



Eccentric Existence, Two Volume Set *A Theological Anthropology* **David H. Kelsey**

LEVEL: Seminary and graduate

COURSES: Systematic Theology; Theological Anthropology (Doctrine of Humanity)

What does it mean to be a human being?

In one of the most thorough examinations of theological anthropology ever produced, author David H. Kelsey probes this complicated issue.

In this remarkable two-volume work, Kelsey posits that humanity's relationship to God is a basic claim of Christianity and that God actively relates to human beings in three major ways: God creates them; God is there at the end of all things, eschatologically; and God reconciles humans when they are alienated from God. Part 1, "Living

on Borrowed Breath," explores God's relation to all things, as the creator of all things. In part 2, "Living on Borrowed Time," Kelsey explores God's drawing all things to their final ends. Finally, part 3, "Living by Another's Death," explores God's reconciliation of all that is estranged from God. The result of this seminal work is a textured affirmation of humanity's relationship with God and with each other.

This landmark theological work is unrivaled in scope and represents the culmination of decades of theological thought. It will inform, influence, and inspire theologians, academics, and students for generations to come.

Flourishing as Dying Life

I am suggesting that the glory of God defines human creaturely flourishing. However, what counts as "flourishing" is relative to what flourishes. It is actual living human personal bodies' flourishing that we seek to understand, not God's. In the case of a human creature, what flourishes must be understood theologically not only in terms of its ultimate context but also in terms of its proximate contexts.

Recall some themes developed in earlier chapters: Understood in terms of its proximate context, a human person is a type of being that at once (a) is a living body set into a society of beings, living and nonliving, interacting as systems of

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physical and sometimes cultural-linguistic energies, and (b) has this living body on loan. It lives on borrowed breath and is alone accountable for the fundamental orientation, dispositions, policies, emotions, passions, and beliefs that shape its living body's interactions with fellow creatures. . . . The task here is to identify the consequences of our proximate contexts for the idea of human flourishing.

"To flourish" means both "to blossom" and "to thrive." There are connotations of each sense that are useful here; there are other connotations that must be excluded. So my use of "to flourish" and related terms must be somewhat stipulative. "To blossom" is to manifest the type of beauty of which a given life is capable by virtue of God relating to it creatively. "To blossom," in a metaphorical sense, is also to be on the way to providing both fruit, on which contemporary others' flourishing may depend for nurture and support, and seed, on which a subsequent generation's life may depend. The range of metaphorical uses of "seed" and "blossom," of course, extends much more broadly than simply to procreation. In all these senses, "flourishing" may be used metaphorically to characterize a certain type of human life. But "to blossom" and "to bloom," used metaphorically, may also connote maximal good health. I shall argue that health, whether physical, emotional, intellectual, social, or cultural, is at best a problematic metaphor for what is meant theologically by human flourishing. I seek to qualify radically that connotation in theological use of the term.

As for "to thrive," its root is Old Norse, "*tbrifask*, to have oneself in hand." Used metaphorically of a certain type of human life, that too is theologically appropriate. However, used metaphorically, "to thrive" may also connote both "to grow luxuriantly" and "to prosper." I seek to exclude both of these senses, the first because it unqualifiedly reintroduces health as a metaphor, and the second because it introduces wealth and achievement as metaphors definitive of human flourishing.

Understanding human beings in terms of their proximate contexts foregrounds two themes fundamental to a theological idea of human flourishing. It stresses, first, the fact that what may flourish is radically finite. It is life lived on borrowed breath. Personal bodies are inherently relational beings, limited by their dependence on others and by others' dependencies on them. Because it is the flourishing of finite creatures who are integral parts of the thoroughly finite quotidian, human flourishing is something quite different from utopian life in a paradisiacal setting free of social and physical stresses and conflicts. Human persons' flourishing in their kind is inseparable from the flourishing of all creatures in their kinds. Hence human creatures' glory, whatever it is, lies neither historically behind the quotidian (in Eden) nor ahead of it (in the "Kingdom of God"). Nor does it lie above the quotidian in transcendence of the everyday. It lies rather in human creatures being dedicatedly active for the well-being of their everyday proximate contexts as citizens of the society of creatures that comprise the quotidian. . . .

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Flourishing as Living Bodies

In one sense, flourishing personal bodies are the glory of God simply as living human bodies. As part of all that exists by virtue of God's utterly intimate creative relating, personal bodies are in their own fashion the glory of God. Indeed, their "fashion" is a remarkably rich expression of God's glory. The more complex the powers of a creature, the more richly it expresses God's glory. The difference between more and less rich expression of God's glory is not a difference of degree on some scale or continuum of "expressivity of God's glory." It is rather a series of differences in the complexity of their modes of expression. Different creatures are God's glory in different modalities; they simply express God's glory in different ways.

Hence the theological concept of the flourishing of human creatures in particular is a highly relative concept. Christian understanding of human persons as God's creatures does not entail any abstractly ideal and absolute standard of human flourishing against which the degree of flourishing of each and every human life could in principle be measured. Not even the life of Jesus provides such a standard. Instead, what counts as the flourishing of any given human life must be understood concretely in terms of the particular finite array of powers and capacities that the given living body has and the particularities of the finite networks of relationships in which it has been set in its proximate contexts across time. Given that flourishing personal bodies are living bodies with a remarkably rich and complex array of types of powers, they are the glory of God in their own distinctive modes simply as living bodies creatively related to by God. If nothing else, the complex physiology of living human bodies, as construed within their proximate and ultimate contexts, is in itself an "impressive observable," expressive of God's glory.

That remark immediately invites the question whether only healthy lives are the glory of God. That question, of course, is only the camel's nose of a larger problem of evil. Are the infant suffering from failure-to-thrive syndrome and the elder suffering from Alzheimer's disease not the glory of God even though they are God's creatures? Aspects of the topics of sin and evil are taken up in later chapters. Here it is sufficient to point out that the question assumes that health is the index of flourishing, Christianly understood—an assumption I wish to challenge.

In a theocentric anthropology, human flourishing ought to be understood in relation to God. I suggest that expressing God's glory—that is, being derivatively the glory of God—is the index of human flourishing. Flourishing human bodies are not the glory of God because they are healthily flourishing; theologically speaking, they are deemed flourishing to the extent that even in extreme unhealth they are nonetheless in some mode (derivatively) the glory of God.

"Health" is problematic as an index of a human flourishing (theologically understood) because "health" and "unhealth" are usually understood functionally; indeed, "dysfunctional" has come to be used almost interchangeably with "unhealthy." The criteria of the "healthy" functioning of energy systems are

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self-referential. To the extent that an energy system functions to maintain itself in its immediate environment and to grow, it is healthy; to the extent that it does not, it is unhealthy. A self-referential index to human flourishing is problematic in an anthropology that seeks to understand human persons, not finally in relation to themselves and their proximate contexts, but ex-centrally, in relation to God as the center of their reality and value “outside” themselves.

Of course, a healthy human living body is preferable to an unhealthy one. For that matter, for any personal body, thriving in the sense of prospering is preferable to being impoverished. These are common themes in canonical Wisdom literatures. Proverbs has “Solomon” (or is it Woman Wisdom, as at 1:20ff ?) enjoin the hearer,

My child, do not forget my teaching [of wisdom],
but let your heart keep my commandments;
for length of days and years of life [presumably healthy life]
and abundant welfare they will give you.

(Prov. 3:1, 2)

The theme that being wise will make life bloom and thrive reverberates in both mainstream wisdom—for example, Proverbs—and in its internal critics—for example, Ecclesiastes. Wisdom literature cuts against any theological tendency to play down the importance of healthy and prosperous life. Furthermore, in that literature this theme has very broad application because “life” is construed broadly to embrace several dimensions: biological, emotional, intellectual, social, and cultural, each of which may at any particular time be relatively healthy or unhealthy.

It is clearer today than ever before that the health of each of these dimensions is interdependent with that of the other dimensions in complex ways that are not now well understood. It is also clear that a certain minimum degree of biological health is the necessary condition of any degree of health whatever in the other dimensions of human life. The infant that for genetic reasons will never mature biologically, the infant born radically retarded, the mature human living body afflicted with advanced stages of neurological diseases such as Alzheimer’s, and any human living body that has slipped into coma, although they all continue to live, simply do not have the powers needed for the emotional, intellectual, social, or cultural dimensions of human life. Some greater degree of healthy human life is preferable because it is a necessary condition for the exercise of the complex array of powers, wherein human persons may distinctively express God’s glory simply by being living bodies.

Nonetheless, I suggest, personal bodies in extreme states of unhealth continue in their own ways to express God’s glory. It is not in virtue of their unhealth or health that God creatively relates to personal bodies in those conditions; and it is not in virtue of either their unhealth or health that they are the glory of God simply as living human bodies. Rather, they express God’s glory in virtue of the

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minimal degree of functioning life they still do have as the condition, as it were, of their profound dysfunctions. So long as they do physically live in virtue of God self-expressively relating to them, those suffering extreme unhealth also are in their own ways the glory of God. The index of their flourishing as God's glory is not any sort of health, but simply the fact that God's creative relating to them is inherently self-expressive of God's own glory. In all the ambiguity of their dying lives, as God's creatures they express God's glory. They constitute the limit cases of living human bodies as the glory of God.

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David H. Kelsey is Luther A. Weigle Professor of Theology Emeritus at Yale University Divinity School. Among his books are *Imagining Redemption* and *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School?* both published by Westminster John Knox Press.

“In a work of astonishing theological virtuosity, Kelsey develops his account of “eccentric” human existence in terms of the triune God’s actively relating to humanity in three interrelated but distinct ways: as One who creates, who promises eschatological consummation, and who reconciles. Along the way, we are treated to panoramic surveys of persistent problems in modern theology, innovative appeals to canonical wisdom texts, ethical and pastoral reflections on communal Christian life, explorations of the paradigmatic humanity of Jesus Christ, and much more. In this magnum opus Kelsey spreads before us the riches of his accumulated theological wisdom. You will return to this book again and again.”

—Amy Plantinga Pauw, Henry P. Mobley Professor of Doctrinal Theology, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“David Kelsey caps an illustrious career as one of the most theologically adept minds of his generation with this highly anticipated work on theological anthropology. His learned and astute magnum opus was well worth the wait.”

—Kathryn Tanner, Dorothy Grant Maclear Professor of Theology, The University of Chicago Divinity School

“This is the most important work in Christian theological anthropology to emerge in decades. It is also a model of theological reflection at its best.”

—Charles M. Wood, Lehman Professor of Christian Doctrine, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University