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What's the "Positive" in Positive Psychology? Teleological Considerations Based on Creation and *Imago* Doctrines

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While positive psychology has considered a social science perspective of optimal development and living, a pressing question for the integration of psychology and theology is to consider what Christian theology suggests is essential for humans to thrive. Recognizing that God's purposeful action in creation has a *telos*, that is, a goal or purpose for humankind, propels Christian psychologists to investigate a theology of thriving in order to more fully grasp what God has intended for humanity. In this essay we argue that the Christian faith uniquely contributes multiple perspectives to our understanding of human thriving and flourishing that are central to psychological inquiry and are unique contributions to positive psychology. Specifically, the doctrines of creation and *imago Dei* broaden and deepen our understanding of thriving by providing a teleological perspective.

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The field of positive psychology has gained increasing momentum in the last decade. Academia and popular culture have enthusiastically welcomed a renewed emphasis on optimal functioning and development as well as thriving and flourishing (Damon, 2004; King & Clardy, 2014; Larson, 2000; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2009). For example, clinical, personality, social, and developmental psychologies have brought constructs such as well-being, flourishing, thriving, positive psychology, and positive youth development to the forefront of theoretical, methodological, and applied dialogues. Clinical psychologists have sought to conceptualize mental health beyond the absence of pathology (Keyes, 2007; Snyder & Lopez, 2009). Personality and social psychologists have distinguished between a flourishing life and a languishing life (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff, 2008); and developmental psychologists have begun to more intentionally ask what can go right, rather than merely focus on what can go wrong with young people (Benson & Scales, 2009; Damon, 2004; King & Clardy, 2014; Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, in press). These efforts have increased our imagination and understanding of human well-being and development. However, from an integrative approach, we still need to ask: How might we understand the "positive" in positive psychology from a Christian theological perspective?

This is a difficult question for social scientists to answer as scientific inquiry does not offer the proper epistemological tools to adequately address this topic. For example, the field of psychology is not equipped to make precise claims about the nature of idealized personhood or optimal development. Such ideals are relegated to disciplines engaged with ideology, morality, and values such as philosophy and theology. Specifically, investigating goals of human development, or what it means to thrive, invokes questions of teleology. What is the goal or *telos* of different approaches within positive psychology (e.g., What is the goal of optimal development or of positive youth development?)? Although a goal or *telos* is implicit in the various theories or frameworks of positive psychology, few social scientists have explicitly addressed these teleological issues (see Balswick, King, & Reimer, 2005; Entwistle & Moroney, 2011; King & Clardy, 2014 for exceptions).

Given the epistemological resources of the social sciences, this void is not surprising within the field of psychology, and the teleological perspective opens a door for theology to contribute to an understanding of what it means for humans to thrive. A valuable question for the integration of psychology and theology is to consider what Christian theology suggests is essential for humans to thrive. Recognizing that God's purposeful action in creation has a *telos*—that is, a goal or purpose for humankind—propels Christian psychologists to investigate a theology of thriving in order to more fully grasp what God has intended for his creation, especially as humans. Consequently, we argue in this essay that the Christian faith uniquely contributes multiple perspectives to our understanding of human thriving that are not outside the purview of psychological inquiry. Specifically, theology broadens and deepens our understanding of thriving by providing a teleological perspective.

We conceptualize "thriving" as a state of growing toward that which something is supposed to be. If something has a high degree of thriving, then it is more closely approximating what that thing is supposed to be. Given this definition, thriving can only be evaluated in relationship to some purpose or *telos*. Consequently, human thriving can only be evaluated in terms of what a given human is supposed to be (i.e., that human's purposes, or *teloi*). As Christians, we regard each human's *teloi* as ultimately God-endowed, and theology illuminates what these *teloi* actually are, either collectively or individually. Positive psychology cannot provide an ultimate goal for human development, but Christianity provides a *telos* for which humans have been created. Psychology claims that optimal development entails individuals having a repertoire of adaptive behaviors that are appropriate for their developmental context (Lerner, 2006), but psychology cannot make more than normative or conventional claims. The purpose of this paper represents a preliminary attempt to explore Christian theology for insights concerning human *teloi* that may inform the psychological study of human thriving. The theological components that are identified in this essay have potential to deepen and broaden our perspective in ways that positive psychology cannot, while also highlighting certain commonalities between what psychology describes and what Scripture emphasizes.

From the outset, we acknowledge that thriving and related constructs cannot be considered from the standpoint of one doctrinal locus because areas of theology overlap considerably, and the resources they offer for a psychology of human thriving mutually reinforce each other at times. That said, in order to address the centrality of the goodness of creation and human functioning to the construct of thriving, we offer a preliminary perspective on human thriving based on the doctrines of creation and the *imago Dei* in order to discuss how God is actively involved in the created realm and how God's life sustains and informs human life. Although we use the doctrines of creation and *imago Dei* to structure our discussion of teleology, we acknowledge the importance of the salvific act of Jesus Christ, the ongoing work of the Spirit, and eschatological realities.

Humans are Created to Thrive: The Doctrine of Creation and Thriving

We cannot speak of thriving without acknowledging the unique place that Scripture has in detailing how the triune God is the souree of all life on the earth—both human and non-human (animal and plant life). Our createdness underwrites the very notion that we humans have *teloi* that are intended by our Creator. This side of eternity, creation provides the context for thriving. The Genesis narrative is clear that all life exists because God has created it—"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1, New International Version). God is the One who loves in freedom, freely creates the world out of love, and freely creates because love seeks to share its goodness (Barth, 1957/1961). Grenz (2000) similarly remarks that, "the act of creation is the outflowing of the eternal love relationship with the triune God" (p. 101). Creation theology provides an essential framework for understanding that the world is God's intentional creation, how humans are created to exist and flourish

within that world, and how they may live in harmony with the Creator.

Not merely a description about the beginnings of the cosmos, the doctrine of creation describes the Triune God's continuous, free, and loving action of *creating, sustaining redeeming* and *perfecting* the entire created order (Barth, 1957/1961; Reeves, 2012). It is these movements of God's action—creating, sustaining, redeeming, and perfecting—that provide the contours for conceiving a theology of thriving. God *creates* and brings the human creature into existence; God *sustains* the human creature (despite the creature's refusal to participate in the action of God); God *redeems* the human creature from dissolution; and God *perfects* the human creature over time by bringing the Creator's original intentions to fulfillment. These movements are informed by a *Trinitarian* account of creation. Thus, a theology of thriving informed by a robust doctrine of creation acknowledges that the Triune God immerses himself in the messiness of history and, through the work of the Son and Spirit, graciously enables his creatures to thrive and have life. From this perspective, the redeeming work of the Son and the perfecting power of the Spirit enable creatures to become what they are intended to be (Hart, 2001). Any understanding of thriving is grounded (and dependent) on God's free and gracious loving action towards the human creature and the rest of the created realm that occurs through the Son and Spirit. From this Trinitarian perspective, we highlight four aspects within the doctrine of creation that are vital for conceptualizing a theology of thriving.

Thriving Within the Good Creation

First, contemplating the goodness of creation orients us to the goodness of the created "space" of the world. The space and freedom that creatures have within the world is not something that creation inherently possesses but is something that God has graciously established for both human and nonhuman creation so they may thrive, flourish, and be perfected into who or what they are supposed to be. God's act of creating this space is not arbitrary—God wills a reality other than himself, entrusts this space to humanity, and enables humanity to shape this created space into "things of beauty, truth and goodness" (Gunton, 2002, p. 7; Collins, 2003).

The triune God is, in essence, a gracious and generous host, who creates an environment where it is possible for human life to exist (in a similar way that humans might prepare a space in their home for a guest to stay). The material created realm is the place where humanity finds their "home" and community, establishes their vocation, participates with God, and encounters God's love. In short, God is not only the giver of life and the one who enables humans and nonhuman creatures to thrive, but he is also the one who creates an environment and atmosphere where thriving might exist. We affirm that God has created an environment where we have the potential to thrive and flourish as humans, in addition to acknowledging that God has provided the way that humanity can participate in the life of God through the Son and Spirit within the created realm.

Thriving Through God's Providence and Common Grace

Second, a theology of thriving informed by a robust doctrine of creation stresses God's providence within the created realm. Human life continues to exist and thrive because of God's providential care in sustaining that which he has created—"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). We are reminded by Job 34:14 that if God withdrew his Spirit, then all of humanity would perish; God as creator speaks his continual "yes" to life as he sustains creation.

Since God gives life to all of creation, this life takes the form of what is referred to as "common grace" to all of creation. Common grace is the notion that God gives blessings to both the redeemed and the unredeemed. As Christ reminds us, God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). In the verse from Matthew, we see that God's blessings still fall upon those who might not acknowledge God or heed his commands. God upholds the life of his creatures and is a God that takes no pleasure in the death of even the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23).

Considering the idea of common grace helps us to see that God can work in the field of psychology in ways that benefit humanity and help individuals to thrive, regardless of whether those individuals acknowledge God. For instance, common grace is at work in the family therapist who helps parents reconcile in order to provide a safer home environment for their children or in the gifts that enable a researcher to provide care to those who are mentally ill or overlooked in society. The gifts of common grace that God bestows on all people do not bring salvation but make God's goodness apparent; they are glimpses and reminders of God's coming Kingdom, where persons will be whole and complete.

In some streams of evangelicalism, the material world, the body, or the emotions are discounted as

unimportant or even "evil" (see also Entwistle & Moroney, 2011); however, if thriving is disconnected from the created, material realm, it tends to be construed in an individualistic and otherworldly fashion. A thick doctrine of creation does not allow for this and affirms the body, biological sex, and emotions as being good since they were created by God. Consequently, we affirm the entire bodily existence of the human creature as something valuable and affirm that creatures exist in a certain kind of relationship with the material nonhuman creation (Brown & Strawn, 2012).

Thriving and Sin

Third, God's providential action through his Spirit takes the form of restraining evil so that the consequences of sin are not as destructive as they could be; his is part of God's preserving or conserving action to uphold what he has created. God still regards his creatures and creation as something of value and "very good" (Genesis 1:31). As H. Richard Niebuhr (1951) reminds us, the world is good, but it is "perverted good" (p. 194), and though we must acknowledge that evil exists, it does not completely destroy all of the goodness within creation.

Simply asked: Is it possible for non-Christians to thrive? How should we understand thriving while also acknowledging the reality of sin? The conception of common grace answers both of these questions. In short, it is possible for someone who is non-Christian to thrive since God's goodness is bestowed upon all humanity. Though sin perverts how humanity relates to God, hinders thriving, and disrupts the created order, it does not corrupt creation entirely or alter God's commitment to the human community (Moltmann, 1985). God's covenant love continues to graciously sustain humanity and "overrule the worst that the human race can do to subvert his order" (Gunton, 1998, p. 192). Therefore, we must have room in our theology to speak of the goodness that is still present within God's creation (Kim-van Daalen, 2012). In this essay, we are conceptualizing that the providential action of God enables us to understand many of the discoveries of positive psychology as ways that God's goodness is still present within creation. This is seen in aspects of thriving.

Jewett (1996) rightly observes that the doctrine of original sin has often been upheld in such a way that our "unworthiness as sinners" (p. 100) often implies our "worthlessness as creatures" (p. 100). Mouw's (2011) perspective here is also helpful: We know that sin still affects the way we think and act, however, it is important to remember that just as "we are not as holy as we might be expected to be, the unbelieving world is not always as bad as we might predict on the basis of our theology of depravity" (p. 63). In God's graciousness, he affords human creatures the time to become what they are supposed to be and time for the wicked to repent from evil. Through his providential care and commitment to what he has made, God's Spirit works within the created realm to allow his creation to prosper and flourish by restraining evil and blessing both the redeemed and unredeemed with good gifts. God's love of the creation and his blessings of common grace allow for all creatures to thrive to some extent.

The Doctrine of Creation as a Basis for a Theology of Thriving

Creation is a pivotal doctrine for understanding what it means to "thrive" from a theological perspective. We are reminded that creation is good; our God, our generous host, has provided us with physical bodies, emotions, spiritual capacities, and a social world in which and through which we may thrive, flourish, and point others towards God. Through God's providence and common grace, believers and nonbelievers are called to thrive and flourish in this life. The Christian doctrine of creation provides an important corrective to positive psychology, orienting us to understand aspects of thriving as not simply something that increases human well-being but moves us to consider how thriving is a gift given by God through common grace.

Thriving in God's Image

Not only are humans God's creation, but they are God's image bearers. The Old Testament declares that humans are made in the image of God, and the New Testament affirms that humankind bears the Adamic image. As authors, we start by acknowledging the incomprehensibility of the image of God. Humans are creatures and are created, along with the rest of the material world. Given the ontological difference between the created and the Creator, humans are unable to completely understand the nature of God's image in us.

Nonetheless, we offer our best understanding of the *imago*, just as theologians have done throughout the centuries. The redaction of different perspectives on the qualities or attributes of humankind that may actually image God is familiar (see Gunton, 2001; Shults, 2003). We posit that the *imago* is not limited or bounded to a singular attribute, ability, or disposition that mirrors the image of God; rather, we argue for a dynamic and malleable perspective of the *imago* that enables us to understand how both non-Christians and Christians have the capacity to thrive. From this standpoint, imaging God is not only dynamic but directional as well.

Current Conceptualizations of the Imago Dei

Theologians have debated for centuries about what aspect of God is displayed in human creatures and about what potentially unique abilities this might give humans (e.g., reason, creativity, morality). However, given empirical evidence that demonstrates the commonality of many of these features across species (Jeeves, 2005) and knowledge that has increased sensitivity towards those with disabilities (Green, 2004), this perspective has become less accepted and been replaced by relational and functional understandings of the image of God.

Relational. Some understand relationality as a key characteristic of the *imago Dei*, while others highlight how the relational aspect of humanity is part of growing into the image of God and imaging God (see Barth, 1957/1961; Grenz, 2000; Thiselton, in press). For instance, Balswick et al. (2005) advocate that as the Trinitarian God necessarily combines both the uniqueness and unity of the three-persons of the Godhead, so too humans are created to be unique individuals united with God and with others (akin to the I-Thou relationships championed by Barth [1957/1961] and Martin Buber [1970]). They assert, "To live as beings made in the image of God is to exist as *reciprocating selves*, as unique individuals living in relationships with others... as a distinct human being in communion with God and other in mutually giving and receiving relationships" (Balswick et al., 2005, p. 31). This notion of reciprocating selves constitutes their understanding of *telos,* while their tTrinitarian understanding of the *imago* informs a *developmental teleology* that emphasizes the importance of the development of the person engaged in interdependent relationships with God and others.

Relationality highlights the significance that the uniqueness of individuals has to a theology of thriving. Gunton (1993) stresses the significance of a theology of relationality along with a theology of particularity. For Gunton, everything is created by God to be and become what it is and not something else. As Anderson (1993) notes, "Being human thus means being in the image of God as particular persons" (p. 78). The doctrine of the *imago Dei* informs how we become unique and particular humans. As such, we recognize that central to the discussion on thriving is the notion that persons are distinct and particular beings who become more so by fully relating to others (a provision given by the doctrine of creation that is available to all people).

Relational-functional. An important considerarion beyond the relational interpretation of the *imago* is a functional perspective that acknowledges the commission that God gave Adam and Eve in Genesis to have dominion over the rest of creation. A theology of thriving informed by the doctrine of the *imago Dei* includes tending to God's creation—human and otherwise. Mouw (2012) points out that this feature of exercising dominion is applied uniquely to human beings among the creatures. Consequently, bearing the image of God is apparent when human beings exercise the authority that God has given to them, a concept that Kuitert (1972) describes as covenant partnership. "Covenant" emphasizes the importance of relationships, while "partnership" points to the privilege and responsibility of living with God, others, and creation.

This functional perspective emphasizes that thriving involves responding to God's love and specifically participating in the action of the triune God—namely creating, redeeming, sustaining, and perfecting. This interpretation of the image emphasizes the *role* that humans are given by God to actively be image bearers. Thus, a theology of thriving includes an understanding of human nature as sharing in this social progression throughout time as action (Webster, 2003).

Directional. Although we argue that humans are intended to thrive on this side of eternity, we acknowledge that humans will not be made complete in this life. Grenz (2000) notes, "The divine image is the goal or destiny that God intends for his creatures. Hence, it is a future reality that is present now only as a foretaste, or only in the form of our human potential" (p. 173). Grenz points out that imaging God is not only about anthropology or Christology, but is also about eschatology. Migliore (1991) also notes that being "created in the image of God is not a state or condition but a movement with a goal: human beings are restless for a fulfillment of life not yet realized" (p. 128)[1].

Drawing from Webster (2003), we emphasize thriving as *becoming.* The doctrine of the *imago* upholds the importance of becoming like Christ as part of our *telos.* Thus, thriving is a process not only of becoming who one was uniquely created to be but also of becoming more Christ-like. By this, we are not suggesting a "tractor beam teleology" that draws us all towards uniformity; rather, we are acknowledging the importance of conforming to Christ as we become more distinct selves.

It is important to consider whether this perspective of thriving differentially impacts Christians and non-Christians. We have already established how, through

[1] Although all humans share the *image* of God, we grow more into God's *likeness* through common and particular grace.

common grace, God gives gifts of wholeness and well-being—concepts that positive psychology is able to observe and study—to those who might not even acknowledge him. We might refer to this as our common *telos*. However, theologians have typically made the distinction between common grace (which God bestows on all humanity and creation) and particular or special grace (which refers to the gift of salvation). While these distinctions are important to a discussion of well-being and thriving, it is even more valuable to note the interconnected nature of these forms of grace.

Thriving does have a different focus when we consider the Christian. This can be seen as thriving moving from a common *telos* (which is understood through common grace) to a particular understanding of *telos* (which is understood ftom the perspective of salvation). The gifts of thriving given through common grace (one's common *telos*) allow God's redemption plan to unfold in the world so that humanity may move towards their particular Christian *telos*, where persons find salvation and are conformed more into the image of Christ (Kim-van Daalen, 2012). Crisp (in press) reminds us that Christ is the perfect image of God; thus, being conformed to the likeness of Christ is the Christian understanding of *telos*. We are careful to note that thriving towards this particular *telos* found in and through Christ is something that secular positive psychology does not recognize.

The significance of this cannot be overstated: Christians thrive through their participation in the life of the triune God and as they become more like Christ. From this perspective, *becoming* is both having the capacity to relate to God and actively relating to God. Because they are created in the image of God, non-Christians also have the capacity for relationship with God, though they may not exercise this capacity (McMartin, 2013).

We propose that perhaps there is both an inward and outward participation in the life of God that results in becoming more fully human for the Christian. Inwardly, we participate in the life of God and become more aware of the ongoing action of the Trinity through spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and study. Outwardly, we participate in the life of God by representing Christ through the ways our unique selves extend compassion, seek justice, and reconcile people to God through the Spirit (2 Corinthians 5). True humanity occurs in our active participation—receiving and responding to the life of the Triune God in the social and contextual realms into which God has placed us.

For example, what is particularly salient and unique from the Christian perspective of thriving is the concept of *vocation* that emphasizes a sense of calling and active engagement with God. Vocation is not a static position or sentry post as Calvin (1536/1997) described), nor is it a designation to a duty in a social or metaphysical way. Rather, vocation is a kind of living—being vivified by the Spirit of God. It is living a life of discipleship in Christ and responding to God's love by building God's kingdom through one's uniqueness and thereby becoming more fully human (Labberton, 2014). Drawing on the language of Romans 12:1-2, vocation might be understood as offering one's life as a living sacrifice. From a Christian perspective, pursuing one's vocation(s) is one manner towards fulfilling one's *telos* to glorify God. Thus, to thrive from a Christian perspective is to answer the divine call—to actively engage in a life of worship in the fullness of our own uniqueness and to use our particular gifts, skills, and passions for God's glory.

From this standpoint, thriving is not merely becoming, developing, growing, or improving. In Webster's (2003) words, Christian theological anthropology is not a "celebration of a general principle of 'becoming'" (p. 228) nor of the cultivation of the self for the self's sake. Rather, it is a "shapely and ordered fulfillment of calling" (p. 228), in which individuals fill out or participate in the gracious work that the triune God has appointed to humankind. Thus, we stress to become or to thrive for the sake of oneself and not in relationship to God and/or God's creation is to be "full of oneself" at best; thriving is an empty enterprise that results in self-centeredness and self-importance when it is pursued without relating to God and others.

It is valuable to remember that one perspective alone is not sufficient for understanding how humans may image God, and each approach bears significantly on our understanding of thriving. The *imago* is not located in one particular capacity or attribute (e.g., wisdom or reason); the *imago* involves the whole person as one relates to God and others. Relational interpretations of the *imago Dei* emphasize that having the inherent capacity to image God is different than participating in that reality by relating and responding to God, others, and creation. Through these relarions, the image of God has the potential to become more evident. Imaging God is active and involves taking on the role of image bearers. In this way, the *imago* is directional and emphasizes that humanity was created with the capacity to grow, change, and develop towards God's intentions for us—the general *telos* of thriving and flourishing that is exemplified in Christ

and worked out through our vocations. Thus, *imago* is both directional and dynamic.

A Dynamic Perspective of the *Imago*

Given human malleability and the ongoing sustaining and perfecting work of the Spirit, we make two propositions regarding a dynamic perspective of the image of God. First, the *imago* or imaging God may be dynamic in that the means by which individual or communal entities relate to God are not fixed throughout time and place. Second, for the Christian, the *imago* entails an ongoing relationship to God that emphasizes human malleability and conformity to Christ through active participation in the life of the Trinity.

These propositions suggest that different aspects of the *imago* may be more apparent in different historical or cultural contexts. For example, during the Enlightenment, reason may have been used more prominently to understand humans' relationship to God; whereas relational qualities, such as a coherent identity and empathy, may be emphasized more frequently in recent times as a means of participating more fully in Christian fellowship and in the life of the triune God. This is not a relativistic claim about the *imago*, but rather a supposition about how cultural and historical context scaffolds different opportunities for imaging God that may inform the intellectual history of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. This is ro say that God, or what the *imago* is, does not change; rather, human understanding and apprehension changes. This notion challenges the historical tendency ro want to locate the image of God in a particular quality that a human possesses and allows for an understanding of humankind as image bearers that can deepen and expand throughout history.

These propositions also emphasize that imaging God involves the whole person and becomes more apparent through continuous relating to God and others. A theology of thriving, informed by theological anthropology, stresses that thriving is both a dynamic and ongoing process, just as imaging God is. Human nature has a plastic and undetermined element that enables humans to be shaped into a better likeness of the image of God. Although the *imago* may involve specific qualities or capacities that enable humans to engage and respond to fellowship with the Triune God, these qualities are not necessarily "immobile" (Webster, 2003, p. 226). The attributes that comprise *what the image is* (e.g., will, reason, relationality) are less important to thriving than the ways these attributes inform *how one images* God (e.g., participating in fellowship with God). Said differently, the image is not located in a singular attribute, but emerges out of a constellation of capabilities that give rise to the ability to relate and know God more fully.[2]

All humans are created in the image of God, but not all are thriving because not all are intentionally moving toward actualizing their capacity to image God. In this way, true humanity is not a possessed identity but "rather life in a perpetual movement of receiving and responding" (Webster, 2003, p. 228) to the gifts and the absolute generosity of the triune God. The *imago* is dynamic in that it stems from ongoing human engagement with the being and activity of the triune God. Such a conceptualization affirms the importance of various qualities such as reason, will, and relational capacities, but emphasizes the process by which these qualities enable an individual to engage in the ongoing activity of God. Given that the Spirit creates new energies for life as the sustainer and perfecter in our process of sanctification, then we should not be surprised that there could be change over time in our understanding of the *imago*.

For those who seek God, thriving is understood as a dynamic process that involves purposeful engagement in one's ever-changing relationship with the triune God. As Tanner (2011) states,

> If humans are to be made over in God's image...then what is of interest about human nature is its plasticity, it's openness to formation through outside influences and the unusually wide range of possible effects of such a process of formation. (p. 65)

According to Tanner, we have life by imaging God, and we so image God by "living off God" (Tanner, 2011, p. 65)—like fetus living off mother. All creatures are formed in relationship to others (of their own kind or to other species), but humans are open to radical reformation because we are created with the capacity ro be open to God for transformation. Human nature and thriving are supremely found in "participa-

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[2] To illustrate this point further, Nouwen (1988) has highlighted the profound emotional capacity for individuals with Down syndrome to relate to God and others despite having cognitive disabilities. Whereas high-functioning individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (such as Asperger's syndrome as listed in the *DSM-IV-TR*) often do not show delays in cognitive ability but tend to experience impairments m social interaction and communication. Proposing a dynamic process that draws on a constellation of attributes rather than a single attribute allows for a broader, albeit more complex, understanding of the *imago*.

tion in the unfolding of God's ways with humankind" (Webster, 2003, p. 228).

From this perspective, humans are image bearers, and similar to a photo that changes in quality or resolution as it comes into focus, so the image we bear becomes more apparent as we become more fully who we were created to be by relating to God, God's people, and God's creation. Said differently, the substance of the image is present in a picture; although, we may not see it clearly. Increase the resolution of the picture, and increase the clarity of the image. Consequently, the *imago* is not limited to a singular quality that mirrors the image of God, but rather it is an active process in which God's image becomes more apparent as we draw closer to conforming to Christ as our unique selves.

Implications for Thriving

The burden of this essay has been to demonstrate how Christian theology has its own unique contribution to elements of positive psychology—specifically in relation to what it means for humans to thrive. Taken together, the doctrines of creation and the *imago Dei* inform and provide a vision for the teleological issues raised by psychological questions of human thriving and flourishing. As we have argued, it is a Christian vision of the purpose of human life that broadens our conception of *telos* and informs what it means to thrive in a helpful (and yes, Christian) direction.

We will now address how theology informs the framework of thriving by addressing the "who," "what," "when," "where," and "how" of thriving. We recognize that a one-way examination of how theology informs psychology is insufficient. We must also identify how psychology challenges common theological assumptions and prominent evangelical beliefs. Consequently, we will follow a discussion about the theological implications of a psychology of thriving by highlighting some of the ways in which positive psychology challenges Christian theology.

Theological Implications for "Who" Thrives

The *imago Dei* strongly influences our understanding of what it means to be human and holds significance for understanding the processes and goals of human development and thriving. Humans have a common *telos*, and Christians have a particular understanding of this *telos*. This common *telos* is granted to all humanity because they are God's creation, whereas salvation received through Jesus Christ orients individuals to a particular understanding of their *telos*. This particular *telos* begins as persons follow Christ, and is given further direction as persons discover their uniqueness in strengths, spiritual gifts, personality, and vocation. The doctrine of common grace helps clarify humanity's common *telos* by explaining how those who do not know God may find health and life because of God's free provision of grace to all creation. However, the connection between common grace and particular grace also helps explain how the Spirit is working and drawing humankind towards God's love, or towards their particular understanding of their *telos* in Christ. Looking beyond one's common *telos* causes us to consider how humans are intended to glorify God by knowing God as their creator, redeemer, and sustainer (which is also the Christological and ecclesial vision of thriving).

This perspective of one's common *telos* suggests that all humans have the potential to thrive and become what God intended them to be in some capacity. This is not simply because humans possess qualities on their own apart from God, but because God has created a world that allows his creatures to receive the gifts (of life, breath, food, vocation, etc.) that he bestows on them through his common grace. All humans have the potential to live in mutually giving and receiving relationships, to receive good gifts from God, and to find their unique vocation. Even those with disabilities—whether physical, cognitive, or emotional—have the potential to thrive in their own unique way since they still stand in relationship with God and others. Despite this, not all who receive these gifts acknowledge God as the giver or live in communion with God.

Theological Implications for "What" is Thriving

Through the doctrines of creation and *imago Dei* we recognize that humans are distinct from other species in that they are created in God's image. From our theological perspective, people are thriving or flourishing when they are intentionally moving toward who God created them to be as unique individuals by investing in their personal development; contributing to the lives of their family, friends, and society; and becoming more like Christ—whether they are intentional about the latter or not. On this basis, we suggest that a psychology of thriving emphasizes a *process* rather than a *state* of thriving (Bundick et al., 2010; King, Carr, & Boitor, 2011; Lerner et al., in press); the idea of *telos* emphasizes the developmental process, human growth potential and plasticity, and the state of human beings as "works in progress" towards God's *telos* for them.

This theological perspective suggests that thriving involves living up to one's unique potential that is informed by one's experiences and context rather than meeting prescribed criteria for thriving. There is not an objective or absolute way to measure thriving because individuals thrive in accordance with their uniquely inherited capacities in the context of the

psychological, social, and spiritual resources available to them In essence, thriving involves doing the best you can with what you have—as an individual and in the world around you (Benson & Scales, 2009; Bundick et al., 2010).From a Christian perspective, fulfilling one's potential is accomplished as individuals apply their skills, talents, passions, and spiritual gifts in pursuit of their vocations or callings in order to point others towards God's love and glorify God. Consequently, a psychology of thriving involves humans living and acting according to a greater purpose that integrates their identity, competencies, passions, and actions (Benson & Scales, 2009; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Lerner et al., in press).

Drawing on a relational understanding of the *imago*, we argue that thriving is not an individual enterprise but involves growing in mutual and interdependent relationships. Furthermore, thriving involves both individual development as well as contribution to the greater good. Thriving is not a merely a project of self-affirmation or self-development; rather, it involves mutually increasing the well-being of the individual and the contexts in which that individual is embedded (Bundick et al., 2010 Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2006). This relationality not only involves human relations, but also how humans relate to the rest of God's creation and to the divine (King & Boyatzis, in press). We echo Grenz's (2001) statement: "Glorifying the Father in the Son [through the Spirit] together with all creation is the ultimate expression of the *imago Dei* and therefore marks the *telos* for which humans were created in the beginning" (p. 327). Consequently, from a Christian perspective the relationality inherent in thriving assumes the potential for a spiritual component that includes a relationship with God.

Theological Implications for "Where" Humans Thrive

The doctrine of creation speaks of the goodness of God's created world. Out of God's effusive, bountiful love he has created the world (Gunton, 2001; Reeves, 2012). We recognize that the material world is good and can be understood which, by extension, affirms the goodness of the human body, mind, and emotions. We affirm that the God-given purpose of life is to honor and to glorify him; this purpose is to be pursued in relationship with God and others through the Holy Spirit here on this earth. We are called to be stewards of our lives and this world, to build God's kingdom, to point others towards God's love. In short, thriving happens in this world.

The goodness and sanctity of the created order suggests that a psychology of thriving promotes thriving in this material world as embodied persons embedded in social, cultural, and ecological contexts. An embodied approach to thriving, informed by the doctrine of creation and *imago Dei,* emphasizes that thriving is holistic and involves balance (see Bundick et al., 2010). Thus, success in one area of life is not a holistic vision of thriving. For example, work success at the expense of emotional or relational health is not thriving. This perspective provides an understanding of how programs that specifically focus on the well-being of the body, mind, and emotions can also be affirmed by the theology of thriving presented here.

Based on the goodness of God's creation, we affirm the importance of the social, cultural, and environmental context for thriving. Thus, a systems perspective of thriving is necessary to account for the bidirectional interactions between individuals and their communities, economies, nature, etc. As psychologists, this influences the social and cultural programs that we advocate for and value. The contexts—families, schools, congregations, organizations, workplaces, economies, cultures—that people live, and hopefully thrive, in are worthy of our attention and endeavors. Moreover, working towards the good in these various contexts can also be seen as part of a Christian vocation. Specifically, relational-developmental systems theories that describe development occurring through interactions between individuals and their environments are helpful in promoting a robust understanding of human thriving (Lerner, 2006).

Theological Implications for "When" Humans Thrive

Our teleology is informed by eschatology that suggests that humans are intended to thrive in the present and realize their full purpose on the other side of eternity. From this standpoint, eschatology emphasizes that thriving is a process that is only fully realized in the eschaton. Developmental teleology emphasizes that humans develop over rime towards God's intentions or goals for human development (Balswick et al., 2005). Since thriving is understood as the process of growing more into God's general *telos* for humankind and his specific *telos* for each individual, consideration should be given to the nature of thriving throughout the lifespan. Accordingly, a psychology of thriving accounts for the importance of thriving in both the present and the future. Psychological interventions or enrichment programs that nurture individual and relational health for the present and equip individuals, families, and communities for the future fit the vision for a Christian understanding of thriving. Such a perspective also provides hope and gives meaning to

failure and obstacles and provides opportunities for resilience and growth (King & Clardy, 2014).

In addition, developmental teleology underscores the importance of all the stages of the lifespan. Thriving is not age-biased (Bundick et al., 2010); it must affirm the worth and value of all stages of life. Developmentalists caution that infancy and early childhood are critical years of development, yet many evangelical churches and government programs reflect a lack of attention and funding for programs that focus on these age groups. Although much of positive psychology addresses optimal living or flourishing across the various stages of adulthood, late adulthood is often overlooked. Baltes and Freund (2003) remind us that even in late adulthood thriving continues to be about not just *being* but *becoming*, (Allport, 1955), as human development is perpetually marked by transitions and the ongoing processes of selection, optimization, and compensation.

To summarize, when informed by the doctrine of creation and *imago Dei*, we see that:

1. All humans have the potential to thrive as they grow in their God given uniqueness and are conformed to the likeness of Christ.
2. Thriving is a dynamic process not a state. Thriving involves living into one's potential as informed by one's uniqueness, experiences, and environment, rather than meeting prescribed criteria of thriving.
3. Thriving occurs through the complex interactions between an individual and the many systems in which they live (i.e., family, religion, economics).
4. Thriving involves growing in and integrating one's identity, competencies, passions, and behaviors, which are eventually applied in the pursuit of a vocation or calling that serves a purpose beyond the self.
5. Although thriving involves individual development, it is not an individual enterprise—it includes contributing to the greater good and growing in mutual and interdependent relationships with God, others, and the rest of God's creation.
6. Thriving is embodied, holistic, and should foster balanced living.
7. Although thriving can and should be experienced in the present, it is also a process of ongoing growth that continues, and is equally important, across each stage of the lifespan, and is not complete until the eschaton.

Positive Psychology's Contributions to Theology

The teleology evident in the Christian doctrines of creation and the *imago Dei* challenges our vision of positive psychology. However, this cannot be a one-way analysis. Just as this theological exploration has highlighted how Christian theology informs and overlaps with positive psychology, the investigation also highlights how psychology challenges common evangelical assumptions. For instance, Charry (2010) wrote about the need for a corrective to Christian theology and proposed a "positive theology" that emphasizes God's goal of blessedness for God's people. In addition, Entwistle and Moroney (2011) stress the need for a more holistic view of humanity within the integration literature that highlights humanity's positive features. In regards to our treatment of thriving, we underscore positive psychology's championing of humankind's potential, which is especially evident in its emphasis on the goodness of humans, human plasticity, the importance of the social and cultural context, and the importance of contribution.

Evangelicals often emphasize fallen humanity. Positive psychology frequently offers an important perspective and reminds us of the goodness and potential of God's creation given to us through common grace. Positive psychology is commended for the goal of celebrating humankind and recognizing the value of human strength, virtue, and character. For example, *Eudaimonic* approaches emphasize the importance of life satisfaction, happiness, personal development, and goal pursuit (Waterman, 2008). In their work on character strengths, Peterson and Seligman (2004) have emphasized human virtue. Positive psychologists who research Positive Youth Development (PYD) emphasize that all youth have strengths and competencies to be developed (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Damon, 2004; Lerner et al., in press). Such approaches emphasize optimal development rather than simply normative functioning. Consequently, living with purpose (Damon et al., 2003; Keyes, 2007); regulated goal pursuit (Ryan & Deci, 2000); growing in the "5 C's" of competency, confidence, character, connection, compassion (Lerner et al., in press); and engaged living (Froh et al., 2010) are hallmarks of psychological approaches that focus on flourishing and thriving.

Positive psychological approaches also emphasize the potential for change. Relational developmental systems theory points to the importance of plasticity (Lerner et al., in press). In fact, Lerner and colleagues (in press) argue that plasticity legitimates the optimistic search for personal and contextual characteristics that promote positive development and thriving. Ryan

and Deci's (2000) conceptualization of self-determination theory emphasizes qualities (e.g., competence, relatedness, and autonomy) that are essential for "facilitating optimal functioning of the natural propensities for growth and integration" (p. 68). Ryff and Keyes (1995) also emphasize the importance of personal growth in their formulation of well-being. In this way, psychology conceptualizes thriving as a process of growth rather than a trait or a state.

We recognize that the dynamic understanding of the *imago Dei* suggested in this paper is not typically discussed by Christians in psychological circles. However, being influenced by the reality of human plasticity and our belief in the continually renewing efforts of the Holy Spirit, we find it difficult to imagine a static conception of the image of God. We assert that a more dynamic understanding of the *imago Dei* will greatly enhance theology's practicality and ability to speak into applied issues whether regarding thriving, disabilities, clinical psychology, etc.

Given that humans develop and grow based on their transactions with their environment, we highlight the significance of context that is evident especially in systems approaches to psychology. For instance, relational developmental systems theory emphasizes that development occurs through "person ← → context interactions" (Lerner et al., in press), whether biological, psychological, economic, spiritual, etc. Bundick and colleagues (2010) have defined thriving as "a dynamic and purposeful process of individual ← → context interactions over time, through which the person and his/her environment are mutually enhanced" (p. 891). The Search Institute identified 40 Developmental Assets—half of which are "external assets" or resources that are embedded in a young person's community—that enable youth to thrive (Benson et al., 2006). Systems approaches also highlight the necessity of our sociocultural contexts and remind us that our faith is a confessing faith, lived out in relationship with the community of faith and as citizens of a broader world. Psychology's emphasis on the embedded nature of human life affirms the importance of holistic ministry and caring for individuals', families', and communities' greater well-being.

Evangelicals often emphasize personal spiritual growth or "vertical" spirituality but neglect social justice and civic contribution or "horizontal" spirituality. Central to PYD approaches is a contribution to the greater good. From a PYD perspective, personal growth is necessary, but not sufficient, to warrant thriving (Damon, 2004; King & Clardy, 2014; Lerner, 2006). Moral identity, volunteer service, and acts of compassion are all recognized as crucial to positive development. The emphasis on contribution is also evident in psychological approaches that are oriented for adults. For example, Froh and colleagues' (2010) work on the importance of engaged living, not only identifies passion in what one is doing but also social integration, which involves helping and feeling connected to others. Park and Peterson (2006) also note that those individuals possessing character strengths are directed to "do what is worthy and good" (p. 903). These sentiments are consistent with Christian theology—liberal, conservative, and contemplative. However, this point stands as an important reminder for evangelicals, that we are called to love God and neighbor. It is all too easy for evangelicals to focus on one's individual relationship with God and lose sight of their call to live as a disciple in the broader world and to extend God's love, grace, and compassion to others throughout their lives.

Conclusions

As we seek to understanding thriving, we find that conceptions of human thriving and flourishing run throughout the pages of Scripture. In the New Testament, we recall that the abundant life that Christ speaks of and offers in John 10:10 is not simply life in the future but also a certain type and quality of life in the present. In Scripture, life does not exist on its own, but as the gospel of John conveys, it is only because of the *Logos* that life exists on this earth (Morris, 1995). Conceptions of thriving also emphasize the teleological perspective that humans are in the process of growing or becoming as they participate in the life of God and are conformed to Christ.

A dynamic understanding of the *imago* acknowledges the importance of qualities that enable relations with God and participation in the life of the triune God—both inwardly and outwardly. Similarly, thriving is a dynamic process that occurs as individuals or communal entities draw closer to the creating, redeeming, sustaining, and perfecting life of the triune God. As such, humans are a particular kind of creature that are extraordinarily complex, mobile, and malleable. Their thriving may be apparent and occur differently in various contexts, but it is informed by the *telos,* or full purpose, for which they were created.

Broadly speaking, evangelical theology has typically emphasized what Jesus has saved us *from,* not what Jesus has saved us *for.* No doubt, we do not want to lose sight of God's magnanimous gift of grace that saves us from sin, but we do hope to point to God's saving love that has reconciled us to God and enabled us to live in relationship with God and his created

order. We hope that a theology of thriving will further thought on what it means for all humans to thrive, to be Christ's ambassadors on earth, and to have ministries of reconciliation. Additionally, we hope that a theology of thriving will provide greater clarification of what it means to pursue one's vocation(s)—to lead and serve out of spiritual gifts, to be peacemakers, to be stewards of God's creation, and to be disciples of Christ.

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