

PURSUING SHALOM IN EVERY  
CORNER OF SOCIETY

AGENTS  
OF  
FLOURISHING

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## ALL ABOUT FLOURISHING

*It is the task of the Christian minister to keep before the public an understanding of when human beings are well-off and when not.*

DALLAS WILLARD,  
“ECONOMIC WISDOM AND HUMAN FLOURISHING”

*Those who belong to Jesus the Messiah are now to be “rulers and priests,” serving our God. . . . Jesus is the one true “living stone”; and his followers are the “living stones” by which the true Temple is to be built, bringing the presence of God into the wider world, carrying forward the mission of declaring God’s powerful and rescuing acts, and beginning the work of implementing the messianic rule of Jesus in all the world. This is what it means to be a “royal priesthood.”*

N. T. WRIGHT, *AFTER YOU BELIEVE*

MY FRIEND G’JOE told me a while back of an encounter he had with a young clerk at the Speakeasy Clothing store in San Diego. He was killing time for a few minutes before a meeting, and she was friendly and chatty. Given G’Joe’s winsomeness and wit (not to mention his good looks), it’s no surprise she was ready to talk. The conversation ranged from work to race to religion—the latter prompted by her inquiry of whether G’Joe was a Buddhist. He replied that he was a follower of Christ.

Thinking of C. S. Lewis, G’Joe responded, “I actually believe that my God has given us desire and wants us to know him through enjoying and delighting in his gifts.” Taken aback, the young woman exclaimed, “I’ve never heard anyone talk about Christianity like that!” To G’Joe’s glee, she asked, “Could I come to your church sometime?”

The clerk's reaction reveals an important reality. Like all of us, she desires. God designed us as desiring creatures. We are hungry for relationship, for beauty, for pleasure. Our desires are typically a mix of the noble, the mundane, and the sinful. Our desires are complicated.

But that doesn't mean we should avoid using words like *pleasure* or *beauty* or *delight* when talking about our Christian faith. Jesus was too much of a lover of a human life fully lived to justify that. Moreover, the creation, though marred, shouts these words. Simply think of the most recent time you enjoyed a fantastic meal, a stunning sunset, or good sex with your spouse.

Desire isn't the problem. The problem is wrongly ordered desires and desires pointed toward the wrong objects. The problem isn't that we want to flourish. God wants that for us too. The problem is our definitions of human flourishing fall short of God's.

### SHALOM: HUMANKIND'S DEEPEST DESIRE

We fallen humans need an expanded imagination to help us understand our deepest longings and desires. Augustine, that great theologian of desire, famously reminded us that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. All the food, natural beauty, and sex in the world won't truly satisfy us because we are made for more. We are made for God and others. Made in the image of the triune God who exists in blissful, loving friendship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we, too, are relational beings.

Indeed, the Bible teaches that we are made for four foundational relationships: with God, ourselves, others, and the creation itself. The Hebrew word *shalom* captures the notion of peace in these four relationships. Shalom signifies spiritual, psychological, social, and physical wholeness. And shalom is God's normative intention for us. Shalom is what we find in his original creation, and shalom is what will characterize the new heaven and new earth in his consummated kingdom. Put another way, God designed us for flourishing. This is because, as Art Lindsley has said, flourishing is simply "shalom in every direction, personal and public."<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT IS GENUINE FLOURISHING?

This book seeks to urge and equip congregations to seek the flourishing of their communities. The first task in doing that is defining what *true*

flourishing is. Helping people see the difference between genuine flourishing and false flourishing is one of the most important things followers of Jesus can do to serve the kingdom of God and the common good.<sup>2</sup>

A short history lesson from Yale theologian Miroslav Volf will help us get started on this task. In a 2013 essay on human flourishing, Volf describes three dominant definitional paradigms.<sup>3</sup> To simplify, the first is essentially Augustinian. It argues that since God is the source of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, human flourishing arises out of communion with God. We flourish when our lives are centered on the love of God and of neighbor. The second is an Enlightenment/humanist paradigm that reoriented the focus from God to humans. Here flourishing was defined without reference to a higher authority, yet there remained a sense of human community—the belief that our flourishing is tied to the flourishing of others. The third, now-dominant, late-twentieth-century paradigm argues that human flourishing is all about an individual’s *experiential satisfaction*.

For our purposes here, it’s important to highlight the progression in these definitions of human flourishing. Volf explains:

Having lost earlier reference to “something higher which humans should reverence or love,” it now lost reference to universal solidarity, as well. What remained was concern for the self and the desire for the experience of satisfaction. . . . [Other humans still matter but] they matter mainly in that they serve an individual’s experience of satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

Western Christians today swim within this cultural water. Thick in our imagination is a view of flourishing that assumes the highest goods are individual freedom, happiness, and self-expression.

## SIX MARKS OF TRUE FLOURISHING

To dislodge this prevalent view, we need to examine several images of human flourishing provided by the bookends of Scripture’s grand narrative: creation and new creation.<sup>5</sup>

The first mark of true flourishing is *communion with God*. In the ancient past, human beings enjoyed the profound goodness of God’s fellowship as he walked in the Garden. Our great future hope in new creation is that we will “see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” (Ps 27:13) and live eternally with God, who promises to dwell among us (Rev 21:3).

The second mark of flourishing involves *beauty* and *creativity*. God is the source of all beauty and creativity. Made in his image, we experience deep joy when encountering beauty and in creatively crafting beauty.

The third feature of flourishing involves *learning* and *discovery*. God designed human beings with intelligence and curiosity. He made us thinking beings. He gave us brains to exercise and placed us in an intricate, complex, wonder-full, awe-inspiring cosmos. He commanded us to cultivate and develop his good creation. That command includes a call to pursue knowledge of the world—to observe, study, contemplate, investigate, experiment, and learn.

*Wholeness* is the fourth feature of biblical flourishing. In the Garden we enjoyed total physical and psychological health. In the garden-city of the new Jerusalem, we will again delight in bodies free from all disease, depression, and distress. This wholeness will extend to the creation itself. Many of the biblical passages that give us previews of the coming consummated kingdom speak of the healing of the natural world as God restores everything that was once barren. Isaiah 51:3 is representative: “He will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.” God will one day set his beloved creation free from all its groaning.

Fifth, in the consummated kingdom we will experience deep, rich, satisfying *unity in diversity* with other people. We will experience peace and harmony as richly diverse members of Christ’s body from every “nation, tribe, people and language” join in common worship of King Jesus (Rev 7:9-20). This unity will be expressed in *peace*. In the new Jerusalem we will enjoy complete security and safety. All violence, injustice, and war will cease.

Finally, when we consider the flourishing of creation and the new creation, we observe *prosperity* or *abundance*. In Genesis, God creates a virtually endless array of plants and animals; the original creation “teemed” and “swarmed.”<sup>6</sup> Prophetic glimpses of the new earth speak of “showers” of blessing (Ezek 34:26), reapers overtaking sowers (Amos 9:13), and mountains flowing with wine and milk (Joel 3:18). The new heaven and new earth will be a place of economic bounty.

### **FLOURISHING IN THE TIME OF NOW AND NOT YET**

It is delightful to meditate on creation and new creation. But we live in the time in-between. Is flourishing possible *now*? Is flourishing something God

wants for us *today*—or only in the sweet by-and-by? Our gracious God says yes to both queries. Indeed, much of his instruction in his Word is aimed at helping us to experience a measure of shalom even in this fallen world. This comes about in two ways.

The first involves God’s faithfulness and presence. These enable us to be resilient even in tough times. Consider the image of flourishing provided in Psalm 1:3. There, the righteous person is depicted as a tree whose leaf never withers, which bears fruit in *every* season. In biblical terms flourishing and difficulties can exist simultaneously. In this fallen world we’re not guaranteed a pain-free life. In a more delicate phrasing of the popular contemporary bumper sticker, “Drought Happens.” But the righteous person can still thrive amid drought and trouble—and in “trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword” as the apostle Paul puts it in Romans 8:35—because God’s love and presence sustain them.

The second emerges from living in conformity with God’s wisdom. He instructs us in the path of life. Imagine you’re driving on a twisting mountain road. You see a speed limit sign warning you of a dangerous curve ahead. The posted speed is 25 mph. If you try zooming around it at 65 mph, the serious consequence is not so much that you might get a speeding ticket (though this is possible as a punishment for breaking the law). The serious consequence is that by ignoring the laws of physics, your car will likely go careening off the road and you could end up dead.<sup>7</sup> God has given all kinds of instructions about life that are like the posted speed limit. Obeying these commands offers the prospect of greater health.<sup>8</sup>

### **THE KEY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REAL AND FALSE FLOURISHING**

God created a world of flourishing, and even now, in the age before the final kingdom, he desires that people experience a measure of shalom. God created us with legitimate desires (e.g., for sufficient nutrition, warm and safe shelter, meaningful work, and physical health) and delights in giving good gifts to his children. God knows that we want to play, to read, to connect, to belong, to matter, to feel, and to rest. In short, we want to live and to live fully. Jesus has no problem with that; in fact, he says he came to bring us abundant life.

The Bible teaches us to find abundant life in communion with God and conformity to his ways. Our secular society believes we can achieve the good



life by satisfying all our natural desires devoid of any connection to or dependence on supernatural intervention.<sup>9</sup> Flourishing is defined in a way that shuts out the satisfaction of our deepest, truest desires: for God, for his kingdom, and for his righteousness.

Further, the secularist sees flourishing as achievable through human actions alone in a society that has cast off the strictures of orthodox religion, with its (allegedly) outdated view of a God who has a claim to our obedience. In our hubris we imagine that we can build a society that will fulfill all our human desires, principally by embracing a radical enthronement of the self. We think we can create a community free of fear and free of want, a welfare society that meets at least minimal standards of well-being—*but without reference to God*.<sup>10</sup> Our flawed definition of human nature (extracting as it does our soul) then leads to a fundamental misconception of genuine pleasure and happiness. We think such treasures are achievable apart from a relationship with our Maker and Sustainer. We want, in Mark Sayers’s memorable phrase, “the kingdom without the King.” Our post-Christian culture, Sayers explains, “intuitively yearns for the justice and shalom of the kingdom, whilst defending the reign of the individual will.”<sup>11</sup>

### WHO WE ARE: ROYAL PRIESTS CALLED TO FLOURISH OTHERS

You and I were made to flourish—in two senses. We’ve been looking at the first. We were created for a certain state of being. God’s normative desire is for us to live as whole people in a world of shalom. We will not fully experience this genuine, holistic flourishing on our still-broken planet. But God desires that in an intimate, obedient relationship with him, we will discover even now some foretastes of the full, future thriving we’ll enjoy in the new Jerusalem.

The second sense in which we are made to flourish is that we are made for a purpose, for a vocation. Though this isn’t an exact, grammatically correct way to put it, a huge part of that purpose is *to flourish* others. Jesus called this loving our neighbors. True biblical flourishing involves the good of others as well as our own good. Flourishing is meant to be a shared experience. We are blessed *to be* a blessing (Gen 12:2). “You will be enriched in every way,” said the apostle Paul, “*so that* you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God” (2 Cor 9:11, emphasis added).



This is opposed to how flourishing is defined in the kingdom of darkness. In a fallen world unbridled human desires and the demand that they all be fulfilled creates brutal power struggles as people compete for resources.<sup>12</sup> In this context so-called flourishing bends inward: it's about me getting my desires satisfied—and the heck with you. This is the exact opposite of biblical flourishing.

### ROYAL PRIESTS FLOURISH OTHERS

Throughout the Scriptures this vocation of flourishing others is described as the work of the royal priesthood. If the first task in pursuing the shalom of our communities is understanding what true flourishing is, the second is understanding biblical teaching on who we are as royal priests. Unfortunately, this is not a very familiar concept to many Christ-followers, despite its prominence in Scripture.

***Our identity as royal priests: From Genesis to Revelation.*** First, I must emphasize that royal priests are what human beings were originally *meant to be*. That's how deep this identity runs. When God created Adam and Eve, he created royal priests.

In Genesis, God commissions the first humans with a mandate to rule and fill the earth (Gen 1:28) and to tend and develop the creation (Gen 2:15). God gives humankind this commission in a particular setting, namely, in the Garden of Eden. This matters greatly for our discussion on the royal priesthood. This is because the Garden was a kind of temple. A temple is a place where humans and the divine meet.<sup>13</sup> The setting where God gives the cultural mandate must shape our understanding of that mandate. As Kelly Kapic and Brian Fikkert explain in *Becoming Whole*,

The garden of Eden was far more than just a place where Adam and Eve watered plants and cared for animals. *It was a temple-garden in which the first humans served as priests and kings.* As priests, they were to protect the “temple” from any corruption and lead others into worship of the one true God. As kings, they were to promote the welfare of others and the rest of creation by ruling as God's vice-regents, his assistant rulers. As priest-kings, then, humans were to lovingly serve God, others, and the rest of creation.<sup>14</sup>

From the very beginning of our story we were created to be royal priests. Not surprisingly, in the book of Revelation, which reveals the end of our

story, we find the same thing. Revelation tells us that human beings are re-created in Jesus to (again) be priest-kings—for all eternity. As N. T. Wright describes in *The Day the Revolution Began*, four places in Revelation speak of this vocation.<sup>15</sup>

Two of those texts (Rev 1:5-6; 5:9-10) teach us something astounding and rarely heard in our churches today: *Jesus died to (re)make us as a kingdom of priests*. Meditate for a moment on Revelation 5:9-10:

You were slain,  
 and with your blood you purchased for God  
 persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.  
 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,  
 and they will reign on the earth.

Being the new humanity, living as the royal priesthood of God, is the church's telos. It is the point of life for every Christ-follower, its central objective. "This is the goal of human existence," Wright sums up. "Forget 'happiness': you are called to a *throne*."<sup>16</sup>

I'd encourage you to stop here and linger on this profound (and perhaps somewhat unfamiliar) idea. If you are a pastor, think for a moment about how a liturgy like this might influence your flock.

LEADER	Who has God created us to be?
CONGREGATION	<i>The royal priesthood of God.</i>
LEADER	What is God's given purpose for our lives?
CONGREGATION	<i>To live as his royal priests, being the presence of God to and for the world. We bring the praises of creation before the Creator and we reflect God's wisdom and justice into this world.</i> <sup>17</sup>
LEADER	What is our telos as the people of God?
CONGREGATION	<i>To reign on earth with King Jesus in the consummated kingdom.</i>

The context in Revelation where these truths about the human vocation are affirmed echoes the context where they were proclaimed in Genesis. As we saw, there the setting was the garden temple. In Revelation the setting is the new Jerusalem, the garden-city wherein God dwells with redeemed humanity.<sup>18</sup>

So, the narratives at the Bible's bookends—creation and consummation—affirm our foundational calling to be a royal priesthood. What about the in-between parts? As we will see, the theme of the royal priesthood remains prominent.

***The royal-priestly vocation.*** At the heart of the sin of the first humans, Wright contends, was *a failure of vocation*. We were made for a purpose. Humans were created to image God in the world, offering up our worship to him alone, and to reflect his character in the world. We were made, in short, for worship and mission. *We flourish* when we inhabit this vocation (since it connects us in an intimate relationship with our heavenly Father and engages us in the life we were designed for), and *others flourish* when we discharge it in God's strength and according to God's ways. We were made to be with God and to work in the world as his royal priests, bearing his image.

Our human forebears turned away from this vocation. They didn't want merely to *reflect* God in the world; they wanted to *be* God. Their fundamental sin was idolatry, turning away from the true worship of God. This quickly expressed itself in humankind's turn to self-preoccupation instead of the royal-priestly job of flourishing others.

The biblical story does not run immediately from this vocational failure in Genesis 3 to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in the New Testament. The story of God's response to the fall is much longer and more layered. There is a very long interlude between the fall chapter and the redemption chapter, namely, the rest of the Old Testament. It tells us about God electing a certain group within the human race, the Israelites, to take back the human vocation. The Old Testament matters because it tells the story of how God chose and called Israel to be the people through whom he would redeem the world. As Wright says pithily, "The call of Abraham is the answer to the sin of Adam."<sup>19</sup> We won't fully understand Jesus' work—or our call as his disciples—if we don't pay attention to Israel's story.

The fall of humankind began in Genesis 3 but continued circling in a downward spiral. In Genesis 11 the same kind of human arrogance found at the base of that infamous tree in the Garden of Eden—that of wanting to be like God—is repeated at Babel. There, all the peoples of the earth decide to build a tower that will reach the heavens so that they could "make a name" for themselves (Gen 11:1-4). The right-side-up vocation, the original royal

priesthood vocation in the Garden, involved humans making *God's* name great. At Babel humans turned this calling upside down, seeking instead to make their *own* name great.

God's response to this is one of both judgment and mercy. The judgment involves confusing the people's language and scattering them throughout the earth (Gen 11:8-9). The mercy is that following this, God calls a single human family back to the image-bearing, earth-blessing, royal-priesthood vocation (Gen 12:1-3). Through Abraham, God now promises to undo the mess humankind has made. In this gracious covenant, God will bless the world through Abraham as his family takes up the original call to worship and to work, to be in loving, obedient relationship with God, and to live as his image-bearers bringing flourishing to others.

Tragically, as we know all too well, neither Abraham nor his descendants end up doing a very good job.

Indeed, the story gets so far off course that Israel ends up enslaved by pagan Egypt. Humankind's exile from the Garden is echoed in Israel's exile in the land of bricks, lashes, and tears. Exile is the consequence of vocational failure. When Israel chooses to love other gods instead of YHWH, when Israel refuses to live as a blessing bringer, "a light to the Gentiles," this brings slavery and death.

***Exodus: Presence and recommissioning.*** And yet faithful YHWH remembers his covenant and acts mightily to rescue the people chosen to be his conduit of blessing. In great mercy God unleashes judgment on the gods of Egypt and brings his people out in the exodus. It is a marvelous story of rescue and provision. It is also—vital for our review of the royal-priesthood idea—a story of recommissioning.

In Exodus 19:4-6, God instructs Moses to restate the human vocation given at creation and to apply it specifically to his chosen people Israel, whom he has just rescued from oppression:

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a *kingdom of priests* and a holy nation." These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

God here gracefully chooses (or elects) Israel for a purpose. This recommissioning is—again—given in a temple setting, that is, in a place where God is present with his people, where heaven and earth meet. The recommission is given in the wilderness, where God himself has traveled with the rescued Israelites by day as a pillar of cloud and by night as a pillar of fire.

Tragically, despite God's continually and graciously giving his presence to his people, they continually turn away from him to idols and away from the vocation God gave them. Even a cursory read through the Old Testament offers a picture of this repeated reality. Unlike royal priests who serve God alone and spread flourishing to their neighbors, Israel persists in idolatry and oppression. The prophets repeatedly exhort Israel to turn from such grave sin, but the people refuse to heed their words. The result is both the exile of the Jews into Babylon and the shekinah glory's departure from the temple.<sup>20</sup>

***The Israel chapter and the redemption chapter.*** This story of Israel is the backdrop to the redemption chapter of the Bible's big story. We miss critical insights about Jesus' mission and our mission in that chapter when its Jesus story is delinked from the Israel story.

Jesus not only came to be God in the world in his divinity. *He also came, in his humanity, to be the perfect fulfillment of a royal priest.* He faithfully takes up the vocation that we sinful, selfish, idolatrous humans abandoned. Through Jesus flows the Abrahamic blessing that Israel failed to bring to the world. The blessing of God runs into and out from Jesus: the Spirit descends on him like a dove, and "power comes out" from Jesus even to those who merely touch his garments (Mk 5:24-35).

Through the life and death of Jesus, the perfect royal priest, full redemption comes. Through Jesus, sin—not just the breaking of individual moral codes but the whole deviation of humankind from worshiping the Creator to worshiping idols—is conquered. In Jesus, sin—humankind's failure to be the image-bearing, royal priests we were created to be—is conquered. In Jesus, sin—Israel's failure to be the chosen royal priests through whom God would remake the world—is conquered. In Jesus, our sin is forgiven, and as a result the greatest, fullest return from exile is made possible. Indeed, in Jesus, rescue from the ultimate exile—our captivity in the kingdom of darkness—comes.

## THE CHURCH AS A THIRD ISRAEL

This brings us to the next big point about royal priests: that Jesus commissions his followers, the church, to live into this identity.

Missionary-theologian Lesslie Newbigin speaks of “three Israels” who are elected and commissioned by God “to be a sign and instrument of God’s redemptive purpose for all humanity.”<sup>21</sup> First, God chooses Abraham and the nation that comes from him to be his royal priests in the world, living in true, single-minded devotion to God and being a blessing to the nations. This Israel failed.

Second, God chooses Jesus to act as a kind of second Israel, “faithfully doing what Israel did not do—disclosing and effecting God’s renewal for the whole world.”<sup>22</sup> Jesus reenacts the Israel story in a variety of ways. He spends forty days for Israel’s forty years in the wilderness. He calls twelve disciples, reminiscent of the twelve tribes. Like Moses on the mountain with the Ten Commandments, he gives his new commandments in his Sermon on the Mount. He calls and commissions the Twelve to both be with him and to join him in the work of bringing blessing—shalom—to the peoples (Mk 3:14).

King Jesus’ unique redemptive work is all-sufficient: his death atones for the sin of the whole world and his resurrection accomplishes the defeat of all the demonic forces of sin and anti-shalom, everything that sets itself up in opposition to God’s kingly reign. Yet the story of the King’s work in our world is not finished, for the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus is not yet completely revealed or consummated. *Jesus still has work for his followers to do.* Those followers, the “third Israel”—the church—are commissioned to live as royal priests, spreading the good news of the kingdom throughout the nations.

For the church to understand fully our commission as a third Israel, we must see its link back to the original charge given to the first Israel (Ex 19:6). This is precisely what the apostle Peter does in 1 Peter 2:9, where he writes: “You are a chosen people, *a royal priesthood*, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Peter’s reference back to the Exodus text is vital to our Christian identity and our Christian mission. Consider the similarities between these two Scriptures. The Exodus text speaks of God’s choosing a people to be his treasured possession and commissioning them to be a kingdom of priests. The 1 Peter text repeats this idea of a chosen

people, a treasured possession, and their commissioning as a royal priesthood to declare God's praises.

This "declaring" is meant to happen through both words and deeds, since Peter continues in verse 12: "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." Peter, in short, understands that Jesus' commission to his disciples is that they be a royal priesthood. The vocation is now for Gentile as well as Jewish followers of Jesus.

To sum up, living as the royal priesthood is central to the church's identity and mission.

Following Wright, Newbigin, and other lesser-known theologians, I believe that *the chief end of man (and woman!) is to be God's royal priesthood*. My choice of words here is deliberate. Having been in Reformed congregations for the past thirty-five years, I've heard the Westminster Confession aplenty. We are indeed made to "glorify God and enjoy him forever," but that may not be the fullest and best way of expressing the Bible's teaching on the human vocation.<sup>23</sup> It certainly isn't when it's interpreted to mean some kind of 24/7 worship service or to suggest that *only* the "being" part of our human purpose (to be with God) and not the "doing" part of our purpose (fulfilling the role God scripted for us as royal priests) is what truly matters. And given the ascendancy of what Fikkert and Kopic call "Evangelical Gnosticism" in America, these are too often the very ways this statement is interpreted.

What are we made for? Flourishing. How has God designed that to happen? By giving us the vocation of the royal priesthood. When we live in Christ as the priest-kings we were always meant to be, we experience flourishing ourselves and we contribute to the flourishing of others.

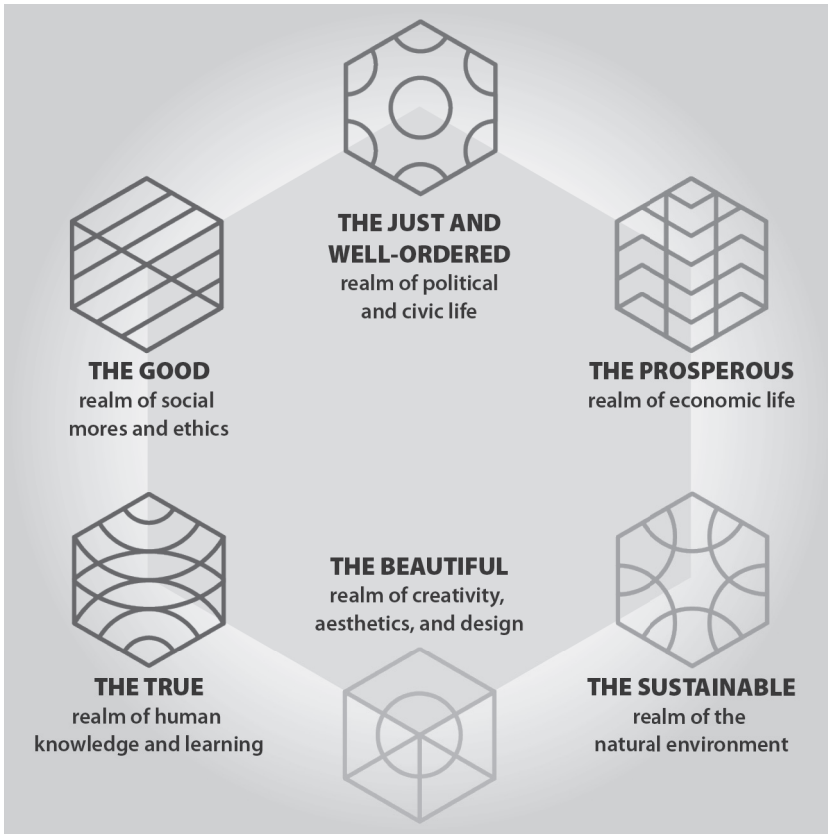
### HOW DO WE DO THE WORK OF ROYAL PRIESTS?

Having explored what genuine flourishing is, and having reviewed our identity and mission as royal priests, we can now ask, How do we do the practical work of flourishing our communities? What does that look like in action?

The rest of this book takes up this question. I organize my discussion using Thriving Cities Group's "Human Ecology Framework." As noted in the introduction, this framework asserts that community flourishing occurs when there is strength and health in six arenas of civilizational life: the Good,



the True, the Beautiful, the Just and Well-Ordered, the Prosperous, and the Sustainable (see fig. 1.1). Thriving Cities Group calls these “community endowments” to highlight the fact that these arenas are dynamic. Their health can fluctuate up or down. As royal priests committed to neighbor love, one of our key tasks in our communities involves assessing the relative health of these endowments and making strategic investments in selected ones in ways that contribute to their strength.



**Figure 1.1.** The six community endowments

I’ve chosen the Human Ecology Framework over other definitional models of community flourishing for three reasons.<sup>24</sup> One is that it covers well the many aspects of our common life, such as family, religion, education, government and civic life, commerce, finance, the natural and built

environment, arts and media, the justice system, and public health and safety, among others. Another is its recognition that the six endowments are highly interrelated and interdependent. Third, and most important, it corresponds well with the marks of genuine biblical flourishing I highlighted in the introduction (see fig. 1.2).

Marks of Genuine Flourishing	The Six Community Endowments
Communion with God	The Good
Beauty and Creativity	The Beautiful
Learning and Discovery	The True
Peace, Justice, and Unity in Diversity	The Just and Well-Ordered
Wholeness and Health	The Sustainable
Prosperity and Abundance	The Prosperous

**Figure 1.2.** Comparing biblical flourishing and the six community endowments

With its attentiveness to the dynamism of human society and its comprehensive and holistic approach, the Human Ecology Framework is an excellent resource for Christ-followers eager to promote the shalom of their cities. At the same time, to this sociological approach we need to add theological reference points. Theologian Albert Wolters’s notion of *structure* and *direction* can help.

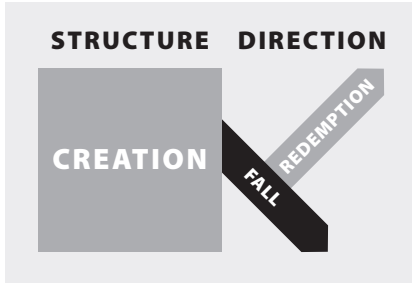
## STRUCTURE AND DIRECTION

In *Creation Regained*, Wolters explains that God is the maker and designer of not only the physical cosmos but also of families, social institutions, beauty, and “an almost unimaginable variety” of objects and relationships.<sup>25</sup> And God rules over his creation via both “laws of nature and norms.”<sup>26</sup>

The idea that there are given norms for human behavior is highly suspect in our postmodern culture. But it is a foundational part of a biblical worldview. Through general and special revelation, Wolters argues, human beings can “discern the creational normativity” of created things.<sup>27</sup> He labels this created normativity *structure*. “Structure,” he says, “denotes the ‘essence’ of a creaturely thing, the kind of creation it is by virtue of God’s creational law.”<sup>28</sup>

All created things have been tainted by the fall, and all are being renewed through the work of Christ—a work yet to be fully completed in the

consummation of the kingdom of God. Wolters uses the term *direction* to denote these two opposing movements. As depicted in figure 1.3, direction “refers to a sinful deviation from that structural ordinance” or toward “renewed conformity to it in Christ.”<sup>29</sup> Created things, in other words, are either aligning with their original intention (structure) or moving away from that intention.



**Figure 1.3.** Wolters’s “structure and direction”

However, in the places and ways that created things are pulled and distorted by sin, they can be brought back in the proper direction by the quickening power of the gospel. Referencing Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 13:33 about yeast in dough, Wolters says that “the gospel is a leavening influence in human life wherever it is lived, an influence that slowly but steadily brings change from within.”<sup>30</sup>

As we seek to promote the flourishing of our communities, our task involves

- seeking to understand the “structure,” that is, the creational intent of things (e.g., marriages, business transactions, artwork, communications systems, agricultural practices, architecture, and everything else from A to Z)
- recognizing and resisting where those things have been deformed by sin
- praying for and working for their re-formation in Christ

Although it is sobering to observe the many deformations in every sphere of social life, Christians have hope because of the power of the gospel. As Michael Goheen writes in the postscript to *Creation Regained*, “the gospel is a redirectional power . . . it is the renewing power of God unto salvation. The gospel is the instrument of God’s Spirit to restore all of creation.”<sup>31</sup>

The chapters ahead seek to illumine a biblical vision for the True, the Good, the Beautiful, the Just and Well-Ordered, the Prosperous, and the Sustainable. They also offer descriptions of how the church today, and in

years past, has pursued various strategies to cultivate flourishing in each of these realms. The stories told are by no means comprehensive. They showcase one or two strategies for how congregations can contribute to the health of that particular endowment—but there are many other possible strategies. I hope that these stories will inspire congregational leaders to imitate their strategies or try additional ones.

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