

## PEOPLE OF HOPE IN AN AGE OF ANXIETY: POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE

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“Even before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and its aftermath, the Western world had been experiencing a growing crisis of hope.”<sup>2</sup>

–Timothy Keller

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

–Romans 15:13, NRSV

### I. INTRODUCTION

The suggestion that we are in a “new age of anxiety” will resonate with many.<sup>3</sup> Despite major industrial, scientific, and economic advances over the last two centuries, pessimism about the future is on the rise.<sup>4</sup> Political polarization, global terrorism, the decline of the middle class, rising mental health problems, the threat of recession, and the pandemic are among the issues that lead people to worry about the quality of life their children and grandchildren will have.<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller suggests that our increased pessimism about the future is related to a loss of social trust

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, *Hope in Times of Fear: The Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter* (New York: Viking, 2021), xv.

<sup>3</sup> Keller, *Hope in Times of Fear*, xv.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Parker, Rich Morin, and Julianna Menasce Horowitz, “Looking to the Future, Public Sees an America in Decline on Many Fronts,” Pew Research Center, Washington, DC (21 March 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/03/21/public-sees-an-america-in-decline-on-many-fronts/>.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 9–10. See the discussion of Mishra in Joel D. Lawrence, “Pastoring in an Age of Anger,” *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* 9, no. 1 (2022): 49–58.

which undermines the institutions on which our society is built. He notes that our advances have, ironically, produced new major challenges. We can travel quickly around the world by air, but that convenience made it nearly impossible to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> We are more connected than ever through technology and social media, yet many feel isolated, lonely, and discontent. Andrew Sullivan puts it this way, “As we have slowly and surely attained more progress, we have lost something that undergirds all of it: meaning, cohesion, and a different, deeper kind of happiness than the satiation of all our earthly needs.”<sup>7</sup> Counterintuitively, perhaps, the progress we have made has not made us happier.

The church stands in this age of anxiety as a people whose shared life ought to be marked by hope. Even a cursory reading of the NT demonstrates that followers of Jesus are called to embody hope, whether in peace and ease or suffering and difficulty.<sup>8</sup> Consider the benediction of Rom 15:13, where God himself is identified as “the God of *hope*” who is able to make his people “abound in *hope*.”<sup>9</sup> The experience of abundant hope is grounded in divine agency because it is God who “fills” believers with “all joy and peace.” The Holy Spirit is named explicitly as working powerfully to make the people of God “abound in hope.” Passages like this would suggest that, though the world at large feels growing anxiety about the future, the church is called and empowered by God to bear witness to a different future—one marked by light more than darkness, promise more than fear.

This contrast between the pessimism that characterizes much of the West and the hope that ought to characterize the church raises questions. How do we cultivate hope among the people of God? How do the people of God embody hope in relation to a world often marked by anxiety? How do pastors guard those under their care from the temptation to participate in cultural pessimism?

Our consideration of the psychology of hope in relation to Christian hope will proceed in three steps. We first begin with a survey of two major conceptual models in positive psychology to describe and measure the experience of hope. The first is a cognitive model and the second is an integrated model. Second, we turn to Paul’s letter to the Romans to consider whether and to what extent Christian Scripture and theology may have categories that resonate with what we have learned about the psychology of hope. Third, we conclude with a pastoral reflection on the need to cultivate hope and strategies for doing so among the people of God. As we proceed, it will become increasingly clear that attention to the way God has created us as psychological beings is a valuable tool for articulating and nurturing the theological virtue of hope.

<sup>6</sup> Keller, *Hope in Times of Fear*, xvii.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “The World Is Better Than Ever. Why Are We Miserable?” *New York*, March 9, 2018, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/03/sullivan-things-are-better-than-ever-why-are-we-miserable.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Acts 23:6; 24:15; 26:6; 28:20; Rom 4:18; 5:2, 4–5; 8:20, 24; 12:12; 1 Cor 13:13; 2 Cor 3:12; Gal 5:5; Eph 1:18; 2:12; 4:4; Heb 3:6; 6:11, 18; 7:19; 1 Pet 1:3, 21; 3:15.

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis added.

## II. POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND THE QUESTION OF HOPE

As a discipline, psychology deals with mental processes, the way those processes are expressed in behavior, and the causes of those processes. A significant amount of attention is given to mental disorders and abnormal behaviors. In 1998, Martin Seligman, then president of the American Psychological Association, suggested psychologists should also devote time to considering positive experiences. His comment contributed to the rise of positive psychology. As Mark McMinn recounts, “Almost overnight a vibrant contemporary science of virtue was born.”<sup>10</sup> Seligman and Christopher Peterson later described positive psychology as a focus on “what is right about people and specifically about the strengths of character that make the good life possible.”<sup>11</sup> When it comes to the virtue of hope, positive psychology has tended to work around two theoretical frameworks—one cognitive and generally associated with C. R. Snyder, and the other more integrated and associated with Anthony Scioli. We will take each in turn.

## A. THE COGNITIVE MODEL (C. R. SNYDER)

In a 1995 article, C. R. Snyder defined hope as, “the process of thinking about one’s goals, along with the motivation to move toward (agency) and the ways to achieve (pathways) those goals.”<sup>12</sup> Snyder takes human beings to be fundamentally goal-oriented and suggests that there are two aspects to this feature of our psychology. The first is the agency component, which involves “the cognitive willpower or energy to get moving toward one’s goals.”<sup>13</sup> The second is the pathways component, which is “the perceived ability to generate routes to get somewhere.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, as we think about our goals, we engage in a process of cognitive evaluation in terms of agency (“goal-directed determination”) and pathways (“planning of ways to meet goals”).<sup>15</sup> Do we have the motivation and will to move toward our desired future? And can we see a legitimate path toward achieving that future? Some people may be motivated to move toward a goal, but without a feasible path toward that goal their level of hope in achieving it will be lower. Similarly, a person may see legitimate paths toward a certain future, but without the motivation to take one of those paths, their sense of hope in relation to that future will be lower. Higher-hope persons will approach various situations with an increased sense of agency and pathways. They

<sup>10</sup> Mark R. McMinn, *The Science of Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2017), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004), 4.

<sup>12</sup> C. R. Snyder, “Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope,” *Journal of Counseling & Development* 73 (1995): 355, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676>; cf. C. R. Snyder et al., “Hope and Academic Success in College,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 94 (2002): 820–26, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.94.4.820>; see further C. R. Snyder, *Psychology of Hope: You Can Get Here from There* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Snyder, “Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope,” 355.

<sup>14</sup> Snyder, “Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope,” 355.

<sup>15</sup> Snyder, “Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope,” 355.

tend to approach goals with positive emotions and focus on success rather than failure. Goals are seen as challenges rather than barriers. In contrast, lower-hope persons see things more negatively in general and tend to focus on failure over success. Snyder sees this as the result of their poor perception of agency and pathways.

To measure a person's general level of hope, Snyder employs a "hope scale" (or "future scale").<sup>16</sup> Individuals are asked to respond to twelve statements with one of the following numbers: 1 = definitely false, 2 = mostly false, 3 = mostly true, and 4 = definitely true.<sup>17</sup> The items on the scale are mixed in such a way that statements 2, 9, 10, and 12 measure agency, while statements 1, 4, 6, and 8 measure pathways. A person's hope scale score is determined by adding the value of their responses to those questions. Items 3, 5, 7, and 11 were included to obscure the content of the scale. Statements to gauge agency include: "I energetically pursue my goals"; "my past experiences have prepared me well for my future"; "I've been pretty successful in life"; "I meet the goals that I set for myself."<sup>18</sup> Statements to gauge pathways include: "I can think of many ways to get out of a jam"; "there are lots of ways around any problem"; "I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me"; "even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem."<sup>19</sup>

The Hope Scale provides counselors a tool for diagnosing low-hope persons and crafting strategies for nurturing hope in them. For persons who may have difficulty regarding agency, Snyder suggests a process of clarifying goals. Goals should be concrete, not vague. Higher-hope people tend to have very vivid goals that they easily describe to others. Lower-hope people will often struggle to articulate their goals. Thus, learning to identify specific goals may provide a heightened sense of energy for attaining those goals.<sup>20</sup> Snyder also suggests that hope can be nurtured by focusing initially on step-by-step processes to achieving short-term doable goals. That is not to say long-term goals should be avoided. It is to say that completing several goals in the short-term carries potential for increasing one's sense of agency and pathways with a sense of self-satisfaction at achieving a desired future.<sup>21</sup> A person's sense of agency and pathways may be built or rebuilt by learning to talk about success, thinking of difficulties in terms of strategy rather than talent, reflecting on previous successes, listening to testimonials about other people's successes, developing friendships with goal-oriented people, seeking goal-oriented role models, physical exercise, and proper nutrition.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Snyder, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope," 357.

<sup>17</sup> Snyder, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope," 357.

<sup>18</sup> Snyder, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope," 357.

<sup>19</sup> Snyder, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope," 357.

<sup>20</sup> Snyder, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope," 356.

<sup>21</sup> Snyder, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope," 356.

<sup>22</sup> Snyder, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope," 356.

Mark McMinn has raised concerns about Snyder's cognitive model for hope, particularly as it relates to a Christian understanding of hope. The critique focuses primarily on the way Snyder sees hope as a matter of individual vision and willpower.<sup>23</sup> While these dynamics are certainly present in each of us, McMinn argues that our sense of hope is also formed in relationship to others, whether God, members of our family, or our community of faith.<sup>24</sup> McMinn's encouragement to consider relational dynamics of hope reminds us that we are necessarily embedded in communities that shape our sense of self and our perceptions of the future. This means we should seek out models for conceptualizing hope that go beyond "will and ways." This suggestion is likely to resonate with Christians who understand the will to be damaged by sin and our vision darkened by depravity.<sup>25</sup> A deeply Christian account of hope will take into consideration the way our agency and vision are restored in relationship with the triune God and in the context of local church. As we will see below, positive psychology and social psychology provide tools for conceptualizing hope in ways that take these relational dynamics into account.

### B. THE INTEGRATIVE MODEL (ANTHONY SCIOLI ET AL.)

In a 2011 article, Anthony Scioli, Michael Ricci, Than Nyugen, and Erica R. Scioli defined hope as "*a future-directed, four-channel emotion network, constructed from biological, psychological, and social resources.*"<sup>26</sup> This approach is grounded in the conviction that the preference among psychologists for purely cognitive goal-oriented models of hope neglects crucial affective and religious dimensions.<sup>27</sup> The four channels they identify are: mastery, attachment, survival, and spiritual systems.<sup>28</sup> The advantage of conceptualizing hope as an integrated network of interrelated parts is that it provides a range of metaphors for articulating processes often associated with hope. To make the point, Scioli et al. suggest that hope for power can be understood in light of a control network, while hope for presence or relationships can be understood in terms of a social network, and hope for protection in terms of a safety network.<sup>29</sup> The four channels are said to develop in a semiautonomous way. That is, one channel may feed two or more of the others. A person with a strong religious background may have spiritual sensibilities that shape his or her mastery, attachment, and survival responses. Alternatively, a person's mastery, attachment, and survival systems

<sup>23</sup> McMinn, *The Science of Virtue*, 127–29.

<sup>24</sup> McMinn, *The Science of Virtue*, 132, 136–37.

<sup>25</sup> For a recent and comprehensive account of the doctrine of sin and its implications, see Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Scioli et al., "Hope: Its Nature and Measurement," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 3 (2011): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020903>. Italics original.

<sup>27</sup> Scioli et al., "Hope," 78.

<sup>28</sup> Scioli et al., "Hope," 79.

<sup>29</sup> Scioli et al., "Hope," 79.

could flow together to impact his or her spiritual experiences and growth.<sup>30</sup> This approach looks at hope more thoroughly than the cognitive model by taking into account aspects of behavior, faith, relationships, social context, fear management, integrity, culture, levels of support, etc.

Since the cognitive model of hope described above is focused largely on goals, it offers no way of evaluating the attachment, survival, or spiritual aspects of hope. The result is that higher scores on the hope scale often correlate narrowly with achievements (e.g., college grades).<sup>31</sup> The integrated network approach seeks to measure levels of trust (attachment), perceptions of skill (mastery), one's ability to handle difficulty (survival), and sources of inspiration (spirituality).<sup>32</sup> The question remains, however, as to whether these psychological approaches resonate with a theological understanding of hope. That is the question to which we now turn.

### III. ROMANS AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HOPE

Positive psychology has given us two frameworks for conceptualizing hope. The question before us now is the extent to which these scientific frameworks resonate with hope as a theological virtue. As an initial step toward that question, we turn to the way hope is portrayed in Christian Scripture. Since an extended analysis of hope in the Bible is beyond the scope of this essay, we will, instead, take Romans as a case study to consider how the psychology of hope might bring fresh insight to our reading of Scripture. Coming to the motif of hope in Romans from this angle will involve keeping our eyes open for the sorts of cognitive and affective concepts we have encountered in the above survey. How might Paul's portrayal of hope relate to questions of agency and pathways? To what extent do questions of mastery, attachment, survival, and spirituality occupy his understanding of hope? Does one psychological framework resonate more deeply with Paul's account of hope? To be clear, the goal is not an anachronistic reading that imposes modernist scientific categories on an ancient text. I am not suggesting Paul was operating with models from the field of positive psychology. Rather, these categories function as a lens we might place over the text to see what emerges. We are not looking to force these categories on to Romans. In fact, if none of the categories resonate with Paul's concept of hope, it would raise further potentially valuable questions for us. That would provide space to consider how and why present-day conceptions of hope differ from Paul's.

When we think of scholarship on Romans, the theme of hope is probably not the first to come to mind. That does not mean, however, that hope as a motif is not significant for Paul's argument in his longest extant letter. It is certainly true that *ἐλπίς* does not appear as frequently as *δικαιόω* and its cognates, nor as often as the *πίστις* word group. But it does show up in several key moments in the overall argument of the letter. The language

<sup>30</sup> Scioli et al., "Hope," 79.

<sup>31</sup> Scioli et al., "Hope," 82.

<sup>32</sup> Scioli et al., "Hope," 84.

of hope is associated with the Abraham narrative in Rom 4:18 (twice); it bookends Rom 5–8, the second major segment of the letter (Rom 5:2, 4, 5; 8:20, 24 [3x]); and it appears twice in the climactic benediction of Rom 15:3. In what follows, we will look specifically at the end of Rom 4 and the beginning of Rom 5.

#### A. ABRAHAM'S HOPE IN ROM 4:18

The language of hope in Romans appears first in association with Abraham. Paul says of Abraham, “Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become ‘the father of many nations’” (4:18 NRSV). This double use of hope language comes in the context of Paul’s discussion of Abraham’s faith as justification for his patriarchal relationship not only to Jews but to Gentiles also. Paul is reflecting on Gen 15 and 17, in which God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky (15:5) and that he will be the father of many nations (17:5). Abraham’s well-known problem is that both he and his wife, Sarah, are too old to have children. Paul’s repetition of ἐλπίς in the phrase ἐλπίδα ἐπ’ ἐλπίδι—which the NRSV translates “hoping against hope”—emphasizes the strength of Abraham’s hope in what would otherwise be deeply *hopeless* circumstances.

Taking this passage of Scripture through the lens of Scioli’s hope network, we quickly recognize the role of trust (or attachment) in the formation and maintenance of Abraham’s hope. Paul grounds the patriarch’s hope for descendants in his trust in God: “He did not weaken in faith (πίστις) when he considered the deadness of his own body, which was about one hundred years old” (4:19, author’s translation). Paul’s language of faith here cannot mean mere intellectual assent. This is no shallow belief. Rather, Abraham exhibits a deep level of trust in God that undergirds his optimism about the future.

That Abraham exhibits optimism about the future despite circumstances that normally would mean he must remain childless also resonates with the category of survival in Scioli’s hope network. Abraham is in a situation that would be unspeakably difficult for an ancient Near Eastern man. Without a child of his own, a slave in Abraham’s house would be his heir (Gen 16:3) and his name would not be carried on after his death. The significance of this difficulty is highlighted by the Ishmael narrative in Gen 16. That Abraham attempted to secure an heir by conceiving a child with Hagar illustrates the lengths to which a man (and his wife!) in his situation would go. After the failure of that plan, Abraham found himself in a position where his dependence on God was essential for the survival of his name. His increasing trust in God thus grounds his hope and enables him to persevere in a situation of great difficulty. Taken this way we can conclude that Paul’s portrayal of Abraham’s faith resonates with Scioli’s hope network and can be framed in terms of attachment and survival.

When we take Paul’s account of Abraham’s faith in light of Snyder’s agency/pathways framework, two points can be made. First, in and of himself Abraham has neither the power to provide himself an heir nor a

pathway for doing so. As Paul indicates, at one hundred years old, Abraham's body might as well be dead when it comes to fathering a child. He lacks sufficient agency to have a son. Further, with Sarah's barrenness, the pathway for having a child is not present. He has neither power nor opportunity. If hope is framed exclusively in terms of personal will and way, as Snyder frames it in his conception of hope, then we find little that resonates with the Pauline account of hope. Second, if we read Paul's account of Abraham's hope with a view to agency and pathways, then both are exclusively attributed to God, who brings life out of Abraham's dead body (cf. Rom 4:17). Thus, if we are talking about hope as a theological virtue, we must include the agency and power of God to create pathways for moving forward.

### B. CHRISTIAN HOPE IN ROM 5:2

Hope is understood in relation to trust and survival again just a few verses later in Rom 5:2. But this time, instead of the particular case of Abraham, Paul is discussing Christian hope in general. As he did with Abraham, Paul frames Christian hope in relation to justification by faith (5:1). Justification has an instrumental role as the means to peace with God and hope of sharing in the glory of God. This should be understood in relation to Paul's claim that "all have sinned and now fall short of the glory of God" in Rom 3:23. If sin means humanity is unable to participate in God's glory, then justification deals with the consequence of sin and reintroduces hope for sharing in God's glory (Rom 5:2). Notably, justification is not said to bring glory presently. Rather, justification brings *hope* for glory, which is framed as something to be received in the future (cf. Rom 8:17). This optimistic vision of the future is then grounded on and maintained by trust in God.

Paul does not use the language of spirituality here, but in so much as his favorable vision of the future is inspired by the work of Christ to reconcile believers to God, his view could be said to resonate with Scioli's way of describing spirituality. What does come to the fore, given Scioli's model, is Paul's insistence that "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Rom 5:4 NRSV). While Paul's way of framing hope is not identical to Scioli's, there are points of overlap. For Paul, hope is the result of character transformation forged in suffering after a believer has been reconciled to God. It is hope of participating in the glory of God—a favorable vision of the future if ever there was one—that enables the believer to handle difficulty and see it in light of God's work to transform her character.

If we take this through the lens of agency and pathways, we may say once again that any concept of human agency must account for the priority of divine agency. Left in our sinful state, we have neither the power to attain future glory nor the pathway toward future glory. For Paul, God takes the initiative in giving Christ for our justification (Rom 3:24–25). Human agency only comes into the picture after God takes the initiative to



provide for our reconciliation. Individuals have agency in that we respond to God's initiative, but that agency depends on God's prior work. Human agency also shows up for Paul in terms of enduring suffering. But again, this is not absolute agency; it is dependent on "this grace in which we stand" (Rom 5:2 NRSV).

Our consideration of Rom 4:18 and 5:2 would suggest that Scioli's hope network carries more potential for relating the psychology of hope to hope as a theological virtue. When we consider agency and pathways apart from divine agency, there is little for Christian theology to say. Christian hope must include an anticipation of participating in divine glory. Left to our own agency, we are left without hope. That does not mean Snyder's model is altogether useless. By raising the question of agency, we are invited to consider the agency of God to rescue us from sin as an expression of his grace.

#### IV. PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

We return now to the question of the church's vocation to cultivate hope in our new age of anxiety. The very suggestion that we live in an age of anxiety would suggest that we need to be thinking about hope in relation to Scioli's notion of survival. Anxiety itself is a sort of difficulty, and a growing number of people dealing with growing levels of anxiety regarding a range of cultural difficulties would seem to indicate that the time is ripe for the church to offer hope. To that point, the fact that increasing numbers of people are dealing with anxiety should motivate the church to embrace the vocation of proclaiming and offering a fresh vision of hope to the world.

##### A. ANXIETY AND HOPELESSNESS

The very fact that we are in what can be called an age of anger or anxiety should draw our attention to the question of expectations. Anxiety (and possibly) anger arise because expectations go unmet, or because our previous expectations appear increasingly unlikely to be realized. And what are the faltering expectations that have given rise to this new age of anxiety? Mishra points to the increasing loss of confidence in the American Dream. Earlier generations believed deeply that hard work and determination would give rise to a life generally marked by comfort—home ownership, picket fences, 2.5 children, and a dog. This idealized image of the American life was prevalent in the middle of the twentieth century. But that expectation of the good life has, for many, given way to constant worry over how the bills will be paid, whether groceries can be afforded, and fear that the car may break down.<sup>33</sup> The very presence of anger and anxiety in this situation suggests some amount of presumption about what life should be like, what we deserve, and how much privilege we think we have. Why do we think we deserve a life free from hardship, especially when so many people in so much of the world live with daily hardship and no expectation of relief?

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<sup>33</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 278–79.

Given the expectation of a life of comfort free from difficulty (and the disappointment-induced anxiety experienced by so many), it is striking to note how frequently the NT reminds believers to expect hardship. “In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus tells his disciples, “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33 NIV). Freedom from anxiety or anger or fear is not here portrayed as a life free from difficulty; rather it is framed as a life of hardship in which believers persevere with hope—“take heart!”—because of their communion with Jesus in his victory. In 2 Tim 2:9, the apostle Paul draws attention to the hardship he suffers for the gospel. But his hardship is no occasion for despair. Rather, he celebrates the counter-intuitive advance of the gospel despite his apostolic chains (cf. Phil 1:12–18).

We may consider that one feature of the church’s vocation is to articulate accurate expectations regarding life and the answers to questions of comfort in relation to hardship.<sup>34</sup> When believers embody hope despite hardship, we model for the world both an accurate accounting of what we may expect from life and an appropriate posture in which to engage the challenges that will inevitably come. In doing so, we may be able to increasingly untangle the deceptive merging of the American Dream with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which teaches us to expect hardship rather than ease and to hope in the one who endured infinite suffering on our behalf.

#### B. THE NECESSITY OF DIVINE AGENCY

If pastors, theologians, and psychologists are going to engage one another around the question of hope, it will be necessary to carefully distinguish between divine and human agency. For the Christian theologian, human agency can only be understood in relation to divine agency, but not all psychologists will acknowledge the category of divine agency. We found repeatedly that Snyder’s conception of hope shared less in common with Paul’s understanding of hope, particularly as these different conceptions relate to agency. Scioli’s hope network, however, was more useful for reading Paul because the relationship of divine and human agency could be articulated in relation to attachment and trust. In both Paul’s account of Abraham’s hope and his general statements about Christian hope, the apostle assumes the priority of divine agency. For Paul, human hope ultimately depends on God’s provision for us. Left to ourselves, we have neither power nor opportunity to attain hope. Human agents are enabled through the work of the divine agent.

#### C. PREACH THE MEANS AND THE END

Our readings of Rom 4:18 and 5:2 both highlighted the instrumental relationship between faith as the condition of justification and hope for the future. Faithful preachers will consistently articulate the rich truth of

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<sup>34</sup> See the discussion of divine promise in Lawrence, “Pastoring in an Age of Anger,” 55–58.

this comforting doctrine that we are accepted by God, not for any worth or merit in ourselves, but only on the basis of the perfect and sufficient work of Christ. We may at times be so focused on justification that we preach it as an end in itself. This, however, is not the way justification functions in Paul's theology. Justification is not itself an end. It is a means to the proximate end of present hope for the future and the ultimate end of participating in the glory of God. Attention to the function of justification by faith in relation to hope will help us cultivate hope among the people of God. We are reminded that Christian hope is always eschatological. Scripture does not promise the full realization of the freedom for which we hope in the present life. That awaits the future resurrection of the body when the last enemy will be defeated. The sanctified character of the believer's life between justification and future bodily resurrection serves to remind all—believers and unbelievers—that our risen Lord is able to give us hope in the present and actualize our hope in the future.

#### D. PRACTICES THAT CULTIVATE HOPE

If the people of God are to be a people of hope in an age of anxiety, it will require attention to practices that cultivate hope. Peter Leithart says that "The church's existence, activities, and ministries nourish hope because they are specific avenues of communion with God."<sup>35</sup> From a Christian perspective, true and lasting hope will not be mustered through self-referential perceptions of agency and pathways. Rather, hope comes from being rightly related to God and communing with him through word and sacrament. Paul remarks in Rom 15:4 that Scripture is an instrument for cultivating hope. The practice of reading Scripture with the church is not merely a matter of information or education. The biblical narrative of God's saving acts is formational. It forms hope in us because it calls our attention to God's faithfulness in the past and calls us to expect God to be likewise faithful in the future. The crucial thing is to be specific.<sup>36</sup> Pastors will be wise to explicitly highlight the power of Scripture in forming hope in the hearers of Scripture. Different texts and different genres will do this differently. Narratives invite us to consider hope in story form. Epistles exhort us to be people of hope. The Psalms invite us to take hardship seriously and yet to trust in God for hope. Texts of lament do the same. Apocalyptic literature invites us to imagine a world in which a lamb reigns in an eschatological garden, to remember that the powers that carve up the world for their own ends will not finally stand victorious. The practice of reading Scripture—both publicly and privately—is necessary for moving from despair to abiding hope. And the link between that practice and the cultivation of hope should be articulated explicitly and frequently.

If the reading and proclamation of Scripture is a practice that narrates hope, the sacraments are a practice that dramatize it. The waters of baptism

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<sup>35</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *God of Hope* (West Monroe, LA: Theopolis Books, 2022), 84.

<sup>36</sup> Leithart, *God of Hope*, 85.

wash over us, effecting a covenant with “the one who loved us and gave himself for us” (Eph 5:2). This image takes the reality of sin seriously and yet invites us to consider and worship the God who does not run from our filth but instead washes us to make us fit for his presence. This dramatization is deeply hopeful because it insists that our depravity does not have the final word and that God is committed to bringing his people into communion with himself. That communion is marked by movement from our bath of covenantal cleansing to a feast of hope.<sup>37</sup> When the apostle Paul remarks that, with the sacrament, God’s people “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26 NRSV), he reveals that the Eucharist is fundamentally oriented towards the future. The language of the Lord’s coming is picked up later in the same letter and indicates the time when the last enemy of God (and of the people of God) will be defeated, when mortality will give way to life, when sin and death will be swallowed up by resurrection life. If our practice of the Lord’s Supper only draws our attention backwards to our Lord’s death, then we have not yet come to see the full formative power of the meal. The eschatological orientation of the Eucharist makes it a meal of hope. Again, our practice of communion should make this explicit.

## V. CONCLUSION

It falls to pastors to lead the church to embrace the distinct application of its vocation in this age of anxiety, and positive psychology draws our attention to our creatureliness and the way we experience anxiety or hope. We considered above two psychological frameworks that suggest we experience hope in relation to pathways and agency in the context of relational, spiritual, emotional, psychological, and biological processes. We also considered how Scripture stands in dialectical relationship to those psychological frameworks. And while the studies we looked at do not offer a robustly Christian account of hope, they highlight some of the ways Christian practice might be oriented in relation to our psychological needs with a view to cultivating hope.

We are always to be about the business of making disciples and teaching them to obey all that Christ has commanded. The question is: what does that look like in an age marked by anxiety, uncertainty, anger, and fear? In this age the people of God must be a people of hope. This means taking the reality of hardship seriously and offering hope in the midst of that hardship. That hope will acknowledge the importance of human agency, but it will also offer the reminder that human agency exists relative to divine agency, and that ultimate hope may only be realized through the saving acts of God in Christ and the Spirit. That hope will also be dramatized and embodied in specific practices, word and sacrament not least, which offer the church and the world a glimpse of hope where God washes us anxious and desperate folk with clean water and brings us to a table filled with bread and wine.

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<sup>37</sup> Leithart, *God of Hope*, 92.

Let us not be people who fall to despair and so betray our calling. Rather, let us be people of hope for the glory of God and the life of the world.