

Book Review

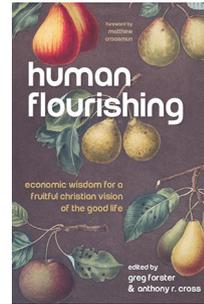
Forster, G., & Cross, A. R. (eds).

Human flourishing:

Economic wisdom for a fruitful Christian vision of the good life

Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020.

Stephen M. Vantassel, King's Evangelical Divinity School



Human Flourishing is a collection of articles from 12 authors from schools ranging from Western Theological Seminary in Michigan to Baylor University in Texas to Georgian College and State University in New Jersey and Biola University in California. The editors desired to create a collaborative document that would move theology from the technical and arcane to the practical and life changing (p. xiii). The book arises from papers submitted to the Oikonomia Network's January 2019 colloquia at which Miroslav Volf gave a plenary talk on human flourishing (p. xiii).

Matthew Croasmun uses the Foreword to argue that discussions of human flourishing must recognize and contend with two key realities. First, humans are not islands but are subject to a variety of interconnected realities ranging from the public/private, environmental/societal, and macro/microeconomic. Challenges that occur in one sphere impact others and vice versa. The second reality is the problem of hierarchy or put differently, inequality of power amongst humans. Answers to achieving human flourishing should be anchored in the creation mandate which seeks harmony between the human and non-human creation and bridging socialism and capitalism. Ultimately, it is through the reality and experience of the church that God seeks to illustrate and develop a home that impacts nature, society and family,

positively. Oikology, the study of the home, is how we can explore our role in experiencing the flourishing that God has designed for humanity. Readers should use Croasmun's understanding of human flourishing as connected to the meaning of "home" as the framework to read and understand the articles in this volume. For without this framework, the articles can appear as a hodgepodge of disconnected ideas.

The editors collected the 12 articles under three headings: faith, hope and love. Articles listed under faith deal with issues of doctrine. Those under hope discuss ways Christians approached public/private life in the past. Finally, articles under love engage questions related to social ethics. Substantively, the articles range in topics from scriptural interpretation to insights from Church history to investigation of the perspective of some leading theologians. The diversity of topics is both a detriment and a blessing. A detriment in that the reader is not given a clear starting point to engage the subject of human flourishing. On the other hand, the diversity can be a blessing in that the reader is presented with a variety of starting points from which to choose.

It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss all 12 chapters. Rather this review focuses on a few of the chapters of particular interest to the reviewer. J. Michael Thigpen, in his article "Flourishing, Justice and the Gospel as "Subduing" the Earth", reminds us that the creation mandate includes subduing the earth.

He correctly recognizes that the Hebrew verb for subdue cannot be properly softened. However, Thigpen argues that subdue (Genesis 1:28) calls for humans to subjugate not the earth, as traditionalists believe, but the earth's human inhabitants. With this interpretation, Thigpen can side step the environmentally unpopular application of "subdue" as war on the planet or its ecosystem.

While Thigpen's idea is certainly creative, it fails to appreciate the immediate context. The simplest way to understand the passage is to identify subdue as referring to the earth and its non-human occupants. Anyone who has farmed or dealt with wildlife damage immediately recognizes the need to subdue organisms that resist the farmer's designs. The notion that Genesis 1:28 is referring to subduing people is so subtle that one has to wonder if the ancient Israelites would have thought of it. God had to command Adam and Eve to subdue because wildlands have to be pressed into service. Once land is pressed into service, human behavior transitions into care and protect as argued by Calvin Beisner or Stephen M. Vantassel.

Suzanne McDonald's piece, "Waiting with Eager Longing: The Inseparability of Human Flourishing from the Flourishing of All Creation", correctly argues that creation is set free to flourish when man's rebellion against God is resolved (p. 48). I commend her attempt to move beyond the tired platitudes, (e.g. avoid wanton exploitation etc.) and provide concrete examples of proper environmental stewardship (pp. 50f). Readers should be troubled by her rejection of Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 9:9 where he contended that God wasn't concerned about the oxen. Ultimately, her failure to recognize the distinction between the treatment of wilderness (unsubdued land) and subdued land in the interpretation of those passages

makes this yet another article that does not help move biblically grounded environmentalism forward.

Greg Forster, in "Nations in the Metanarrative of Redemption: A Gospel for Public Life", argues that God's treatment of nations shows that salvation must be understood collectively and not just individually. Forster uses the Tower of Babel, the Day of Pentecost and the New Jerusalem as key events to show how God used nations to suppress sin, spread the gospel and ultimately reconciliation. Unfortunately, his discussion of God's use of nations neglects to fully appreciate the special and continued status of ethnic Israel. Though God will maintain the status of the gentile nations, Forster, he did not fully appreciate that the nations become the people of God through their adoption as children of Abraham, in other words, by becoming spiritual Israelites. Ultimately Forster's position leads one towards a supersessionism that is not supported by the testimony of Scripture.

Lynn H. Cohick's and John Anthony Dunne's article, "'Better than a Slave:' Paul and the Economics of Slavery-A Rejoinder to Ulrike Roth", is quite timely given the recent inroads of "woke" theology in Evangelicalism. The authors properly avoid claiming that Paul never used slaves. Instead they highlight some key questions that must be considered before one naively adopts the claim that Paul used slave labor to spread the gospel.

Greg Forster's second article, "Lamentable Obligation in Augustine's Political Theology", uses Augustine to acknowledge the imperfection of politics in a fallen world, while recognizing its importance. By highlighting the tension, Forster reminds idealists that the perfect ultimately awaits Christ's rule, while simultaneously exhorting realists that they should not be comfortable with the status quo.

Anyone concerned with human flourishing must think about ways to address and correct ills of poverty, illness, addiction etc. “Godly Non-Profits: Extending the Porterfield Thesis” by Robert E. Wright reviews the history of non-profit organizations in the United States to illustrate the uses and limits of non-profit work to further social good. He shows how non-profit organizations addressed societal concerns but that their role was ultimately eclipsed by government programs. The reason for the rise of government programs and the decline of non-profits stemmed from non-profits failing to properly market themselves, to completely address societal ills and societal support for government expansion.

Poverty certainly plays a key role in whether one is flourishing or not. Daniel J. Estes in his article, “Failure to Thrive in the Lord’s Ordered World: Causes for Poverty in the Book of Proverbs”, shows that Proverbs acknowledges that the causes of poverty can include, slothfulness, evil actions by others, and acts of God. Estes also correctly noted that Proverbs esteems character and wisdom (i.e. godly wisdom) above financial wealth, underscoring that righteousness is better than riches. In the end, Estes concludes that Christians must have a balanced view of poverty, one that does not emphasize one cause over the other as occurs in political debates over social welfare policies. Estes is certainly correct. However, Estes missed two key issues. First, Estes did not discuss how the bible views government’s role in social welfare. I would suggest that scripture recognizes a limited view of government, one that focuses on jurisprudence and not social welfare programs. Second, Estes should have considered the role of the family (nuclear and extended) as the initial barrier against abject poverty. By ignoring the family’s role, he fell

into the trap that the discussion only centers on individual behavior and government action or inaction.

Does Paul understand poverty to be the result of injustice? Is Paul concerned with economic inequality? John W. Taylor in the article, Paul, Poverty, and Economic Justice”, answers those questions, and others, by analyzing how poverty was understood in Greco-Roman and Jewish literature, followed by an investigation of key accounts of Paul’s teaching and activity. Taylor concludes that Paul does not believe that poverty is automatically the result of injustice. Rather the poor, just exist. Paul teaches that Christians should give to the poor and to do so voluntarily. In addition, the poor should learn to be content and to work so as to be self-sufficient so that they would be able to help others. In short, Paul was not a social justice warrior.

Article-based books are always difficult to evaluate because the diversity of writers and topics resists sweeping comments. This text is no exception to that general rule. Certainly, the book jump starts thought on the topic of human flourishing from an Evangelical/biblical framework. At best the book is suggestive and encouraging of further development and thought. No one reading this text will come away with a framework, let alone a foundation for the area, so in that sense the book was disappointing. Several articles, however, a few which I have highlighted, justify purchasing the book on their own.

Seminary faculty looking for a supplemental text to extend the conversation on human flourishing should consider this book. There is certainly enough here to give students ideas for research papers and class discussion.

