

At the Following Christ conference, we gather people active in the powerful institutions of the world — academia, business, government, the media, medicine, the courts — in order to challenge and encourage one another in living as Christ's followers in the world. It's all too easy to lapse into either over-confidence or cynicism about the role our institutions (and we ourselves) play in shaping culture. It's wise instead to consider how we will be shaped and how we will seek God's redeeming influence in the world. What discourses set the terms of our questions? Whose word and way will we follow? It matters how we know and praise God and how we serve him with our days — for us individually, for the quality and direction of our culture, and for the peace and well-being of the world.

### **Human Flourishing**

The program of Following Christ 2008 is shaped (though not constrained) by the theme of *human flourishing*. Whether in plenary sessions, disciplinary and topical tracks, interdisciplinary seminars and workshops, or Bible study, our conversations will return again and again to this theme. So what is human flourishing? Frankly, one purpose of this conference is to answer this question — so the matter will have to remain open. Meanwhile, this thematic overview provides a few conversation starters as we set out together.

One biblical index of human flourishing appears in the prophets and recurs in Revelation. In trying to help people understand his promises of blessing to them, God sketches a picture of a city with the sound of musicians heard in the streets, artisans busy at craft and trade, the economic engine of the millstone turning, the domestic miracle of a lamp in a window and the voices of bride and groom rejoicing (Rev. 18:22-23; see for example Jer. 7, 16, 25, and especially 33). When either our hearts or our societies cease to flourish, these sounds fall silent. But these are

sounds God loves to hear, for our good and his delight.

These outward signs of flourishing might well be supplemented by the inward signs of Christian virtues or the fruits of the Spirit. Are we bearing the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? If so, then we are flourishing.

### **Contributing to Flourishing**

Sadly, it must be said that many people are not doing well. They're sick, they're poor, their leaders oppress them, their relationships are shallow, their hopes are unrealized, or they have no hopes left at all. Christians looking about them at the world are sensitive to many forms of human suffering and human failing, and we're right to remain sensitive to all of these — whether economic or emotional, political or intellectual, international or intergenerational, physical or spiritual. People in every sphere are right to ask, "Is this any way to live?"

One reason we can be sensitive to human suffering and failing is that we, following Christ, remain committed to human flourishing. In the fallen world, such flourishing will be hard-won. But we can get beyond a mere catalog of the disasters around us and rise up to challenge suffering's sources and symptoms alike, because knowing God has given us a taste for what his world is supposed to be like.

As Christians we join in the work of Jesus, who (by his own testimony) came that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). This life is multi-dimensional: spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, and social. As Jesus' followers, we are called to nurture life within ourselves, in our communities, and around the world. Abundant life is a quality of the Kingdom of God, and from this root grows our commitment to human flourishing.

All people can contribute to human flourishing, if only in the humblest acts of care for others. But those of us in the universities and professions have been given a

precious gift. We can contribute in extraordinary, even unique, ways to human well-being: the obstetrician who delivers a baby alive who would otherwise die, the teacher who guides students to understanding and academic success, the judge who shepherds a case to justice. Such examples can and should be multiplied and the stories told. Such principles should be advanced in every discipline and profession. Imagine what Christians might accomplish in our culture if we conceived of our academic and professional work as making a godly contribution to human flourishing?

### **What Human Flourishing Is Not**

Let's be clear about what human flourishing is *not*.

Human flourishing is not the only way to frame our life as Christians in the university and professions. By focusing our attention on the topic for several days together, we do not intend to eclipse other important approaches to understanding God's call to academics and professionals.

Nor is human flourishing to be cultivated at the expense of the non-human elements of God's creation. In fact, God has always called us to be good "gardeners" in order to best live life. God made all of creation good and made its living inhabitants to be fruitful and multiply, and he charges us with responsibility — in accountable dominion — to help it flourish.

Human flourishing does not pit the individual against the community or the personal against the social. We want to consider the ways we can both model and multiply human flourishing. It rejects the selfishness (not to mention the inefficiency) of "looking out for number one." At the same time, it does not submerge each individual within a smothering collective. God makes individual persons and he makes communities, and we believe he wants both to flourish.

Human flourishing is certainly not to be reduced to the acquisition of physical

comforts and economic security (or security of any kind). We believe that God's vision for human flourishing is broader and deeper than "the American dream," a single-minded petition for "health and wealth," or the facile appeal to an ethic of "survival of the fittest." In the academy and professions, we often see the lack of flourishing manifested precisely in the pursuit of illusory forms of flourishing, through careerism, overweening ambition, vainglory, or the sacrifice of relationships to selfish goals. Human flourishing is not merely "success."

The alleviation of physical and economic suffering is part of the picture, especially for those most affected, but we also know that there is a mystery in God's economy: that often hardship brings blessings not found among the complacently comfortable. Jesus himself was a man of sorrows, and we learn to "suffer well" as we are conformed to his image. We particularly want to remain open to the role of sacrifice in human flourishing, without valorizing poverty or despising riches.

It turns out that human flourishing is not really very human at all: it is a divine gift. Its original design was given by the Maker and now he endows the spiritual gifts and provides all the resources to pursue it. Human flourishing is not an end in itself and cannot be fully realized without worship, apart from which we cannot apprehend the proper ordering of the world. As we worship, we are released from the naïve and arrogant egalitarianism in which we imagine we are like God. Human flourishing is never grounds for boasting, but always an occasion for prayer, praise, and gratitude.

## **Questions**

In the end, the concept of human flourishing presents us with more questions than answers, and this is precisely why it merits the collective attention of 1,500 delegates and scores of speakers and presenters during four days at Following Christ 2008. Those who are planning the conference are engaging the following kinds of questions:

- ◇ Are there universal elements of human flourishing, things that every person needs to flourish? If so, which of these are immediate gifts of God and which can be created, shaped, or nourished by the practice of the academic and professional disciplines?
- ◇ Why do men and women fail to flourish? To what extent does sin, both personal and systemic, account for this failure?
- ◇ In the face of such failure, how is the gospel good news and how does it help us flourish ourselves within our vocations and beyond?
- ◇ Is it really true that to fully flourish one must be a follower of Jesus? How can such an outrageous claim be presented compellingly in our culture?
- ◇ Must our bodies be doing well for us to flourish? In what ways does our embodiment affect our flourishing?
- ◇ What does pursuing excellence have to do with human flourishing? Is elitism inherent in excellence, and does it impede human flourishing in a diverse society?
- ◇ Will the career and personal path I'm on lead to my flourishing and that of others? Are my vocation and occupation in sync? Should I perhaps change paths, and how can I know?
- ◇ What kinds of suffering stifle human flourishing, and what kinds can contribute to it?
- ◇ How can we prepare to flourish and help others flourish in the face of an uncertain future and rapid social, cultural, economic, and technological change?
- ◇ How does the right practice of one's discipline enable us to demonstrate neighborly love, to be energized in witness to God's character and doings, and to effect God-honoring institutional change — in other words, to contribute to the flourishing of others?

In the end, the ultimate question is one of identity and vision: who did God make us to be? What would it have been like to live in God's original garden, walking with him at our side as we practiced our calling? Or perhaps better — what will it be like to live in God's New City amid his New Creation, dwelling in a divinely restored

community, within a renewed environment, loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength? The theme of Following Christ 2008 challenges us to consider this vision, to long for it, and to seek God's help in realizing it, even as we wait for his ultimate fulfillment.

### **Why Now?**

Much has been accomplished to make universities more open for Christians to work on and work out their faith within their intellectual and professional milieu. Much helpful guidance for scholars and professionals is available in print and in public discourse among Christians. Many colleagues and mentors have gone this way before and can offer their advice, their experience, their encouragement, and their challenge. We are resource rich, and the time is ripe to distribute those riches as widely as possible.

Because of such riches, we should perhaps be especially attentive not to squander the opportunities. And of course, the imperative to bring our faith and our work together can all too often be neglected quite easily and without apparent professional cost. The integration of study, work, and worship warrants fresh reflection and renewed practice. God has endowed us with education and opportunity; we are accountable for the stewardship of our talent, knowledge, and privilege.

Finally, there's room to push ahead. We must endeavor to bring ever more wisdom, more graciousness, more intelligence, more commitment, more integrity, more beauty, more charity to the professional and academic worlds. We do not yet see enough flourishing in the universities and professions, do we? Thank God for his redeeming presence there, but we want still more, and more people called by and flourishing in his name.

For complete conference information, visit [followingchrist.org](http://followingchrist.org)