Positive Psychology and Biblical Thinking from a Christian Perspective

Margaret L. Kern[1] and Susan D. Benecchi[2]

[1] The University of Melbourne, [2] Planetary Science Institute

Author Note

Margaret L. Kern, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne, Australia; Susan D. Benecchi, Planetary Science Institute, US.

Correspondence concerning this article can be addressed to Margaret L. Kern, 100 Leicester Street, Level 2, Parkville, VIC, 3010, Australia. Email: Margaret.kern@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

The field of positive psychology (PP) – the scientific study of wellbeing – has recently generated considerable interest in academia and the general public. PP has made it possible to empirically study constructs such as happiness, love, spirituality, gratitude, and hope, bringing a scientific approach to philosophical and theological domains. Notably, many core PP principles appear throughout the Bible and Christian teachings. This paper explores the occurrence and context of PP constructs within the Bible. We first identify overlap between PP constructs and Biblical studies. We then examine dominant PP themes in greater detail, integrating literature from PP, Christian psychology, and theology to identify ways in which PP and Christianity, as representative of the practice of Biblical studies, overlap and diverge. Points of connection include human happiness and flourishing, character strengths and virtue, and the importance of social relationships. While similar language is used, PP and Christianity provide two different lenses, which are both complementary and competing. As a whole, PP potentially offers opportunities for Christianity to connect with and inform science in the modern age.

Keywords: Positive psychology, theology, Biblical philosophy, Christianity, flourishing, strengths, virtues

Positive Psychology and Biblical Thinking from a Christian Perspective

"Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence."
~ Aristotle

The field of positive psychology (PP) – the scientific study of wellbeing – is a relatively new discipline that has generated considerable interest in academia, with practitioners, and in the general public. The field is incorporating multiple methodologies, measurement approaches, statistical design, and rigor to add empiricism to areas that previously were untouched by science – such as love, spirituality, gratitude, and character. The concepts that the field studies are by no means new (Kristjánsson, 2012), but approaches to these concepts are providing an empirical basis for understanding and developing these "soft" domains.

In this paper, we link together PP and a text that has been around for millennia – the Bible. This controversial collection of books forms the foundation of Judaism, Christianity, and parts of Islam and is the best selling book of all non-fiction (with over 5 billion copies sold; Guinness World Record, 2016). For some, it is the core of their religious doctrines, for others it is a historical account of times long past, for others it defines morality, and for still others it is a fantastical account, designed to deceive the multitudes.

Writing from a Christian perspective, we first introduce PP, providing the history of the field and highlighting the major topics studied by scholars in the field. Second, we review the extent to which PP constructs align with the Bible. We then identify the occurrence in which PP concepts are mentioned or discussed in the Bible, and review PP findings for these areas.

History and Perspectives

Positive Psychology

PP was officially founded as a sub-discipline within psychology during Seligman's 1998 opening presidential address for the American Psychological Association. The founders boldly claimed that traditional psychology, as practiced for the past century, was incomplete (Seligman & Csikzsentmihalyi, 2000). For centuries, humankind has sought to remedy its societal ills. Medicine creates treatments and remedies for illness. Psychology treats depression, anxiety, and other psychopathologies. The criminal system punishes socially undesirable behaviors. Science and research have made enormous progress in meeting the perceived problems of humanity. However, removing sickness, depression, and violence is not the same as creating healthy, happy, productive functioning members of society. From the PP perspective, restoring "normal" functioning is certainly important, but insufficient. Our aim should be not only to help people to survive life, but to truly thrive.

The PP perspective has taken hold across multiple disciplines, including business, medicine, law, gaming, neuroscience, education, and public policy, among others (Rusk & Waters, 2013). For example, positive organizational scholarship focuses on how to build employee happiness and develop more virtuous organizations (Cameron, 2003; Hess & Cameron, 2006; Wright & Goodstein, 2007). Positive education aims to support both student academic achievement *and* wellbeing and character (Seligman et al., 2009). PP has also been immensely popular with lay audiences. Leaders in the field have been quick to publish common interest books, spreading pieces of the science, combined with their own perspectives and

advice, to hungry audiences. Turn on the news and everything one hears will be negative. PP offers a fresh perspective, which counters the rather hopeless futility of life that seemingly surrounds us.

The Bible

The Bible is a library of 66 books, compiled by more than 40 authors and cataloged over 16 centuries. It has been translated into more than 1,200 languages and its teachings and principles have had a significant influence on literature and history, especially among Western civilization. It was the first mass-printed book, and the first of significance to use movable type (Thorpe, 1997). It is divided into two parts. The *Old Testament* (OT; 39 books) describes the creation of the world and the history of God's chosen people – the Hebrew nation, referred to today as the Jews –and their interaction with the Gentile (non-Hebrew) world. It contains books of law, history, literature, poetry, wisdom, and prophecy. The *New Testament* (NT; 27 books) focuses on the life of Jesus Christ and the early church, and also includes an apocalyptic account of the end of the modern world and the beginning of an eternal world. The NT was penned within 100 years of the death of Christ, and extends the promises God made in the OT to the Gentile world. There are potentially 12 to 16 additional historical texts, referred to as the Apocrypha, which are part of the Septuagint (Greek) version of the OT, but traditionally these are not included in main Biblical texts.

Traditional Judaism ignores the NT, believing that they are still awaiting the promised Messiah prophesized in the text. Christians – people who believe in and submit to the authority of a divine Christ – view that the entire Bible is inspired or "God-breathed", without error in the original inscription, and is God's instruction book for human life. They believe that the Bible as a whole tells one great story: the story of God – Creator, Sustainer and Ruler over all that exists – and His purpose of redemption for His people through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From this perspective, the OT sets a foundation for the events and teachings of the NT.

Muslims view parts of the Bible as authentic revelation [the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), the Psalms and the Gospel as revealed to Jesus – not the same as the Christian gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John], but believe that the text has been corrupted over time. As such the Qur'an supersedes the Christian Bible for Muslims with respect to a life reference.

Although 59% of Americans (as of 2013) do not adhere to the Christian faith or consider themselves atheists, 88% of them own a Bible and 80% identify the Bible as sacred literature (Barna Group, 2013). The basic moral principles upheld in the majority of western societies primarily stem from those grounded in the Bible. And while politically America was not founded with a particular religion in mind, it is clear that many of the principle founding documents can be traced back to Biblical teachings. Clearly the Bible has had a significant influence on the development of thought among Western civilizations and as such, is a key source of reference for comparison with modern scholarship.

Psychology and Biblical Thinking

Psychology and Biblical thinking are often held apart – with a general hostility by many psychologists toward the Christian faith, equaled by a strong sense of suspicion of psychology by many Christian communities. Many psychologists accept the practices and approaches of the

field, believing in the superiority of the scientific method as the pathway to knowledge. Yet these methods are a product of philosophy and social and political events that have unfolded throughout history (Reber, 2006). They are also highly influenced by the worldview, or lens, through which those leading in the field viewed the world and the subject. Traditionally, theologians were the psychologists (Charry, 2011). Greek philosophies strongly influenced both the early Church and our understanding of humanity. It is only over the past few centuries that the secularization of modern society has resulted in religious ideas and practices losing their influence (Reber, 2006).

As the scientific revolution unfolded through the 19th and 20th centuries, varying aspects of wellbeing – the physical, mental, and spiritual – were separated, with study and treatment relegated to medicine, psychology, and religion, respectively. The body and the mind were disconnected, and spirituality came to be viewed as unscientific. Notably, PP has awakened the possibility of rigorously studying religious beliefs and experiences, drawing on existing methodologies and introducing creative approaches to study connections between psychology and spirituality. Although findings are mixed, studies have linked religiosity and spirituality with higher levels of happiness, physical and mental health, social relationships, purpose in life, and a greater ability to cope with stressful life events (Joseph, Linley, & Maltby, 2006; Lewis & Cruise, 2006; van Dierendonck, & Mohan, 2006).

Still, the field runs the risk of trivializing the actual human experience. Driven by a desire to contend with hard sciences, psychological research has relished in finding ways to apply rigorous methods to malleable human beings. Yet when God is excluded, we study something that might resemble religion, but is not religion as individuals experience it (Reber, 2006). Indeed, William James (1985) warned against excluding religious, spiritual, and mystic experiences from being considered as a core part of the human experience (Yaden et al., in press).

The philosophies and focus of psychology over the past few centuries have strongly impacted perceptions of the psyche and the role of the psychologist. Many of the practices in the field are grounded in a pathological model, and research and therapies are applied to fixing psychological problems. This same perspective has filtered into the church, such that Christian psychology is often driven by a moral pathological model (Charry, 2011). Efforts to integrate psychology and Biblical thinking have primarily focused on what is wrong with humanity - the sinful human condition (Entwistle & Moroney, 2011). Among the general populous, this perspective is illustrated by hellfire and brimstone evangelical methods, which draw on a sense of fear to induce people toward God, with God as a wrathful judge and salvation as the necessary route to avoid eternal damnation.

Several scholars have recently made the case for a theological approach informed by the PP perspective (e.g., Charry, 2010; 2011; Entwistle & Moroney, 2011; Hackney, 2007; 2010). The PP perspective suggests a need to focus on what goes right in the world, human strengths, and the goodness of God's character. The focus shifts from the fallen human condition to God's compassion, mercy, grace, and love. Humans are formed in the image of God, and embracing this identity provides grounds to foster positive emotion, resilience, virtue, and overall happiness (Charry, 2011).

Bridging the PP and Christian Perspectives

There is growing interest in applying positive psychology within Christian education, research, and clinical practice. How are Christian and secular perspectives similar and different and can they mutually benefit each other? To provide guidance for the field, we identify areas of intersection and divergence between PP and Christian thinking and research. To expand beyond our own working knowledge of PP and Biblical principles, we used multiple dictionaries to identify common terms and concepts (aiming for a deeper conceptual level, not simply relying on the words themselves, which commonly overlap due to a mutual Greek base), crowd sourced knowledge from Christians and experts in PP, and reviewed a growing literature linking PP and Biblical thinking.

Identifying Overlap Between Positive Psychology and the Bible

To identify potential terms and concepts that overlap between PP and the Bible, we first manually searched two Bible dictionaries: the third edition of the *New Bible Dictionary* (Douglas et al., 1996) and the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Kittel, Friedrich, & Bromiley, 1985). The first author read each term, and noted keywords and concepts generally relevant to PP, resulting in a final list of 127 terms.

In psychological research, there is growing interest in using language to study characteristics of people (e.g., Kern et al., 2014; Pennebaker & King, 1999). Dictionaries (in this case, defined as lists or categories of related words) have been developed that represent emotion, social relationships, positive education, and numerous other topics. These lists tend to be over-inclusive in terms of the words they include, but provide a starting point for identifying key components in PP. The primary sources for the dictionaries included the Linguistic Word Count Inquiry Program (Pennebaker et al., 2007), a list of words developed to examine positive education at an Australian school (Faram, 2015), and a list manually created by our lab (the Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne). The first author read through each of these lists of words and pulled out those most relevant to PP. The final list included 183 terms.

Combining the Bible and PP dictionary search, 243 concepts and terms were identified. Of these, 69 occurred in both lists and an additional 25 near duplicate concepts and terms were eliminated. This resulted in a final list of 216 concepts and terms (see Appendix 1).

Rather than relying on our own knowledge and experience of the PP field, the Bible, and Biblical commentaries, we chose to draw on the knowledge and experience of individuals working and researching in the field of PP and Christians with a personal understanding of the Bible. Two versions of a survey were developed, which included the 216 final concepts and terms: (a) a PP version, which asked, "Below are a series of concepts and terms. Which ones do you think are core things that we study and/or use in positive psychology?" and b) a Christian version, which asked "Below are a series of concepts and terms that are studied and applied within positive psychology. Which ones are important from a Biblical perspective?" Using personal online networks, the surveys were sent to: a) individuals with formal training in PP, and (b) Christian friends and church members.[1]

[1] The surveys were intended to crowd source perspectives from experts in each area. Participants were informed that this was not an official research project, but agreed to the anonymous use of their responses for research purposes. Care should be taken in generalizing the resulting information beyond the responses included here.

Twenty-two individuals with training in PP and 24 individuals with a Christian background completed the survey. Table 1 indicates the frequency (percentages) of the top 20 terms in PP and the Bible, respectively (see Appendix 1 for full list). Gratitude, character, and hope were consistently in the top twenty concepts. From a PP perspective, strengths and virtues were two of the most dominant themes. Notably, many of the top concepts in the Bible refer to individual strengths, including forgiveness/ mercy, gratitude, hope, honesty, perseverance, humility, and love.

It is also striking to consider the top PP concepts that were less dominant in the Bible and vice versa. In PP, meaning and purpose, satisfaction with life, wellbeing, flourishing, and thriving were common themes that are considered the core business of the field. Although these were rarely endorsed as occurring in the Bible, several scholars have compared flourishing from a PP perspective versus from a Biblical perspective, as we discuss below.

To further draw on the knowledge and expertise of respondents, the surveys also included a qualitative question that asked respondents about what they perceive to be the three most important concepts, terms, or areas that are studied in the PP field or occur in the Bible.[2] All 22 PP participants and 22 of the Christian participants provided responses (see Appendix 2 for full responses). Multiple participants indicated that the most important concepts in PP include: character strengths, well-being/ flourishing, resilience, meaning/ purpose in life, positive relationships and pro-social behavior, positive emotion, research and evidenced-based, flow, optimism, gratitude, mindfulness, and hope. Top concepts in the Bible included: forgiveness/ mercy, grace, love (for one another, for God, and God's love for humankind), hope, relationship with God, and faith.

Practical, Theoretical, and Empirical Knowledge Integration

To further consider similarities and differences between PP and the Bible, we examined empirical and theoretical literature in the PP and theological domains. In the surveys, some participants also provided more extensive commentary on some of the core constructs. Here, we synthesize these responses with some of the literature, ordered across four areas: (1) happiness, wellbeing, and flourishing; (2) character strengths and virtues; (3) relationships with God and others; and (4) spirituality, wisdom, and truth.[3]

Happiness, Wellbeing, and Flourishing

Human happiness and flourishing is the core business of PP. Indeed, the field has been defined as "the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of peoples, groups, and institutions" (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 103). This begs the question as to what flourishing is and what it means to function optimally. We use the

[2] PP survey: "We study and use many different concepts in positive psychology. What would you say are the three most important concepts, terms, concepts, or areas within the field?";

Christian survey: "What would you say are the three most important concepts, terms, or areas in the Bible (beyond the core message of salvation through Christ alone)."

[3] Here, we attempt to give a fair overview of the literature, but this is by no means an exhaustive review, especially across the extensive PP literature.

terms flourishing, thriving, happiness, and wellbeing interchangeably, though at times make specific distinctions according to the literature.

The elusive concept of happiness. The concept of human happiness has been debated throughout the centuries. If asked what people want for their children, happiness tops the list (Seligman et al., 2009). Prominent PP scholars have suggested numerous theories defining wellbeing and flourishing. As a whole, the field has a jingle-jangle problem (i.e., the same words being used to indicate different things, and different words used to describe the same things; Peck, 2004). Flourishing, thriving, wellbeing, happiness, health, and optimal functioning are used interchangeably, or one is used to define the other. For instance, the World Health Organization (1946) defined health as "a complete state of physical, mental, and social wellbeing, not simply the absence of disease and disability". As one participant in our survey noted, wellbeing is defined as "complete mental health, absence of mental illness and presence of flourishing, psychological wellbeing, and resilience".

Wellbeing and flourishing are often viewed as meta constructs that subsume multiple other affective, cognitive, social, physical, and at times spiritual dimensions (e.g., Diener et al., 2010; Forgeard et al., 2011; Hone, Jarden, Schofield, & Duncan, 2014; Huppert & So, 2013; Seligman, 2011; Wong, 2011). Philosophically (returning to ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Socrates), theoretically (in the theories of PP scholars), and empirically (factor analyses of wellbeing scales), happiness has been classified into two primary domains: hedonic and eudaimonic (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Recent theories in the field include both domains. For instance, Seligman (2011), one of the official founders of the field, suggested that flourishing is defined in terms of five domains: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). From an Eastern perspective, Wong (2011) proposed that hedonic, life engagement, eudaimonic, and a sense of feeling blessed, all contribute to wellbeing, but the combination of the different domains will look different for different people. Huppert and So (2013) perhaps most succinctly capture the hedonic and eudaimonic domains, defining flourishing as "feeling good and functioning well" (p. 838).

Hedonic happiness. Hedonic wellbeing is what the general public often associates with the concept of happiness. It refers primarily to high levels of positive emotion (e.g., pleasure, excitement, contentment), low negative emotion (e.g., sadness, anxiety, anger), and a general sense of satisfaction with life – subjectively 'feeling good' (Diener, 1984). Humans generally are driven to avoid pain and maximize pleasure. Fredrickson (2001; 2013a) suggests that negative emotions narrow one's attention to the problem at hand, while positive emotions broaden one's psychological, social, and cognitive capacities. Positive emotions help people to connect with others and build resources, which can be a buffer in times of stress (Pressman & Cohen, 2005). Emotion can spread to others, seemingly passed along through social networks (Christakis & Fowler, 2012; Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Kramer, Guilory, & Hancock, 2014)

Positive affect has been linked with numerous socially-valued outcomes, including better physical health, longer life, good social relationships, career advancement and success, lower levels of divorce, less mental illness, and greater creativity, among other benefits (e.g., Diener & Chan, 2011; Fredrickson, 2001, 2013a; Howell, Kern, & Lyubomirsky, 2007; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Pressman & Cohen, 2005). Evidence suggests that it is beneficial to have a greater proportion of positive emotions compared to negative emotions during the course of one's day (Fredrickson, 2013c). Various interventions and simple exercises

that can cultivate good feelings have been developed, with success, in relieving mental distress and improving self-reported wellbeing (Bolier et al., 2013; Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Sin & Lyubormirsky, 2009). An example of a simple exercise might be to write down three good things that happened at the end of each day (Lyubormirsky & Layous, 2013).

However, feelings are fleeting. An act of kindness might make one feel good for a few minutes, but it is temporary. Emotions change continually throughout the day. We have a generally stable level of chronic happiness, and despite good or bad experiences, we typically return to the same level (Lyubomirsky, 2011). It is possible to shift that level over time through one's activities, but it takes time and continued effort (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Sheldon & Lyubormirsky, 2007). While an entire industry of self-help books, entertainment, drugs, high-thrill activities, and the like have sprung up over the past decade to help people feel good, it often leaves a person feeling unfulfilled and wanting more. Even while the idea of being happy sounds good, perhaps "all is vanity and a chasing after the wind" (Ecc. 1:14, 2:17).

Eudaimonic happiness. Increasingly, theory and research has shifted its focus to eudaimonic wellbeing. Defined as "the good life", eudaimonism is another abstract term, whose vagueness offers a comfortable inclusiveness. Eudaimonia focuses on what makes life worth living. Several theories originate from this perspective, which provide different conceptualizations and measures of what it means to be human. Self-determination theory provides a macro-theory of human motivation, and suggests that humans have three core needs that drive behavior: relationships, autonomy, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Happiness occurs when these needs are met.

Ryff (1995) defined psychological wellbeing across six dimensions: positive social relationships, environmental mastery, autonomy, purpose in life, self-acceptance, and personal growth. Ryff (2014) suggests that the appeal to the eudaimonic approach "stems from the fact that these phenomenological indicators capture core aspects of what it means to be human" (p. 23). Studies over the past 25 years suggest that psychological wellbeing reduces the risk for disease and early mortality (Ryff, 2014).

Closely linked to the idea of what makes us human is research around meaning in life. Of our PP survey participants, meaning in life was consistently selected as one of the most important concepts in PP. Steger (2009, 2012) suggests that meaning involves two dimensions: comprehension, or an understanding of one's life (who one is and how one fits into the world), and purpose, or long-term aspirations that fit one's values and motivate activity toward fulfilling that purpose. Participants defined meaning as "having an internal reason you do something", "serving something bigger than oneself", "being connected to something bigger than oneself", and "knowing the reason for your existence".

Research around meaning in life initiated with the work of Viktor Frankl (1963), a Holocaust survivor, who suggested that having a sense of something to live for was a core factor that differentiated those who survived, instead of perishing, in the camp. Studies have linked meaning and purpose to various subjective well-being measures: active engagement in life, better physical health, and lower mortality risk (Boyle et al., 2009; Friedman & Kern, 2014; Steger, 2012). Notably, the meaningful life is not necessarily a happy life, when happiness is defined in terms of hedonic positivity (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013).

Theological perspectives. The theological perspective aligns most closely with the eudaimonic perspective. Christians are often suspicious of happiness, equating it with the hedonic notion of fleeting pleasure (Charry, 2007). To outsiders, Christians are perceived as judgmental, uptight, and unpleasurable. The freedom of the hedonic lifestyle is contrasted with the rigidity of moralistic Christian practices. Charry (2004, 2007, 2010) suggests a strongly contrasting view, suggesting that happiness really is a core part of the Christian tradition, and should be embraced by Christianity. The practice of Christianity helps one to understand, love, and enjoy God more completely, which is the true root of happiness (Charry 2010; Marais, 2015). Rather than being a source of anxiety and restriction, joy comes from centering one's life on his or her God given purpose. As one focuses on God, they come to know, love, and enjoy Him better, which blesses both oneself and others.

Charry (2004) distinguishes happiness from euphoria. Hedonic pursuits leave one empty and dissatisfied. A deeper sense of pleasure is needed. The happy life comes from living well – peacefully, justly, fairly, and wisely. Happiness is not easy; rather it is a process of navigating toward God, recognizing one's failings, and journeying forward. Charry argues that there are hints of God's grace and beauty in everyday life, and that by tasting this each day, one moves more toward a life that pleases Him.

Notably, the Bible's portrayal of a happy ("blessed") state is not the hedonic pleasure of the world, but of a more spiritual nature (New Bible Dictionary). This is best captured through the beatitudes (Mat. 5:3-11), where Jesus describes the blessed person as poor in spirit, one who mourns, is humble, longs for righteousness, shows mercy to others, has a pure heart, seeks peace, and is persecuted. Christian teachings see happiness as deriving from one's relationship with God, not one's circumstances (Phil. 4:12-13). Although Christians must often survive the trials and evils of this world, they can look forward to the hope and promise of what is to come.

In describing happiness, some Christians use the word "joy" to describe the positive experience of life. As one of the spiritual fruits (Gal. 5:22), joy is based on the character of God, and comes from becoming more like Him. This sense of joy is independent of circumstance, allowing not the enjoyment of trials, but a deeper satisfaction resting on the security of one's relationship with God. As one participant noted, "joy is not a feeling; it is knowing I belong to God and He loves me no matter what".

Christian purpose. The abundant theories of flourishing and happiness in the PP literature are predominantly self-driven and define elements that comprise the "good life." Christianity adds the importance of *telos* – the realization of one's ultimate purpose, one's function or design (Hackney, 2007, 2010). PP theories focus on *elements* of the flourishing life, but lack a coherent purpose or *outcome*. The implied *telos* is one of individual fulfillment and enjoyment, but what that specifically means is left vague and to be defined by the individual. Christianity calls for a higher purpose that is defined by God. Such a perspective first requires understanding one's purpose, then, the "good life" is one that is lived according to that purpose. From this perspective, the source and meaning of happiness lies in God, rather than in the success or failure of one's own effort.

The Bible provides a specific purpose for humanity. Humans were created in the image of God (the *imago Dei*) and for the purpose of glorifying God (1 Peter 4:11). Creation exists because God created it, and the different pieces exist according to His plans, which one can only glimpse in part (King & Whitney, 2015). Flourishing, or living the good life (i.e., a sense of

happiness and thriving), occurs when one lives according to the design that God intended (Entwistle & Moroney, 2011). A person's purpose is to live in obedience to God's will for one's life, which results in a deep sense of personal pleasure (Charry, 2007; 2010). This obedience is not simply a legalistic life confined by specific laws; rather it is an obedience to God's intentions for one's life, grounded in a close relationship with Him (Johnson, 2011). As one's love for God grows, obedience and a sense of peace and happiness follows. It is a process of becoming both who God uniquely intends one to be and becoming more Christ-like in one's attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors (King & Whitney, 2015). Christ provides the ultimate example of human flourishing. Through His life He demonstrates complete obedience to His design within the order of creation (Hackney, 2010).

The role of sadness and suffering. The word "positive" within PP often contributes to a misconception that the field only focuses on the good side of human functioning, casting a blind eye toward the problems and suffering of humanity. While early scholarship in the field perhaps necessarily needed to take an extreme stance to disrupt the focus on the negative, there is a growing trend toward recognizing and embracing the importance of negative emotion, aiming for an even-handed psychology that embraces the full spectrum of human functioning. It is interesting to note a parallel in both Christian traditions and the PP field toward an avoidance of negativity. PP, in trying to restore the psychological obsession with negativity, strays too far toward positivity. Christians often wear a facade, with church attendees playing that life is going well, while doubts, negativity, and struggles lie just below the surface.

Keyes (2002) introduced a two-dimension model, in which mental health and mental illness are separate dimensions. Flourishing involves high mental health combined with low mental illness, whereas languishing comprises high mental illness and low mental health. This model suggests that mental health and illness can coexist. Even those with physical or mental illness can thrive. For instance, an individual with depression might generally experience minimal positive emotion, but can maintain close social relationships, feel a sense of meaning and purpose, and subjectively perceive that life is going well. In a similar vein, Beck (2006, 2007) suggested a circumplex model of faith with two dimensions: communion and complaint. Communion refers to a sense of feeling close and intimate with God. Complaint includes disappointment, loss, disillusionment, and doubt. Too often, Christians see negativity as a lack of faith. Yet it is often during the darkest times that a person feels closest to God. The flourishing faith then occurs both in good and bad times, and depends more on one's relationship and pursuit of God (communion) than a sense of belief versus doubt and negativity (complaint).

Others have focused on the important role that traumatic experiences, trials, and negative emotions can play within one's life narrative (e.g., Bastian, Jetten, Hornsey, & Leknes, 2014;). Growth occurs after trauma through rationalization and the formulation of a story around the role and greater purpose that a traumatic or series of traumatic events plays in one's life. Similarly, the Christian definition of happiness is compatible with sadness and suffering (Charry, 2007; Hall, Langer, & McMartin, 2010). Suffering serves multiple purposes. It can indicate when life is disordered. It can help one develop skills, a new mindset, and attitudes that are needed to better function in life. It also provides an opportunity for introspection, helping the person identify their worldview and perception of God, and readjust that view to realign their perspective to better match what God intends (Hall et al., 2010). Suffering is

detrimental when seen as a barrier to growth, but becomes an enabler when woven into one's life story.

Summary. As a whole, the Christian perspective adds three elements to considerations of what flourishing in life really means. First, telos addresses the purpose behind feeling good and functioning well. If it is only for individual fulfillment, as is the case of most PP theories, then something is lacking. Christianity calls for a higher purpose, which is found in God alone. Second, flourishing is separate from pleasure, and is inseparable from the good and virtuous life. Living well comes from living according to one's purpose, which may not necessarily be pleasurable. Third, flourishing and suffering can coexist. It is through struggle that growth occurs. From this perspective, flourishing can only be viewed in terms of one's life journey and growth as a whole person, rather than as a snapshot at any single point in time.

Character Strengths and Virtues

A second area where PP and Christianity converge lies in the area of human virtues and character. In PP, strengths of character are a foundational component of the good life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Polly & Britton, 2015). Various models of character exist, but research and practice in PP has been dominated by the Values in Action (VIA) classification of strengths, developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The VIA identifies 24 strengths that are thought to be valued across most cultures. The 24 strengths were theoretically grouped into six overall virtues: wisdom (creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, and perspective), courage (bravery, perseverance, honesty, and zest), humanity (love, kindness, and social intelligence), justice (teamwork, fairness, and leadership), temperance (forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-regulation), and transcendence (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality). Everyone is thought to have all 24 strengths to some degree, with certain strengths (i.e., signature strengths) being stronger for different people. Research suggests that the strengths are indeed found across most cultures (McGrath, 2015a), but group into three factors (self-control, caring, and inquisitiveness), rather than the theorized six virtues (McGrath, 2015b).

The idea that strengths and virtues lie at the heart of the good life is paralleled in the Biblical fruits of the spirit (Gal 5:22-23), which characterize a life lived increasingly for God and enabled by the Holy Spirit (the third person or essence of the trinity). Virtues are relatively stable characteristics that help one to live life according to one's telos (Hackney, 2010). The virtuous person consistently does the right things, regardless of circumstance (Hall et al., 2010). In the Old Testament, virtue (*hayil*) points to the idea of having moral worth, while the New Testament (*arête*) suggests excellence in a person or object (Douglas et al., 1996). Beck and Haugen (2013) suggest some degree of alignment between the VIA's core virtues and both the fruit of the spirit and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13). As illustrated in Figure 1, faith and faithfulness align with courage; love, kindness, and gentleness align with humanity; peace, self-control, goodness, and patience align with temperance; and joy aligns with transcendence. However, the Christian and PP understanding of these virtues differ significantly, as we further detail (Beck, 2014; Entwistle & Moroney, 2011).

McCall, Waters, and White (2015) illustrate how character strengths can be incorporated within Christian education. Students can be challenged to explore their own strengths and then learn to use them to serve God. The parables and the actions of Jesus can be

analyzed from a strength-based perspective to teach students how they should act, rather than correcting actions that they should avoid. Research in PP is developing methods for building these strengths in individuals to teach students tangible strategies for living out the fruit of the spirit in their everyday lives (Hackney, 2010). By implementing a strength-based model, schools have the potential to become conduits not only of academic knowledge, but also foundations for building strong moral character in young people (e.g., Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009; Seligman et al., 2009).

While some PP research focuses on the value of identifying and using one's strengths as an ensemble, other research focuses on individual strengths. PP studies that identify ways to build these strengths in an individual might provide Christians with practical methods for building a virtuous life. We highlight a few below.

Gratitude. A strength that has gained considerable interest in the PP literature is gratitude. Gratitude can be defined as a positive emotion (e.g., I feel thankful in response to a kind word or a gift from another), an attitude (a general feeling of being grateful for one's life and the things in one's life), a moral virtue, and a stable personality characteristic, or as a life orientation (Watts, Dutton, & Gulliford, 2006; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Individuals with higher levels of gratitude are more likely to report positive emotions, good social relationships, greater life satisfaction, better physical health, and experience less psychopathology (Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009; Waters, 2011; Wood et al., 2010). Gratitude may promote positive social relationships and help maintain good relationships (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). Strategies for increasing gratitude include counting one's blessings, writing a heartfelt gratitude letter to another, and sharing with others what one is grateful for (cf. Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013; Wood et al., 2010).

Whereas PP-based gratitude is generally directed towards another person, Biblical gratitude is often directed towards God, the giver of all good things. Thankfulness was well regarded by the Greek world, and is a prominent theme throughout Paul's letters (Kittel et al., 1985). It is expressed through offerings, song, and praise, and is both individual and collective in nature. The Bible points to a sense of thankfulness that comes from a humble heart, and coincides with confession and joy. It involves being thankful for what one has and who one is in God. It is often expressed through "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Col 3:16). Praising God is one of the most frequent commands in the Bible – God designed man not just to exist, but to glorify Him through praise, thanksgiving, and worship (Westminister Catechism). It goes beyond a feeling of appreciation. It is an attitude of thankfulness, which also contains humility; it suggests acceptance that a sovereign God knows what is best, and gratitude stems from submitting to God's will, even in difficult circumstances.

Interestingly, PP scholarship suggests that as one practices acts of gratitude, it changes one's attitude (Wood et al., 2010). One can be both miserable and thankful at the same time; by focusing one's attention on what is good in life, it shifts attention away from discontentment and toward satisfaction. Survey participants noted "gratitude reshapes our attitude" and "in finding things that we can be thankful for, it helps us to have a more positive attitude".

Self-control. One of the strengths that consistently scores in the lowest across most samples is that of self-control and self-regulation (Kern & Bowling, 2015). It refers to an ability to regulate one's attention, emotions, and behavior, despite temptations that may be present (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). There is a moralistic element involved, in which one regulates their

behavior to align with socially-valued goals and standards (Duckworth & Kern, 2011). It is a facet of the broader personality factor of conscientiousness (Roberts et al., 2014), which has been linked to better physical and mental health, longevity, healthier behaviors, positive social relationships, and high performance and success in school and work (Duckworth, Gendler, & Gross, 2014; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Kern & Friedman, 2008; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007; Roberts et al., 2014).

Socrates believed that self-control (*enkráteia*) was one of the cardinal virtues (Kittel et al., 1985). The term itself is rarely used in the Scriptures, but is one of the fruits of the spirit. It points to the value of having a sound mind (*söphrön*), being self-disciplined in one's lifestyle, and underlies a life lived in obedience to God. The Bible compares the licentious living of non-believers to the controlled lifestyle of the believer (Titus 2). The ability to be self-controlled is not self-driven, but comes from the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 1:7), and is developed through a growing relationship with God.

Modesty/ humility. Another uncommon strength is that of humility. Worthington (2008) suggests that humility is a quiet virtue, which speaks more loudly through action than in what a person says or claims. Humility is not low self-esteem. Rather, the humble person is confident in who they are and has no need to present themselves as being superior or inferior to others. Humility requires having a proper perspective of oneself, recognizing and accepting one's strengths and limitations. Humility involves keeping accomplishments in perspective, and celebrating true victories, but not overemphasizing success. The humble person puts others first, not to belittle themselves, but because they choose to overlook themselves for the sake of others. C. S. Lewis (1943) described this quiet virtue as follows:

> Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call "humble" nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, swarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seems a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all (p. 99).

The extent to which humility is valued depends on the culture (Worthington, 2008). Asian cultures tend to value humility more, whereas Americans value it less. Interestingly enough, even though humility is considered a strength, pride (its opposite) has come to be defined as a valued positive emotion, taking satisfaction in a job well-done.

The Bible clearly supports the value of humility, proclaiming throughout its pages the danger of humility's antithesis, pride. Humility is part of God's character; although He is all powerful and mighty, He humbles Himself to care about His creation (Ps. 113:5-6). In the Old Testament, the quality is praised and often results in blessing (Douglas et al., 1962; Pv. 11:2, Pv. 22:4, Zeph 2:3). In the New Testament, it is by being brought low that God can bring blessing. Humility comes from realizing that apart from Christ, one can do nothing (John 15:5), but through Him one is a loved and accepted child of God. While true humility is praised (Phil 2:1,3), false humility is condemned, and reflects a sense of pride (Col 2:18).

King Solomon noted, "pride goes before a fall" (Prov. 16:18). Pride involves thinking about and caring about oneself above others. It is considered one of the core sins, stemming

from wanting to be like God, outside of God's design. It occurs both when we raise ourselves up to be superior to God or others, but also when we undervalue our identity in God. C. S. Lewis (1943) explains, “As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you” (p. 96). He continues, “If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed” (p. 99).

At the same time, not all pride is bad. One's value should be rooted in belonging to God, not in accomplishment for oneself or for God. While stories throughout the Bible warn of the evils of pride, they also proclaim value in boasting about who one is in God. For instance, Jeremiah 9:23-24 notes:

> This is what the Lord says: ‘Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight’.

The New Testament affirms “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:31). Christian pride, then, is rooted in God, and the virtue of humility involves recognizing and accepting one's place in comparison to the infinite God.

Hope. Optimism and hope are often used interchangeably. The VIA defines hope in terms of being future oriented, optimistic, expecting good future outcomes and working to make those outcomes happen. Hope is seemingly a basic psychological need, for it provides motivation and reason to continue to move forward to an unknown future (Douglas et al., 1962). Snyder (1994) suggested a process model of hope, which involves setting goals for the future, multiple pathways for achieving those goals as well as long term motivation. While optimism suggests a generally favorable view of the future and can provide motivation, hope is an active process that makes that future come about by pursuing goals despite resistance (Watts et al., 2006). Hope is not simply wishful thinking – it is a drive that motivates behavior. Hope relates to goal achievement, greater satisfaction with life, perceived competence, and higher levels of self-esteem (Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2006).

Hope is one of the three core theological virtues (1 Cor. 13:13). It involves an inner confidence based on God’s promise of an eternal future (Heb. 6:19-20). One is called to place hope in God. Whereas the secular perspective of hope is rooted in human agency and effort, Christian hope arises from faith in God. Hope does not depend on human capabilities or what a person can do themselves, but rather stems from belief in a living God who can be trusted to fulfill the promises He gives in His Word (Douglas et al., 1962). The goal of the Christian life, ultimately, is the reality of a resurrected life, as Paul writes in Philippians 3:14, " I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." The pathway to reach it is by obeying God and aligning one’s life according to His purposes. Agency is both enabled by the Holy Spirit, and grows as one becomes more aligned with one's God given purpose.

Love. The VIA strength of love involves both a capacity to love others and an ability to accept love. Definitions and descriptions of love are far-reaching and varied.[4] Fredrickson (2013b) defines love as a positive emotion. [need to describe her theory].

Love involves doing good for God, others, and for the self (Oord, 2012). Whereas psychology points to the importance of love, Christianity provides the end to which love should be directed – first toward God, and then toward others (Tjeltveit, 2012). From the Christian standpoint, love is God's image written into the lives of humankind. It centers around loving one another (Clough, 2006) and is the most predominant command in the Bible. Jesus states that the two greatest commands are to "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Luke 10:27). However, the Biblical concept of love is complicated by language. The Bible contains multiple words that in English all translate as "love". *Storge* refers to an empathetic bond or affection-based love, which is both need and gift related. C. S. Lewis considered that it was responsible for 90% of human happiness (Lewis, XXX). *Philia* is the love between friends, similar to that shown by Jonathan to David in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 18:1-4). *Eros* describes the emotional or sexual "being in love" feeling. *Agape* is God's unconditional love, which is extended to humankind regardless of circumstances or our response (John 3:16). Fundamentally however, all of these loves are only possible because of God's love for humankind. It is not solely a reactionary emotion, but rather a choice, and for the Christian, it is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Faith. A final virtue that we consider is that of faith. Beck and Haugen (2013) suggested that faith aligns with the VIA strength of courage, but it is perhaps the one core theological virtue that is not included as a strength. Biblical faith involves actively trusting in God's promises (Heb 11). In the secular sense, it involves trusting in a particular reality, given various forms of evidence. While science claims to be objective, belief in the findings and truth of the claims requires a degree of trust and faith in those results. In contrast, in the Bible, faith is both rooted in and comes from God. It entails believing in something or someone that one cannot see, however, it is not blind. American pastor Adrian Rogers wrote: "A faith that cannot be tested, cannot be trusted." God places evidence of Himself in His design of the physical world (Kober, Benecchi, & Gossard, 2015) and confirms it in the heart of those who submit their lives to Him. Faith is a requirement of the believer, and is the pathway to pleasing God.

Summary. In sum, from both the PP and Biblical perspectives, character strengths and virtues are core to flourishing in life. Notably, strengths such as gratitude, hope, love, self-control, and humility are socially valued and strongly contribute to flourishing, but they often are not top strengths, suggesting that they are not easy to attain (Hall et al., 2010). If virtues are the pathway to the good life, then it is an arduous but worthwhile journey.

Relationships with God and Others

Humans are relational creatures. We are driven by a need to relate with others (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Our biology is wired to connect with others, and it is the bedrock of our wellbeing. Relationships begin early, and the quality of how we connect with caregivers impacts the

[4] We cannot begin to do justice to the topic here. See the 2012 special issue on love in the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* for a more comprehensive consideration.

trajectory that our children will follow (Brophy, 1988; Brophy & Good, 1986; Dolan, Kellam, & Brown, 1989; Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 1992; Poortinga, 2012). Reviews suggest that social relationships contribute to psychological wellbeing, mental illness, physical health, length of life, behavior, and other valued aspects of life (Tay et al., 2012; Taylor, 2011). Chris Peterson, one of the founders of the PP field, often noted that PP is best summed up in three words: "other people matter".

A full review of the literature surrounding the many aspects of social relationships goes well beyond the scope of this article. PP generally focuses on a horizontal, interpersonal relation between individuals, such as feeling that others are there when needed, and having a sense of connection with others. The Bible, too, stresses the importance of interpersonal relationships. It describes and illustrates relationships of all sorts: positive and negative, parent and child, marital, master and worker, and friendship, among others. However, the New Testament moves beyond the personal benefit of having strong relationships, to one that is others focused. One is to "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look no only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil 2:3-4).

The idea of looking out for others arises in research around compassion and acceptance. Compassion involves accepting oneself or others despite imperfections. Compassion involves an awareness that another is suffering, and feeling moved by their suffering. It involves a sense of kindness and care for others. Neff (2003) adds the importance of accepting not only others, but also oneself. Self-compassion involves treating oneself with the same care and concern that one would show to others. Research suggests benefits of compassion XXX

In the Bible, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) provides a prime example of compassion at work. The key to understanding this parable is knowing that Samaritans were hated by the Jews. In the parable, the Priest and the Levite represent people of high standing, with a high sense of morality in Jewish society, however they were prideful. They failed to help the man who was beaten because they did not want to dirty themselves with his troubles. Yet the Samaritan – the rejected foreigner – put aside ethnic differences and went out of his way to help the man. From the Christian perspective, compassion is grounded in a restored relationship between God and individuals, which stems from God's amazing grace and compassion for humankind.

Beyond the interpersonal aspect of relationships, the Bible centers around one's relationship with God, which is both vertical (God as all-powerful being, humankind as inferior beings) and horizontal (God as Father and friend) in nature. God's purpose from the beginning of creation was relationship with humankind. But sin disrupted this relationship. Israel's history illustrates God pursuing relationship with His people, but the people resist and suffer the consequences. Through Jesus, we see the greatest example of sacrificial love to restore this relationship: "For God so loved that world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Underlying relationship, then, is grace. While grace in the secular sense refers to being polite in social settings, the concept of grace holds a much deeper connotation within Christianity. Grace is God's powerful kindness poured out on the utterly undeserving humankind. Ephesians 2:8-9 states: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." If God

was fair, then no one would be able to have relationship with Him because everyone is sinful and a pure God cannot look on sin. Jesus as fully God and fully man paid the ultimate penalty – death – to pay humankind's debt of pride and to restore the relationship between God and humankind.

It is from this relationship with God that all other relationships flow. As a result of being given grace by God, humans can offer grace to each other, extend compassion, and coexist through harmonious relationships. One's relationship with God is primary, and affects every other relationship in life. The basic human need identified by psychological theory is left unsatisfied when grounded in human effort alone, but becomes possible through relationship with the God who created that need.

Spirituality, Wisdom, and Truth

A final area that we examine surrounds issues of spirituality, wisdom, and truth. These are three areas where there is a much greater discrepancy between the secular and Christian perspective.

Spirituality. The founders of the PP field are admittedly atheist or agnostic in their beliefs. PP has rekindled the importance of religion and spirituality to the human experience, but it is one that is often devoid of the Christian God (Entwistle & Moroney, 2011). Evidence suggests that both religiosity (identifying with a particular organized religion, which in the PP literature is predominantly Christian) and spirituality (connection to something greater than oneself) relate to better physical and mental health (Joseph et al., 2006; van Dierendonck & Mohan, 2006). Religious groups often prescribe healthy behaviors providing a set of normed behaviors that are beneficial for the community, and social support. Further, religion can provide a sense of meaning and purpose for one's life, hope for a positive future, and control can be seeded to a bigger, beneficent Being (van Dierendonck & Mohan, 2006). Evidence suggests greater benefit stems from an internalized, intrinsically motivated, secure relationship with God, compared to an externally regulated practice driven by imposed regulations and a disconnected relationship with God (Pargament, 2002).

Growing evidence supports benefits of mindfulness and related practices (e.g., Khoury et al., 2013; Sutcliffe, Vogus, & Dane, 2016; Waters, Barsky, Rikki, & Allen, 2015; Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014). Mindfulness involves purposely regulating attention, and adopting an open, non-judgmental orientation to ones thoughts and experiences. Mindfulness training has demonstrated success in helping both youth and adults regulate their attention. It can help one to see and appreciate things all around them. Contemplation, then, offers a tool for living the good life (Marais, 2015) by taking control of one's thoughts and emotions. This mindful attitude also occurs in the Bible, but the focus of attention is on God and the Bible with an understood empowerment by the Holy Spirit to let go of self and to yield to God (Tan, 2011).

Due to its mystic connotations, Christians are often quick to dismiss mindfulness and spirituality, yet these are core elements of the Christian experience. Joshua encouraged the Israelites to meditate on the Book of the Law day and night (Joshua 1:8). David meditated on God's word (e.g., Ps 1:2; 63:6; 119:15,23,27,48,148), and Jesus spent considerable parts of His ministry stepping away from people and focusing His attention on the Father through prayer (Matt 14:23, Matt 26). Most importantly, Christians are instructed to "[receive] the message

with great eagerness and examine the Scriptures every day to see if what [is said is] true" (Acts 17:11).

The distinction here is the source and focus of spiritual connection. PP is characterized by anthropocentrism, which depends on the self. Influenced by Buddhist and other Eastern traditions, spirituality arises from human practice, such as mindfulness and meditation. Biblical spirituality focuses on God, and is also enabled by the Holy Spirit. In the words of one survey participant, "Biblical Christianity is God-centric, while positive psychology is mostly human-centric". Another individual noted, "it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that I am able to keep a clear and unblemished view of God's Word and His plan for my life". One's best efforts to stay focused on God fall short when relying on human effort alone. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, one has the sustaining motivation and energy required to pursue a closer relationship with God.

Part of the success of mindfulness as an intervention lies in the intensity required to learn and master it. One of the most successful programs, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990) requires training over an eight week period, often including a full day retreat and active daily practice. It is not a quick fix, but becomes a habitual practice and approach to life, much like other healthy behaviors. If the good life involves a process of sanctification and living more in God's image (Hackney, 2010), then it requires discipline and daily practice. Thus, there is potential for Christians to take the ideas and practices of mindfulness and apply them to help them to live a more focused, God-centered life. For instance, in schools, stillness and mindfulness can be incorporated into activities. In churches these same techniques can be used to focus prayer, and mindful walking can be used to focus attention on God, rather than on one's own thoughts and emotions (McCall, Waters, & White, 2012).

Wisdom. Definitions of wisdom vary in both secular and Christian scholarship. Like spirituality, wisdom is often removed from its religious foundation. Studies attempt to identify elements that mark the wise life, and subsequent outcomes, but it is narrow in scope (McLaughlin & McMinn, 2015). Returning to Aristotle, practical wisdom involves having the ability to select and use strengths and to select goals that are appropriate for a particular context (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). It goes beyond rules and tasks by integrating and applying different aspects of knowledge and experience. Wisdom is one of the VIA virtues, defined in terms of cognitive-based strengths that help one to learn and utilize information, including creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, and perspective (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The Christian perspective of wisdom suggests that wisdom is an attribute of God, and is often referred to as knowledge given to man by God. It is not only intellectual pursuit, but involves a way of thinking that sees a bigger perspective to one's actions, and living in a way that is morally upright, socially sensitive, and orderly. Our participants noted that wisdom "is more than knowledge – it should be sought and of great gain", and it is "the accumulation of one's knowledge and experiences, for the benefit of making good decisions". Like the practical wisdom suggested by Schwartz and Sharpe (2010), wisdom demands not only knowledge, but also practical action (McCall et al., 2015).

From the PP perspective, wisdom is equivalent to applied knowledge – the ability to both learn information and then appropriately apply that knowledge to different situations. It arises from life experiences and structured learning. In contrast, wisdom (*sophia*) from the

Biblical perspective is God's self-revelation. God is the ultimate source of wisdom (Job 9:4; Prov. 3:19-20; Dan. 2:20-22; Rev. 7:11-12), and wisdom is best manifest in Jesus Christ. It is a gift of God, which is personal in nature, relational, and helps one to live rightly (McLaughlin & McMinn, 2015). "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10). Wisdom offers protection and the ultimate guidance for life (Prov. 4:6-7), and provides the foundation of the happy life (Marais, 2015; McCall et al., 2015).

Relative versus absolute truth. A final area of distinction lies in the concept of truth. One's perspective is determined by one's presuppositions. PP and Christianity are compatible in terms of their focus and emphasis, but ultimately are incommensurable because they follow different rational systems and differ in what is considered the ultimate standard (Watson, 2011). Both Christianity and science function within boundaries, imposed by their own philosophies and norms. As much as science claims to be objective in nature, it too lies within its own context, or worldview, and is not fully objective (Watson, 2011).

In the secular perspective, truth is relative as we are evolving creatures, and our ultimate purpose lies in avoiding pain and increasing pleasure (Vitz, 2011). It is human-centric, self-motivated, and self-driven. People believe in their own goodness, and through one's own efforts, one seeks to achieve the highest levels of success in life (Entwistle & Moroney, 2011). There is no single truth or vision of what the flourishing life entails – it is up to each individual to define their own destiny. We define our own reality, and truth is relative.

In contrast, the Christian perspective espouses an absolute truth, founded in God, and revealed in the Bible. Christians believe that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:1) and there is no other path to salvation. Jesus claims that His purpose in coming to the world was to testify to the truth (John 18:37-38). Christianity claims a supreme Being, the Creator of the world, who holds everything together. While all religions include elements of Christian truth claims, they lack personal relationship with that supreme Being, God. God is truth, revealed through His Word (e.g., Psalm 18:30, Prov 30:5, Jeremiah 10:10, John 1:17).

The Christian perspective recognizes both human potential and the reality of the fallen human condition. Defined by fallen humans, morality becomes diluted, whereas God provides the highest standard of what is true and right. It is only by grace that one finds life, and it is only through God that one can live according to His design (Hackney, 2010). The emphasis on one's potential must be tempered by an appreciation for the human ability for evil (Entwistle & Moroney, 2011). The good life is a virtuous one, involving a process of sanctification, getting to know God better, and living in obedience to His will for one's life. Living according to God's design for one's life gives a sense of meaning and purpose, and constitutes the happy, blessed life. As represented by the beatitudes (Matthew 5:2-11), this vision of the blessed life is different than the hedonic focused happiness often portrayed within PP.

The foundation of Christian claims lay in the assumption that the Bible itself is the true Word of God. Although many claim to find contradictions when looking at the Bible as a whole and understanding its teachings in context, there are none. Two such examples are (1) The thief on the cross and (2) The mission of Christ. In the first case "the two thieves reviled Christ" (Matt 27:44 / Mark 15:32) or "Only one of the thieves reviled Christ" (Luke 23:39,40), the authors of these texts have different foci and look at the event from different perspectives. It is likely that both thieves reviled Christ at the beginning, and then one repented while the other was still reviling Him. Luke does not say that the one who requested forgiveness had not

previously been throwing insults as only a portion of the conversation is recorded. In the second case, "Christ's mission was peace" (Luke 2:13,14) or "Christ's mission was not peace" (Matt 10:34). Understanding these two passages must be done in context. Christ's purpose in coming to Earth was to bring reconciliation between God and man – spiritual peace. However, to the extent that the way of life of a Christ follower (Christian) contrasts with that of the sinful world, then Christians while peaceful internally, suffer persecution from non-Christians, even within their own families.

With respect to its authenticity, of the approximately 2500 prophecies contained within the text of the Bible, nearly 80% have already been fulfilled to the letter (i.e. without any error). The remaining 20% are related to events still in the future (Ross, 2003). Geological and archaeological evidence also exists to support the historical authenticity of the Bible most notably that there is a common flood story among all civilizations (Ryan & Pitmap, 1999) and evidence for Biblical events and people groups which are found among ancient artifacts including the Code of Hammurabi, the Nuci Tablets, the Mernepta Stele and a variety of Biblical cities such as Jericho, Megiddo, and Lachish (Maier, 2004). If truth is defined in terms of what is lasting, the Bible far exceeds any scientific knowledge, which shifts and bends with each new study.

Conclusion

Christianity is often suspicious of science and psychology. PP provides a direct link between the two. In this review, we have brought together PP and key themes within the Bible. As a whole, PP provides multiple points of intersection with the Bible and Christian thought. Whereas Christian psychology often focuses on the fallen human condition, applying PP principles suggests the value of focusing on God's love and compassion, and how one can live life best in line with God's design.

Interestingly, this shift toward the positive elements of God and humanity parallels a growing movement toward universalism, acceptance, and love in many faith-based communities, which can be appealing to young people looking for acceptance and community. Unfortunately, at the same time many of these institutions avoid discussion of God's judgment altogether and run the risk of losing sight of the core message that makes Christianity unique. The law exists not to bring condemnation, but to help humankind to recognize sin as sin, and to turn away from it to God (Rom 7:7-13). While Jesus claims "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life", without an understanding of why Jesus came, the truth becomes relative, Christian thought becomes a stumbling block that must be removed, and religious faith becomes indistinguishable from the secular.

Notably, calls for incorporating PP into Christian thought and teaching do not suggest a blind application of the positive, but rather a return to a balanced perspective that includes both God's compassion, mercy, and love, but also the truth that sin is a constant threat that must be acknowledged, dealt with, and avoided (Charry, 2011). Humans are made in God's image, and this gives a sense of meaning and purpose in life, but humans are also sinners saved only by grace. Over the past two decades, PP has challenged the broader psychological field, suggesting that the focus on mental health has been off-balanced, focused too much on the negative, at the expense of the positive. Yet this has been met with a recent backlash (e.g., Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015). The field is criticized for being Pollyanish in nature, only

focusing on the positive while ignoring the value of negative emotion, and even the importance that traumatic and challenging circumstances can play in enabling wellbeing. Similarly, Christian psychology too often focuses on what is wrong with human beings and neglects what is right. The risk here is that the pendulum swings too far in the other direction, only emphasizing goodness. The church becomes a place that highlights the human potential – what one can be when everyone is striving to increasingly embrace and reflect the image of God in themselves and in their communities, but this must be tempered by a continual appreciation of one's potential for evil, and recognition that one is a finite temporal creature compared to the infinite creator God (Entwistle & Moroney, 2011).

As a whole, our review suggests numerous areas of overlap between PP and Christianity as represented by the Bible. The PP field is developing various interventions and practices that can be applied to the practice of Christian faith, potentially helping a person to identify and live in greater accordance with God's purpose for their life. However, there are also key points of divergence. Most predominantly, the two disciplines are distinguished by their telos and design. In both cases, flourishing arises from living according to one's perceived purpose. From the secular perspective, the end goal is optimal function across mental, physical, social, and cognitive domains. This end is relative in nature, defined by the individual, motivated by one's values, and enabled by individual strengths. From the Christian perspective the end goal is to fully live out God's intention for one's life to the most complete sense that it can be determined. The end is defined by God, motivated by a close and growing relationship with God, and enabled by the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps C.S. Lewis (1955) stated it best when he wrote in his children's novel "What you see and what you hear depends a great deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are".

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Table 1

Crowd sourcing the relevance of terms in positive psychology and in the Bible.

Top 20 concepts in positive psychology			Top 20 PP concepts in the Bible		
Term/ Concept	**PP**	**Bible**	**Term/ Concept**	**PP**	**Bible**
Meaning/ purpose	95.45	58.33	Forgiveness	40.91	95.83
Strengths	90.91	41.67	Grace	18.18	95.83
Satisfaction with life	86.36	37.50	Humility	36.36	91.67
Well-being	86.36	33.33	Faith	22.73	91.67
Flourishing	81.82	37.50	Prayer	4.55	91.67
Grit	81.82	16.67	Love	59.09	87.50
Optimism	81.82	16.67	Thankfulness	54.55	87.50
Gratitude	77.27	83.33	Self-discipline	50.00	87.50
Virtue, excellence	77.27	62.50	Wisdom	45.45	87.50
Mindfulness	77.27	37.50	Joy	36.36	87.50
Engagement	77.27	29.17	Trust	31.82	87.50
Character	72.73	83.33	Honesty	18.18	87.50
Hope	72.73	83.33	Justice	18.18	87.50
Mindset	72.73	50.00	Mercy	18.18	87.50
Resilience	72.73	37.50	Gentleness	13.64	87.50
Thriving	72.73	37.50	**Gratitude**	77.27	83.33
Savouring	72.73	29.17	**Character**	72.73	83.33
Eudaimonia	72.73	12.50	**Hope**	72.73	83.33
Achievement	68.18	25.00	Perseverance	59.09	83.33
Self-control	63.64	79.17	Kindness	54.55	83.33

Note. Numbers indicate the percentage of respondents who endorsed the concept as being core to positive psychology (PP, n = 22) or core to the Bible (n = 24). Terms appearing on both lists (gratitude, character, and hope) are bolded.

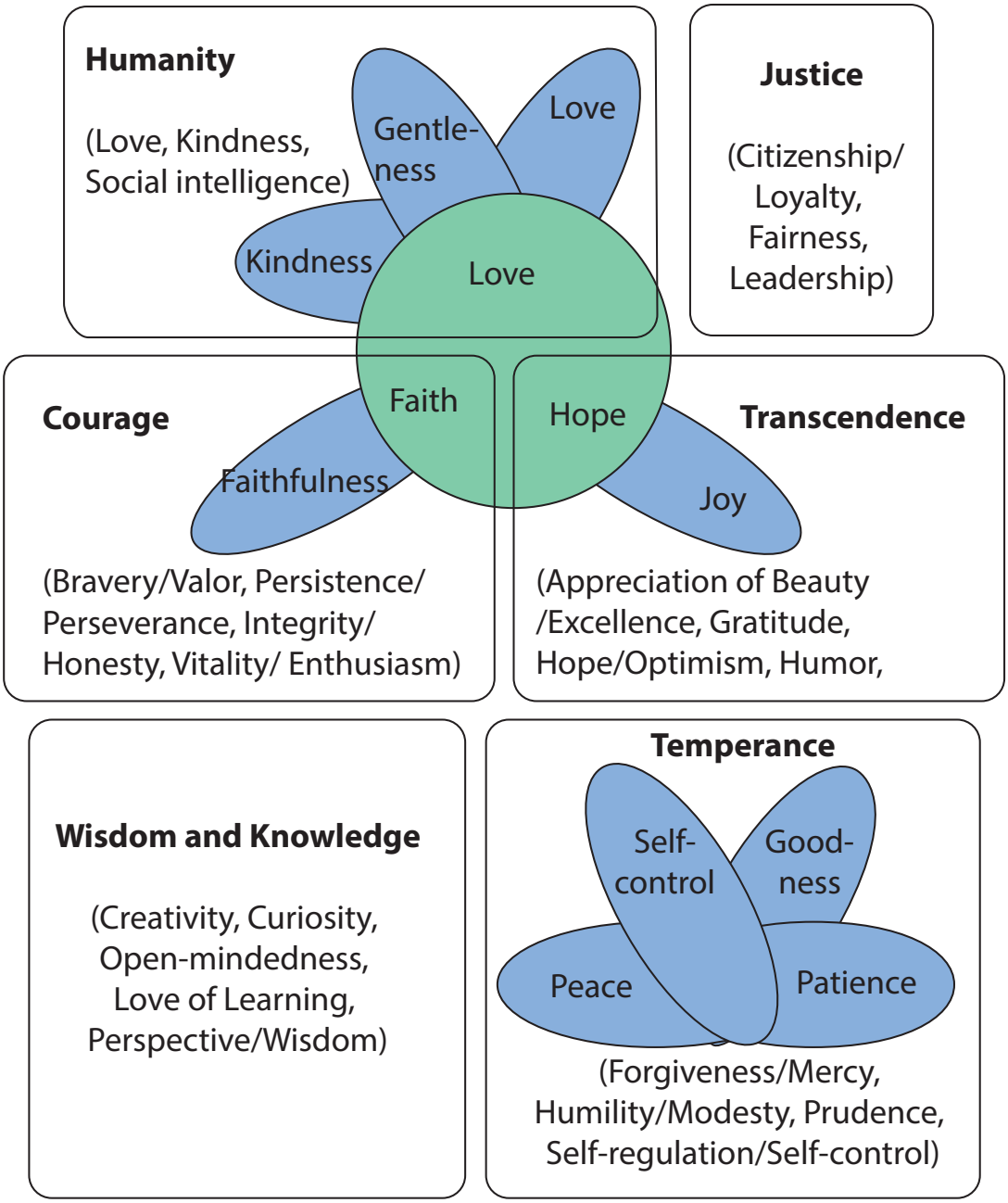

Figure 1. An illustration of how the virtues and character strengths in positive psychology, according to the VIA classification system (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) relate to the Christian traditional theological virtues (green) and the fruits of the spirit (blue).

Appendix 1

Survey on main concepts in PP and the Bible: Full list

The table below indicates the frequency that each term/ concept was selected (alphabetically) by experts in PP (*n* = 22) or Christianity/ theology (*n* = 24).

Term/ Concept	PP	Bible	Term/ Concept	PP	Bible
ability	13.64	20.83	intelligence	9.09	20.83
acceptance	36.36	41.67	joy	36.36	87.50
achievement	68.18	25.00	judgment	22.73	66.67
adaptation	31.82	29.17	justice	18.18	87.50
adjustment	18.18	20.83	kindness	54.55	83.33
adversity	27.27	58.33	knowledge	18.18	70.83
altruism	40.91	33.33	lawfulness	0.00	54.17
anger	4.55	54.17	leadership	36.36	45.83
anxiety	18.18	50.00	learning	40.91	41.67
appreciation of beauty	50.00	54.17	life	27.27	66.67
attention	45.45	25.00	lonely	4.55	41.67
authenticity	59.09	58.33	loss	4.55	50.00
awareness	36.36	29.17	love	59.09	87.50
awe	63.64	62.50	love of learning	54.55	29.17
bad	0.00	29.17	mastery	50.00	25.00
being	22.73	37.50	meaning/ purpose	95.45	58.33
belonging	45.45	66.67	meditation	54.55	41.67
benevolence	27.27	50.00	mental health	54.55	29.17
boredom	4.55	8.33	mental illness	4.55	25.00
bravery	31.82	37.50	mercy	18.18	87.50
change	31.82	33.33	mind	18.18	50.00
character	72.73	83.33	mindfulness	77.27	37.50
cheerfulness	31.82	50.00	mindset	72.73	50.00
citizenship	31.82	54.17	modesty	27.27	58.33
commitment	22.73	62.50	money	9.09	58.33
compassion	45.45	83.33	morality	27.27	66.67
competence	40.91	25.00	motivation	59.09	50.00
concentration	27.27	20.83	nature	13.64	41.67
connectedness	54.55	45.83	obedience	4.55	79.17
consciousness	18.18	29.17	openness	36.36	33.33
contemplative practices	50.00	33.33	optimism	81.82	16.67
contentment	36.36	83.33	pain	9.09	50.00
cooperation	31.82	41.67	passion	40.91	41.67
coping	27.27	25.00	patience	27.27	83.33
courage	45.45	79.17	peace	13.64	83.33
creativity	45.45	33.33	peak experiences	63.64	20.83

Term/ Concept	PP	Bible	Term/ Concept	PP	Bible
curiosity	50.00	25.00	perfection	4.55	50.00
darkness	4.55	33.33	perseverance	59.09	83.33
death	0.00	66.67	person	13.64	29.17
deception	0.00	45.83	perspective	40.91	45.83
depression	13.64	45.83	philosophy	36.36	25.00
discipline	27.27	83.33	physical activity	36.36	29.17
disease	4.55	29.17	physical health	36.36	29.17
distress	9.09	33.33	pleasure	45.45	50.00
dreams	13.64	25.00	positivity	59.09	16.67
dualism	0.00	16.67	power	0.00	37.50
education	54.55	29.17	prayer	4.55	91.67
efficacy	59.09	16.67	pride	18.18	45.83
effort	36.36	37.50	pro-social behavior	63.64	25.00
emotion	50.00	33.33	productivity	40.91	29.17
empathy	36.36	58.33	advancement	31.82	16.67
endurance	31.82	70.83	prudence	36.36	50.00
engagement	77.27	29.17	quality of life	59.09	16.67
envy	0.00	54.17	reality	18.18	33.33
equality	0.00	45.83	religion	13.64	33.33
ethics	31.82	62.50	resilience	72.73	37.50
eudaimonia	72.73	12.50	respect	18.18	45.83
excellence	40.91	50.00	rest	9.09	75.00
expectation	13.64	41.67	sacrifice	13.64	83.33
experiences	22.73	25.00	sadness	4.55	45.83
expertise	18.18	20.83	satisfaction	45.45	41.67
failure	13.64	33.33	satisfaction with life	86.36	37.50
fairness	36.36	41.67	savouring	72.73	29.17
faith	22.73	91.67	self-acceptance	40.91	12.50
fear	13.64	62.50	self-control	63.64	79.17
fitness	31.82	20.83	self-determination	54.55	16.67
flourishing	81.82	37.50	self-discipline	50.00	87.50
forgiveness	40.91	95.83	self-esteem	27.27	12.50
freedom	13.64	66.67	self-regulation	63.64	37.50
friendship	40.91	62.50	serenity	31.82	33.33
fulfillment	54.55	45.83	shame	4.55	50.00
future	31.82	66.67	sickness	0.00	50.00
generosity	31.82	83.33	significance	22.73	37.50
gentleness	13.64	87.50	skill	27.27	25.00
giving	36.36	66.67	sleep	13.64	37.50
goals	50.00	29.17	social intelligence	50.00	16.67
going forward	31.82	25.00	social responsibility	31.82	41.67
good	22.73	58.33	sorrow	0.00	50.00

Term/ Concept	PP	Bible	Term/ Concept	PP	Bible
good deeds, doing good	54.55	75.00	soul	4.55	66.67
goodwill	36.36	41.67	spirituality	36.36	37.50
grace	18.18	95.83	strengths	90.91	41.67
gratitude	77.27	83.33	stress	13.64	25.00
grit	81.82	16.67	success	36.36	25.00
growth	59.09	66.67	sympathy	9.09	54.17
guilt	0.00	58.33	teamwork	50.00	33.33
habits	59.09	41.67	thankfulness	54.55	87.50
happiness	54.55	25.00	thought	9.09	45.83
hardiness	18.18	29.17	thriving	72.73	37.50
hardworking	13.64	37.50	time	13.64	58.33
harmony	18.18	54.17	transcendence	40.91	33.33
hatred	0.00	45.83	transformation	27.27	66.67
health	45.45	29.17	trauma	13.64	33.33
hedonia	45.45	8.33	troubles	4.55	45.83
helping	31.82	66.67	trust	31.82	87.50
honesty	18.18	87.50	truth	13.64	83.33
honor	13.64	58.33	values	63.64	45.83
hope	72.73	83.33	virtue, excellence	77.27	62.50
hospitality	9.09	70.83	vitality	63.64	25.00
hostility	0.00	37.50	well-being	86.36	33.33
humanity	45.45	58.33	wellness	54.55	20.83
humility	36.36	91.67	wholeness	36.36	41.67
humor	45.45	29.17	wickedness	0.00	54.17
ill-being	4.55	16.67	wisdom	45.45	87.50
illness	4.55	37.50	work	45.45	50.00
improvement	40.91	33.33	worry	9.09	54.17
inspiration	45.45	33.33	wrong	0.00	37.50
integrity	36.36	75.00	zeal, zest	45.45	50.00

Appendix 2

Most important concepts in positive psychology (top) and the Bible (bottom), based on participant's qualitative responses

Most important concepts in positive psychology	
authenticity	positive emotion (x2)
character strengths (x4)	Positivity
Strengths (x3)	positive institutions
Contributing	Positive relationships (x2)
courage	prosocial behaviour (x2)
education	prospection
Eudiamonia	Looking beneath the "feeling" for the evidence so that we really know it - how / if it works - for the first time
flourishing	Research
Flow (x2)	The study of automatic, unconscious heuristics. We need to discover and describe them and analyze when they are adaptive or maladaptive.
Frameworks for wellbeing	A conscious emphasis on what can go right, while rigorously acknowledging that things do go wrong
Good things individuals can do for themselves, such as perseverance or meditation	An investigation into what makes life more worth living for each person, on their own terms (~satisfaction with life, but not quite)
Good things that create synergy, i.e. good things people do in family and community contexts.	ABCs (resilience)
Gratitude (x2)	Resilience (x4)
Hope	Self-determination theory
hope for the future	self-efficacy
Individual differences and cultural contexts	Thriving
learned optimism	Vitality
meaning/purpose (x4)	Well-being and flourishing - at all system levels
Mindfulness (x2)	Wellbeing (x3)
Optimism/Resilience	Willpower and habit formation
Performance	PERMA

Core concepts in the Bible	
Acceptance despite sin	align your motivations with that of the Holy Spirit.
Forgiveness (x4)	know your identity and citizenship > act that way
Mercy	reflecting God in work and relationships in His creation
the importance of being forgiven and forgiving others	showing honor, praise and thanksgiving to God - gratitude

adoption in to God's family

Compassion
Grace (x7)
God's love/grace in human history
Love (x9)
love for one another (x2)
love God and one another>forgiveness>mercy
love god our maker and saviour
love the earth

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.. and love your neighbor as yourself
Charity
new community in Christ
Relationship
Relating with God
The character of God
God is good
God is just
God is love
Glory

obedience, submission, trust - without trust there's no obedience
submission
Hope (x3)
hope in a recreated future
Looking beyond this life towards heaven
New creation
the faithfulness of God
truth (and reality - what is real)
The human condition (separate from God, in God's image)
sin

Purpose/Mission
peace
Character
Gift and strength through the Holy Spirit
Humility
Identity
justice
Faith (x3)