

Why We're Here: Theology for the Life of the World

***Faith & Flourishing* Founding Editorial Board**

Faith & Flourishing is yet another journal created to meet the vital need of the present moment. Like all newly founded journals, this is exactly the journal that needs to be founded at such a time as this.

All of us are commanded to love our neighbors and to steward God's world; in doing so, we flourish as creatures bearing the image of our creator. *Faith & Flourishing* brings fresh insight to this perennial precept, inviting readers to critically engage with a range of timely and timeless theological inquiries.

A new journal focused on "theology for the life of the world" is not needed because existing theological scholarship ignores issues related to wholeness, well-being or flourishing – in short, to the question of what kind of life is good. On the contrary, concern for how theology can speak into the flourishing of human beings and the whole creation has clearly emerged as an important theme of scholarship over the past 30 years, among authors ranging all the way from neo-Aristotelians to eco-feminists to the spiritual formation movement.

This recent scholarship builds on earlier sources. While Elizabeth Anscombe appears to have been the first to focus on the term “flourishing” as a locus of inquiry in 1958, investigation of themes such as “blessedness” and “happiness” has a much longer history in the theological knowledge tradition, from the social reformers of the 19th and 20th centuries through the Reformation period and the High Middle Ages, all the way back to early Christianity and the Jewish tradition before it.

We therefore see the recent growth of scholarly interest in flourishing as much more than a passing intellectual fad or academic trend; more than the shoring up of a weak spot in the theological knowledge tradition as it has been handed down to us; more even than a critically important opportunity for theological knowledge to inform the practical life of the church in bold new ways. We see in this growing interest the potential for academic theology and theological schools to rediscover their purpose and cultivate their own flourishing in the context of the advanced modern world.

We are founding *Faith & Flourishing* to help transform that potential into actuality. We are here because contributing to the life of the world is why theology is here, and why theological schools are here.

Why Theology Is Here: A Gospel for the Life of the World

As theological scholars, why are we here? Theology is always informed by its social context, and changes as its social context changes. Today, complex and exceptionally rapid changes in our context are challenging theological scholars to reassess what is essential and what is secondary or tertiary in their work. And, more generally, the unfolding social structures of the modern world have dislocated the relationship between religious truth claims and the way people actually live their lives on a daily basis.

In a pluralistic society, theology is not publicly institutionalized as a way of knowing truth. And the expectation that religion could govern the personal sphere in isolation from the public sphere has been undermined by a growing awareness of the interdependence of social structure and individual consciousness. As a result, it has become unclear to many why academic theology is valuable, when its impact on practical life even at the personal level, much less the public level, is not obvious. Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun have called this “the crisis of theology” in our time.

Are we, as theological scholars, here to reproduce over and over again, in endless new verbal configurations, the same old set of propositional statements about God? If so, what we call “theology” would be a sterile exercise in erudition and pedantry. Our job would be to promote ever-greater precision in the making of statements about a subject that no longer matters.

Or are we here to borrow the moral authority of religion, left over from an earlier age when people used to believe they had received a real revelation from God, for the purpose of lending credibility and urgency to social reform movements of various kinds? If so, what we call “theology” would be cheerleading – chanting slogans and waving pom-poms to rally “our team” to victory in socio-political competitions that are not themselves shaped by theology in any important way.

We believe that we are here, as theological scholars, because God not only actually reveals himself, he does so for a purpose – and he is inviting all humanity into that purpose. God made the world to participate in the holy love that God is, in the Trinity, and there is no hope for real and lasting peace, power, justice or joy outside that divine communion. But the world has fallen away from it, which is why the world is in the state it is in, dominated by darkness and evil. God reveals himself – not just in the distant past, but today – in order to invite the world back into his holy love – not just in the distant future, but today. Theology’s primary purpose is to help people accept this invitation, for themselves and for the creation entrusted to their stewardship, by continually discerning, describing and commending afresh the kind of life that enters into the holy love of God, and finds therein wholeness, well-being and flourishing.

In other words, theology is rediscovering that the flourishing of human beings and the whole creation is central, not peripheral, to the gospel of Jesus Christ; and that the gospel of Jesus Christ is central, not peripheral, to the flourishing of human beings and the whole creation. He came that we might have life, and have it abundantly – not just in the age to come, but, proleptically, in the present age. His message was not that the kingdom of God would someday come near, but that it had already done so, and that through his life, death and resurrection, a life in the kingdom had become available to us as a present, if anticipatory, reality.

In some Protestant quarters today, those who argue that the flourishing of God’s world is central to the gospel are typically accused of seeking to water down or compromise the core distinctive commitments of Protestant theology. We emphatically reject any suggestion that there is a conflict, or even a tension, between the view of the gospel we express here and the classical Protestant doctrine that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. On the contrary, it was precisely to bring us back into a living and abundant communion with the holy love of God that Christ came, and it is because we have no hope for that return other than wholly and exclusively in Christ that he had to die on the cross to bring it about. Justification occurs so that sanctification can occur, as anyone can see by noticing that Ephesians 2:8-9 is followed by Ephesians 2:10.

If flourishing is not central to the gospel, the gospel must tend over time to reduce itself into statements such as: “If you believe in Jesus, you get to go to heaven when you die.” So once you believe in Jesus, what is the next step? And while you wait to die, you can show up at church once a week to (in Dallas Willard’s appropriately cutting phrase) “consume religious goods and services.”

If the gospel is not central to flourishing, flourishing must tend over time to reduce itself into competitions for power. If flourishing is not the presence of God as our king, friend, savior, provider and protector, then flourishing must be something we accomplish by our own efforts. Power is therefore needed for flourishing. Over time, this quest for power increasingly takes the form of defeating and humiliating those whose definitions of what constitutes flourishing are different from our own.

Recognizing the often-outstanding work that is already being done in theological scholarship on particular issues that are related to flourishing, we are founding *Faith & Flourishing* to provide a more intentionally cultivated scholarly outlet that views contributing to the life of the world as central to the task of academic theology. Our view is that the flourishing of human beings and the whole creation is not one more topic in a long list of topics for theology to treat. It is – we hope, relying on the Lord – a doorway, through which theological scholarship can rediscover its purpose in the *oikonomia* of God.

Another reason for founding *Faith & Flourishing* is to provide a scholarly publication outlet that crosses disciplinary lines, both among the disciplines of the theological academy and including theologically informed scholarship in the liberal arts and professions. Concern for the life of the world belongs in every discipline of the academy, and is especially challenged by the breakdown of cross-disciplinary integrative insight in our time. While we will evaluate each submission by the high scholarly standards that prevail in existing disciplines, the availability of a “disciplinary Switzerland” dedicated to theology for the life of the world will support scholars in breaking out of captivity to mere incremental progression along the same old, long-plowed lines of inquiry.

In these aspirations we build on prior efforts in our community, such as the 2019 interdisciplinary colloquia on theology and flourishing, held in collaboration with the Karam Forum conference, which culminated in the book *Human Flourishing*. Even the order of the chapters in that volume – grouped under the three section headings Faith, Hope and Love, with chapters from different disciplines present in each section – expresses our integrative and collaborative approach, as well as our intention to cultivate a special home for scholarship on flourishing.

Why Theological Schools Are Here: A Knowledge Tradition for the Life of the World

As theological educators, why are we here? Just as the intellectual value of theological scholarship has become unclear amid the dislocation of social forms as modernity has developed, the institutional value of theological schools has become questionable. Why do we need special communities set aside for stewarding the knowledge tradition – why should students pay large sums of money for the privilege of spending a few years in such communities – when everyone can get all the information they want on the internet? Volf and Croasmun refer to this institutional predicament as the “external crisis” of theology, alongside the “internal crisis” over its intellectual purpose.

The basic questions of human life have become more urgent in our time. How can we be good people and find a good way to live, and help our communities do the same? Our political and social crises, severe as they are, are only symptoms of this deeper spiritual crisis. And this is not merely a question of belief versus unbelief. Christians, believing that the good life is found in Christ, nonetheless struggle to bring their practical lives into harmony with their faith in the context of advanced modernity. Fragmented culture has left most Christians finding it more and more difficult to seek deep virtue and real human flourishing in Christ. Religious institutions, which have always played a unique role in equipping people to be good and do good, find themselves in a complex and ambiguous new environment that resists their traditional approaches.

Theory and practice have been growing further apart for centuries, and the church has unfortunately participated in this growth of double-mindedness. Scholars have failed to place adequate value on *praxis*; practitioners have failed to place adequate value on *theoria*. Above all, both sides have too often failed to recognize each other as sources of knowledge. And this challenge is now being greatly magnified by increasing cultural diversity both within and across religious communities.

The church needs a fresh vision that connects the wisdom of the Christian knowledge tradition to the way God’s people live today. This begins with the conviction that theological knowledge, grounded in scripture, has a unique power to counteract the fragmentation and narrowmindedness that advanced modern life tends to lead us toward. Theologically informed scholarship can reconstruct connections between our daily practices and the “big picture” of our faith, reconnecting the fragments of life into a coherent whole.

Thus we believe that theological schools – audacious as it is for us to make this claim – can contribute to a resolution of the public crisis of our time. Only the Bible can answer with consistency and sustainability the really

ultimate questions about the meaning and purpose of things – the kind of world we really live in, the kind of life that is really the right way to live, the experiences that are truly worthy of praise and pursuit. Schools that reconnect the theological knowledge tradition to the way people actually live would make a major contribution to the life of the world.

And, not coincidentally, such schools would be well worth paying to attend, and would thus become sustainable by helping the world become sustainable – finding their *shalom* in the city's *shalom*.

Faith & Flourishing is, as its subtitle indicates, a journal of Karam Fellowship, a community that exists to pursue this vision of theological education together. The journal has its own editorial board, but its association with the Fellowship is another reason *Faith & Flourishing* is positioned to make a unique contribution to scholarship. We are here not just to publish traditional scholarly articles, but to be part of a scholarly community; to that end we will publish essays and conversations in addition to traditional articles. We will also collaborate with discussions that are happening at Fellowship conferences and webinars. Through these opportunities we can cultivate insight beyond the capacity of a traditional journal. (Despite the similar name, we are not associated with the Center for Faith and Flourishing at John Brown University.)

What We Are Doing Here

Faith & Flourishing is a journal of Christian theological scholarship. We rejoice to be members of and to carry forward, along with so many others, the great knowledge tradition of Christian theology that includes Irenaeus and Athanasius, Augustine and Gregory the Great, Anselm and Aquinas – figures who had much to say about the gospel and the life of the world. Our editorial focus will inevitably be affected by the fact that we, as believers and scholars, work within the classical Protestant branch of the tradition, as expressed by Luther, Calvin, Wesley and their peers. But we look forward to publishing broadly on the whole tradition, as the Lord gives us opportunity.

We plan to publish material in three categories:

- **Articles:** Traditional peer-reviewed journal articles contributing to scholarly knowledge
- **Essays:** Curated reflections that contribute to theological insight in light of scholarly knowledge
- **Conversations:** Cultivated exchanges among contributors on important theological questions

We welcome submissions in all academic disciplines, whether the disciplines of the theological academy or theologically-informed scholarship in the liberal arts and professions. All submissions will be peer-reviewed by scholars in the relevant disciplines. See our publication criteria and submission instructions for details.

Although we are a journal of theology for flourishing, we are not adopting a precise definition of what we mean by “flourishing.” What constitutes authentic flourishing is itself one of the most important topics of discussion we wish to facilitate. We intend to publish articles that consider flourishing as a perennial concern as well as those that consider the pressing concerns of the present. Because the flourishing of the human race and the flourishing of the whole creation (which has been entrusted to human stewardship) are interdependent, we include both the flourishing of human beings and the flourishing of all creation in our “theology for the life of the world.”

There is no avoiding the 800 pound gorilla in the room: politics. These days, it truly does sit wherever it wants to. No journal that presumes to take on the task of theology for the life of the world can avoid wrestling with the tensions inherent in this dangerous but essential topic. Our founding editorial board includes scholars with a wide variety of political predispositions, and the right way to ensure *Faith & Flourishing* would handle these topics responsibly was a subject of much discussion and debate in the board’s early meetings.

We will not shy away from publishing material that touches on politics; indeed, in a world where everything from chicken sandwiches to vaccines has become a subject of polarized passions, it is more a question of whether we could avoid politics even if we wanted to. But we are taking steps to ensure we serve our entire community well, and avoid partisan or ideological captivity. These include adopting a standard of charity and also of hospitality (i.e. avoiding the assumption that the scholarly audience is likeminded) as a formal criterion required for publication, and the cultivation of fruitful exchanges among scholars with diverse views through such means as our Conversations features and our collaboration with other Karam Fellowship initiatives. We trust the Lord for these and all our aspirations.

These are exciting times for theological scholarship. New conceptual frameworks for thinking about the enterprise of theology itself are emerging. A crying need has developed in the world around us for an integrative, formative and missional Christian witness that can only be the fruit of deep learning in the theological knowledge tradition. We have been humbled by the willingness of theological scholars to step up and support our efforts to carry the conversation about theology for the life of the world to the next

level. In all this, we recognize the hand of the Lord shepherding his people and superintending his world.

We commit our efforts to his grace, trusting that he is working out his plan to restore all things to their only hope for flourishing: his own holy love, made known to us in Jesus Christ our glorious God and king.

***Faith & Flourishing* Founding Editorial Board**

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