

Positive Theology: An Exploration in Theological Psychology and Positive Psychology

Ellen T. Charry
Princeton Theological Seminary

Christian theological psychology has focused on sin and human helplessness before God to drive people to forsake self-confidence and take shelter in God who is often depicted as wrathful at the occasion of human sin yet mercifully willing that Christ bear the penalty of death that all deserve, although in reality all die in any case. This essay seeks to augment this pathology-driven narrative with strength-based language inspired by the sacraments, especially Christian rites of initiation, and particularly chrismation. These provide a secure foundation for Christians to live from their baptismal identity, for it authorizes strength and courage for healing from sin and for exploring the world equipped with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Before modern medicine and psychology, theologians were the therapists of the West. They addressed anxiety and depression, psychopathology and character flaws. With the advent of modern psychology, theology's contribution to understanding human psychology has been considerably muted. Some recent theologians have distanced themselves from modern psychology because it is based on secular presuppositions of human independence from God, while others, thinking that theology has been outpaced by modern psychology, have sought to reinterpret Christian doctrines in current psychological terms (Holifield, 1983). Yet neither approach is finally adequate. Here the attempt is to structure a conversation between theology and psychology that respects their different foundational principles while seeking to foster an exchange of gifts. It should be noted, however, that speaking from the side of theology this writer is not positioned to speak of how psychology might benefit from attending to theology, only to suggest points at which some psychologists might be interested in such conversation. The point here is to note how psychology might assist theology without surrendering the terms of its own discourse.

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of Krister Stendahl's (1963) address to the American Psychological Association that inaugurated "the new perspective on Paul." Stendahl was invited to address the APA based on an earlier

version of the paper published in a Swedish journal. The English translation was a bombshell that Stendahl dropped on New Testament studies. That address reshaped Paul studies and the implications of its argument about Paul's emotional state of confidence and security in his Jewish identity was well before the burgeoning of positive psychology that examines confidence and emotional security. Theology, however, has not considered the positive turn that Stendahl's article inaugurated (in the case of New Testament studies) and anticipated (in the case of psychology).

Christian Psychology embraces those disciplines that speak of the soul (thus, the etymology of "psychology") from within Christianity, encouraging a transdisciplinary dialogue. Theology is central to that discussion because it sets the terms for thinking about human nature in broad sweep, also identified as "theological anthropology," "the human condition," or "the human predicament." That is, Christianity carries a set of psychological commitments that ground all attempts to think about the soul, or the self as moderns have translated *psyche*. This article examines a psychological theme, character strengths and virtues, in theological terms and identifies how theology may profit from the current turn to positive psychology also in its own terms.

The intent here is not to lean on the content of positive psychology but simply to take a cue from the idea of expanding the field to include interest in strength as assistance in addressing pathology. Psychology will not, and should not, give up addressing problems. Psychological interest in strengths and virtues is not to replace

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Ellen T. Charry, Ph. D., 104 Mercer Street, Princeton NJ, 08540; ellen.charry@ptsem.edu.

but to supplement studies of psychological difficulties. So too, the hope of positive theology is not to replace defect-based theology but to supply theological conversation about human strengths and abilities on which insights into defects (in theology's case, sin) may be put to constructive use and not be debilitating. It is the suggestion of thinking positively that is of interest here.

While thinking positively is a suggestion from psychology to theology, theology may offer a gift to psychology as well. Despite the fact that modern psychology is skittish about theology, theology has a long and rich history of speaking about both psychological problems and virtues although it does not use modern psychological terms. Indeed, some essays in *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* could benefit from some theological literature on these themes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). At the same time, the millennial issue of the *American Psychologist* devoted to positive psychology and the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (second edition) will stimulate theologians to think theologically about those themes (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; and Snyder & Lopez, 2009).

Although theology and psychology may await a further exchange of gifts and though some pastoral theologians have embraced much of the content of modern psychology, here the attempt is modest. It is to ask how theology might speak more constructively about human psychology, again, on theology's own terms. Once that is established, some of the insights of modern psychology may help theological psychology speak with more nuance. Indeed, various theological doctrines understand themselves better because of contact with other fields. For example, the modern environmental movement is chastening and so assisting theology to improve its understanding of its doctrine of creation.

The invitation to theologians here is for theology to balance its defect-based psychology with a strength-based one consonant with the positive and negative features of Christianity's fundamental psychology. While classic western Christian psychology (CWCP) contains a positive element, much of its psychological conversation has emphasized the negative elements conveyed by the phrase "the human predicament." This article will identify the components of CWCP and then suggest a way to balance that by lifting up the power of the sacraments, especially the church's

rites of initiation, to support personal healing and strength in theological terms.

Toward a Wide View

CWCP has been heavily influenced by those writings of Paul that are read as identifying sin as the central feature of human life. Eventually, anxiety at the inability not to sin and fear of divine wrath that condemns sin became a if not the driving force in western theology. Stendahl (1963) proposed that modern readings of Paul impute to him a brooding introspective conscience that in fact he did not have, although Luther perhaps did have.

Romans 7:15-25 has been made to carry much freight for the cause of a terrified conscience, unable to comply with the demands of divine law and fearful of divine wrath as a consequence. Stendahl (1963) replies that the bad conscience notion stems more from medieval Christianity than from pharisaic Judaism, where imperfect compliance with details of the law was not castigated and divine wrath in that regard not emphasized. Rather, Saul embraced the Lordship of Christ not because he despaired of complying with pharisaic law—for he did comply—and was ridden with guilt and anxiety that only justification by faith in Christ could ease. For him personally, Christ is not a fallback position to soothe a bad conscience about at not being able to please God by complying with divine law. Saul's pharisaic conscience was at ease (Philippians 3). His complaint that he fails at the good he wishes to do (Rom 7:18) may be about moral matters quite apart from pharisaic precept. It was, on the contrary, as a follower of Jesus that he experienced guilt actually. Only after his Damascus road experience (Acts 9) did he regret having opposed the Jesus movement at its inception. It took direct confrontation with Christ for him to realize his error and take up the call to become Paul, the emissary to pagans.

The remainder of his career among pagans, of course, relieved any guilt he might have carried from his earlier resistance to the Jesus movement. Paul's polemic against pharisaic law is not to declare it dead because it is psychologically paralyzing. Matthew 5:17 has Jesus saying that he came to fulfill, not abolish, the law after all. Paul delegitimizes pharisaic law for a practical reason. Christ opens a way to God for pagans that obviates the deterrent of circumcision and separation from pagans reinforced by dietary

rules because Jews and pagans have been reconciled to one another in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:13-16). While Christ was not a way around the law for Saul, it may have been for adult pagan males for whom circumcision must have been a daunting prospect for membership in the Jewish people. Even granting that anxiety, the turn from pharisaic law to Christ has little to do with Paul's aggrieved conscience. Paul's complaint in Romans 7 may be more about his ability to be morally perfect than his ability to comply with pharisaic precepts.

Accepting that Saul was not psychologically debilitated at the realization that he could not please God by observing the commandments both contextualizes his polemic against law and undermines the later assumption that fear of God, with its consequent self-despair, is the necessary precondition for faith in Christ. On the contrary, far from doing away with the law/commandments, theology and preaching used it to encourage self-despair over one's irrefragable fallenness in order to drive sinners to Christ. Defining "the human predicament" as utterly sinful presses people to submit to God's judgment and then long for reprieve at the well-deserved condemnation.

Classic Western Christian Psychology

CWCP has two foci: being created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and being fallen (Romans 5:12-19, relying on Genesis 3). These are understood as ontological realities that apply to every human being. The human condition then, is to be forever struggling between who we are and who God intended us to be.

Claims about Humanity

CWCP offers two main ontological features of human identity: we are created in the divine image yet through the first parents we have all fallen away from it and are duly punished. It is a theory of collective guilt. Although Augustine of Hippo gave western theology its robust doctrine of sin, his massive moral psychology in *De Trinitate* is the story of the recovery of the image of God in the believer (Augustine, 1991). Subsequently however, the encouragement inherent in the recovery model was lost sight of as monastic spirituality focused on other aspects of Augustine's thought. Original and actual sins, election, and implied rejection by God and Augustine's vivid depiction of hell at the end of the *City of God* (1984) cast a long dark shadow

over the recovery model. The move from the dignity of Genesis 1 to the ignominy of Genesis 3 was seen as psychologically devastating. Being both in the divine image and being fallen placed each person on a seesaw between the two.

While neither of these two features of human identity can be eliminated, a common message is that the godly image is now inoperative, being crushed by sin. Calvin (1960) puts it clearly: "... even though we grant that God's image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity," (p. 189).

Based on a frightfully deformed godly image, CWCP makes three assumptions about sin and three claims about God. The three assumptions about sin are that 1) Sinfulness is a chronic spiritual illness; 2) We are responsible for actual sins; and 3) Self-rejection is a way forward.

Sinfulness is a chronic spiritual illness.

Augustine's teaching on sin is profound and complex. Sin is misbegotten love that results from distorted desire with which we are born. Original sin is an ontological condition that deters one from seeking good things and inclines one to seek lesser goods. Because sinfulness is inherited from our parents, we are helpless against it. This helplessness, however, is thought not to be obvious to us. We erroneously think we are morally competent. Helplessness must be taught and learned (Seligman, 1975). The assumption that we are morally competent is evidence of the chief sin: *superbia* (pride). Here is the opening for the condemnatory function (the "first use") of the law of God on which the anxiety-ridden portrait of Paul rests (Tappert, 1959).

We are responsible for actual sins.

Although we are unable not to sin, we are nevertheless responsible for our bad behavior. Helplessness is no excuse before the standards of righteousness. Justice requires and society demands that sin be punished. Righteousness demands accountability at least as a model. The moral demand for punishment acts both as a deterrent and as instruction for internalizing standards of justice in keeping with the eternal law of divine righteousness. Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur Deus Homo* (1985) (to which we shall return) brought this out most clearly.

Self-rejection charts a way forward.

Because we cannot correct ourselves, following Galatians 2:20, the remedy is to abandon one's self and embrace Christ instead. Reformation theology read Paul's Adam-Christ parallel in

Romans 5:12-17 as relieving the condemnation of sin, but not sinfulness itself. Humble gratitude enables one to take hold of the divine gift of Christ by becoming a "new creation" in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). The psychology is substitutionary. One must repudiate one's self and take on Christ's identity instead. Pieties hesitant to embrace such intimacy between Christ and the believer encourage clinging to Christ's sinlessness as the warrant for undeserved absolution although self-rejection is still required.

Claims about God

The divine pedagogy CWCP proposes to address sin focuses on divine justice and mercy to banish pride and cultivate humility. Three of its claims are that 1) God is indignant at human failing; 2) He relies on fear of additional punishment to obtain human compliance with righteousness; yet 3) he selects some to escape the further punishment beyond those of Genesis 3 that all deserve in order to display his power and glory. Here is just a word on each of these.

God is indignant at human failing. In the early fourth century, Lactantius (1994) defended the anger of God against the Epicurean and Stoic notion that the gods are uninvolved with human affairs and so there is no punishment after this life and so no reason to fear death or the gods. Lactantius argued that God is necessarily and eternally angry at humanity and ready and willing to punish beyond the punishments imposed at Genesis 3. Divine wrath expresses divine care because, without fearing punishment that religion teaches, society would disintegrate. Lactantius affirms:

Let anyone consult his own feelings; he will at once understand that no one can be subdued to the command of another without anger and chastisement. Therefore, where there shall be no anger, there will be no authority. But God has authority; therefore also He must have anger, in which authority consists. (p. 279)

God relies on fear to obtain compliance with righteousness. Fear became the instrument of choice to assure compliance with God's demand for righteousness with the image of an eternal fiery punishment of sinners that does not destroy whatever post-mortem body or soul consigned there. Eternal fire appears in a few New Testament texts (Matthew 13:42, 50; 18:9; Mark 9:43; Revelation 20:10). Various church fathers

had different views of hell, some supporting retribution, others supporting punishment only if it is medicinal. The first vibrant depiction of hell is Book 21 of Augustine's (1984) *City of God*. It depicts hell extensively as an actual place rather than a state of mind, propelling it to the forefront of Christian attention in the Middle Ages. Art and literature regularly reinforced the spatiality of hell.

God permits some to escape the rejection that all deserve in order to display his power and glory. Romans 9:22-3 says that God's punishing wrath toward some displays his power while his mercy toward others displays his glory. Romans 5:8, by contrast, attributes Christ's death, and by implication absolution of sin, for at least some, to God's love, so it is unclear what God's motive is for Paul. Later theology made much of both possibilities.

In any case, we cannot distinguish the vessels of mercy from the vessels of wrath; only God can know that. Once Augustine takes the Pauline distinction as a paradigm of election and rejection and connects it to eternal bliss and suffering, each individual must think of him- or herself as among the elect to restrain the fear of being among the vessels of wrath. Faith in God's love keeps anxiety at bay. The Augustinian view that election and non-election are judgments of God's about which we can do nothing reinforces the learned helplessness that there is nothing one can do but hope and trust that one is among the Jacobs rather than the Esau (Romans 9:11-13). Faith that one is a beneficiary of Christ's death is the basic tool in the Christian toolbox that offers peace of mind and heart.

In sum, a commitment to moral pathology/sin drives CWCP. It pivots on conviction of sin and the need for divine absolution administered by the church. It posits a morally flawed person facing divine judgment in order to promote civil society. God's judgment on humanity on its own terms is unflinchingly negative. Some will be spared the appropriate consequence by the grace of divine mercy through the death of Christ that intercedes between our sin and divine wrath.

Positive Psychology

Along with CWCP, modern neurology, and its offspring psychiatry and psychology, have been oriented toward curing disease. Medicine has traditionally been oriented around identifying, analyzing, and curing illness. A prophylactic

orientation to health and well-being is a relatively new phenomenon in the form of preventive dentistry and medicine. Psychology is now developing its own way of speaking about human strengths and virtues that function both prophylactically and reparatively.

While the phrase, “positive psychology” is from Abraham Maslow and dates from 1954, (Lopez & Gallagher, 2009) the turn from interest in emotional and mental problems to interest in psychological health, resilience, hardiness and strength dates from 1999 when Martin Seligman, who had done his original work on learned helplessness, began meeting with a group of psychologists to talk about human strength (Snyder & Lopez, 2009). In the past decade, positive psychology has swept the scene. Still in its infancy, demand for constructive support from business leaders and educators seeking resources and strategies for productive work forces and schools is pressing psychologists to apply strength-based psychology in practical settings.

Space does not permit a review of how interest in health and strength is affecting psychology, yet the tantalizing question, at least for modern evangelical theology, cannot quite be ignored. Within its conversion-oriented framework, could it think about spiritual health as well as pathology? Perhaps the thought of thinking in terms of health and strength is jarring. For its part, psychology will never stop tackling problems. Similarly, theology’s focus on sin is a powerful and important corrective to sunny theories of human psychology that do not account for the pervasiveness of bad behavior, attitudes and character weaknesses (Zimbardo, 2007). Still, if God’s goal is not to debilitate but to encourage human well-being in the face of sin, where is theology’s place for self-confidence, self-respect, and self-love and how might such a discourse proceed?

Positive Theology

Perhaps the tension between divine wrath and mercy is merely rhetorical. Since its earliest days, theologians have indulged in hyperbole, strident invective, and polemic in vehement pursuit not only of theological correctness but also to undermine believers’ self-confidence and drive them to seek refuge from themselves in God. In responding to possibly damaging overuse of negative discourse about humanity, others have flipped over to a rhetoric of uncritical acceptance

by God. This extreme will not do either, for it fails to stimulate self-reflection. The psychological concern then is two-fold. **Theological psychology must address the perennial challenge of balancing talk of divine distress at human failing to promote realistic self-reflection—much as insight-oriented psychotherapy does—with talk of divine compassion that inspires genuine love for and trust in God not only as judge but also as friendly companion.**

Rebalancing theological psychology requires locating a doctrinal arena within which to work. The effort must assume that God provides grounds for self-confident functioning that enable us to enjoy self-reflective morally good lives. One such arena is pneumatology in the sense of the activities of the Holy Spirit. Since the time of Origen of Alexandria, the Holy Spirit has been associated with holiness of life. “In those persons alone do I think that the operation of the Holy Spirit takes place, who are already turning to a better life, and walking along the way which leads to Jesus Christ, i.e., who are engaged in the performance of good actions, and who abide in God” (Origen, 1885, p. 253). While the tradition recognizes both spontaneous and ordered works of the Spirit, various sub-communities within the broad faith of the church that abides by the Nicene Creed, have stressed one or the other of these. The ordered work of the Spirit is primarily through the sacraments. Here sacramental traditions further divide about which formal rites of the church are considered to be sacraments in the technical sense that the Holy Spirit is active in them and which are sacramental rites, rituals or ordinances that are community practices because the rituals do not regard the Holy Spirit as their agent.

Augustine and Calvin are both sources of doctrinal help here. While deeply committed to the language of self-disapproval and self-denial, Calvin, for example, recognized the spontaneous work of the Spirit in the transformation from rebellion against God to devotion to God. At the same time, standing in the great Augustinian tradition, he does not neglect the ordered work of the Spirit in the church’s sacraments. This is especially clear in his spirited support for infant baptism (1960, pp. 1324-1351). It is from that argument that theology might well take encouraging language for human confidence and self-love as will be explained below.

Both Augustine and Calvin agree that baptism cleanses from sin. In the case of infants, it

removes original sin, since they have no actual sins. In the case of older children and adults, it removes both imputed original sin and subsequent actual sins. As Augustine tells those about to be baptized, "you will be without any sin at all as you come up from that bath. All the things plaguing you in the past will there be blotted out" (Augustine, 1993/410, p. 145). Again, "A total and complete forgiveness of sins is brought about by baptism," (Augustine, 1997, p. 86). Calvin follows suit. Little ones receive remission of sin in baptism and are engrafted into the body of Christ and called heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven (1960, p. 1345). Calvin teaches that baptism is also the sign of regeneration and that children should be educated to grow into their baptismal identity as they mature. "If they happen to grow to an age at which they can be taught the truth of baptism, they shall be fired with greater zeal for renewal, from learning that they were given the token of it in their first infancy in order that they might meditate upon it throughout life" (1960, p. 1344).

A first step in establishing a theological space for a discourse of encouragement, then, is to recognize the church's complex of initiatory rites: the revived catechumenate for baptismal preparation, baptism proper where the agent is the Holy Spirit, chrismation (anointing with oil that symbolizes the giving of the Holy Spirit in Origen's sense) and receiving the Eucharist, the beginning of on-going nourishment of baptismal identity. These rites establish the baptisand in an irreducible Christian identity. Its features include 1) being truly free of original sin as well as previously accumulated actual sins; 2) co-opting Christians into the drama of the redemption of the cosmos, indeed in the very life of God through engrafting of each person into the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and 3) locating people in the ongoing life of the Christian community with its ministrations of grace in the company of all faithful people past, present and future who offer guidance and support for the Christian life. Each Christian will still face the prospect of future sins but they enter the church as unsullied participants in the drama of the redemption of the cosmos, taking their place in the company of the church militant (on earth) and triumphant (in heaven).

Renewed rites enact this initiation. Formal induction into the catechumenate inaugurates an extended preparatory period of study, reflection, instruction, and prayer. Baptismal rites include

the taking of vows, recitation of the baptismal creed, prayers for those being baptized and the pouring or sprinkling of or immersion in water accompanied by the words of the Matthean baptismal formula. Together these place the baptized into the trinitarian life of God. Being clothed with white garments symbolizes the purification from sin. Receiving a lighted candle signifies the light of Christ by which the person will now live. Being signed and sealed, preferably with special oil symbolizes the power of the Holy Spirit that thereby takes up residence, so to speak, in the person's body. Being officially welcomed by the community there present formally introduces the community and the newly baptized into the body of Christ. Finally, attending the Eucharist that proclaims the narrative of salvation and receiving communion from the God who feeds us with himself begins the Christian life nurtured by God.

In the ancient church, the week following these rites was given to further Christian study, indicating the expectation of life-long growth in one's understanding of the faith itself and in the spiritual life. All these capture the gravity and joy of adding a new member to the body of Christ and remind the established community of its own identity and the expectations of the Christian life.

It is perhaps worth noting that the Westminster Confession (Beeke & Ferguson, 1999) stepped back from the freedom from sin that Augustine and Calvin celebrated. Article 6.5 on the fall, sin and punishment reads, "This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin" (p. 47). Further, in article 28.5 on baptism, Westminster denies "that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated (Beeke & Ferguson, 1999, p. 217). The Westminster divines weakened the comforting and encouraging potential of sacramental initiation. Along this line, the Westminster Larger Catechism of the following year (1648) sees baptism as yet another opportunity to gauge one's sinfulness. In response to question 167, "How is our baptism to be improved by us?" (that is, how are we to grow into our baptism) part of the answer is "by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to the grace of baptism and our engagements" (Beeke & Ferguson, 1999, p. 217). Here is the point at which overly strong language meant to humble haughty souls may become psychologically harmful, at least for tender souls.

To be sure, the warning also commends “growing up to assurance of pardon ... and ... drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ” (1999, p. 217). But baptism no longer triumphantly begins the Christian life joyously celebrating entry into the fullness of the trinitarian life by the cleansing freedom that Augustine and Calvin attributed to the sacrament that the rites enact. Rather than being the rallying point for self-confidence in being a child of the covenant, Westminster’s dour view sees baptism almost as a burden or temptation to sin that incurs additional shame should one fail to appreciate it. The anti-dote threatens to become fresh poison.

The earlier Heidelberg Catechism (1563) teaches that baptism both remits sin and constitutes renewal and sanctification by the Holy Ghost, but it also anticipates future struggle going forward that “we may more and more die unto sin, and lead holy and unblamable lives” (Beeke & Ferguson, 1999, p. 216). While baptism here is both a fresh start and a sort of boost up in strength as “members of Christ,” it strengthens for the future war against sin that always threatens. Although it does not know of reception of the Holy Spirit in chrismation, the Second Helvetic Confession, just three years later, does refer to sealing of baptismal gifts in a lovely passage that includes this: “For baptism once received does continue all a man’s life, and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption unto us” (1999, p. 216).

The Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession thus emphasize slightly different “cash value” in the initiatory rites. Heidelberg sees baptism as release from the past and strength for fighting future sin while the Helvetic Confession agrees that baptism releases from sin while enabling one to “be called a son of God; to be purged from the filthiness of sins, and to be endued with the manifold grace of God, in order to lead a new and innocent life” (Beeke & Ferguson, 1999, p. 216). They may not disagree substantively but the rhetorical effect of the one is not quite as encouraging as the other.

Quite apart from these guiding documents, in our day, the full panoply of the uplifting and healing work of the Spirit in the rites of initiation has again become palpable. The restoration of the epiclesis to the liturgy that invokes the Holy Spirit, identifies the Spirit as the sacramental agent. Rites of initiation induct people into the life of God thereby incorporating them into the physical body of Christ—the church—bestowing upon them the very holiness of God

for a triumphant life. The identity that these rites impart is the source of Christian strength and self-confidence.

Augustine clings to the idea that the Holy Spirit is the agent of sacramental vivification. Indeed, the bishop neither adopts a discourse of discouragement, nor promotes anxiety as a way to God. He imputes the guilt of the fall to everyone but does not employ a pedagogy of shame to instill it.

For his part, Calvin agrees that we receive the benefits of Christ by the Holy Spirit. He speaks of the inward teaching of the Spirit, as the “secret energy of the Spirit” (1960, p. 537), the “secret call” of the Spirit to ministry (1960, p. 1063) and “the secret working of the Spirit” in the baptism of infants (1960, p. 1343) for example. In passages like these, he is referring to the spontaneous work of the Spirit.

Of course, both Augustine and Calvin also recognized the ordered work of the Spirit in the sacraments. With today’s reclaimed sacramental rites of Christian initiation, we now have another source of spiritual strength for encouraging discourse. The ancient practice of chrismation has been restored to the liturgy of initiation. This provides a second step in constructing a discourse of theological encouragement. Chrismation is the seal of the Spirit. It often includes the laying on of hands, signing of the cross on the forehead with oil dedicated to this purpose, blessing of the newly baptized and the invocation of the Holy Spirit to seal and mark the person as Christ’s own forever (Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 1993).

Baptism cleanses and identifies the person as a participant in the drama of salvation of the redemption of the cosmos. In chrismation, one is “sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and grafted into Christ forever” (Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 1993, p. 414). Just as the washing with water is the sign of the remission of sin by the invocation of the Spirit, so in the anointing and signing of the cross with the oil of chrism the church believes and witnesses to the self-gift of the Spirit in, with, and to the baptizand for the Christian life. Together, baptism and chrismation signify the death of sin and the rising to life in God made possible by the Spirit. When the liturgy also includes the celebration of the Eucharist, the new Christian is immediately fed that food which will nourish discipleship throughout life. This is a third step in the construction of a discourse of encouragement. Thus, cleansing



from sin, empowering for holiness and forgiveness, and feeding for sustenance are the trajectory of the Christian life.

These powerful sacramental rites offer a theology for a discourse of encouragement. While sin will undoubtedly pursue every Christian through life, being inducted into the death of Christ, raised for life in him and sealed with the power of the Spirit for that life enlists one's whole self in the confident building of a godly life. That identity constitutes a divine promise never to let go of the person so that one may forgive oneself for sin on the strength of that promise of divine love. Here is a godly self, given by God to which repeated falls in life can repair and be healed. Here is cause for genuine self-confidence, self-love, and self-appreciation amidst the struggle of the divided self, torn between toward and untoward loves.

In his influential treatise on the Holy Spirit written in 375 CE, Basil the Great, one of the Greek-speaking church fathers, an older contemporary of Augustine's, attributes sanctification to the Holy Spirit, as did Origen. It is worth quoting at length:

[The Holy Spirit] is the source of sanctification, spiritual light, who gives illumination to everyone using His powers to search for the truth—and the illumination He gives is himself. His nature is unapproachable; only through His goodness are we able to draw near to it. He fills all things with his power, but only those who are worthy may share it. He distributes His energy in proportion to the faith of the recipient, not confining it to a single share.... Only when a person has been cleansed from the shame of his evil, and has returned to his natural beauty, and the original form of the Royal Image has been restored in him, is it possible for him to approach the Paraclete. Then, like the sun, He will show you in Himself the image of the invisible, and with purified eyes you will see in this blessed image the unspeakable beauty of its prototype.... Spirit-bearing souls, illumined by him, finally become spiritual themselves, and their grace is sent forth to others. (Basil, 1980, pp. 43–44)

Basil (1980) does not connect the gift of the Spirit to chrismation, although he knows the practice. He does, however identify the Spirit as the agent of cleansing baptism. "Being cleansed from the shame of his evil" (p. 44), "... baptism signifies the putting off of the works of the flesh" (p. 58) ... and that "the Spirit pours in life-giving power, renewing in souls which were dead in sin the life they first possessed" (p. 59).

Basil (1980) seems to attribute receiving the Spirit as the decision of an individual to withdraw from evil passions and take up a blessed life. Associating the giving of the Spirit with the rite of chrismation has the advantage of something done to one that, although it may be disregarded and abused, gives an unalienable identity that belongs to the recipient and can be relied upon for courage and strength. It is an inner resource of power for dealing with dysfunctional habits and traits, untoward experiences, and the unavoidable contingencies of life. The notion that the Holy Spirit abides in one comes from Paul: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16–17). **Taking the gift of the Spirit in one's body seriously means that one is never alone, never abandoned, always held safe in God's strength and always capable of spiritual beauty, even when it seems distant.** Thus, the idea is that the church's authority to invoke the Holy Spirit in faith gives us a powerful resource for strength and comfort when one's own faith fails to provide self-acceptance. For "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29).

For those who live into it, Christian identity provides a solid floor on which positive psychology's interest in resilience, emotional security, positive emotions and coping mechanisms, as well as the classic Christian virtues like compassion, empathy, forgiveness, gratitude, love, and hope can build. Here a genuine exchange of gifts can occur. Theologians can reflect on and incorporate these strengths and virtues in developing a deeper understanding of baptismal identity and gain a fuller understanding of human psychology in theological perspective. Counselors and psychologists can call upon the Christian identity given sacramentally as a therapeutic foundation from which to help people build strength and well-being.

The recent self-esteem movement in education, now widely discredited, but with a long afterlife may be considered inimical to Christian psychology on the rhetoric of CWCP (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). However, in sacramental perspective we may say, following 1 Peter 3:21, that Christianity has its own quite different understanding of self-esteem that comes from the emotional confidence of having been taken into the fullness of the trinitarian life. The Spirit grafts us into the death, resurrection, ascension, and the session of Christ at the right hand of the Father. With the rejuvenating power of the Spirit assisting us, we are able to dwell in the Son and by his association with the Father in the fullness of the triune God as suggested by John 15:3-11. We may esteem the self-in-God we are becoming as we grow ever more fully and deeply into our initiation into God and the church, regularly nourished by the sacrament of the table in the communion of the church.

A sacramental foundation for a therapeutic discourse of strength does not, of course, suggest that sin is not "crouching like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8) throughout life. But it does suggest that maturation in spiritual and practical wisdom is a realistic hope because God's love and trust abides in the deep recesses of one's soul. Expressing the recovery model spelled out in *The Trinity* Augustine (1997) put it this way:

... people become children of God to the extent that they begin to exist in the newness of the Spirit and begin to be renewed in the interior human being according to the image of him who created them. All the old weakness is not done away with from the moment of one's baptism. Rather, the renewal begins with the forgiveness of all sins and is realized to the extent that one who is wise is wise about spiritual things. (p. 86)

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Author

Ellen Charry is the Margaret W. Harmon Professor of Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. Her most recent book is God and the Art of Happiness.

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