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First Baptist Arlington

Flourishing Together

First Baptist Arlington

2025 - 2030

Biblical and Theological Reflection

The original command given by God to humanity is found on the opening page of the Bible in Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful . . .” This admonition is given to humans in the midst of a new creation that is teeming with life. God filled His earth with *life!* Seed-bearing plants, vegetation, all manner of creatures were placed by God to live on His earth. Then, the climactic moment came when He created humanity – surrounded by life! His desire for humans is revealed in this basic command to be fruitful and multiply.

We read later in Genesis 2 that the setting for this assignment for human beings was the Garden of Eden. How fitting. The command to be fruitful – given in a garden! This should not surprise us. The imagery of fruitfulness or fruit-bearing is found throughout Scripture. And the setting of a garden is also the physical context of the resurrection of Jesus (John 20). In fact, the Bible ends with the profound restoration of the Garden of Eden in Revelation 22 (Revelation 22:1-5).

Throughout the Old Testament, God uses the vivid imagery of fruit and vineyards to express the nature of His relationship to His people. For example, the Psalmist refers to Israel as God’s vine in Psalm 80:

“You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.”

-Psalm 80:8-9

In Isaiah 32, the prophet uses the imagery of fruitfulness, sowing seeds, and fertile fields with regard to the presence of righteousness and peace among His people. Earlier in Isaiah 27, he paints an image of Israel as a fruitful vineyard. Famously, in both Jeremiah 17 and Psalm 1, a deeply rooted, fruit-bearing tree is used to call to mind a righteous person who trusts in the LORD.

Not surprisingly, both Jesus and the New Testament writers capitalize on the imagery of life and fruitfulness in their teachings about following The Jesus Way. Jesus expressed His desire for His followers in John 10:10 when He exclaimed, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Further, in John 15, Jesus boldly proclaimed that Israel is no longer viewed as the vine, but rather He is now the vine, and we are the branches. We are to abide and remain in Him, and we will bear much fruit. This dynamic relationship, resulting in much fruit is to the Father’s glory and it will be the true sign that we are his disciples (John 15:1-8).

Paul also uses the image of flourishing and fruit-bearing in his explanations of the Christian life and the power of the Gospel. In Colossians 1:6, Paul declared from prison in Rome that the Gospel was “bearing fruit and growing” across the world. He shared his prayer with the believers in Colossae in 1:9-14 and revealed he was praying that these Christians would bear fruit in every good work and increase in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:10).

Obviously, Paul also draws upon this imagery of fruit-bearing in his discussion in Galatians 5 of what it means to walk by the Spirit. In contrast to the works of the flesh, Paul outlines the fruit of the Spirit of God revealed in the life of a Spirit-filled believer: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

With all that said, perhaps we can capture the life God intends for us in the concept of *flourishing*. Through the years, there has been a considerable amount of theological reflection given to the idea of human flourishing. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians have given much thought to the concept of flourishing through the years. Prior to the Protestant/Catholic divide, men like Augustine and Aquinas contributed their thoughts to this topic. At one level or another, voices from the past like John Calvin, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Abraham Kuyper, Richard Niebuhr, and Tim Keller have joined in the chorus. Today, incredibly thoughtful and insightful scholars like Robert George (Princeton), Neil Messer (Baylor), Carl Trueman (Grove City College), Tyler VanderWeele (Harvard), Byron Johnson (Baylor), James Davison Hunter (University of Virginia), N. T. Wright, Andy Crouch, and many others are contributing to the conversation about human flourishing from their respective areas of expertise.

From the Christian perspective, flourishing basically means that we are engaged in life as God intended. As I have already mentioned, the Bible has much to say about life. God designed human beings to . . . *live!* God is a God of life. He created

this earth, and it is teeming with life! He is the Author and Sustainer of life. To flourish means to live life as He intends.

As Christians, we approach this conversation with the basic premise that human beings are *creatures*. This fundamental acknowledgment means that we believe in a Creator! The *Declaration of Independence* famously proclaimed that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator, with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This declaration represents a certain worldview that begins with the assertion that a fundamental relationship between God (Creator) and human beings (creatures) lies at the core of any perception of reality. This may sound elementary, but it is fundamental to the Christian idea of human flourishing. While I am appreciative of Thomas Jefferson and the founders who referenced the “rights” given to human beings by our Creator, Christians would also add that our Creator has not only endowed us with “rights” but also with responsibilities! And great opportunities!

Baylor scholar Neil Messer explains this fundamental concept regarding human beings being viewed as creatures with a Creator in his insightful chapter, “Human Flourishing: A Christian Theological Perspective” in the influential textbook, *Measuring Well-Being: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Social Sciences and the Humanities*, edited by Matthew T. Lee, Laura D. Kubzansky, and Tyler J. VanderWeele (Oxford University Press, 2021). Messer explains how this core belief serves as the well-spring of theological reflection from a Christian perspective regarding human flourishing. The idea that we are all creatures, designed by a Creator has theological, evaluative, and teleological implications.

In other words, creatures require a Creator. Second, the implication is that there is inherent goodness or value in their existence. Finally, their existence implies a purpose, an aim, an end, and an intent to the reason for their existence. So, when Christians declare that human beings are creatures --- we have proclaimed a mouthful of truth. And this points us to the whole idea of human flourishing. We believe God intends for His creatures to flourish as they live into His intentions and honor Him as their Creator God.

Messer further explains how Dietrich Bonhoeffer uses this concept of humanity as creatures designed by a Creator to express value in both the eternal life we have been promised by God and the meaningful life on earth for which we have been designed:

“To borrow a distinction made by the twentieth-century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we can say that human creatures have ‘ultimate’ and ‘penultimate’

ends. The *ultimate* has to do with the salvation and eschatological hope mentioned earlier: our ultimate end is the complete fulfillment of all that God has created us to be. It is only God, not we, who can bring this about: this hope is available to us simply because of God's free and generous love, or what theologians call God's grace. The *penultimate* refers to the conditions of life in this world, for which humans are called to take responsibility. The penultimate matters because it is in this world, in the here and now, that humans can encounter God's love and the promise of the ultimate. In theological perspective, life in this world has real, great, but not ultimate importance."

-Neil Messer, "Human Flourishing: A Christian Theological Perspective," in *Measuring Well-Being*, ed. Matthew T. Lee, Laura D. Kubzansky, and Tyler J. VanderWeele (Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 288

The discussions and reflections concerning human flourishing transcend the theological arena. All manner of scientists, health organizations, and governments are interested in human flourishing. In fact, this topic is at the forefront of some of the most innovative scientific inquiry occurring today in the social scientific community.

The Global Flourishing Study

In October 2021, Baylor University and Harvard University announced the launching of the Global Flourishing Study. Here is an excerpt from the press release from Baylor:

"Social and biomedical scientists at Harvard University and Baylor University have joined forces to launch the largest initiative of its kind to investigate the factors that influence human flourishing. This \$43.4 million initiative - "The Global Flourishing Study" (GFS) - will involve a five-year study of 240,000 individuals, representing 22 countries globally, with annual data collection across a broad range of well-being outcomes. This effort includes the data collection and management expertise of Gallup and the stakeholder coordination and open science leadership of the Center for Open Science."

This grant is the largest single grant in the history of Baylor University. The research from Baylor is headed up by Byron Johnson, Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences and Director of the Institute for Studies of Religion. Harvard's research is led by Tyler VanderWeele, the John L. Loeb and Frances Lehman Loeb Professor of

Epidemiology and Director of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard. VanderWeele is recognized worldwide as a lead researcher in the field of human flourishing. Both Johnson and VanderWeele are competent, respected scholars and dedicated Christians.

The research team is comprised of some 45 scholars/researchers who are guiding the longitudinal studies of over 200,000 people across 22 countries. This work is to take place initially over the next 5 years. It is the most comprehensive undertaking of its time in social science history.

Preliminary results are already being compiled and shared. Prior to the launching of the work, the team had to come to an agreement as to the definition of human flourishing. The team decided to expand upon the traditional idea of “well-being.” It also moved beyond the definition of health according to the World Health Organization. In a special report from Baylor’s Institute for the Studies of Religion, here is the working definition of “flourishing” as well as some explanation:

“Scholars leading the Global Flourishing Study suggest what while well-being concerns the individual, flourishing is ‘the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good including the contexts in which that person lives.’ Flourishing therefore involves emergent ‘interrelationships among the domains of material spiritual well-being of individuals communities, and ecosystems.’”

The research team of the Global Flourishing Study have identified and defined six domains that are to be measured to assess human flourishing:

1. Happiness and Life Satisfaction
2. Mental and Physical Health
3. Meaning and Purpose
4. Character and Virtue
5. Close Social Relationships
6. Material and Financial Stability

The research team has devised a 12-question (2 questions per domain) assessment tool known as the Flourishing Measure. The six domains and the measuring instrument are based upon the research team’s conclusion that the desire for human flourishing is a universal desire that transcends cultural, geographical, religious, socio-economic, and ethnic considerations.

There are a number of things that are fascinating about this landmark study. For example, both the interdisciplinary nature of the project and the profound agreement about the universal desire for human flourishing are unique in this arena of research. Also, an historic breakthrough is represented by the disciplined usage of measurement tools that has shifted the research from correlative science to causative science. Further, the applause throughout the academic community and the public health sector is stunning as evidenced by the interest given to this research by reputable and highly respected scientific journals. There are indications that public policy in many places could be tied to the results of this research. Finally, even though this research is now being promoted and advanced through the Center for Open Science, the directors of the project are both dedicated followers of Jesus!

So, why am I so interested in this research? Unsurprisingly, these researchers have immediately recognized the value of the spiritual dimension in assessing human flourishing. Further, the researchers have acknowledged the role that faith communities play in the fostering of human flourishing. And the researchers are studying how vibrant and flourishing faith communities can affect the broader community around them. In other words, there is scientific interest in how flourishing Christians can comprise flourishing congregations that have real impact in the world around them.

The Global Flourishing Study and The Church

Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion and the Human Flourishing Program of Harvard University have now joined with the Abundant Life Flourishing Program of Regent University to study and promote flourishing in the church in the 21st century. This is a wonderfully new outgrowth of the Global Flourishing Study.

As the research team has begun their work, they have produced some preliminary results and a summary report of their findings and their intent. Here is the opening paragraph from the new booklet published by the Global Flourishing Study that outlines the aim of *Flourishing & The Church*:

“What does it mean for the Church to flourish in the 21st Century? What does such a church community look like? What factors lead to its flourishing? These are questions on the minds and hearts of many amidst cultural shifts and changing patterns of affiliation and engagement. To explore these questions, we embark on a journey to empirically study *Flourishing and the Church*, with deep and sustained interdisciplinary and theological reflection. This collective effort – spanning across

three institutions (the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, and the Abundant Life Flourishing Program at Regent University) – will build on the work of many existing programs and initiatives to explore multidimensional aspects of Flourishing and the Church with the aim to promote growth and flourishing of the Church into the 21st century and beyond.”

-Introduction to *Flourishing & The Church*, 2024

The work of this group will focus on three levels: Individual Christians, Congregations, and Communities Surrounding Congregations. They intend to research the factors that lead to the facilitation of flourishing Christians. Collectively, these Christians living in community with each other will result (or already has resulted) in flourishing congregations. Then, these flourishing congregations will have an impact on the surrounding, greater community and contribute to its overall flourishing.

Baylor, in particular, has contracted several Non-Resident Fellows to assist in the research of the Global Flourishing Study connected to local churches and church networks. One of these researchers is Scott Heare, located in San Antonio. I have had an initial interview with Scott regarding this project. We discussed the potential connections with First Baptist Arlington and the interest we may have in serving as one of the pilot churches in this study. I am incredibly interested in our potential partnership and further, the opportunity to access the material produced by the scholars in this study will be valuable to us in the days ahead. Finally, this research connects quite well with the plan that I believe God has for us in this next season of ministry.

First Baptist Arlington 2025-2030: Flourishing Together!

Obviously, we all want our people, our church, and our community to flourish! The core premise of the Global Flourishing Study that the desire for flourishing is universal is exhibited here in Arlington! The good news is that we are a part of a church that cares about such things and has a wonderful heritage of seeking the well-being of our community and world for over 150 years!

CURRENT CONTEXT

As we prepare for the next half of this decade, there are many opportunities in our future. We are strategically positioned on so many levels for a season of fruitfulness and

missional impact for the glory of God. God is already at work in the life of our church and His Hand is on us. He has placed us in Downtown Arlington and in this season of ministry and mission for such a time as this: For example, consider the following:

- **Trinitarian Theology** – We are theologically grounded as a body of believers committed to the historically orthodox view of the Trinity. Our church has adopted our *Constitution and Bylaws* which expressly states: “God is the ruler of all that is; Jesus Christ, whose reality and wisdom are expressed through the presence of God’s Holy Spirit, is the head of the church.” Our church is not going to be led astray by some wayward view of God, or some aberrant teaching about His Spirit, or a reductionist view of His Son.
- **Biblical Authority:** Our church is committed to the authority of God’s Word, and we have agreed to abide by God’s Self-revelation in the Holy Scriptures. Again, a quote from our *Constitution and Bylaws* is appropriate here: “The Bible is the written trustworthy record of God's revelation of Himself to humanity and the authority for doctrine and practice.” We do not worship the Bible, but we do recognize its appropriate role in our lives as followers of Jesus.
- **Confessional Identity:** We also are not a creedal people bound by or beholden to ecclesiastical authority. We are a confessional people solidly rooted in the historic Baptist tradition. Once again, a quote from our *Constitution and Bylaws* is helpful: “We embrace the doctrinal statements contained in the version of *The Baptist Faith and Message* adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention on May 9, 1963, and believe those doctrinal statements represents a consensus of our members and is suitable for general instruction and guidance. We believe the Preamble to this version of *The Baptist Faith and Message* calls for its continual interpretation as a confession of faith and prevents it from being construed as a creed.”
- **Clarity of Mission:** We have embraced a theological position summarized by the statement, “Glorifying God by Following *The Jesus Way*.” From this emerges our calling, our mission, our purpose: *Producing fruitful believers and influencing our world for Christ*. We are in agreement about our identity as a church: First Baptist Arlington is a purposeful community of gathered believers following *The Jesus Way* together. Our core commitments are in place: Deepen the spiritual lives of our people, Be spiritually influential in Downtown Arlington, Provide a Christian witness to our broader community, and Participate strategically in global Christian witness.

- **Holistic Ministry:** Our church is characterized by a deep commitment to holistic ministry that is expressed through an array of ministries aimed at the overall spiritual maturity and well-being of every age group and life stage.
- **Heart for the Community:** First Baptist Arlington is widely known for our love for the people in our own community. Obviously, Mission Arlington is the most tangible expression of this ministry heart. However, there are so many other examples of ministries in our community that have our fingerprints all over them: Women's Shelter, Life Shelter, Christian Women's Job Corps, Living Hope, The Center for Integrative Counseling and Psychology ---- these are just some of the ministries that we have either started or now support that demonstrate our practical application of caring for our community.
- **Heart for Missions:** Our church is also marked by a strong commitment to missions. We have long been connected to various parts of the world through our many volunteer mission efforts. Thousands of our people have traveled across the world to share the love of Jesus. We also have matured in our missiology to include sending our own cross-cultural workers to live long-term in strategic places on the globe. We also started Restore Hope to assist our church and other churches to answer the call to send missionaries. We also are at the forefront of launching Ascent, the newest evangelical missional network in North America.
- **Seasoned Staff:** We are blessed to have professional staff members, called by God into their respective ministries who provide leadership, vision, and oversee the implementation of ministry programming across the life of our church.
- **Heritage of Ministry:** We are the beneficiaries of a church that has been engaged in ministry in this community in 3 different centuries! First Baptist Arlington has served this city through seasons of tumult and change over the past 153 years. We have quite a legacy to build on.
- **Mature and Engaged Laity:** Our church is blessed to have so many mature leaders and invested church members. Our people love their church and are willing to serve across the life of our church.
- **Strategic Location:** We are positioned in the heart of the city of Arlington. We have been a downtown church as long as there has been a downtown! Further, Michael Lindsay, in his seminal research tome, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (Oxford University Press,

2007), names the four “halls of power” in American cultural life: Business, Entertainment, the Academy, and Government. With that said, consider the physical location of our church --- we are located at an intersection of at least 3 of these expressions of power!

- **Re-vitalized Campus:** Across the 6 ½ blocks of our campus, we now possess the best facilities in the history of our church! With the exception of the Wade Building, we have re-furbished the bulk of our facilities and outfitted them technologically at a level never experienced before. We already use these facilities as instruments for effective ministry for our church family and outreach to the community. The potential usage of these facilities is incredible.
- **Financial Competency and Integrity:** Our church also is committed to transparency and integrity in our financial operations. Lay leaders work alongside our Business Office and ministers to appropriately manage the finances the Lord entrusts to us. There is great trust across the board in the stewardship of our church’s resources.
- **Larger Missional Context:** Our church is connected to various missional entities. In particular, the Baptist World Alliance is one of our global partners. They have just announced a new initiative called **2033: The Acts 2 Movement**. This is a global missional challenge to accomplish the following by the year **2033: *By the 2000th anniversary of the Birth of the Church (Pentecost 2033): A Bible in the heart language of every person, A personal Gospel witness for every person, a fellowship for every person and a prayer offered for every person by name.*** This missional effort coincides with the similar plan sponsored by ***Finishing the Task***, a missional network led by Rick Warren. This network has as its goal: *To mobilize all of Christ’s Church, in all its diversity, to do all Christ’s commands, with all people, in all places, all for God’s glory by 2033, the 2000th anniversary of the Great Commission.* As I mentioned earlier, we also are a founding member of a new missional network known as ***Ascent***. The stated goal of Ascent is: *Re-Evangelizing North America.* So, our broader missional context is at an inflection point in some ways. Consequently, this is an invigorating season in the missiological arena and we are connected to it in both organic and official ways.

So, all that to say, we are well-positioned for this next season of ministry here in Downtown Arlington and in our broader ministry and missional connections. We have a great foundation upon which to build, dynamic ministries to expand, strategic

ministry/missional partners, great leaders who serve us, a horizon of opportunities ahead of us, an exciting season of missional life to help shape, and a loving Lord who is leading us. Praise God!

FLOURISHING - 2025, 2026, 2027 . . .

As we begin this next half-decade, I want to initially address the next three years in particular. With our foundational responsibilities in mind and with an eye on our three areas of focus, I intend to lead us in an integrated and holistic exploration of the concept of *flourishing*. We will give consideration to the research side of the conversation as we will find some level of connection to the Global Flourishing Study – the Flourishing and The Church section, in particular. Obviously, our focus will be more in the spiritual dimension as we walk through a thematic journey on Sunday mornings in our worship services. These three years will be connected Biblically, theologically, spiritually, and practically.

Over these next three years (2025-2027), we will give attention to solidifying and deepening our church's understanding of three theologically and spiritually significant and practically connected realities that have served as the basis for our foundational commitments. These all connect easily to the concept of flourishing.

2025: Flourishing Together: *Rooted in Christ*

1 Corinthians 2:6-16 (Gospel Guide: Matthew)

Producing fruitful believers means we have to work “below the surface” in individual lives. We have to explore the “deep things of God” that give believers a spiritually healthy root system. Biblical literacy, hermeneutical training, doctrinal integrity, emotional health, and the basics of discipleship are all germane to this conversation. We will use the spiritual tools at our disposal to engage in the exploration of what lies at the root of flourishing in the domains highlighted by the Global Flourishing Study. Our hope is to build depth into the lives of our people amidst the shallow cultural currents of contemporary American life.

Winter 2025 Happiness is . . .

One of the Domains highlighted by the Global Flourishing Study is “Happiness and Life Satisfaction.” What does the Bible teach us about happiness? Is there a difference between happiness and joy? What about gladness, to be cheerful, to be merry, to be delighted? How might they all be connected? We will begin the year with a study of the Biblical teachings about the meaning of happiness, joy, gladness, etc. We will explore the connection between the Biblical perspective of God’s creation of human beings in His image and the possibility of living a life as He intended. This will give us the opportunity to introduce the whole concept of *flourishing*.

We should not be surprised that God’s intended life for humanity includes the experiences of joy/gladness/cheer/happiness. God filled His creation with goodness. The first chapter of Genesis chronicles the goodness of God’s creative genius. The creation of humanity is the climax of the creation narrative. God provided for the goodness to be experienced by human beings. Obviously, the reality of goodness for human beings is rooted in acknowledging and nurturing our relationship with our Creator.

St. Augustine famously wrote, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.” Tyler VanderWeele references this quote in his book, *A Theology of Health: Wholeness and Human Flourishing* (University of Notre Dame, 2024). VanderWeele points to the creation narratives as indicators for God’s desire and intent for human beings: “The creation narratives the Scriptures begin with are an important source for discerning God’s intent for the human person. There it seems that God’s intent for each person and for all creation is that all aspects of being should be good.”

We will focus on God’s design and intent for humanity in the midst of God’s expansive genius revealed through creation.

Flourishing Together: January 24-26, 2025

As the year unfolds, we will progress through various liturgical seasons of our church. We will begin the year with a **church-wide retreat**. The weekend will be given to the introduction of concept of flourishing --- from a Biblical and spiritual perspective. We can introduce the flourishing domains. Our various ministries can work together collaboratively to create a fun, family-friendly, informative, inspirational time that includes worship, recreation, teaching, fellowship/community, and assessment.

Also, I have spoken with Scott Heare, Chief Vision Officer of the Global Flourishing Project – Austin/San Antonio Region concerning his availability for the weekend. He is available and willing to assist us in introducing Flourishing & The Church.

The texts for the winter season will be primarily drawn from the Beatitudes as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. A blessed life is available to us as God's people!

Lenten/Easter 2025 The Real Story

Ash Wednesday (March 5, 2025) marks the beginning of the Lenten/Easter Season. We will have an Ash Wednesday service to launch our annual journey to the cross and empty tomb. We will use the Gospel of Matthew to guide us. Matthew offers us a panoramic view of the purpose of God revealed in the grand story of redemption. Our connection to The Real Story of God's purposeful work offers us an opportunity to live purposefully as God intends.

Spring 2025 Walk *This Way!*

At our church, springtime is associated with numerous celebrations and traditions. We customarily acknowledge and recognize our College graduates, High School graduates, and we embrace the importance of family through our Parent Dedication on Mother's Day. So, this is a season of joy and recognition. This year, we will give attention to developing our roots together regarding character and virtue. As noted, this is one of the Domains in the Global Flourishing Study. As the Apostle Paul has admonished us, we are to "be very careful, then, how you live" (Ephesians 5:15). The Greek word underneath the English translation "live" is the word, *peripateo* – which literally means "walk." It carries the connotation of ethical living in the New Testament. This challenge fits in quite nicely during this season as we focus students and families. We should be learning how to "walk" as we pass through the various stages of our lives.

Summer 2025 You are Here!

The summer will be given to an exploration of why we are on planet earth! We will seek to deepen our understanding of meaning and purpose (another Domain!) during this emphasis. We will take a journey through the Scripture to engage in a deep dive into the subject of meaning and purpose. We will begin with an introduction to the only true God – Who is strategically purposeful in all He does, and He is at the very heart of the discovery of meaning. We will discuss what it means to overcome the distraction of sin

and engage in the discovery of our place in God's grand plan (You are Here!). God has called us to be disciples of Jesus and He invites us to a life of dedicated holiness. He has gifted us to serve His Kingdom's interests and to live for eternity. As we live in relationship with Him, we progress towards the life He has for us, the life destined for His glory.

August 2025 Gold's - God's Gym

We will take these 5 weeks to facilitate a deep understanding of health. We will attempt to develop a deeper appreciation of the beauty of God's design of human beings and His intent for us to live as healthy creatures. He has uniquely created us in His Image. This series will be a time to theologically reflect upon His imprint on our bodies, our emotions, our minds, our hearts---and our will. One of the Domains in the Global Flourishing Study is Mental and Physical Health. This series will be aimed at helping all of us have a better understanding of healthy and flourishing.

Fall 2025 It is Not Good . . . to be Alone

We will give the Fall of 2025 to a deeper understanding of the value of meaningful relationships. The first "not good" in the Bible is found in Genesis 2:18 when God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." Obviously, God was planning to create woman at this moment in creative history. However, the reality is that all humans have been created for community. God lives in eternal community within Himself - and we are created in His image. One of the Domains of the Global Flourishing Study is Close Social Relationships. In our society today, loneliness has reached epidemic proportions. In 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy published a report entitled, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* -

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

In this report, Dr. Murthy writes,

"Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling – it harms both individual and social health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. The mortality rate of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity. And the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations, where performance, productivity, and engagement are diminished."

So, developing close social relationships is vital to human flourishing. Obviously, God has created us with the capacity and the desire to connect with others. We will explore how we live this out in our journey together this Fall.

Missions 2025 Call to the Wild

In 1903, Jack London's *Call of the Wild* was published, and it has never been out of print since! It famously tells the story of the hero dog, Buck and his incredible adventures in the Yukon. As I have led churches for the past 40 years in the grand missional endeavor known as the Great Commission, I have noted how we often have truncated the call of God and reduced the mission to individual witness and church planting. While both individual witness and church planting are both vital to God's plan for reaching this world for Christ, there is more to our mission. We have been "called to the wild" so to speak. We are to live out our faith in the public arena. We are not to be afraid of engaging in public witness in public spaces (in the wild). Our missiology must have a public aspect to it if we are to live fully into God's plan of redemption and restoration. Greg Okesson has challenged us to give consideration to how a public missiology can result in community flourishing in his seminal work, *A Public Missiology: How Local Churches Witness to a Complex World*. Here is a brief word from Ekesson, "I define public missiology as *congregational witness that moves back and forth across all 'spaces' of public life in order to weave a thickness of the persons of the Trinity for the flourishing of all of life.*" We will explore this call and how we can connect to it as we engage in our annual missions emphasis.

Advent 2025 The King!

We will bring our year to an end with what is actually the beginning of the traditional liturgical year --- Advent. We will bring our exploration into the topic of what it means to flourish together as we are rooted in Christ. We will do this by celebrating the birth of the purest example of what it means to flourish as a human being ---- the Person of Jesus Christ! He is the true example of humanity. He fulfilled everything prophesied about the Messiah in the Old Testament. And, He clearly is our King! Matthew's Gospel famously and decidedly portrays Jesus as King! He records the question of the Magi in Matthew 2:2, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" The rest of his Gospel is a testimony to the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of Abraham, the Son of David, the King of the Jews, the King of Kings!

2026: Flourishing Together: *Transformed on The Jesus Way*

Romans 12:1-2 (Gospel Guide: Luke)

Following *The Jesus Way* is a journey of transformation. It is a total, holistic reforming of our humanity. We learn to live in community with other believers in accountable relationships, as well as engage in our own personal journey of holiness. Our behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, life goals, relationships, finances – everything about us is transformed as we become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

2027: Flourishing Together: *Impacting our World for Christ*

John 15:5-8 (Gospel Guide: John)

As we grow and mature as deeply rooted, transformed believers, God is able to use us to live influential lives for His Kingdom's sake. God has placed our people across the cultural spectrum in places of potential influence. As we work to produce fruitful believers, those believers are to bear fruit in their respective areas of influence and the Christian witness is spread beyond the walls of our church in meaningful ways. This is to the Father's glory!

FLOURISHING – 2028. . . 2029. . .

These years will include some inevitable transitions. We don't know everything, but there will be transitions, challenges and opportunities along the way. Our Staff and lay leaders will work alongside each other to lead us forward into the future.

RESOURCES

A Theology of Health: Wholeness and Human Flourishing, Tyler J. VanderWeele, University of Notre Dame Press, 2024

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Social Conservatism for the Common Good: A Protestant Engagement with Robert P. George, edited by Andrew T. Walker, Crossway, 2023

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Into the Depths of God: Where Eyes See the Invisible, Ears Hear the Inaudible, and Minds Conceive the Inconceivable, Calvin Miller, Bethany House, 2000

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Happiness, Randy Alcorn, Tyndale House, 2015

Some New World: Myths of Supernatural Belief in a Secular Age, Cambridge University Press, 2024

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A Public Missiology: How Local Churches Witness to a Complex World, Gregg Okesson, Baker Academic, 2020

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FIRST BAPTIST ARLINGTON A FLOURISHING CHURCH: a spiritually transformative community

Glorifying God by Following *The Jesus Way*

This is the **MESSAGE** of our church. God has created human beings in His image with the capacity to reflect His glory in His world. This is possible only when human beings embrace God's plan for their lives by responding to the invitation of Jesus to accept Him as Savior and follow Him as Lord.

At First Baptist Church, our **MISSION** is *producing fruitful believers and influencing our world for Christ*. We believe that followers of Jesus (Christians) should always be on a journey of **spiritual formation... transformation...** being changed from the inside out. God expects us to keep growing and maturing throughout our lives. He wants us to be healthy and productive for his glory.

We will continue to use the imagery of the **Psalm 1 Tree** to help illustrate how this looks in our lives as individuals and in our life together in community as a church. Think of it this way -- the three sections of the tree serve to represent our **MOTIVES** as a church:

FOUNDATION *“deep roots” ... Loving God!*

The key to a healthy tree is a good root system. That's why we start by focusing on *“deepening our roots.”* What happens below ground (in private) determines what happens above ground (in public). Deep roots come from knowing who we are, why we

are here, and what we believe. Our foundational relationship that governs everything else is our relationship with God. Our lives take on purpose by loving Him.

FORMATION “*strong trunk*”... *Seeking God’s Kingdom!*

In order for a tree to reach its full potential – and be able to support the weight of branches and leaves – it has to have a strong trunk. For an individual believer, this requires participation in a process of spiritual formation. Our lives take shape as we seek the Kingdom of God first.

FRUITFULNESS “*fruit and shade*”... *Loving Others!*

Ultimately, a *Psalm 1 Person* is a fruitful person who is influencing the lives of others by bearing fruit, sharing God’s love, and personally engaging in God’s mission for His world. Blessed people bless people. God’s desire is for us to be so completely transformed by His love for us that we share that love with others.

A FLOURISHING PERSON

*That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not
wither—whatever they do prospers.*

-Psalm 1:3

Fruitfulness

What is happening through me?

Loving Others

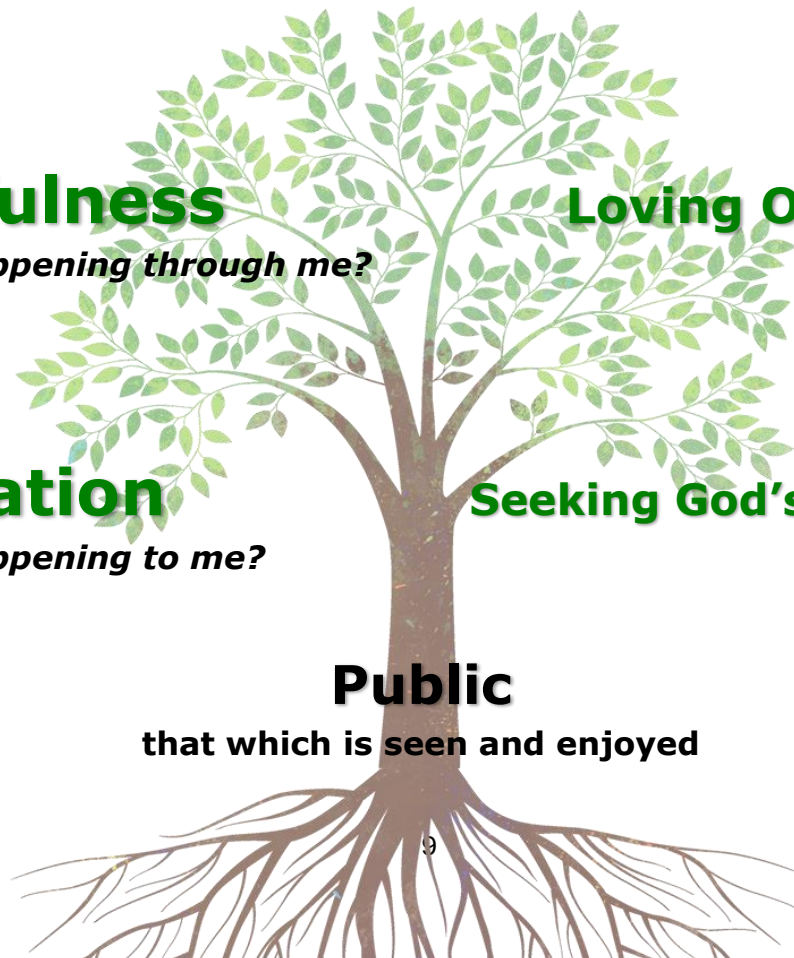
Formation

What is happening to me?

Seeking God’s Kingdom

Public

that which is seen and enjoyed



Foundation

Why am I here?

Loving God

Private

that which is unseen and essential

A FLOURISHING CHURCH:
a spiritually transformative community

Fruitfulness

What is happening through us?

Loving Others

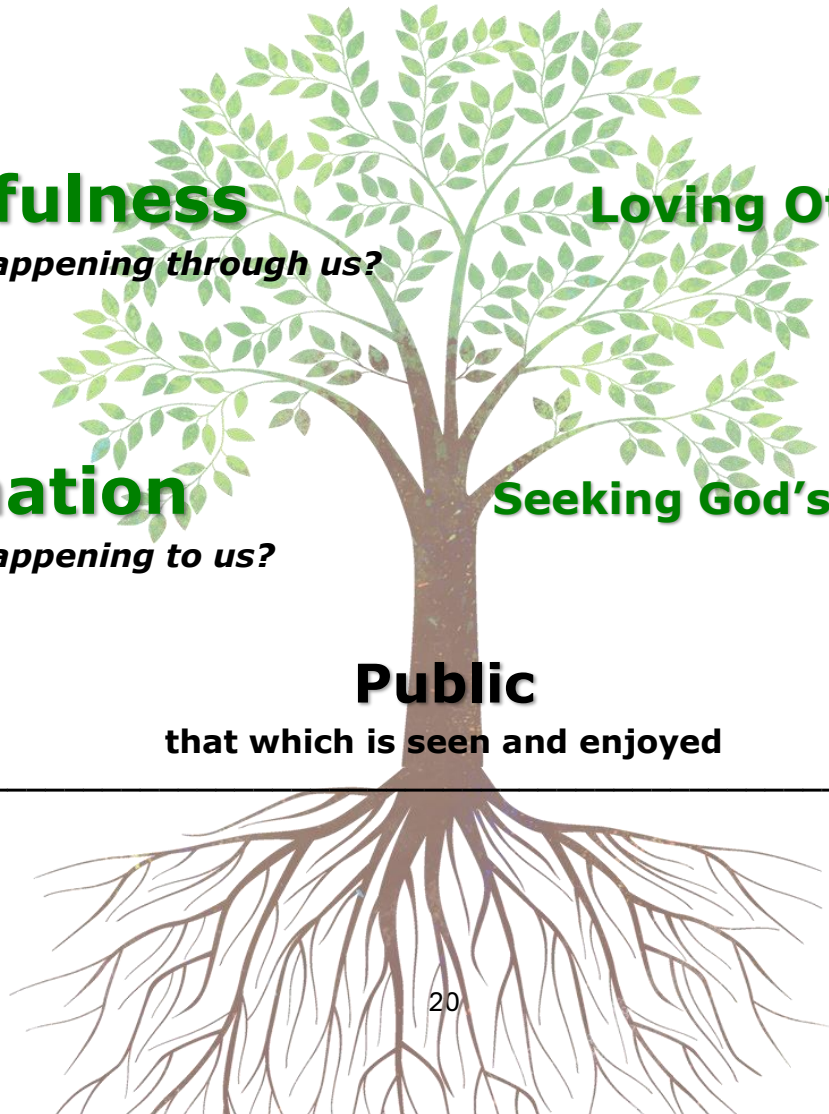
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