

REVIEWS

A REVIEW OF MARK MCMINN'S *SCIENCE OF VIRTUE: WHY POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY MATTERS TO THE CHURCH*

*By Nate Brooks*¹

Mark McMinn's recent book, *The Science of Virtue*, is based around two core assumptions. First, is that positive psychology needs the church. Positive psychology is the relatively recent discipline (McMinn dates its origins to an APA talk in 1998) that seeks to study what goes right with people. As evidenced by the progression of the book, positive psychology studies wisdom, forgiveness, gratitude, humility and other virtues. For all his enthusiasm about positive psychology, McMinn is concerned that without an understanding of Christian virtue, positive psychology drifts towards a sterile, reductionist understanding.

McMinn admits his second core assumption will be polarizing: the church needs positive psychology. Positive psychology provides a ground for science and faith to dialogue because "the subject matter—virtue—is something valued by both parties in the conversation" (9). Just as the church is able to inform positive psychology's understanding of true virtue, positive psychology fills in specifics where the Bible is lacking. Speaking of forgiveness, McMinn opines,

Most Christians agree that forgiveness is important. Jesus taught that we should forgive others in various ways, even right in the middle of the Lord's Prayer. ... But how do we forgive? ... The practical strategies for accomplishing forgiveness tend not to show up in the Bible, though it is clear we are called to figure it out. I have good news about this because positive psychologists have done tremendous work in figuring out the mechanism for forgiveness (9).

¹ Nate Brooks is the Coordinator of the Christian Counseling Program at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC. He may be reached at nbrooks@rts.edu.

Consequently, a sermon that “goes beyond the Christian mandate to forgive and demonstrates how it is actually done” will most likely be preached by a pastor who is trained in positive psychology (9).

The idea that the Bible does not sufficiently explain how to forgive comes as quite a surprise. Forgiveness is an essential character quality of Yahweh (Exodus 34:7) and cannot be understood apart from His actions in forgiving fallen men and women. Ephesians 4:32 makes clear the manner in which Christians are to forgive—“Just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” Rather than lacking a specific “mechanism,” the Scriptures detail forgiveness far more clearly than any psychological analysis could by rooting genuine forgiveness in the template of God’s forgiveness of man.

McMinn extends the lack of specificity beyond forgiveness to other key aspects of following Christ. “A full-bodied understanding of virtue calls us toward teleology, toward sanctification, toward understanding we are on a pathway toward becoming more fully the people we were created to be. Imagine how this might look in counseling. ... In a Christian counseling context these virtues would undoubtedly be shaped by the church and would include the topics discussed in this book—forgiveness and hope and gratitude, wisdom and humility and grace. Understanding the science associated with each of these topics might, in turn, help counselors consider the mechanisms of change in their client’s lives” (166). Are we really to believe that the Scriptures are devoid of explaining the method of growing in the fruit of the Spirit? Galatians 3:3 asks a pertinent question: Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? How could God be good if he were to command his people to grow in grace without describing for them how to do so? Such a deity does not resemble the God of the Bible, but Pharaoh commanding the Israelites to supply bricks without straw.

While the second of McMinn’s assumptions is the more polarizing of the two, the first assumption bears scrutiny as well. How does one establish what is virtuous? And is the science of virtue really science?

Speaking of virtue requires a baseline for evaluation. McMinn moves in a good direction when he says that virtue without Christianity is “sterile.” However, even this

assumes agreement on what constitutes virtue. In the missionary classic *The Peace Child*, Don Richardson describes the backwards “virtues” of the Sawi tribesmen who found in Judas a model worthy of emulation. Indeed, Romans 1 concludes that by his autonomous reasoning, mankind descends to being “inventors of evil.” Speaking of virtue requires special revelation as all virtue is reflective of God’s character and work. When positive psychology studies wisdom, what exactly is it studying? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Any study that fails to discriminate between worldly wisdom and revealed wisdom will be incapable of coming to accurate conclusions regarding wisdom.

Similarly troubling is the view of science taken by positive psychology. Psychology has historically been considered the domain of philosophy, not science, and positive psychology is a perfect example of why this is the case. While observational psychology can provide helpful information regarding patterns of human thought and behavior, as soon as it moves to interpret the data it has moved into the realm of philosophy. McMinn notes that forgiveness lowers blood pressure, reduces back pain, and increases an individual’s vertical jump (48). This is fine and acceptable. There are times where this will not be the case (see Jesus on the cross), but these physiological results are helpful to know. However, it is illegitimate to argue from this scientific data that science proves we should forgive. What happens when observational psychology indicates that heteronormativity is dangerous? Interpretation of data must remain in realm of philosophy (i.e., theology). Karl Barth helpfully reminds us that science is only able to address the outer man, for it cannot measure man’s essence. The inner man is the reserve of special revelation (*Church Dogmatics*, 43. Pg 20-21).

McMinn is clear what drives his desire to wed positive psychology with the church. “Science is the language of the day, and if we in the church want to remain relevant, we need to keep up with the dialect ... ” (125). While he is clear that science does not hold all the answers, this impulse to save the church from irrelevance makes explicit McMinn’s driving presuppositions. Without psychology, the church will become irrelevant.

How?

Church history is full of a long string of theologians warning that the church is going to become irrelevant. Descartes tried to save Christianity from irrelevancy by starting with reason. The Modernists sought to save it from scientific progress. McLaren fought to save the church from postmodernism. Every attempt to save the church by propping up its influence with some outside element has always ended in disaster. McMinn's definition of counseling bears out this arc: "That's what counseling is: sitting with people in the complicated places of life, with such a calm and gracious presence that it makes people want to lean in and get a closer look" (143). Is this how Jesus counseled?

Church history also bears out the fact that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. The church rarely speaks the prevailing dialects well, but of what matter is this when the prevailing dialects are built upon wrong foundations? Though some may call it simplistic, the faithful application of God's Word to the problems individuals face will never be moved to the dustbin of history. There are hard words in such counsel, words like sin and repentance and suffering and sovereignty. Faithful biblical counsel may not always be "calm" and "positive," but we can know that it will never be irrelevant.