

The “good life” and Christian formation

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Looking back on my formation within two very different church communities, I'm struck by how often the call to follow Jesus produces sharply contrasting visions of human flourishing—what we might call the good life.

Here lies the challenge: most church formation—both personal and communal—rarely engages with a robust theological vision of the good life. Instead, it quietly absorbs cultural scripts that equate happiness with self-fulfilment.

If church communities want to avoid malformation, reflective practice must sit at the heart of church life.

This research project begins by examining cultural forces such as individualism and consumerism alongside a prevailing well-being theory. Next, it explores the micro-culture of church communities. Finally, the study draws these threads together in dialogue with Scripture and theology, focusing on Charry's biblical vision of happiness.

The tensions and harmonies between Charry's concept and cultural ideals reveal something critical: without theological reflection, we risk baptizing secular notions of happiness as Christian.

Insights

- *The Good Life:* A Harvard longitudinal study commencing 1938, found that people want to “be happy” and believe it is something we achieve. Today, the “good life” is often seen to be the happy life. A person's vision of the good life shapes their deep desires and daily practice, their formation and personal flourishing.
- *Macro- and Micro- Culture:* Cultural understandings of the good life are seen in both macro-culture (the broader Western secular culture), and micro-cultures (found in smaller groups, such as local church communities). Church micro-cultures often echo aspects of their macro-culture. Individualism, consumerism, prosperity theology, attractional models of church, an overemphasis on rationalism and teaching for formation, and therapeutic moralistic approaches, are all micro-cultures which shape us in both conscious and unconscious ways.

Probe

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The wider culture suggests we can achieve a happy and flourishing life through positive psychology. The problem with that approach is its anti-biblical basis and goal that elevates the self in pursuit of a vision of personal happiness. In the church this may be seen in efforts to ensure people experience positive emotions; or happiness preached as an outcome of following Jesus. We need to be cautious in unreflectively appropriating ideas.

- *Asherism.* Ellen Charry's "asherism" defines a biblical basis for happiness. Unlike culture, the goal of the good life is not happiness, instead it is obedience to God's commands mediated through the healing love of Jesus Christ - happiness may flow from this. Personal and corporate well-being are inseparable in asherism. In other words, it is in seeking the flourishing of others and the communities of which we are a part, that we ourselves flourish. Asherism is a lens that supports prayerful reflection and discernment around the macro- and micro-cultures that shape us and our visions of the good life.
- *Formation:* Our practices and habits shape us and direct us towards an end – for good or ill. We must reflect on the cultural communities we're part of, and pay attention to the visions of the good life we hold and to what these visions are forming in us. We'll only see how culture is shaping us by bringing these mostly hidden cultural dimensions into our conscious attention.
- *Reflective Practitioners:* Theological reflection is a spiritual exercise, a contemplative posture, an active inquiry leading to renewed action. We need to go beyond the pure pragmatism of noticing what works, to prayerfully reflect, allowing space to discern where God is at work not only in the local church but in the world. It is an important practice, a discipline that needs to be prioritized both individually and corporately in our church communities.

Discuss

1. What 3 dimensions of the macro culture most powerfully shape the vision of the good life for members of your church community?
2. In what ways does wider culture influence the shared life of your church community?
3. What would it take to move beyond pragmatic evaluations of "success" to deeper theological reflection and discernment of what flourishing looks like for you individually and corporately?

