

## Human Flourishing or the Sovereignty of Self?

### A biblical reflection on identity

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#### INTRODUCTION

It might not be far-fetched to say that the concept of human flourishing is in our day a paradoxical one. While increasing wealth, global economic development and ease of living form the pillars of human wellbeing in modern developed society, the juxtaposition of increasing mental health issues and suicide,<sup>1</sup> ecological desecration and systemic oppression of the vulnerable threaten to cause these haughty foundations to come crumbling down. What does the Bible say to such a shallow, deluded and esoteric understanding of human flourishing?

While a robust biblical examination of human flourishing far exceeds its scope, this paper explores how the understanding of human wellbeing in the Global North – particularly in affluent middle-class Australia – is far removed from a biblical view. It would be helpful to begin by exploring what the Bible has to say about human flourishing.

#### BIBLICAL TEACHING ON HUMAN FLOURISHING

*Look here! Today I've set before you life and what's good versus death and what's wrong. If you obey the Lord your God's commandments that[a] I'm commanding you right now by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments, his regulations, and his case laws, then you will live and thrive, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and so are misled, worshipping other gods and serving them, I'm telling you right now that you will definitely die. You will not prolong your life on the fertile land that you are crossing the Jordan River to enter and possess. (Deut 30:15-18, Common English Bible)*

This passage suggests that human flourishing, or 'living and thriving', is a consequence of obeying God's commandments. This obedience is described as loving God, walking in His ways and keeping His commandments, which might be summed up as living out the *imago Dei* (image of God), since every human being is made in His image and according to His likeness (Gen 1:26). Being human thus rests on reflecting God's image in 'all its fullness, variety and capacity',<sup>2</sup> embodying His attributes and living out His commandments.

It would be reasonable therefore to suggest that the conditions necessary for human flourishing depend on the conditions needed to produce the outcome of image-bearing. The following section proposes that three such conditions necessary for human flourishing include acknowledgement of a transcendent God, our need for community and our capacity to resist evil and choose good.

#### Truth of Transcendence

The premise of Deuteronomy 30:15-18 is built upon the foundation that God is the true Image Bearer from whom humans receive the gift of life. At the heart of being an image bearer lies the simple but profound truth that we are not our own. It is within this grander narrative that human life is brought forth and sustained, such that in its fullness only the Giver and Sustainer of life might be glorified. In other words, humans shall live and thrive when there is rightful acknowledgement of a transcendent Creator from whom all life originates.

If a transcendent God, who is righteous (*tsedeqah*) and just (*mishpat*), is our source of life and standard of good, then His commandments when obeyed by image bearers shall result in flourishing of the *imago Dei*. Deuteronomy 30:15-18 puts forward the notion that humans shall live and thrive insofar as they live according to God's standard, which is to love Him and keep His commandments. The covenant laws given to the Israelites, summed up in Deuteronomy 30:16 as 'His commandments, regulations and case laws',

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<sup>1</sup> B. Fikkert, 'How do we flourish?: The Image of God and Homo Economicus', in *Made in the Image of God: The Importance of the Imago Dei for Issues in International Development*, eds K. Kandiah, H. J. Swithinbank and D. Westlake (Teddington, London: Tearfund, 2017), 52-65: 62.

<sup>2</sup> A. Crouch, 'Restoring the Image: Idolatry, Injustice and the Image of the Invisible God', in *Made in the Image of God*, eds K. Kandiah et al., 35-43: 38.

demonstrates an outlining by God of what being His covenantal people and image bearers would look like in the world. Given as a standard for His people to live by, these laws uphold the faithful bearing of His image and protect the flourishing of human life.

### **Created for Connection**

Humans are created by a relational God to flourish in the breadth of relationships. Our relationality is multidimensional, encompassing relationship vertically between God and self and horizontally with others and the rest of creation. Deuteronomy 30:16 describes relationship with God through obedience and growing in intimacy with Him. Because integral to loving God is the obeying of His commandments that uphold social relationships with others (Exod 20:13-17), walking in His ways necessarily includes communing with those around us in ways that honour horizontal relationships. Lastly, our relationship with the rest of creation is clear: Genesis 1:26-29 describes God's mandate upon humans to take up their role as good stewards, caring conscientiously for the land and all its inhabitants, while Deuteronomy 30:16 and 18 describes the 'land' in which God intends for the Israelites to prosper.

The flourishing of these relationships leads to shalom, a condition where humans as the *imago Dei* can bear God's image in its utmost expression of creativity and completeness. Demonstrated biblically as more important to human flourishing than the pursuit of an ever-increasing standard of living,<sup>3</sup> shalom places right relationships as central to God's created order. The extent to which we engage in right relationship with God, other humans and the rest of creation is the measure by which we, through living out the *imago Dei*, shall prosper and thrive.

### **Repentance Through Resistance and Restraints**

Inherent in Deuteronomy 30:15-18 is a summons to love God and turn away from worshipping other gods. This turning away from things that are not of God constitutes a call to repentance that occurs repeatedly throughout the Exodus narrative and prophetic texts. The Decalogue given to the Israelites after their release from Egypt declares an alternative to worshipping false gods, commanding instead worship and love for the one true God.<sup>4</sup> The prophet Amos implores the nation of Israel to 'seek God and live' (Amos 5:4, 6) and to 'hate evil, love good' (Amos 5:15), while the prophet Micah, through proclaiming oracles of punishment to the people of Samaria and Jerusalem (Micah 1-3), calls them to turn from their corrupt ways to God. Repentance encompasses both a resistance to death and what is wrong and a turning towards life and what is right. It is repentance that moves humankind from deceitful ways to God, and from fallen image bearers to the reconciled *imago Dei*.

The call to repentance requires a personal response as it does a collective one. The repeated addressing of the individual in Deuteronomy 30:15-18 necessitates the exercise of volition through the offering of choice. Indeed, the dignity of individual choice, including the capacity to turn away from the Creator, constitutes one of the basic features of image bearers.<sup>5</sup> That substantial weight is given to the exercise of individual choice, even at the cost of wayward choosing, demonstrates that part of human flourishing entails protecting the dignity of choice.

The choice to choose life or death, right or wrong, is however not consequence-free. Deuteronomy 30:15-18 spells out the consequence of being blessed in the God-given land when the choice is made to obey God's commandments, and contrasts this with the consequence of death and being cursed in the land when the choice is made to forsake His commandments. The exercise of choice is not unrestrained but instead bound by the outcomes of choice. And such restraints or boundaries, seen from Genesis 2:16-17 through to the covenant laws given to ancient Israel, are necessary, firstly, so that choice might be well-informed and free, and secondly, so that life may be experienced in its fullness when God is chosen over other things.

'Following Jesus always requires a turning away from something'.<sup>6</sup> Human flourishing that bears the *imago Dei* requires individual choice in resisting anything that tarnishes God's image, turning instead towards Him and living according to the boundaries set out by God.

## **HUMAN WELLBEING IN MIDDLE-CLASS AUSTRALIAN CULTURE**

<sup>3</sup> B. Goudzwaad, 'Reclaiming our Future: The Vision of Jubilee', in *1999 Stuber Lecture series on "Faith, Justice and Economics: Vision for a New Millennium"*, Colgate Rochester Crozier Divinity School: American Baptist Churches, 1999, 183.

<sup>4</sup> W. Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Crouch, 'Restoring the image'.

<sup>6</sup> J. Cornford, 'Inhabiting the Good News' [Audio recording], presented at Coming Back to Earth: Living Faithfully in the Twenty-first Century: TEAR NSW Conference, 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> July 2017, [https://mannagum.org.au/faith\\_and\\_economy/video\\_audio](https://mannagum.org.au/faith_and_economy/video_audio).

Cornford contends that Australia is 'not only one of the most deeply secularised countries in the world', but that it is also 'aggressively post-Christian'.<sup>7</sup> Such a reality is palpable all around, from the way individualism and unrestrained consumer culture threatens community and ecological health, to the way the vast majority of us – the middle and upper classes in particular – have become blind to our complicity in the structural elements of poverty and injustice. This section outlines how the idols of self, more and power form the tenets of mainstream human wellbeing in middle-class Australian culture and analyses the extent to which this is in alignment (or not) with a biblical understanding of human flourishing.

### **The Sovereignty of Self**

The idol of self in contemporary affluent Western society is pervasive and unmistakable. In the context of Australian culture, Cornford asserts that individualism is 'the lens by which we now refract all of life's questions – relationships, vocation, meaning of life, ethics and even religion' – with the primary question now being 'not what is right, just or good for us but what does this mean for me'.<sup>8</sup> Self-sufficiency and self-gratification, evident in the middle-class Australian's accumulation of excessive wealth and participation in crony capitalism, is prized over God-sufficiency and the common good. When mass media further bolsters the virtue of self by ubiquitously modifying our desires and tipping our sense of self ever so slightly towards it being a benevolent matter, it comes as no surprise that human wellbeing in Australian culture becomes framed in light of the self as superior to other considerations.

The aggrandisement of self to the status of divine and as a standard of good is the antithesis of biblical teaching. It is a gross distortion of biblical understanding which, while not abolishing the notion of self, attests to a social ordering where self is placed in right relationship with God, others and the rest of creation.

### **The Allure of More**

The stronghold that neoclassical economic thought has on the desires of affluent middle-class Australians is undeniable. That the 'rational economic man' lies at the heart of mainstream economic theory<sup>9</sup> is telling of what we have deemed as one of the overarching goals of life: namely, individual and private financial and material wellbeing, resulting in a relentless and idolatrous pursuit of more. Of course, we hardly notice the trappings of this, for consumerism 'thrives on the façade of fulfilling our desires' while 'only ever producing dissatisfaction'.<sup>10</sup> Consumerism and the acquisition of material things causes us to believe that the pursuit of more is inherently good even as we get hungrier and emptier.

This is a far cry, both from the biblical instruction to turn away from worshipping false gods to the only God who is able to satisfy and from the biblical pattern of restraints. Indeed, what lies at the root of a consumeristic spirit is a deep-seated fear; fear that perhaps we would suffer lack, humiliation and exposure of our desperate inability to conform to the status quo. And it is to this fear that the Bible speaks, quelling it by offering the subversive yet redemptive possibility of a Creator God who gives life,<sup>11</sup> breaking its compulsions by advocating an alternative economy of enough.

The prevalent practice of vast material acquisition among middle-class Australians stands in stark contrast to the biblical premise that 'flourishing of creatureliness requires responsible human restraint and attentiveness'.<sup>12</sup> How is it then that we – middle-class Australian Christians in particular – continue in our inimicality to human wellbeing and the common good when we have been presented a gloriously better alternative? The answer might lie in our ensnarement by power.

### **The Problem of Power**

Foundational to the idolatrous worship of individualism and consumerism is a wielding of political power that frames our dominant understanding of wellbeing in middle-class Australian culture. Occurring at both individual and governmental level, from the middle-class Australian's power to subtract from ecological health through excessive consumption and waste production, to the government's power to dissociate from

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<sup>7</sup> Cornford, 'Inhabiting the Good News'.

<sup>8</sup> Cornford, 'Inhabiting the Good News'.

<sup>9</sup> K. Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Economist* (London: Random House Business Books, 2017), 96.

<sup>10</sup> M. Anslow, 'Consuming Desire: Self-mastery as alternative to consumer culture', [https://mannagum.org.au/anna\\_matters/october-2020/understanding\\_the\\_times](https://mannagum.org.au/anna_matters/october-2020/understanding_the_times), October 2020, 6.

<sup>11</sup> C. M. Gay, 'Poverty', in ed. P. Oslington, *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 633.

<sup>12</sup> J. Brueggemann and W. Brueggemann, *Rebuilding the Foundations: Social Relationships in Sacred Scripture and Contemporary Society* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 153.

the pleas of refugees, such power is perceived as a good thing - even necessary for human wellbeing – perhaps because it provides a sense of security and quenches our fear of the unfamiliar.

However, we deceive ourselves when we believe that our wellbeing is contingent on power, not only because it plays into and feeds the idols of self and more, but also because it tarnishes the *imago Dei* within us. Crouch describes this false power as injustice that ‘conspires to impale the Image Bearer on the Cross’,<sup>13</sup> and it is this injustice that is all too prevalent in Australian society, evident in the broad indifference that we, even in the Church, exhibit towards the social ailments of growing inequality, exclusion and climate change.

And so our addiction to the power and prestige of *affluenza* violates in every sense the state of shalom that God intends for creation, exacerbated only by our impenitence and inability to see even when confronted with the stark realities of injustice. To the biblical instruction of loving God and our neighbour, and turning from sin, we remain unfortunately incognisant and rebellious, and thus misled.

## CONCLUSION

Central to a biblical understanding of human wellbeing is the flourishing of the *imago Dei*, which rests on the existence of a transcendent Creator God who has created us for relationship within specified boundaries. This flourishing would however not be complete unless imaging forth our Creator also included human agency and the power to choose life over death. To those of us who comprise affluent middle-class Australians and who have chosen death over life in our pursuit of self, more and power, the Bible calls us to a re-orienting – a resistance against the dominant culture to seek the common good where God’s people operate under values radically different from those of the world. And to this vision of shalom we press on, risky and costly though it might be, that it may be demonstrated that human life flourishes most beautifully when nothing but God comprises its centre.

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<sup>13</sup> Crouch, ‘Restoring the image’, 38.