## Ethics

**THE SCIENCE OF VIRTUE: Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church** by Mark R. McMinn. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2017. 208 pages. Paperback; $18.99. ISBN: 9781587434099.

Christianity and psychology have a checkered history. Despite the systematic scientific review work of David Larson, Dale Matthews, and others, who have demonstrated over the last forty years that sincere Christian faith promotes physical and mental health, antagonistic psychiatrists have continued to look upon the faith community as delusional or mentally unbalanced. Some faith leaders consider psychology as a concoction of the devil and antithetical to a Christian worldview. In this work, Mark McMinn, George Fox psychology professor, Templeton-funded researcher, and clinical psychologist, assures the faith community that it has nothing to fear from positive psychology. Indeed, serious discipleship leads to a fuller expression of the six virtues highlighted in this short book: wisdom, forgiveness, gratitude, humility, hope, and grace.

Each chapter of the book has four purposes: (1) to help Christians understand positive psychology; (2) to illustrate how Christian thought can change positive psychology for the better; (3) to encourage the church to embrace the science of positive psychology; and (4) to consider the implications for Christian counseling.

The first virtue parsed is wisdom, which the secular Berlin Wisdom Project defines as "expert-level knowledge in the pragmatics of life" (p. 15). While this terse definition is helpful, additional criteria are necessary to make wisdom a measurable characteristic: factual knowledge, procedural knowledge, life-span contextualization, values relativism, and managing uncertainty. Scientific wisdom is then contrasted with the conventional wisdom of the wisdom books of the Bible and Jesus's critical wisdom. McMinn describes a PhD student's project on wisdom mentoring in which the study group had six meetings over twelve weeks. Since wisdom formation is greatest in young adulthood, this study paired older mature believers with young adults from 18 to 25. The results, as assessed by surveys before and after, showed improvement in several measures of wisdom that were not seen in the control group.

The second virtue, forgiveness, has been studied more extensively by secular psychology. Prior to the "discovery" of the scientific benefits of forgiveness and the explosion of articles written about the topic in the literature (from zero in 1980 to over one hundred per year from 2007–2014), forgiveness was demonized as wrongfully dismissing the pain of past wrongs. But since science has documented the benefits of forgiveness—lower blood pressure, less low back pain, reduced anxiety and depression, increased hope—the value of helping clients achieve forgiveness can no longer be ignored. For the Christian, forgiveness is not just a mechanism to achieve better mental and physical health but a command of Christ to forgive as we have been forgiven. Positive psychology can help by providing useful exercises, realizing that real forgiveness will take time. Beyond the forgiveness of others, there is the need for the Christian to seek to be forgiven by those they have offended. Although not always possible, reconciliation can sometimes result from seeking and granting forgiveness.

Gratitude is another of the virtues well studied by positive psychology. The book acknowledges the seminal work of Robert Emmons in this field, including his randomized trials demonstrating the value of gratitude journaling. Gratitude, like forgiveness, is associated with many physical and emotional health markers. McMinn is less certain that secular tools such as gratitude journaling can make the ungrateful thankful. For believing Christians, gratitude should come naturally since believers have received the blessing of salvation, a relationship with their Creator, and a hope for life beyond death. In his graduate student's crossover study, which sought to demonstrate that a formal program of gratitude enhancement would improve the psychological health of church members, a "ceiling effect" was encountered. Active church members were already highly grateful, satisfied with life, psychologically well, and spiritually attuned.

Humility represents a more difficult character trait to study. There is often a disparity between self-assessment of humility and the assessment of others. A simple definition of humility by psychologists entails three traits: (1) views self accurately (neither too high nor too low); (2) considers the other and not just oneself; and (3) is teachable, open to the possibility of being wrong (p. 101). One also needs to distinguish between "state humility," which refers to an individual who is humble in a given situation, and "trait humility," which is reserved for people who characteristically demonstrate humility. Scientific studies of humility, while limited, show that

> humble people experience more positive romantic relationships than others, form and repair social bonds more readily … are less anxious about death, are more compassionate, and experience less spiritual struggle. (p. 104)

For the Christian, humility follows logically from our relationship with the Almighty God and should translate into our relationships with people and our view of nature. It is still unclear whether humility can be increased in a measurable way by exercises. Mark believes that humility might be learned through example rather than cognitive exercises.

Hope as defined by positive psychology has three elements (p. 121): (1) feeling optimistic that one's future can be better than the present; (2) identifying pathways to help one move from where one is now to where one wants to be; and (3) having a sense of motivation to make it so. Scientific studies of hopeful people demonstrate that they have many positive health outcomes. They are more likely to engage in disease-preventive activities, less prone to high-risk sex, less prone to self-injury, and better able to cope with illness (p. 125). Although this secular view of hope is positive, it fails to give a rationale for that hope. For the Christian, hope is grounded in the sovereignty of God. The Christian worldview understands suffering within the context of sin and the fall. The individual striving inherent in the above secular definition fails to capture the role of community: hope for the believer comes in part from the faith community where hope is received and given.

Grace is the final virtue covered. While grace has not been well researched, the Templeton Foundation is currently sponsoring grants to study this virtue. There are preliminary studies that suggest that grace between couples "results in increased empathy, forgiveness, and reconciliation," and that a gracious orientation "is related to decreased levels of depression and anxiety and increased general mental health" (p. 144). This virtue has elements of the other virtues, especially gratitude, forgiveness, and hope. There are scales which empirically seek to quantify grace. For the Christian and the Christian community, the concept is rooted in God's grace to us while we were yet sinners. God's grace makes it possible to accept responsibility for our shortcomings and move to self-forgiveness. This then frees us to be more gracious to others and to enjoy the many gifts of people and the natural world.

This book is not a critical review of positive psychology; such a book would be much longer and I would not be qualified, as a practicing cardiologist and medical ethicist, to review it. I am struck by the parallels between virtue ethics and virtue psychology: both have grown in influence over the last fifty years. In virtue ethics, good ethical decisions result from positive character traits (truthfulness, temperance, modesty, courage, etc.) matured through years of practice. In positive psychology, by developing one's wisdom, forgiveness, gratitude, humility, hope, and grace, one becomes better able to withstand life's challenges, resist anxiety and depression, and enjoy better physical health (p. 165).

The book represents the reflections of a Christian psychologist who has contributed to the field of positive psychology. He is writing for fellow believers in the pews who wish to integrate the science of virtue with what we know about these virtues from scripture. There are applications to the church life and to Christian counseling. The book would be useful to ASA members who are always looking for a means to see their faith as a part of rational science. Because it is short, it can be read fairly quickly. If you have the luxury of being able to spend forty minutes to an hour in quiet time, you might use the book as a devotional, reading and meditating on a chapter every day for a week. McMinn's ambitious hope is that

> positive psychology and the church could be partners in promoting a new understanding of the good life in contemporary society, one that focuses more on virtue than pleasure, more on being good than on feeling good. (p. 165)

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**THE NATURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP: Understanding Creation Care Solutions to Environmental Problems** by Johnny Wei-Bing Lin. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016. 326 pages. Paperback; $38.00. ISBN: 9781610976206.

Why can't we agree on what excellent climate action looks like? This question drives *The Nature of Environmental Stewardship* by Johnny Wei-Bing Lin (BS and MS, Stanford University; PhD, UCLA; Senior Lecturer and Director of Undergraduate Computing Education at University of Washington Bothell). Lin weaves an allegorical story about a pastor struggling to mediate a disagreement over environmental stewardship. While doing so, he provides a useful taxonomy for discussing environmental stewardship and a structure to use when debates and conflicts inevitably arise.

Lin begins with clear biblical support for the existence of a creation care command before arguing that the creation care command lacks the clarity of other commands, such as "do not steal." This recognition sets the book apart from many others which may argue the opposite. However, this also makes the book particularly useful for those trying to understand what creation care looks like. He explains that, due to its complexity, obedience does not flow directly from the command. He enumerates criteria that are used to evaluate what obedience looks like. Finally, he sets