homer. Basil tells these young men who are seeking the rigors of asceticism that they can learn an important lesson from Odysseus, who when shipwrecked appeared on the beach to the beautiful, young Nausicaa and all he was wearing was his *aretē*. It should now be clear that *aretē* belongs to Athens, not Jerusalem, and appears in early Christian literature most natively in a humanistic Greek school environment, such as I am positing for Second Peter.

But what is *aretē*, really? This question rumbles throughout ancient Greek literature and never gets a satisfactory answer. For example, Plato begins the *Meno* with Meno asking Socrates, "Can you tell me, Socrates--can *aretē* be taught? Or if not, does it come by practice? Or does it come neither by practice nor by teaching, but do people get it by nature or in some other way?"[6] Socrates immediately asks Meno for a definition of *aretē*, which, when given, Socrates deftly demolishes. Socrates himself, of course, claims ignorance about *aretē*, and says at the very end of the dialogue that he assumes *aretē* is a gift from the gods; but before he makes up his mind about how people get it he would like first to find someone who could define *aretē* for him.[7]

Plato was right. *Aretē* defies description. It is like heartburn. You know what it is when you experience it, but it is not easy to describe. I would translate *aretē* not as "virtue" following the Latin "virtus," which has moralized the concept for the West, but as "excellence," or "brilliance." It is perceived aesthetically, intuitively. The Greeks sensed this when they spoke of it in aesthetic terms, such as "taking possession of the beautiful," or "an orientation toward the best." It cannot be described, only experienced. We experience *aretē* in a professional tennis player who is so in control of the game that she seems to intuit where the ball is going, glides to it, and strokes it authoritatively over the net. We experience *aretē* as profundity in a work of art for reasons we cannot articulate. We experience *aretē* when we read a novel and find ourselves thirty pages later to have been carried unwittingly down a river of words. We experience *aretē* when we see dancers so attune to rhythm, to balance, to their bodies, and the bodies of others that we are caught up in an overwhelming synchrony of music and motion. When reading a story to a child we experience *aretē* as

the enchanted moment when she falls asleep on our lap. Some of us have experienced *aretē* in the library as the great investigative Eurika! The perception of *aretē* is what Robert Pirsig tries to recover for the west in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Craftsmen call it quality. Christian mystics call it the beatific vision. Buddhists call it nirvana. Marathoners call it runner's euphoria. But the French name it best: "un je ne sais quoi," "a something special I cannot describe." I cannot describe *aretē* either, but I do know that it is habitforming. Once experienced we long for it again, and the more we get the more we want.

Now let's return to Second Peter 1:5, and let me make an admission. The point of the text is not to isolate *aretē* as the superlative human good, nor should we. The passage as a whole employs a common rhetorical device which piles virtue upon virtue until it culminates in the most significant. The entire sentence reads:

> Make every effort to supply for your faith *aretē*,
> and for your *aretē* knowledge,
> and for your knowledge self-control,
> and for your self-control endurance,
> and for your endurance spirituality,
> and for your spirituality sibling-affection,
> and for your sibling-affection *agapē*, or love.

I have no quarrel with the author in making love the highest good. But the importance of this passage for me is its recognition that faith, though basic to human life, is not sufficient. The author seems to agree with Celsus his pagan contemporary who complained that Christian teachers "do not want to give or to receive reasons for what they believe. Their favorite expressions are, 'Do not ask questions, just believe,' and 'Your faith will save you.'"[8]

In our chapel services we celebrate faith. At commencement we shall celebrate knowledge. But it seems quite fitting that this morning Iliff, in the intellectual tradition of Clement, Basil, and Second Peter, celebrate *aretē*. We faculty have seen in all of our students, particularly in those honored today, flashes of excellence, whether in general academics, or in preaching, or in Hebrew, or in Church History, or in leadership, or in music, or in peacemaking, or in working for justice. We who teach do not always agree philosophically, politically, or theologically, as you just may have noticed. But when our students achieve excellence in their work, there is very little disagreement among us. We all sense and acknowledge it. It does not take a teacher long to discover that the "A" paper almost grades itself. It is important for Iliff as a whole to celebrate

excellence, for the goal of education is not merely to transmit information but to create additions to *aretē*, to make students forever impatient with mediocrity. At this celebrative event we thank you for enriching our lives by having added to your faith *aretē*.

FOOTNOTES

1 Though see also *2 Clement* 10:1.

2 Gottlob Schrenk, *Dikaiosyne* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol 2 (ed. by Gerhard Kittel; tr. by G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) p. 198.

3 According to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6, 25, 11.

4 *Paidagogos* I, 13.

5 *Paidagogos* I, 8. See also *Shepherd of Hermas* 6, 1, 4; 8, 10, 3; and mand. 12, 3, 1.

6 *Meno* 70, a.

7 *Meno* 100, a-c.

8 In Origen, *Against Celsus* I, 9.