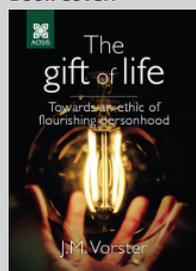


A lesson on life

**Book Title:**

The gift of life: Towards an ethic of flourishing personhood

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What is life and what does it mean to have a meaningful life? How does faith impact on life? These deep theological questions pondered upon from eternity, forms the driving force behind the writing of this book.

In this strongly theological oriented work, Vorster addresses what he considers the four essential theological core doctrines of Christianity, namely creation, fall, redemption and pneumatology (p. 13). According to him, these four perspectives determine what it means to be human. With a biblical theological approach, he sets as goal of the publication, to expound an ethic of life towards an ethic of flourishing personhood. This is as viewed from Reformed Theology (p. 3) which, according to Vorster, departs from the axiom that 'God does exist, and that God reveals God-self in scripture and caring immanent reign' (p. 6). This statement reveals the thoughtful selection of words and formulations making Vorster an exceptional theologian. By using gender neutral language¹ Vorster emphasises inclusivity as a characteristic of true Reformed Theology.

As to the goal of the book, Vorster (2021) states his intention clearly:

The central theoretical argument of the study is that reformed theology can give direction to the contemporary theological search for meaning and purpose and offer answers to the questions on life facing humanity today. Reformed theology can contribute to the development of an ethic of flourishing personhood flowing from God's revelation in the written word (Scripture). (p. 4)

Vorster's publication becomes even more relevant due to the challenges posed to theologians by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, climate change, global politics and social disorder, as stated in the research justification of this publication.

While Christians might have a broad agreement on what they believe, there exists some degree of uncertainty as on how to express and live the faith they confess. Faith is not just acknowledging doctrine, but rather the existential expression of the implications of the doctrine for everyday life. In this regard, Vorster (p. 3) makes use of Bonhoeffer's explanation of lived faith: 'A living faith implies believing through "participation in Jesus' being"; therefore, to live a life in "being for others".' It is the meaning of this impact of faith on life that Vorster intends to explain. The intent is captured beautifully when Vorster (p. 3) reformulates Bonhoeffer's statement: 'Lived faith denotes a life lived for others.'

The life lived for others is expounded in the consequent chapters: what does it mean to have a sacred life (Chapter 3), discussing the sacredness of life since inception up till the end of life; a dignified life (Chapter 4), elaborating on the meaning of dignity and equality; a relational life (Chapter 5), indicating the relationship within marriage, with the state and church; a dedicated life as understood from the perspective of the Decalogue (Chapter 6); and a blessed life (Chapter 7). The life for others becomes especially clear in the way Vorster disseminates his understanding of the implications of the Beatitudes for the Christian life for and among others. The chapters finally culminate in an ethic of flourishing personhood (Chapter 8).

The author must be commended for honestly mentioning the use of some content published previously as part of Chapters 4 and 5 (see p. xvii).

The quality of arguments is exceptional in the sense that it is evident, that long and clear thinking and deep reading on the topics preceded the formulation of the arguments. In a world struggling to regain a moral compass, this publication provides a theological orientation as to how life, as engaged existence, tries to negotiate human interaction with the transcendental and fellow human beings. It is delightful to read the much too short section the ethics of human engagement with the natural environment (pp. 149–154). It is, however, a lacuna not seeing any consideration of the

1.Vorster decides not to refer to God as "Himself".

relation between humans and machines presented in the publication. This is indeed a topic of growing importance in a society dominated by technology.

It can be assumed that the established theologian and student of theology will find this publication valuable. The trans-disciplinarity of the publication cannot be denied. Sociologists, philosophers and anybody with an interest in ethics, will find it worth reading, as will anyone seeking understanding of the meaning of life and a life worth living.

To some extent, the author cites biblical texts without providing the necessary context in which the verses were intended to be understood. The verses are then used to illustrate a point the author is trying to make, without reflecting on whether the verses were intended to be applied in such a context.

This comes down to a critical reflection on the use of Scripture by the author. The matter of a biblical theology and a view of Scripture can be dealt with here simultaneously. Subscribing to a biblical theology implies

that one agrees that there is only one theological way of interpreting the Bible, although the Bible consists of many genres (as Vorster, in fact, acknowledges, p. 8), is written by multiple authors coming from multiple individual time periods, and in varying contexts and with different aims of presenting their experiences and accounts of human interactions and thoughts about God. It is difficult then to accept that the Bible follows one theological track. Surely the Old Testament does not highlight pneumatology in the same way as the New Testament does. The redemptive ways of God in the Old Testament, differ hugely from the redemption described in the New Testament. To read the Bible through one (theological) lens, is not only forced but claiming that the meaning of the Bible is only possible through applying an external lens and not allowing the text to speak for itself. The result is that biblical theology determines what is 'essential' and what is 'peripheral' (p. 11), and not allowing the text to determine what is essential and peripheral. In this sense, Vorster is correct to state that this study is in fact a view from a Reformed Theology perspective only.