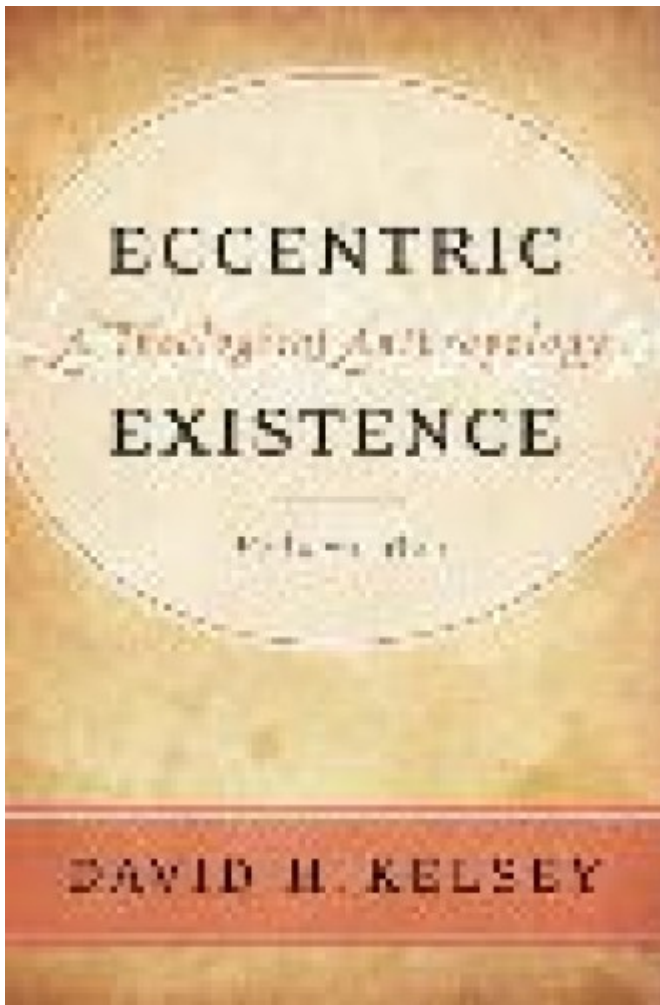


Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology

reviewed by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology

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Theology sits precariously between two precipices. On one side is a sharp drop called “Too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use.” On the other side is an equally sharp drop called “Speaking about humanity in a loud voice.”

If these precipices endanger theology in general, they are particular hazards for the branch of theology known as anthropology. David Kelsey is sure at every step to avoid the second danger. His magisterial two-volume theological anthropology offers an exemplary approach to avoiding it. Yet at the end of over 1,400 pages of absorbing exploration, the first danger is still real.

This is a trinitarian anthropology. Human existence, argues Kelsey, is eccentric because it is centered outside itself in the triune God in regard to its being, value, destiny, identity and fundamental relations to its immediate and ultimate contexts. This is Kelsey’s central thesis, and it is thoroughly, indeed exhaustively, explored. If I were commending a quotation to go on the dedication page, it would be “Your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

For Kelsey, there are three questions with which anthropology is characteristically concerned. What are we? How ought we to be oriented toward our lived worlds? And who am I/who are we? In other words the what, the how and the who. Kelsey addresses the questions respectively in three stories that are simultaneously going on in scripture and in divine and creaturely existence. Story one is a blend between our being created in living human bodies that blossom in creativity and our being lent a human body that thrives in keeping itself in hand. In this story the first person of the Trinity is prominent. It is a story of faith. Story two is a second form of blessing. It is the drawing together of all creation, and with it humankind, to a final consummation. It is a story that determines the shape of time—a story of hope. In this story the Holy Spirit is most prominent. Story three is a story not so much of blessing as of deliverance. Here God reconciles us in our multiple estrangements. God the Son is most prominent in this story. It is a story of love, in which God takes on our living death and draws us into God’s true life.

These three stories create the shape of the project. Kelsey gives some 300 pages to exploring the theme of creation; another 300 to reconciliation; and, in between, another 150 to eschatology. Each of the three parts has a similar structure, with consideration of human kind’s ultimate and more immediate contexts, of its definitive virtues, and of the multiple sinful hows of our lives and the specific sinful

what of our existence.

Not content with such a thorough treatment, Kelsey also offers an enormous 150-page introduction (including a prodigal 40 pages on “The Kinds of Project This Isn’t”) and yet another 150 pages of appendices. These are places where less would equal more. Kelsey’s genius is to give order to the bewildering, to offer a typology amid the array, and to tell a story that incorporates all those theologians you never knew how to categorize. Such genius is diluted when a quiescent editor allows the author to flesh out an ambitious project with the lactose of preliminary qualifiers and superfluous disclaimers.

Most rewarding and distinctive—and, to me, new in Kelsey’s work—are the extended passages of exegesis. These appear in the first part, concerning wisdom, and the third part, concerning the Sermon on the Mount, but curiously and noticeably not in the consequently shorter second part. The welcome insight that dominates the first part is that the wisdom literature is at least as significant as Genesis for an understanding of humankind as created. The key text becomes not Genesis 1–3 but Job 10. No fewer than nine themes emerge from this chapter of Job, of which the most fruitful include awareness of change, of inexhaustible complexity, and of being a center of a variety of finite powers. Kelsey’s treatment of Job 10 is a model of how exegesis can shape a theological inquiry without that inquiry losing its momentum. Here and there it contains characteristically precise yet provocative epigrams: “God as Creator is no closer to spirit than God is to physical matter.”

Equally rewarding are the four chapters given over to exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount. Kelsey explains carefully and convincingly how loving neighbors means being with and for them in the midst of the consequences of their shared estrangement. This emerges from a profound and—to me—novel treatment of Matthew’s Beatitudes in relation to the Sermon as a whole. Kelsey’s extended treatment of the question of whether loving the neighbor can ever come into conflict with loving God represents all his strengths and weaknesses at the same time. Kelsey illuminates, meticulously explores and absorbingly ponders the question, yet at the end no single insight quite grasps the imagination.

While lacking the extended exegesis that lights up the other two sections, the second part, which traces how the Spirit draws humankind to eschatological consummation, has many fruitful lines of inquiry. Most enjoyable, and again characteristic of Kelsey, is his list of 16 “theological claims about fully consummated

eschatological bodily life that are intelligible and not vacuous.” This is the most sober and sane theological account of life after death I have come across. Another rewarding passage comes when Kelsey boldly addresses the question of disability. He maintains that “eschatological bodies continue in their concrete particularity to have the imperfections and disabilities” that constituted their particularities before death.

The work is notable for the way the author’s voice is unclouded by long quotations or digressions. While he weaves historic theological voices into the arguments and extensively draws upon contemporary exegetes, he does not use up pages for ephemeral disputes with other contemporary theologians. The format adopted—with no footnotes but with lengthy methodological passages in a smaller font—in some ways resembles the format used by Karl Barth, although in Kelsey’s work the small-font passages (which, like Barth’s, are at least as intriguing as the main text) are arranged in discrete subchapters. Clearly written in Barth’s postliberal slipstream, Kelsey’s work takes after Barth most evidently in the confidence and thoroughness with which he traverses diverse and daunting territory with smooth eloquence.

If there is one theologian who had more influence on these pages than any other, it would seem to be Kelsey’s erstwhile Yale colleague Hans Frei. Frei’s basic theological moves in his 1975 work *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, concerning the inseparability of Jesus from his narrative, recur over and over again throughout these two volumes. It is as if Frei’s central insights were the leaping off point for a 30-year investigation that led finally to the publication of this grand work.

The most engaging and the most frustrating dimensions of *Eccentric Existence* are closely linked. For me, the most engaging element is Kelsey’s probing account of the goodness of everyday life. It seems to me this is the key to the whole project. Can the incarnation be narrated in such a way that it, rather than creation, constitutes the fundamental divine endorsement of the goodness of human existence? Can the eschatological consummation be described in such a way that it does not diminish the quotidian rhythm of existence?

Kelsey succeeds in his responses to both these questions. His account of human love as a matter of being with and for our neighbor is wonderful. And he is not afraid to offer controversial judgments along the way: in his final chapter (unfortunately on sin) he points out that many otherwise worthy social movements are predicated on the impossibility of forgiveness and thus give up on the redemption of the quotidian.

But in the process of articulating the quotidian, he is less clear about why the activity of the Holy Spirit is so closely associated with eschatological consummation. I would have thought that the work of the Holy Spirit is precisely to make visible in the present the sufficient and abundant work of Christ. By neglecting this aspect of the Spirit's work, Kelsey ends up diminishing the significance of the quotidian by making it too abstract.

And this discloses the frustrating aspect of the book: Kelsey draws boundaries between anthropology on the one hand and ethics and ecclesiology on the other, leaving the reader with a bewildered "So what?" It is not clear where the church is in this theological anthropology—it merits barely 15 sporadic references in the index. If humankind's identity is fundamentally to be found in Christology and to a great extent also in creation and eschatology, is that identity not focused in ecclesiology? This seems to be a manifestation of an incomplete commitment to come to terms with the redemption of the everyday. "Church" perhaps names the most distinctive feature of the redemption of the everyday, but not for Kelsey.

And there is not just an absence of ecclesiology. Ethics is largely missing too. For example, Kelsey offers an excellent discussion of dignity in which he displays his flair for weaving historical treatments (in this case Kant) with a comprehensive collection of relevant questions and some valuable insights. And yet the discussion is not permitted to go where it needs to go—into a consideration of whether the language of rights adequately expresses the sense of human dignity. This is exasperating because Kelsey has won our trust by the quality of his judgments, delineations and perceptions, and we dearly want him to take us into the unresolved quandaries of our social selves. But he stops just at the point where we are eating out of his hand.

In *Eccentric Existence*, Kelsey has done a dazzling job of locating anthropology squarely within the understanding of the triune God. Is it churlish to ask that the passion and compassion of God for the everyday be made incarnate here on the pressing issues of church and world today?