

The flourishing church

You'd be hard-pressed to find a more popular word in evangelical circles today than *flourishing*. But are the churches described that way avoiding complexity?

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February 27, 2017

Trust me on this—they couldn't have chosen a busier intersection, shopping malls all around, a left turn lane in triplicate coming from the exit ramp on the freeway. It was four in the afternoon, relatively mild for winter, and right there on the busiest street corner in town they set up a pulpit.

Not a pulpit, but they waved big, marching-order posters. One said "Jesus Saves" in heavy block print, then something else beneath I couldn't read: I had to turn the corner. It was printed, not hand-lettered. He held it in one hand, wielded the Bible in the other, waved it at the cars. All right, I'll say it, waved it like a madman, waking up shoppers to the truth of the gospel.

The other man authored his own sign, boldly hand-lettered: "He who has not believed will be damned," it said, taking no prisoners.

It seems you'd be hard-pressed to find a more popular word in evangelical circles today than *flourishing*. I don't know its origins exactly, but if the man or woman who first introduced it into evangelical discourse were to collect a bounty, that would be a purse worth weighing. "The flourishing church," today, is a blessing. Own that adjective and you're on the map.

A group in Canada has attempted a definition. It goes like this:

Active spiritual life: prayer, scripture reading, small groups, volunteering, etc.

Belonging: a vibrant sense of community and participation

Inspiring mission: worship services and mission are inspiring

Quantitative growth: church attendance, membership, finances, etc.

Leadership: leaders empower others to use their skills

Outreach and service: faith-based outreach and service, within and beyond

Community presence: an active presence in the community at large.

I don't know if leaders in the movement would suggest that where those two street evangelists worship must be a "flourishing" fellowship, but what's clear is that the two of them know exactly what it is they believe.

What's more, I expect the flourishing fellowship the two of them represent is doing better than the little old Presbyterian church up the road we attend once in a while, a place where we bring down the median age when we do—and we're retired. If the criteria for "flourishing" is as advertised, then First Pres's report card looks somewhat south of dismal.

The takeaway from [Peter Schuurman's fine article](#) in *Christian Courier* about the flourishing church seems clear: if you want to flourish, you've got to have something to believe in; and it better be plain-spoken and conservative. I understand that, and I don't doubt for a moment that it's true.

But in a study group from our church, we've been doing another N.T. Wright book, *The Day the Revolution Began*, a study of the centrality of the crucifixion, just as *Surprised by Hope* emphasized the centrality of the resurrection. What both books share is a determination that for years we defined "the paths of righteousness" erroneously by an eschatology that promised a divine walk up Jacob's ladder to a heaven somewhere way beyond the blue.

In both his books and presumably elsewhere, Wright says that whole business is wrong. "We do not 'go to' heaven; we are resurrected and heaven comes down to earth—a difference that makes all of the difference to how we live on earth." (I'm quoting *Revolution's* advertising copy on Amazon.)

Wright's claims about both the crucifixion and the resurrection seem to me to be stunningly orthodox, but his perception of glory, if preached in almost any

evangelical congregation, would be troubling, wouldn't it?

What I want to know is, does a flourishing church simply avoid complexity? There's nothing about ideas in that definition. What happens when ideas threaten to shatter our sense of truth, as they have since Galileo at least? Do flourishing churches simply avoid black holes?

And what happens when you can't? What happens when the black holes are real black holes? What happens when old friends are happy to tell me what Franklin Graham proclaims concerning sin, salvation, and service in the Trump era? Do we talk? Do we stand out on street corners?

I'm wondering about ideas and their place in a "flourishing" church. Do they have a place at all?

These days I won't use the phrase "the American people" because it has little meaning. Sad as it may be, I don't know if today anyone can say "the church" with any authority either.

How does a church flourish in a such a fragmented world?

Originally posted at [Stuff in the Basement](#)