

# Sanctification as a Source of Theological Guidance in the Construction of a Christian Positive Psychology

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A Christian approach to positive psychology will be distinct from mainstream positive psychology, in that it will be grounded in a unique vision of human nature and the nature of the good life. Following Nancey Murphy's proposal that Christian theology guides our understanding of these topics, the theological literature on sanctification is examined. A Christian positive psychology, drawing guidance from the theology of sanctification, will shift our understanding of ideal functioning from a human-centered perspective to a God-centered perspective, and will feature positive character strengths such as penitence, strengths that might not necessarily be recognized as such by other positive psychologists.

Christians who wish to engage in psychological research and practice in a way that honors both the Christian worldview and the discipline of psychology are faced with several possibilities, each of which offers certain advantages and disadvantages (Johnson & Jones, 2000). One attempt at the construction of a Christian approach to psychology was recently made by Nancey Murphy, Professor of Christian Philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary (Dueck & Lee, 2005). Murphy's integrative approach draws from the neo-Aristotelian work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), grounding her Christian approach to psychology in the field of virtue ethics.

## Virtue Ethics

The neo-Aristotelian approach to ethics is teleological in nature, defining objects in terms of their *telos*, their goal or purpose. A description of the *telos* is an answer to questions of function or design; the *telos* of a watch is to keep time, the *telos* of an apple tree is to produce apples. This functional definition also provides a standard for evaluating an object as good or bad. A good object fulfills its purpose well, while a bad object does not. A good watch keeps time well, a bad watch does not. A good apple tree produces many healthy apples, a bad apple tree does not.

A description of a teleologically-good object involves a description of the ideal qualities of the good object. An ideal watch can be

described in terms of characteristics such as reliability, durability, and precision, and these characteristics are integral to an evaluation of specific objects as relatively good or bad. These characteristics are referred to as virtues. When applied to humans, the teleological perspective involves a description of the human *telos*, and the virtues that characterize the life of a person who maximally fulfills that *telos*. The application of this approach aims at assisting people in their development toward becoming someone who more completely approaches the human teleological ideal. The result is a life of growth and flourishing found through this form of cultivation, in which the person moves from their current "untutored" state (what MacIntyre called *human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be*) toward *human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos*. This kind of life is referred to as *eudaimonia*, or "the good life." Several Christian scholars have endorsed and employed the virtue approach in their work (e.g., Chrysostomos, 1989; Hauerwas & Pinches, 1997; Kotva, 1996; Meilaender, 1984; Roberts, 1992; Wilson, 1997), including Nancey Murphy.

Murphy (2005a) advances the proposition that virtue ethics, particularly as understood by MacIntyre, provides a way in which a uniquely-Christian psychology could be constructed. Because a description of *eudaimonia* provides a description of the ideal human life, it also provides a model for ideal psychological functioning and mental health. MacIntyre's philosophy serves as Murphy's overarching conceptual structure, within which she intends to approach psychology in terms of how people may be assisted in moving toward greater mental health, using Christian theology to help define mental health. Using the ethical thought of John Howard Yoder

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(1972), Murphy (2005b) defines the human telos in terms of Christ-like “self-emptying” (kenosis, see Philippians 2:5-11), claiming that “self-renunciation for the sake of the other is humankind’s highest good” (p. 42).

### Positive Psychology

The neo-Aristotelian perspective has also had a powerful impact on the burgeoning positive psychology movement (Jørgensen & Nafstad, 2004). In his 1998 APA Presidential Address, Martin Seligman (1999) argued that mainstream psychology has placed an excessive amount of emphasis on the pathological. The lion’s share of personnel, resources, institutional supports, career opportunities, and positions of prominence have gone toward the examination of the many ways in which human life can go wrong, leading to suffering and dysfunction, and toward the question of how this psychological damage can be repaired. This is not a bad thing. The desire to help those who are in pain is a worthwhile endeavor. However, Seligman argues, it leaves a considerable amount of psychological territory relatively unexplored. The time has come for psychology to widen its scope to include the many ways in which human life can go right, leading to happiness and greater flourishing, and to address the question of how psychologists might contribute to this eudaimonic process. This can be done by examining topics such as positive subjective experiences that increase enjoyment of life, positive social groups and organizations that facilitate optimal functioning, and the positive character traits (virtues) that empower the individual to live a life of flourishing and meaningful engagement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

### Possibilities for a Christian Positive Psychology

In an earlier article (Hackney, 2007), I argue that I see a natural fit between the positive psychology movement and Nancey Murphy’s proposed Christian approach to psychology. Both are heavily influenced by MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelian ethics. Both approach psychology in terms of ways and means for assisting people toward an ideal of psychological flourishing, and of the variables that foster or hinder this process. In fact, I argue, Murphy’s approach brings a clear theoretical advantage. MacIntyre (1984, 1988) has argued for the centrality of a conception of the

*telos* to any attempt to describe the virtues and the nature of flourishing, and he claims that any attempt to define flourishing without a predefined *telos* ignores the historical fact that rival and incompatible accounts of the virtues have been developed over the centuries. Without a pre-established definition of the “good life,” there is no way to adjudicate between rival prescriptions for eudaimonic flourishing. Seligman (2002), not wishing to impose a definition of the good life on his readers, attempts to evade this difficulty by claiming that positive psychology is descriptive, not prescriptive, when it comes to flourishing. To claim that one is describing flourishing but not advocating that the reader flourish strikes me as questionable. Seligman also claims that he does not endorse the functional definition of *eudaimonia*, preferring to ground his psychology in an examination of subjective feelings of meaning and fulfillment. Such a move is ineffective, as his beliefs about the goal of human flourishing simply become implicit rather than explicit, while continuing to influence his views on mental health (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Slife & Richardson, 2008; Sundararajan, 2005). Further, MacIntyre’s (1984) description of Aristotelian teleology involves the necessary presupposition of “a crucial distinction between what any particular individual at any particular time takes to be good for him and what is really good for him as a man” (p. 150), calling into question the claim made by Seligman and other positive psychologists such as Jørgensen and Nafstad (2004) that they are well-grounded in the neo-Aristotelian tradition. As a Christian positive psychology will be less hesitant to advocate a deliberate description of the human telos, it has the advantage of being more true to the virtue ethics that guide its basic approach.

Rather than attempt to establish a distinctly-Christian eudaimonic psychology that would stand apart from secular positive psychology, I hope to connect this project to George Marsden’s (1997) call for Christian scholars to be active in the mainstream academic discourse of their respective disciplines while still being authentically Christian in their perspective. I argue that Christian positive psychologists should be engaged in a mutually-shaping dialogue with our secular colleagues (Hackney, 2007). Although there will be significant differences between our approaches to the good life, this will be nothing new for positive psychology, as positive psychology cannot be considered a

monolithic school of thought, but rather an “umbrella term” that covers an already-diverse set of scholars and practitioners who are interested in the psychological aspects of the good life (Bacon, 2005; Peterson & Park, 2003). Wong (2006) calls for an approach to positive psychology that allows for a plurality of voices coming from psychologists with different sets of values and conceptions of the good life, and my claim is that Christian positive psychologists can find a place among those voices. Developing and articulating our understanding of the goal and process of eudaimonic growth is a step in this direction.

Murphy’s (2005a, 2005c) argument is that the human *telos* should be articulated in terms of theological statements about humanity’s highest good, that our understanding of human flourishing should follow this description of the highest good, and that our approaches to psychological theories should be guided by this teleological vision. While Murphy finds her theological description of the *telos* in kenotic ethics, my approach here will be more strongly guided by Kotva’s (1996) claim that the closest connection between Christian theology and *eudaimonia* is found in the topic of sanctification. A complete examination of sanctification from multiple theological perspectives is beyond the scope of one article, so I will be restricting my examination to primarily the Reformed theological literature on that subject.

### Sanctification

Anthony Hoekema (1987) defines sanctification as “that gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which He delivers us as justified sinners from the pollution of sin, renews our entire nature according to the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to Him” (p. 61). The process of sanctification is grounded in our status as justified (declared innocent in the eyes of God due to the atoning sacrifice of Christ) and belonging to God (Guthrie, 1981). The words “sanctified” and “holy” carry with them the primary meaning of being set apart to something, and the secondary meaning of one’s character fitting the set-apart status (Procksch & Kuhn, 1964). As we are set apart to God, Christians are called to become holy in their lifestyle and character, as they already are in their status (Bavinck, 1899/2008). Christ’s death and resur-

rection are the driving force for this process, as justification involves a break from the realm of sin and death, and a transition into the realm of righteousness and life (Murray, 1957). Although the regenerate person has been qualitatively converted into a new creation, sin continues to be an active factor within the Christian, so sanctification also involves the progressive transformation of the person in a manner that involves a reduction of the remaining evil, and an increase in the prominence of the new nature as a controlling factor in the Christians’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Hodge, 1872/2001b).

Descriptions of the goal of sanctification have generally focused either on the perfection of the human character, or on a superordinate end for which moral perfection equips the person. Those who focus on the perfection of the person have described sanctification in terms of two interconnected concepts: renewal of the image of God, and conformity to the character of Jesus. Sin involves a perversion and destruction of the image of God in humanity, and sanctification involves a reversal of that corruption. Thus Hoekema (1987) refers to sanctification as “our renewal in the image of God” (p. 66, see also Colossians 3:10), and William Ames claims that the “end” of sanctification is “the purity of God’s image” in the person (Ames, 1629/1968, p.169). While humans are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27), in Jesus the likeness of God finds its full expression (Colossians 1:15, 19; Hebrews 1:3), therefore sanctification may also be described in terms of conformity to Christ (Grenz, 1994; Guthrie, 1981; Hoekema, 1987; Murray, 1955). Ferguson (1996) makes the claim that, since Jesus is the *telos* of the covenant, becoming like Jesus is the *telos* of sanctification. Hendrikus Berkhof (1986) focuses on God’s desire to adopt people as children and covenant partners. Among the other reasons for his life, teaching, death, and resurrection, one of Jesus’ purposes was to model for us the true covenant partner. In Jesus we see “the complete structure of what it is to be man, in his threefold relationship to God, the neighbor, and nature. Here is also the highest quality of what it is to be man, as love and freedom. Here human existence has reached its full maturity and therefore has fully become God’s partner and instrument” (p. 303). The humanity of Christ provides a prototype of human flourishing. We look to the life and way of Jesus for our definition of the neo-Aristotelian *human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*

*telos*, and sanctification can be seen as the closing of the gap between our current state and the state of living the kind of life that Jesus lived (Boice, 1986).

Some scholars look to a purpose for sanctification beyond the perfection of the human person. The cultivation of humans into the image of Christ is not thought of as an end in itself, but a means to a superordinate end. Similar to Berkhof's emphasis on humans' role as covenant partners with God, the ultimate goal of sanctification as described in the community-centered theology of Stanley Grenz (1994) is a life of love involving "fellowship with God, with one another, and with all creation" (p. 446). Conformity with Christ makes us fit members of this community. Hoekema (1987) describes the perfection of character as the "proximate goal" of sanctification, but takes a different approach to the final goal than does Grenz. "The final goal of sanctification," says Hoekema, "can be nothing other than the glory of God" (p. 88). God's judgment and redemption are themselves demonstrations of his glory (Romans 9:15-24), and the more a person progresses in sanctification, the better that person will perform the will of God for the glory of God (Ames, 1629/1968).

The process by which sanctification progresses has two inextricable aspects, divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and scholars who address sanctification strive to find an approach that adequately addresses both aspects. Sanctification is unequivocally a work of the Holy Spirit (Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:13), and is not the result of human effort. At the same time, though, humans are called to a life of strenuous exertion as they battle against the evil that remains in them (Galatians 5:17; Colossians 3:5-10; Hebrews 12:1) and strive toward the development of a more Christ-like lifestyle and character (Acts 24:16; Philippians 2:15; 2 Peter 1:3-8; 1 Timothy 4:15-16). This dual nature of sanctification is clearly seen in Philippians 2:12-13, in which Paul encourages believers to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."<sup>1</sup> When the nineteenth chapter of Revelation describes the Church as the bride of Christ, the bride is "given" fine linen by God, but we are told that this linen represents "the righteous acts of the saints" (Rev. 19:8). Outside of scripture, this dual nature is also seen in Book III of Calvin's *Institutes*. In dealing with sanctification,

Calvin urges Christians to strive "with continuous effort" toward a life of increasing goodness, while at the same time reminding Christians that "in no respect can works serve as the cause of our holiness" (Calvin, 1559/1960, p.783).

Overemphasizing the work of God in sanctification to the exclusion of human effort leads to the errors of passivity and antinomianism, while overemphasizing human effort to the exclusion of the Holy Spirit leads to the errors of pharisaic legalism and self-righteous pride (Berkouwer, 1952). Berkhof (1986) claims that an adequate treatment of sanctification needs to maintain both the "activation" (sanctification requires our earnest effort) and "relaxation" (sanctification as organic growth regardless of effort) models simultaneously, using one to correct the other. "A human being is, after all, not a tree," says Berkhof. "At every step along the path of renewal his own will is helpfully or obstructingly involved ... Man cannot just leave his own deeds to a process. Then he becomes too passive and too careless" (p. 456). Bavinck (1899/2008) uses the terms "active" and "passive" to refer to these two aspects of the process of sanctification. Humans are initially "passive" in the regeneration that initiates our change in status, and in the reception of the empowering Holy Spirit. But as sanctification progresses, believers are also "called and equipped to sanctify themselves and devote their whole life to God" (p. 253). Hoekema (1987) also takes the perspective that we must understand sanctification as being both human and divine in nature, an act of God in which we also are active: "God works in us the entire process of our sanctification—both the willing of it and the doing of it. The harder we work, the more sure we may be that God is working in us" (p. 71).

Is there a role for psychology in the process of sanctification? The immediate danger in this question is that enlisting the work of psychologists on the cultivation of character strengths and virtues could directly play into Berkhouwer's (1952) criticism of the modernist tendency to degrade sanctification into nothing more than moralistic self-improvement, with the accompanying "insidious self-esteem" (p. 129) of the Pharisee. On the other hand, to entirely ignore a potentially-valuable resource would also be an error. William Ames (1629/1968) considered it "testing God"<sup>2</sup> to desire something good, but at the same time to "relinquish ordinary means appointed by God and to expect him to provide

for them at their wish" (p. 275) or to refuse "the means necessary for it, as a person does in this world who desires health and continuance of life and yet rejects medicine or food" (p. 276). While the desire to avoid the error of reducing sanctification to human effort is entirely legitimate, we are provided with both divine and mundane resources for the living of our lives. Following Ames' examples, healing is described in the Bible as a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7-11), and we are told to pray for healing in times of sickness (James 5:14). We are also told not to worry about food, because God knows our needs (Matthew 6:25-26). That being said, we still seek out medical experts when we are sick, and restaurants when we are hungry. This is not a rejection of God, so long as God is given glory and thanks for healing when we recover, and for the food that he provides.

The same principle that we apply to medicine and gastronomy can be applied to the humanities and social sciences. The preaching of the gospel is an activity that is fully dependent upon the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit (Mohler, 1992), but expositors draw from scholarly work in communication, psychology, cultural studies, and philosophy in the construction of effective messages, without considering it shameful (Chapel, 1994). The Spirit of God is a spirit of reconciliation, and many Christians pursue the practice of peacemaking and conflict resolution as a way of living in step with that Spirit (Swartley, 2007), but see no hypocrisy in employing theoretical and methodological resources that arise from non-Christian scholarship on the subject (Kale, 2003). The growth of Christ-like character in the believer is, as we have seen, first and foremost an activity of God, and the possibility exists that research into virtuous development might be useful in providing practical guidance for the human aspect of this process.

Consistent with the ideas of virtue ethicists, many positive psychologists (e.g., Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008) see the practice of virtuous habits as a primary method for eudaimonic growth. William Ames claimed this principle of growth through daily use and exercise of the virtues also encompassed "the virtues which proceed from sanctifying grace" (Ames, 1629/1968, p. 231). Borrowing a term from Aquinas, Ames referred to daily practice as the "disposing cause" of sanctification-related virtues. A disposing cause is "that which renders matter or the subject suitable for

its ultimate completion" (Aquinas, 1268/1963, p. 88). Growth in virtue, then, would be considered a means by which the believer becomes more suitable for the task of developing into greater conformity to Christ, and psychologists' empirically-supported methods for cultivating a eudaimonic life (e.g., those described by Linley & Joseph, 2004a, and Peterson & Seligman, 2004) should be welcomed as useful tools in this process (Hackney, 2007).

### Constructing a Christian Positive Psychology

In the same way that a Christian approach to virtue ethics will diverge from non-Christian approaches (Yearley, 1990), a Christian approach to positive psychology will show marked divergences from our non-Christian colleagues' ideas regarding ideal psychological flourishing. Using the theology of sanctification and the writings of prominent positive psychologists such as Martin Seligman, I will focus on two examples of such divergences. A Christian positive psychology will be distinct from a "Seligmanic" positive psychology in that it will feature (1) our dependence on God rather than self, and (2) repentance as a key component of character growth.

### Dependence on God

Sixteenth-century philosopher Petrus Ramus provides a critique of Aristotelian philosophy (quoted in Ames, 1629/1968) that captures this distinction very well. What Ramus says of Aristotle could easily be said of Seligman:

A child may learn many impieties from Aristotle which, it is to be feared, he will unlearn too late. He will learn, for example, that the beginning of blessedness arises out of man; that the end of this blessedness lies in man; that all virtues are within man's power and obtainable by man's nature, art, and industry; that God is never present in such works, either as helper or author, however great and divine they are; that divine providence is removed from the theater of human life; that not a word can be spoken about divine justice; that man's blessedness is based on this frail life. (p. 226)

Like Aristotle, and many current virtue ethicists, Seligmanic positive psychology is characterized by anthropocentrism. It is assumed that,



in order to determine the good life for humanity, one must look entirely at humans. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle considers humanity's highest good to involve the exercise of our rational capacities, making the intellectual life the *telos* of human flourishing. More recent descriptions of the human *telos* have centered around evolutionary adaptation and survival (Buss, 2000; Devettere, 2002) or social functioning (Foot, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999). In line with scholars such as Iris Murdoch (1970) and Valerie Tiberius (2004), Seligman (2002) attempts to avoid any discussion of a universal human *telos*, instead embracing the idea that the individual's sense of personal fulfillment is the highest possible good, using subjective well-being as the core of his understanding of *eudaimonia*. Similarly, Peterson and Seligman's (2004) first criterion for the inclusion of a character strength in their "Manual of the Sanities" is their evaluation of how that strength contributes to individual fulfillment.

Contrary to this approach, a biblically-informed approach to the human *telos*, guided by the theology of sanctification, centers around the idea that we do not exist for our own good, but for the glory of God. As J. I. Packer (1984) puts it: "Holiness means godliness, and godliness is rooted in God centeredness, and those who think of God as existing for their benefit rather than of themselves as existing for his praise do not qualify as holy men and women" (p. 98). As beings who find their fulfillment in God, our definition of human flourishing must echo Packer's claim that "godliness is the true humanness" (p. 103), and Berkhof's (1986) claim that "extra-human motivation is here the foundation for being human" (p. 464). Wilson (1997), for example, says that a Christian definition of the human *telos* is well summarized in the Westminster Catechism's teaching that the true end of humanity is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Calvin's (1559/1960) approach is to ground his description of "whither we must direct all the acts of our life" (a succinct definition of the term *telos*) in the fact that we "are not our own but the Lord's," and his description of the Christian life follows from that proposition:

We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us

therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal. (p. 690)

If the Christian life is a God-centered life, and *eudaimonia* is a life well-lived, then a Christian eudaimonic psychology will be one that defines positive mental health in terms of the individual's progress in successfully living more for God and less for self. Here we see the possibility of another theoretical advantage for a Christian positive psychology. Many virtue ethicists describe virtuous development in terms of overcoming narcissistic self-love (Comte-Sponville, 2001) and the defeat of the "fat relentless ego" (Murdoch, 1970), and many psychologists talk about the dangers of self-absorption (e.g., Twenge, 2006) and the value of orienting one's life beyond the self (e.g., Frankl, 1984). However, positive psychological literature often contains messages that explicitly ground eudaimonic development in self-interest, including King, Eells, and Burton's (2004) description of *eudaimonia* in terms of the personal enjoyment that comes from cultivating the virtues, and Biwas-Diener and Dean's (2007) claim that positive psychology is valuable because "happy people" make more money. Pursuing a selfless life in the name of self-interest has a ring of incongruity to it. Contrast that with a theological approach to *eudaimonia* in which the self is to be transcended because "extra-human motivation is here the foundation for being human" (Berkhof, 1986, p. 464), and because "becoming virtuous is not only becoming human (as Aristotle and other classical philosophies argued), but also being drawn outside our humanity toward the knowledge and love of God" (Powell, 2005, p. 160). Further theoretical work is called for to demonstrate the greater conceptual coherence of this approach.

Christ is both the goal and the way of sanctification (Berkhof, 1986). The theocentrism of a Christian positive psychology will extend to a discussion of the developmental process as well as the developmental goal. Again paralleling Ramus' criticism of Aristotelianism, a Seligmanic positive psychology assumes that God plays no role in our growth into more mature people. For Christians who wish to develop a biblically-

informed approach to positive psychology, accepting this viewpoint would be a step toward engaging in the aforementioned error of reducing sanctification to human-empowered self-betterment. Instead, a Christian approach to positive psychology would involve the idea, already found in the literature on Christian approaches to counseling psychology, that the Holy Spirit is an active participant in the cultivation of the person (Ingram, 1996), with theoretical models and practical methods shaped accordingly (Decker, 2002; Kunst & Tan, 1996).

One example of this would be the centrality of prayer to a sanctification-influenced view of personal growth and flourishing. As seen in Jesus' prayer that God sanctify the disciples (John 17:17), and in Paul's benediction in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, the Lord may be directly implored to act as sanctifier. The Holy Spirit works in the hearts of believers, providing knowledge and power, leading us, guiding us, and igniting a love toward God that then flows to each other (Grenz, 1994; Hoekema, 1987; Murray, 1957). This is not an adjunct to our own striving (guided by psychological theories and methods) toward higher levels of development. The formation of virtuous patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior are not separate from a prayerful reliance upon the Lord. Rather, as Packer (1984) advises: "all our attempts to get our lives in shape need to be soaked in constant prayer that acknowledges our inability to change ourselves" (p. 109). Packer provides one practical example of how prayer is worked into these attempts:

First, as one who wants to do all the good you can, you observe what tasks, opportunities, and responsibilities face you. Second, you pray for help in these, acknowledging that without Christ you can do nothing—nothing fruitful, that is. Third, you go to work with a good will and a high heart, expecting to be helped as you asked to be. Fourth, you thank God for help given, ask pardon for your failures en route, and request more help for the next task. (p. 125)

### Penitence as Vital to Growth

Contrary to Linley and Joseph's (2004b) argument that the source of evil is located "within the absence of facilitative social-environmental conditions, rather than as an inherent aspect of

human nature per se" (p. 718), Charles Hodge (1872/2001a) claims that our status as sinners is an inescapable fact of our moral nature. A Christian approach to positive psychology, guided by the notion that both the goodness of creational structure and the evil of the spiritual antithesis pervade all of creation (Wolters, 1985), will deny the claim that humanity is entirely inherently good, and will locate evil within the person as well as the environment. Sanctification is described as a dual process of both increasing in Christ-like characteristics and decreasing in sinful characteristics, and a Christian positive psychology will define the goal and process of personal growth in similar terms.

The topic of repentance is central to reduction in sinful characteristics. Repentance can be described in terms of an awareness of the gap between a person's current state and the teleological goal of conformity to Christ (Boice, 1986), and a negative emotional reaction to that gap (Berkhof, 1986). In the psychological literature, repentance is typically treated as a situation-specific expression of sorrow and acceptance of moral responsibility for a wrongdoing, one that is integral to reconciliation between individuals (e.g., Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990). Repentance as a personality trait is not commonly found in the psychological literature. The closest equivalent would be the work by June Price Tangney and her colleagues on dispositional guilt-proneness (e.g., Tangney, 1990; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992). Tangney and Dearing (2002) define guilt as a negative evaluation of the self in connection with a transgression, resulting in feelings of tension, remorse, and regret, and motivation toward confession, reparation, and apology. These researchers emphasize the distinction between guilt and shame. While guilt is primarily focused on the morally-unacceptable nature of the transgression and on the suffering inflicted on the victim, shame is "a self-focused, egocentric experience. The person in the midst of a shame reaction is concerned not so much with the implications for *others* of his or her failure or transgression; he or she is more concerned with the implications of negative events for the *self*" (p. 63). Shame involves feelings of worthlessness, and a desire to hide, disappear, or lash out. While shame is associated with a number of undesirable phenomena such as impaired empathy (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), aggression (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992),

psychopathology (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992), and even chronic procrastination (Fee & Tangney, 2000), "guilt-prone individuals appear better able to empathize with others and to accept responsibility for negative interpersonal events. They are relatively less prone to anger than their shame-prone peers—but when angry, these individuals appear more likely to express their anger in a fairly direct (and one might speculate, constructive) manner" (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 3).

There is an interesting parallel between Tangey's work on shame and guilt and certain theologians' ideas about repentance. Berkhof (1986) claims that the core of repentance is a deploring of the deed that disturbs the love relationship, and is entirely different from self-hatred. "In repentance," says Berkhof, "we are not busy with ourselves, but with God" (p. 433). Making other-centeredness the core of repentance echoes Tangney and Dearing's (2002) distinction between shame as a self-centered reaction that emphasizes the blow to one's self-image and guilt as an other-centered reaction that emphasizes the harm done to the victim. The idea that shame is grounded in an injury to one's pride is also seen in Packer's (1984) condemnation of a morbid preoccupation with one's rottenness, which he connected to a legalistic overemphasis on human works in sanctification. If one begins with the erroneous notion that one's standing before God is the result of one's righteous acts, then a failure to act righteously is a tremendous blow to the self-concept. Conversely, awareness that any standing that the self may have is entirely due to God severs considerations of intrinsic worth from the relative repugnance of specific behaviors, freeing us to identify with our sin without turning our guilt into another opportunity to make it "all about me" (Berkhof, 1986).<sup>3</sup>

In another parallel between Tangey's work and relevant theological scholarship, repentance is also treated by theologians in dispositional terms, as a behavioral practice maintained on a daily basis (Ames, 1629/1968), as an attitude and emotional inclination that marks the believing soul (Murray, 1955), and as "the abiding undertone of all the Christian life" (Berkhof, 1986, p. 433). Berkouwer (1952) considers a natural product of communion with God to be "self-complaint," and argues that progress in sanctification should be accompanied by a corresponding increase in a sense of guilt.

Therefore, in line with this idea of a sense of guilt being a character trait that increases as sanctification progresses, I will be discussing penitence as a dispositional tendency to feel sorrow when one has sinned, to turn again toward God, and to seek atonement and make reparation (Palazzini, 1962; Rahner, 1969; Harrison, 1987), a tendency that individuals can possess at lower or higher levels. Penitence can be thought of as a virtue that facilitates the Christian's development toward greater Christ-likeness, rather than as only a situation-specific reaction. As believers grow in grace, they come to understand God better, and understand themselves better. This will result in an increase in guilt-proneness, and what Berkouwer (1952) called "the humility of the returning prodigal" (p. 129). "Litanies of guilt are spoken on the way of salvation," says Berkouwer, "not only during the first stage of conversion, but, as Christ becomes more wonderful to us, in crescendo" (p. 112).

Despite Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton's (1994) description of guilt as something valuable, promoting interpersonal functioning and buffering against exploitation, and despite the research of Tangney and colleagues linking guilt (both situation-specific feelings of guilt and dispositional guilt-proneness) to numerous salutary outcomes, penitence/guilt-proneness has not been designated as a positive character trait by positive psychologists. Guilt is not listed as one of the twenty-four strengths in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) *Character Strengths and Virtues*. Peterson and Seligman mention guilt as a maladaptive variable, in that it can disrupt creativity (p. 139) and misguide forgiveness (p. 432), and only very briefly list guilt as a possible motivational component of prudence (p. 439). In the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder & Lopez, 2005), guilt is frequently treated as an impediment to be overcome (McCullough & Witvliet, 2005; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2005), and associated with unhealthy outcomes (e.g., Carver & Schier, 2005; Emmons & Shelton, 2005; Langer, 2005), and is only seen in a positive light by Schulman (2005) and Baumeister and Vohs (2005) as a valuable motivator of moral action. Within the two primary scholarly journals of the movement (the *Journal of Positive Psychology* and the *Journal of Happiness Studies*), the only "guilt study" is Kim-Prieto and Eid's (2004) finding that some cultures value guilt more than others. Part of this reluctance to deal with penitence as a positive characteristic may have to do with the fact that guilt



has an aversive, negative quality to it. Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, which has strongly impacted the positive psychology movement, features the notion that negative emotions serve short-term survival functions, but that it is positive emotions that are central to optimal functioning. Although positive psychologists have embraced character strengths such as humility (Tangney, 2005), which moderates positive emotions of pride, the idea of an actively-negative emotion like guilt facilitating optimal functioning may be unwelcome to some positive psychologists. The research supporting the desirable correlates of guilt-proneness seems to contradict this reaction, but lends credence to those psychologists (e.g., Wong, 2001; Sundararajan, 2008) who call for positive psychology to "mature" into an approach that sees both the appetitive "positives" and aversive "negatives" as essential components of the good life. An embrace of penitence as a strength of character would mark a Christian positive psychology as distinct from mainstream positive psychology. Tangney's work on guilt and shame can assist us in refining our understanding of penitence as a Christian virtue, and can inspire research on the empirical consequences of growth in this virtue.

### Conclusion

MacIntyre (1984, 1988, 1990) demonstrated how rival philosophical systems will produce rival descriptions of the virtues. As theories of virtue and flourishing are grounded in a communal vision of the good life, a Christian virtue ethic will not precisely resemble a Confucian virtue ethic (Yearley, 1990), which will not precisely resemble a pagan virtue ethic (Casey, 1990). Similarly, psychological approaches to the virtues and to human flourishing are grounded in shared cultural worldviews that influence theoretical ideas and practical applications regarding self, relationships, community, and the meaningful life (Tjeltveit, 2003; Wong, 2007). A Christian approach to positive psychology will therefore be grounded in a unique vision of the good life, resulting in works of theoretical and applied psychology that will be distinct from positive psychological work derived from alternate visions. In agreement with Murphy (2005a), I endorse the idea that "Christian theology is properly the source of concepts of human flourishing that should inform the hard core of any

research program in psychology" (p. 25). However, while Murphy's integrative project was influenced by Anabaptist ethics, my attempt here is primarily influenced by Reformed theological ideas regarding the process of sanctification. A Christian positive psychology influenced by such theological guidance will see the good life as one that has its center outside of the individual self, views the human person as both good and evil, and endorses "negative" traits such as penitence as vital virtues. Further development of a Christian approach to positive psychology should include examining this topic from theological perspectives other than the Reformed tradition, such as Wesleyan (e.g., Maloney, 1999) and Eastern Orthodox (e.g., Chrysostomos, 1989) approaches, and should also include examination of other relevant theological areas of study. MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian approach involves describing a developmental journey from our untutored state toward a teleological goal; theological anthropology should provide Christian positive psychologists with a better understanding of our basic untutored state, pneumatology should assist us in better understanding the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of maturation, and Christology should provide insight into Jesus' modeling of our teleological ideal. Ecclesiology should also be a valuable theological resource, helping us as we develop Christian ideas of proper versus improper social functioning. Further development of theoretical concepts must be accompanied by the empirical testing of our attempts to construct a Christian positive psychology. The small research literature that exists connecting prayer to well-being (e.g., Poloma & Pendleton, 1991; Whittington & Scher, 2010) should expand to include eudaimonic effects of prayer, and methods of cultivating penitence (without increasing shame) should be developed and tested.

The primary definition of "sanctify" means to set something apart, with characterological considerations flowing from that set-apart status. Bavinck (1899/2008) points out that early Christians endorsed and practiced a specific set of virtues, "aware that by these virtues they were distinguishing themselves from the world and called themselves the people of God" (p. 237). If the cultivation and exercise of Christian virtues, especially "negative" virtues such as penitence, is linked to distinguishing us from the world, as well as making us better fit to glorify God and live in relationship with him, then this satisfies

both definitions of "sanctification." A Christian approach to positive psychology would also fulfill both definitions, as it would be an approach that is distinct from the rest of positive psychology, and (if analyses of eudaimonic flourishing demonstrate greater strength and coherence when set in the light of a biblically-informed worldview) also makes us better equipped to account for the psychological data.

### Notes

1. All scripture quotes are from the New International Version of the Bible.
2. "To test God is to seek some divine perfection in an unlawful manner" (p. 275).
3. One recent exception to this pattern is the study conducted by de Hooze, Breugelmans, and Zeelenberg (2008), in which shame was demonstrated to have positive functions in certain circumstances. In addition to adding new complexity to an examination of differences between guilt and shame, this further supports the argument for the eudaimonic value of negative emotions.

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