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Flourishing Together: A Christian Vision for Students, Educators, and Schools (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Flourishing Together: A Christian Vision for Students, Educators, & Schools. Lynn E. Swaner and Andy Wolfe. Eerdmans, 2021. 310 pp. Reviewed by Timothy Van Soelen, Professor of Education and Director of CACE, Dordt University; and by Whitney Minderhoud, Undergraduate Student, Dordt University.

As a professor of education, specifically of Christian education, I (Tim) am always on the hunt for a book that helps my students and helps me better articulate what it means to teach Christianly. Our teacher-education program at Dordt University has used seminal texts such as *Teaching Redemptively* by Donovan Graham, *Walking with God in the Classroom* by Harro Van Brummelen, and *The Craft of Christian Teaching* by John Van Dyk. These texts help educators wrestle with the overarching, philosophical questions of our vocational calling: What is the role of the teacher? Who is the student? What should we teach? How should we teach? And, the big one, what is the purpose of education?

There are other important questions with which to wrestle, questions that address our current context. How do students, educators, and schools flourish together—especially in a pandemic, when educators are burning out at alarming rates, and students’ mental health issues are at an all-time high? And in a system that encourages schools to strive toward academic achievement as their primary marker of success, what does it truly mean for a school to flourish?

With practical implementation guidance, Dr. Lynn E. Swaner and Andy Wolfe, in their book *Flourishing Together*, offer a holistic vision grounded in a biblical foundation. With discussions grounded in empirical research, based on studies of faith-based schools in England and the United States, the authors explore five domains of education: purpose, relationships, learning, resources, and well-being. They have threaded together analysis from some leading voices on Christian vocation (e.g., James Davidson Hunter, Steven Garber, James A. K. Smith, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Donovan Graham). The authors create an excellent rhythm to each domain’s discussion: an exploration

of the relevant research, an opportunity to deepen one’s understanding, and a challenge to reimagine practice.

The authors propose that the question of **purpose**, the first domain they discuss, is a question of story. We fully agree that humans are story-shaped people formed by narratives. Christian schools are called to help students not only see and be invited into God’s story but live God’s story. We aspire to foster Christian schools where this purpose is genuinely and authentically shared across the community. Reformed Christian school communities that have answered the questions “Why?” and “To what end?” have a shared purpose, through the biblical narrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.

Swaner and Wolfe introduce the Greek word, *zōē*, noting the apostle John’s use of this word (32 times) to convey the absolute fullness of life that is eternal, moral, ethical, social, and cultural. John 10:10 (NCV) captures this truth with Jesus’ words, “I came to give life—life in all its fullness.” If a Christian-school vision invites students into fullness of life through Jesus, how does that calling shape our understanding of the role of the teacher? Swaner and Wolfe encourage us to become “cathedral builders,” providing a consistent and dependable home away from home that students deeply need. Schools should be a place where students get excited about their own journey, learning that their character shapes their achievement.

In discussing the second domain, Swaner and Wolfe challenge educators to consider a variety of interconnected **relationships**: relationships between the school and the community in which it exists; and relationships between educators and parents, educators and students, and educators themselves. The Flourishing Schools research found that

collaboration between teachers correlated with positive outcomes for flourishing. This finding was no surprise, and we agree that social capital has been a critical part of the student-achievement equation for many years. Swaner and Wolfe challenge educators to take a deep dive into how we genuinely include people in a school's ecosystem, which includes students, parents, new teachers, community members, and peer institutions. How are we present in our communities? How do we invite and welcome the stranger, and how do we amalgamate with strangers so that they become members of our school community with us?

To encourage flourishing, we (via Swaner and Wolfe) encourage schools to ask questions such as, "Who is missing from our school?," "How do we genuinely value the contributions of every student?," and "How would things change (e.g., schedules, curricula) if we based decisions on whether students felt they belong and have value in God's diverse kingdom?"

Noting that the Biblical arc is relational—presupposing the crucial importance of the development of our relationship to God, humankind, and the entire creation—Swaner and Wolfe introduce the Greek word *meno* (to abide) to help us understand the ecology of a school system. A flourishing system fosters enduring, inclusive, and interdependent relationships, with practical ways for schools to practice hospitality, educators to encourage others, and students to have their voices heard.

Next, what is learned in school? How does **learning** take place? Domain three challenges educators to consider these two questions as fundamental to flourishing. Swaner and Wolfe share some *un-learning* that has to occur in order for students to make room for transformative learning. We agree that one can undoubtedly find remnants and residue of the industrial age, assembly-line approach to learning in our schools. Since every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets, we will need to redesign our schools if we want quite different results.

Flourishing together within the context of **resources** is addressed in chapters 10-12. Here, Swander and Wolfe challenge schools to return to the "purpose domain," recognizing God's intent for His children to be caretakers of the Garden and

changing our mindset from scarcity to abundance. We agree that such a mindset shifts our thinking and our questions. Rather than wondering how we will find enough new families to fill our latest addition, we ask what new partnerships (e.g., community organizations, churches, other schools, businesses) could we bless with our new spaces. The encouragement is to reframe our relationship with our resources—from ownership to stewardship, responding to the biblical mandate to love our neighbor.

We aspire to create schools that recognize and respond to the cultural mandate (Genesis 1:26-28). When properly grasped, the cultural mandate casts an inspiring, joyful vision for human flourishing within God's created order. Flourishing schools ask what we can give to our communities. Flourishing educators know they have enough because of Christ's work within them. And flourishing students are given what they need to thrive, shaped by teachers and lessons that rightly order their desires.

Well-being is the last but not least domain identified by the authors. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a growing recognition of the importance of well-being in schools. However, recent research has revealed its critical nature for flourishing. Feelings of isolation and adverse effects on the cognitive well-being of children and educators are being recognized by researchers. In a system that acknowledges concrete success indicators (e.g., GPAs, test scores, college acceptance rates), the priority of well-being can be easily side-lined.

We agree that healthy educators are critical for healthy students. The physical setting also affects well-being. As futurist Rex Miller states, flourishing schools recognize that the school itself is "an additional teacher." Buildings—including individual classrooms, communal learning spaces, playgrounds, natural lighting, air quality—need to be purposefully designed, mindful of student and educator well-being. Academic schedules are designed for students' well-being, versus students fitting into and working around academic schedules.

Swaner and Wolfe incorporate the powerful metaphor found in Paul's letter to the church of Corinth about "treasure contained in jars of clay." In the current context, many schools find themselves perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. But,

we aspire to claim the “but not” from this verse as flourishing schools pursue collective well-being (II Cor. 4:8). Schools can name the challenges but not be defined or limited by these challenges. Flourishing schools know when and what to stop. Flourishing educators are more than their job title. Flourishing students are deeply loved and have a secure base from which to explore the world.

The authors begin their book with three principles: we are called, connected, and committed to flourishing. How do they define flourishing? As Swaner and Wolfe explain, they see it

in students who are exuberant in their learning and are growing socially, emotionally, physi-

cally, and spiritually; in educators who love their students and their craft, and who are ever-improving as professionals and serving well together with colleagues; and in schools whose shared energy, creativity, authenticity, and hope overflows and blesses their communities. (1)

Flourishing is not a peripheral concept but rather something paramount—an end to which we are called, connected, and committed as divine image-bearers in faith-based schools. Swaner and Wolfe provide leaders of faith-based schools with both research and questions in the pursuit of flourishing together as schools, educators, and students.