Wisdom for Cultural Challenges about Human Flourishing

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At the Christian elementary school I attended in Wheaton, IL, there was a cement cornerstone with an inscription in an all-caps that read: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” (Prov. 1:7) The things we pass by every day tend to fade into a sort of wallpaper of life. What I passively absorbed as a child walking by that cornerstone, others actively pursued with patience and perseverance as a way of formation.

The school moved to a larger campus about 10 years ago, and so did the old cornerstone. It is displayed as prominently as ever in the new building. In the school’s document of core principles, the first item reads: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge.”

For many years this familiar proverb remained an unexamined truth to me—more wallpaper than way of life. By adulthood I could begin to testify to its truth from observation. But in these last few years I’ve been reflecting on *how* it is true. That is what proverbs are supposed to do: they work on us as we work on them. Their meaning grows in us as we grow in our knowledge of God’s word and the world around us.

But Proverbs and other wisdom literature don’t just shape us cognitively. Wisdom is a tuning fork that brings our thoughts, our habits, our actions—our whole lives—into resonance with God’s design for us as human beings.

Dislocated from Design

We live in a culture dislocated from that design. At an individual level, the dislocation is manifest in struggles from opioid addiction to gender dysphoria. At a social level, our most heated policy debates are challenges to truths taught in the first chapters of Genesis, about what it means to be human: that we are created, in the image of God, male and female, made for each other in marriage, made for right relationship with God, our fellow human beings, creation, and ourselves.

A biblical theology of humanity begins in these first few, rich chapters of Genesis, and every chapter of Scripture after it could give us some insight about it. Rather than trying to summarize the vast biblical data on anthropology, here I will focus on a practical theology of *being* human, with wisdom as its central idea. I offer it as a sort of preamble or prolegomenon to deeper biblical and systematic theological exploration of what it means to be human. As preamble, it also forecasts the end for which we undertake such study: a theology of humanity is for the purpose of being truly human according to God’s design.

This approach grows out of reflecting on Proverbs as a source of wisdom for public life during the challenges of the last year. Wisdom’s urgency is striking as she stands at the crossroads and calls out at the city gates. Human lives are passing by, dislocated from their created design. She’s urgent about her message for their sake.

Wisdom's relation to God's character and creation yields unique insight on our human existence and purpose. It offers coherence and meaning that elude the quest for peace by so many around us. It shows us how our existence relates to God, to our neighbors, and to the rest of reality. Proverbs presents wisdom as an active pursuit that ought to engage us continually. It is a deliberate path of formation. Biblical wisdom is the *way* of true flourishing, and the way to *convey* true flourishing.

It is worthwhile to consider three ways that wisdom works to sharpen our focus on being human. First, wisdom shapes us to be truly human. Second, wisdom can restore a vision of true human flourishing. Third, wisdom directs our cultural engagement in a society with fragmented ideas about what it means to be human.

Christian wisdom beckons a world dislocated from its design back to a flourishing that it cannot generate on its own. In the midst of cultural challenges over human flourishing, what institutions of Christian education have to offer is wisdom, and specifically, formation in wisdom. This is a unique and irreplaceable service that the church, institutions of Christian formation, and individual Christians can render to public life.

Wisdom

What is Wisdom?

Wisdom is a way of life, and it leads to true human flourishing. Wisdom is an organic combination of character and worldview that generates know-how for the here and now. It is correct knowledge correctly applied, real-time in real life.

The complexity of our cultural moment certainly calls for such discernment. But biblical wisdom also addresses the simple and mundane. To focus on wisdom for the *complex* but to neglect it for the *mundane* is one of the mistakes that leads toward the folly Proverbs warns against.

Wisdom is living well. It brings our character and our discernment about the world around us into alignment with the way God has made the world for our good and his glory. It is comprehensive in its implications for our lives. As the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck once wrote, "God never grants us time off in order not to be what we are supposed to be."[1] *We* need the coherence of the way of wisdom as much as we need to offer it to the world.

Where is Wisdom?

Word of God: True wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord: that is, hearing and embracing to the Word of God.[2] Before Scripture becomes the *object* of our theological investigations of what it means to be human, it needs to shape us as *subjects,* to be truly human by being rightly related to God.

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[1] Herman Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good," trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review,* Vol. 2 (2011): 152.

[2] Proverbs 1:7, 9:10.

Works of God: Wisdom is also found in the works of God in creation and providence. Proverbs tells us to consider ants (6:6, 30:25), oxen (14:4), charging bears (28:15) and vomiting dogs (26:11). These show us something about God's wisdom woven into creation, either by reflecting his design (e.g., how ants and oxen go about their work), or by showing the effects of sin at odds with it (e.g., angry bears and vomiting dogs). Observing in this way teaches us the habit of looking for purpose and design in all God's works of creation and providence. It forms in us the conviction that we exist in a world of coherence and meaning, not chaos and nihilism.

Weathering of Life: Experience teaches us wisdom as well. The buffeting of life makes us learn the limits of our temporal nature. These are the contours of our freedom; respecting them allows us to flourish. Wisdom grasps the critical distinction between Creator and creature, and what that implies for a life rightly related to God and the world he has made.

Wisdom is found in the Word of God, the works of God, and in the weathering of life. One way these three come together is when experience teaches us the practice of what John Stott called "double-listening"—i.e., listening to the Word and the world.[3] The habit of hearing God's Word should make us better listeners to the aspirations and frustrations of our neighbors. The experience of walking in the way of wisdom gives us opportunity to testify—and not just with our words—to what satisfies our longings as human beings.

How Does Wisdom Work?

Most proverbs are shorter than the average tweet—and far more weighty. They're short and concrete in order to stick with us, so that we puzzle over them and ponder how to apply them. Like any puzzle forces us to look at a problem from multiple angles, so a proverb teaches us the habit of looking for the inter-connectedness of reality. It pushes us to see beyond a scatterplot of data points to the patterns that reflect purpose in the world.

Alasdair MacIntyre famously begins his 1981 book *After Virtue* with a scene reminiscent of the science fiction novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz.* In this scene, catastrophe has wiped out modern scientific infrastructure. Scientists, laboratories, academic literature and programs—everything is gone. Shards of information are all that remain of science. A later generation that lacks the knowledge to properly connect these remnants nevertheless goes about the business of what it calls "science," oblivious to the fact that it is missing the framework that made it all cohere as a system that actually reflected reality.[4]

This parable introduces MacIntyre's diagnosis of the incoherence of modern moral thought. It exists, he says, in "fragments of a conceptual scheme."[5] In other words, contemporary society's moments of moral consciousness no longer share a consistent framework of first principles. Public life today is characterized by conflicting moral impulses, particularly about what it means to be human. Public rhetoric pledges allegiance to human dignity, but policy undermines it in laws sanctioning abortion and physician-assisted suicide, for example.

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[3] John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 27. Cited in Christopher Watkin, *Thinking Through Creation: Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017) 2.

[4] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 1-2.

[5] Ibid. 2.

In an age professing concern for the whole person, we have an awfully hard time simultaneously addressing the material and immaterial aspects of human existence. On the one hand, antipoverty policy has generally reduced human need to the material, while neglecting the breakdown of relationships that typically coincides with material hardship. On the other hand, gender identity policy proposals insist that a person's most fundamental identity is disembodied and immaterial.

Cultural Challenges

Policy is connected to the personal. In 2020, journalist Abigail Shrier released a book on the sudden rise of adolescent girls identifying as transgender. She calls it an "epidemic" that is affecting many girls who never questioned their biological sex before encountering trans "influencers" and joining friends in declaring themselves transgender.[6] What Shrier is documenting are extreme responses to a couple of very basic questions that everyone faces: *Who am I? How do I fit?*

These are questions that we all ask in one form or another throughout life: *Who am I? How do I fit?* We agonize about them as adolescents. At some point, we reach a degree of confidence and comfort about our answers, only to have that disrupted by the next life change—and so it continues. Much of life is wrestling, consciously or subconsciously, with how to be comfortable in one's own skin.

Lieutenant Dan—Gary Sinise's character in the movie *Forrest Gump*—wrestled mightily in this way. In a famous scene of the movie, Lt. Dan is on the mast of a shrimp boat in a violent storm, raging against nature and the Almighty. A Vietnam War veteran, he'd lost both legs in an ambush, from which Forrest actually rescued him. Instead of being grateful, Lt. Dan is bitter that he was not left to die in the fight rather than made to live what he considered a "useless" life without his legs. In the midst of the storm on the bayou, Lt. Dan is looking for a showdown with God—and he gets it.

The storm is a turning point. In the next scene on that boat, calm has settled on the water—and on Lt. Dan. He finally thanks Forrest for saving his life, flashes a smile, jumps out of the boat, and back floats peacefully in the sunset on the water. As Forrest tells us, "he made his peace with God."

The elements of this placid scene symbolize the holistic peace of existing in right relationship—first with God, then with self, others, and the created world. This is the substance of a life of wisdom, and a life of true flourishing. This harmony of restored relationships overcomes humanity's dislocation from design. It responds to the questions *who am I? How do I fit?* with answers that are true to reality and satisfying to our souls.

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[6] Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2020) xx, 25-26.

Who am I? is a question that tries to make sense of individual existence and how different aspects of our nature and experience relate. *How do I fit?* is a question that looks to the social level to sort out how to live together. These questions are central to human flourishing.

Lt. Dan's story reminds us that no one ever has the luxury of answering these questions in the abstract. They're always embedded in the context of life experiences, which—like his—can be full of hardship, suffering, and bitterness. They're deeply personal. They're also always caught in the midst of prevailing cultural winds. (In the context of Forrest Gump's montage of cultural history, Lt. Dan's rage is a picture of one aspect of the angst around the Vietnam War era.)

As for today's cultural wind patterns, two are particularly powerful in dislocating our concept of human flourishing. The first are the ideas of control and autonomy. Their logic has led, at the extreme, to legitimizing abortion and physician-assisted suicide. The desire for control has also propelled the transhumanist quest to defy the limits of human nature, e.g., through cryogenic preservation with the goal of revival one day. A second set of cultural winds are ones that fragment our view of human nature either by emphasizing material aspects (as in antipoverty policy) or immaterial aspects (as in gender identity policy), to the neglect of the other.

We could list other examples in these categories. But if these two currents dislocate our understanding of flourishing as individuals and society, how can wisdom restore it? Wisdom can reestablish a vision of true human flourishing in at least two ways: first, by affirming the dignity as well as the limits of human identity, and second, by focusing cultural engagement on doing justice to that identity.

Wisdom Restores Flourishing

Human Identity: Dignity and Limits

With apologies to Jason Bourne of the action-thriller movies, I'm going to use the title of his first film to make a point about the reality of human existence as a "born identity." To be *born* is to have limits. We are not here because of our own agency. There is a *givenness* to our existence. Many of the facts of our lives are settled long before we can take responsibility for our actions. Part of true flourishing is to be reconciled to the reality of this givenness.

The drama of life plays out in the tension between what is fixed and what is free in our human nature. All of us experience this tension regularly. But much more seriously, for some people at some times, the tension between what is fixed and what is free becomes a crisis of identity. These deeply personal struggles can become policy challenges when they come with demands for approval or material support for the rejection of the givenness of created existence. This is what we see in the push for mandated medical provision of gender transition treatments, for example.

On a universal level, the tension from our human limits is nowhere more acute than in the prospect of our own death. Dying and death are outside our control. It is precisely this loss of control that has provoked the push for physician-assisted suicide. Fear of losing autonomy and becoming a burden to loved ones are the top reasons people give for seeking doctors' help to end their lives.[7] Physician-assisted suicide denies the givenness of dying and death by seizing control to hasten them.

Transhumanism, on the other hand, strives to delay them indefinitely. It seeks to circumvent the dying process, at a minimum, and ultimately hopes to evade death entirely. Physician-assisted suicide and the transhumanist quest for immortality are asking for their own showdown with God as they bid for control over life's limits.

In sharpest contrast to this, the wise person makes peace with God about the boundaries of dying and death. He can do so because to be born is not just to have limits. It is also to be created for transcendence—and, in spite of sin, to have the sure hope of transcendence because our Creator has become our Redeemer.

This gives a whole new outlook on the approach to death. It allows us to embrace a theology of aging that sees meaning in aging as "sign and preparation for Sabbath rest," in the words of scholar Autumn Alcott Ridenour.[8] ("Sabbath rest" here is a reference to the phrase that the book of Hebrews uses to describe eternal existence in glory.)

Sabbath rest is the ultimate calling for those united to Christ, and aging is preparation for that calling. This outlook can see the good in accepting limits precisely because it keeps its sights set on transcendence.[9] Recognizing these boundaries makes us value the days at hand differently. It encourages us to prioritize and make commitments to people and projects in light of an eternal perspective.[10]

The ESV "Daily Bible Reading Plan" has Psalm 90 scheduled for December 31. It's an especially poignant psalm for the passing of the year because it's about reckoning with the passing of our lives. It also ties this practice of reckoning with our limits back to wisdom: "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." (Ps. 90:12)

Psalm 90 begins where wisdom begins: by acknowledging our Creator. "Lord you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!" (Ps. 90:1-3)

Accepting our created dependence includes acknowledging God's control not only over the number of our days, but also over our capacity for joy in the midst of their struggle. "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil." (Ps. 90:14-15)

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[7] Kevin M. Simmons, "Suicide and Death with Dignity," *Journal of Law and the Biosciences*, vol. 5:2 (2018): 437.

[8] Autumn Alcott Ridenour, *Sabbath Rest as Vocation: Aging Toward Death* (New York: T&T Clark, 2020) 9.

[9] Ibid. 9, 13.

[10] Ibid. 240.

This kind of formation in wisdom shapes us and our cultural engagement in ways that will have public impact. With this in mind, and reflecting on the cultural challenges mentioned above, one of the most significant things we can do to counter the transhumanist quest is to age well. Each day that we grow older with grace and peace, each day we cultivate communities that see aging as a sign and preparation for Sabbath rest, is a day that shows how to live with limits while looking forward to the reality of transcending them.

Across the life cycle, every long struggle with disease or disability, every refusal to abort a child with Down Syndrome or other genetic imperfections becomes another opportunity to tell the old, old story…the story of creation groaning under the effects of sin and death, beginning to be renewed through Christ's redemption, and headed for glory. This is what has made Joni Eareckson Tada's ministry so powerful. She has spent her life singing a new song about living with disability and longing for heaven. That is a song we all need to learn.

In the days ahead, as technology advances, we will be pressed to discern and describe more and more particularly what makes us human. Theology, philosophy, and the sciences have important work to do here, as do the humanities and the arts. (Of note: one of the first publications of the President's Council on Bioethics, launched by President George W. Bush in 2001 and led by Leon Kass, was a literary anthology called *Being Human.*) But perhaps most powerful of all, we need to embody what it means to be truly human, especially in the context of community.

Cultural Engagement and the Character of Community

The character of a community is formed by its view of the human person. Our cultural engagement ought to call on our society to live up to the high view of human dignity that it professes and to accept the limits of being human that it increasingly denies.

It is essential that we recognize the material and spiritual dimensions of human life and how they interact in complex ways in many social challenges today. To be human is to be relational, and true human flourishing depends on right relationships, with God, self, others, and the world.

What we believe about the image of God in humanity determines the character of community as well. Herman Bavinck, a contemporary of Abraham Kuyper, was a systematic theologian whose work on the doctrine of humanity, and of creation generally, is very helpful. Bavinck emphasized three aspects of the image that show the fullness of the picture we need. First, the whole human person images God. Second, both male and female image God, individually and relationally. Finally, the whole of humanity, around the globe and through all the centuries of human history, images God.[11]

"The image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being," wrote Bavinck. "Only humanity in its entirety … is the fully finished image, the most telling and striking likeness of God."[12] This has far-reaching implications throughout our culture and across the full range of policy issues.

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[11] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 533, 554–62, 576–78.

If our concept of the human person shapes our communities, those communities shape us as persons as well. Yuval Levin, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, recently wrote a piece called "The Case for Wooden Pews."[13] It explores the steep decline in Americans' confidence in institutions, including religious institutions. His investigation is more than academic because institutions teach us the skills we need to pursue shared goals in community—just the kind of habits that seem so out of reach in our politics right now.

Levin suggests that one reason for the decline is that the public doesn't trust that institutions can form people of integrity who will practice what they preach. If religious institutions are going to restore trust, he says they must exhibit "not that they are continuous with the larger culture but that they are capable of addressing its deficiencies — that they can speak with legitimate authority and be counted on to do the work of molding souls and shaping character."[14]

Yet some institutions seem to have abdicated that role and have instead become forums for the expressive individualism found in the broader culture. They have become, in Yuval Levin's words, "platforms for performance and prominence."[15] To the extent this is true of religious institutions, it has created skepticism that they can express truth with authority.

Despite these challenges, Levin sees a critical role for religious congregations and organizations in tackling our society's loss of trust in institutions. That's because the experience of religious formation is one of the most promising ways to multiply the kind of commitments our society needs to rebuild trust.

These are the habits that deliberate formation in wisdom can teach, in ways that will bear fruit at the personal and the policy levels. At the same time, the freedom to continue to play this role in society is increasingly challenged. That is one more reason why we must preserve religious freedom, in addition to the fact that it is a proper policy recognition of the transcendent aspects of human existence.

Conclusion

Wisdom is a deliberate path of formation that leads to true flourishing. As such, it ought to shape us, our institutions, and our cultural engagement. Wisdom combines character, worldview, and the skill to act well in current circumstances. It draws discernment from Scripture, creation, and experience about the way God has made the world for our flourishing.

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[12] Ibid. 577.

[13] Yuval Levin, "The Case for Wooden Pews," *Deseret Magazine*, Jan./Feb. 2021.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

We live in a culture experiencing dislocation and fragmentation: the *dislocation* of autonomy and *fragmentation* in its view of the human person. Personal and policy challenges emerge as it becomes more and more confusing to answer basic human questions about *who am I?* and *how do I fit?* People need answers about individual and social existence that are true to reality and satisfying to the soul.

In relation to this, Christian schools, as institutions committed to formation in wisdom, have two critical tasks. The first is to establish a witness to true human identity that affirms human dignity and accepts temporal limits while aspiring to transcendence. The second task is to focus our cultural engagement on calling our communities to do justice to this understanding of human flourishing.

These two aspects—individual identity and society's reflection of it—also offer a way of organizing our approach to the many topics that deal with anthropology. There is much more work to be done in theology and across the disciplines on what it means to be human. Much of it will in fact need to be interdisciplinary—theology and philosophy working together, for example.

Christian education is uniquely poised to undertake this work because it begins with the conviction of the coherence of all the academic disciplines, and of the coherence of human existence. As a primary step, this conviction must first form us and our institutions. May God's wisdom shape us so that we faithfully witness to biblical truth about being human.