

Research and Reflection Paper

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In her final chapter, *Fitted to the Bow*, Paul's Joy, Laura Reece Hogan researches and reflects on the specific theme of joy and love in Paul's writings. She quotes Bonhoeffer, "Joy abides with God, and comes down from God and embraces spirit, soul, and body; and where this joy has seized a person, there it spreads, there it carries one away, there it bursts open closed doors."¹ *This study builds on Hogan's research. It asks how joy and other positive human emotions embrace spirit, soul, and body, how they seize a person, how they spread, and how they burst open closed doors.*

However, this study is not only about joy and other positive emotions, but also informs our understanding of Christian spirituality. It is a study of how they embrace, seize, spread, and burst open a follower of Christ, one who "participates" in the Christian journey. It sheds light on a question that has challenged NT scholars for some time, posed by EP Sanders in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*,

But what does this mean? How are we to understand it? We seem to lack a category of 'reality' - real participation in Christ, real possession of the Spirit - which lies between naive cosmological speculation and belief in magical transference on the one hand and a revised self-understanding on the other. I must confess that I do not have a new category of perception to propose here.²

The reason this statement is so well known is not because of its profundity but its humility. Its insight is not so much a new understanding as it is a new question. Craig Hill has asserted that "few have drawn or deserve attention on the scale of [Sanders], which for nearly three decades has been both continuously acclaimed and constantly resisted. It is the face of Pauline studies that launched a thousand texts."³ *This study asserts that positive emotions provide the "category of reality" which Sanders found lacking in our understanding of participation in Christ.*

1. Hogan, Laura Reece. 2017. *I Live, No Longer I: Paul's Spirituality of Suffering, Transformation, and Joy*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock. 109

2. Sanders, E. P., and Mark A. Chancey. 2017. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. 40th anniversary edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 522-3

3. Craig Hill, On the Source of Paul's Problem with Judaism in Udoh, F. E., ed. *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008. 311.

We must begin this study with some guardrails. While science may explain positive emotions, it cannot explain spirituality. To establish guardrails for using science to inform that which it cannot explain, I draw from Raymond Brown's *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*.

He writes, "Scholars distinguish different kinds of christology. 'Low christology' covers the evaluation of him in terms that do not *necessarily* include divinity ... 'High christology' covers the valuation of Jesus in terms that include *an aspect of divinity*."⁴ Brown clarifies his emphasised words in this statement to convey that he "is making no judgment that the NT writers who used low-christology terminology did not believe in Jesus' divinity." The same may be said of clinical psychologists and neuroscientists. Is it possible to look into contemporary scientific research without asserting metaphysical claims that are out of the reach of those conducting the research? I believe so. *For this paper, the findings of science are a supplement to the study of Christian spirituality; they are not a substitute.*

Science cannot inform theology, and we must not allow theology to inform our understanding of humanity inappropriately. Brown challenges "attitudes that limit the humanity of Jesus," declaring "it is just as serious a deviation from Christian dogma to underplay the humanity of Jesus as to underplay his divinity."⁵ Brown identifies these attitudes as "'could not have' and 'must have' presuppositions that place limitations on Jesus' humanity." *Theology is a supplement to the study of human consciousness, but not a substitute for it.*

Reflection: Brown makes an essential point in an early footnote that may guide us in incorporating new scientific findings into our understanding of the Christian experience. He writes, "In conventional Christian thought a conciliar formulation of dogma cannot contradict the NT; but it may have gone beyond what was clearly articulated or visibly understood in NT times, precisely because questions were now being asked that had not been asked in earlier times."⁶ My we not then consider our exploration of psychology and neuroscience as representing things not asked in earlier times? *Would it not be consistent to grant the same theological freedom to modern researchers that was used in the conciliar formulation of dogma?*

4. Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 1994. 4.

5. Ibid. 27

6. Ibid. 5

What are positive emotions and why are they spiritual? The heart of this study draws from two monographs. First is George Vaillant, *Spiritual Evolution: How We Are Wired for Faith, Hope, and Love*.⁷ Vaillant directed Harvard's Study of Adult Development for thirty-five years, begun in 1938, and it is today the longest longitudinal study of human development.⁸

Vaillant draws conclusions from following the successes and failures of several hundred men over a period of 70 years. However, everything he asserts is grounded in the neuroscience of the human brain. Vaillant places the source of our emotions in the middle layer of a three-layer human brain, the paleomammalian brain, which contains the limbic system. Our emotions can moderate the reflex actions of the inner reptilian brain, and they, in turn, are moderated by the outer neomammalian brain, which contains our capacity for rational thinking.

Much of what Vaillant has to say is rooted in the interplay of these three layers. For example, he explains that addictions caused by drug and alcohol abuse modify the chemistry of our reptilian brain, making recovery nearly impossible. While recovery is not possible, relapse prevention is likely by the moderations of emotions in the limbic system through Alcoholics Anonymous and community support, and by the moderations of our outer cerebral brain through external supervision and 12-step programs.⁹

Vaillant claims that, from a scientific perspective, spirituality is rooted in the emotions of the limbic system. He writes,

“This book defines spirituality as the amalgam of the positive emotions that bind us to other human beings—and to our experience of ‘God’ as we may understand Her/Him. Love, hope, joy, forgiveness, compassion, faith, awe, and gratitude are the spiritually important positive emotions addressed here. I have omitted from the list four other positive emotions—excitement, contentment, hilarity, and a sense of mastery—because we can feel these latter four emotions alone on a desert island.”¹⁰

Vaillant opens his monograph, “Just as a prism separates white light into a spectrum of discrete colors, so this book separates spirituality into a broad spectrum of positive emotions.”¹¹

Vaillant devotes a chapter to several positive emotions: Faith, a feeling of trust; love, an

7. Vaillant, George E. 2008. *Spiritual Evolution : A Scientific Defense of Faith*. 1st ed. New York: Broadway Books.

8. “Harvard Second Generation Study” Accessed July 10, 2025. <https://www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org/people>

9. Vaillant, 194-204.

10. Ibid. 4-5.

11. Ibid. 1-5

attachment that is specific and enduring; hope, a memory of the past attached to the future; joy, associated with overcoming that celebrates God's infinite generosity (pp 119-34); forgiveness, combining empathy with a vision for the future (pp 135-50); compassion, a desire to separate someone from their suffering (pp 151-63); and awe, a state of mystical union (pp 164-84).

Reflection: What Vaillant does not identify is the agency of God in our mental functions. This aligns well with the guardrails established by Raymond Brown and EP Sanders. However, Vaillant does assert that the emotions that define human spirituality are positive. We are much more than a bag of selfish genes. This understanding not only gives us license to explore the agency of God, but it also offers insight into how God's grace may operate in the human mind: by establishing a preference for and an evolutionary advantage of positive thinking and feeling. We should, as Paul said, think on certain things.

Can we map positive emotions to the lived experience of Christian faith? I believe so. I draw from Garwood Anderson, *Paul's New Perspective: Charting a Soteriological Journey*¹². Anderson is notable for his recognition of development or evolution in theological themes. He is, in Jungian terms, a true "perceptive."

Anderson's book opens by laying out how the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) has evolved from "breakthroughs" by Stendhal, Sanders, Dunn, and Wright, concluding that the present "impasse" is a "rather ecclesial account of Pauline soteriology, incorporation into Christ, under the condition of faith, effected using what the church would later call 'sacraments,' formed into an elect people for the sake of the world."¹³

Reflection: If we can summarize Anderson's view of the NPP debate as shifting from theology to ecclesiology, the thesis of this study would foresee a further shift from ecclesiology to spirituality. That would imply a shift from dimensions of "vertical" to "horizontal" to a dimension of "depth," providing for what Martin Luther King might call the "Three dimensions of a complete [spiritual] life"¹⁴ and what I would call "three dimensions of a complete

12. Anderson, Garwood P. 2016. *Paul's New Perspective : Charting a Soteriological Journey*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press.

13. Ibid. 37

14. Richard Lischer. *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Word That Moved America*. Updated edition. (New York: Oxford University Press), 29

participation in Christ.” Is this not an opportunity to bridge the gap between religion and spirituality?

Anderson continues to explore development, not only in NPP but also in Paul’s letters and theology itself. In what he calls Paul’s “itinerary,” Anderson offers a broad sweep of discussions on “participation in Christ” as they apply to foundational theological themes. These include covenant, salvation, justification, crucifixion, reconciliation, grace, and participation in Christ.¹⁵ If spirituality is the study of the lived experience of the Christian faith, we should be able to identify distinct positive emotions associated with each of these foundational themes and their related biblical passages. I identify and map Vaillant’s positive, spiritual emotions to these themes and passages provided by Anderson’s study. Each has a personal reflection.

1. Covenant/Promise interfaces with faith/trust. Anderson notes that Paul makes a rhetorical shift in Galatians 3:15-18, the pericope entitled in the NRSV “The Promise of Abraham.” Anderson says, “The effective substitution of ‘promise’ for ‘covenant’ functions then as a freighted recharacterization of the covenant with Abraham as a promise ... A promise cannot be obeyed; it can only be received and trusted.”¹⁶ Vaillant writes, “Faith ... involves basic trust that the world has meaning and that loving kindness exists ... the absence of faith is nihilism, not atheism.”¹⁷

Reflection: Ultimately, trust is placing one’s faith in God’s providence. We live in either a world of nature or a world of providence. We survive either by relying on our reptilian brain, which cannot trust anything, or using our mammalian brain, which trusts that, despite our cautions, we have the support of a benevolent God. For the Jew, that is revealed in a covenant; for the Christian, it is revealed in a promise. Both Vaillant and Anderson have correctly identified that faith interfaces with trust, but Anderson, speaking to a more limited (Christian) audience, associates trust with a promise. It’s fair to say that the reason for the decline in the Christian religion today is that people have lost trust in the promise. I earnestly wish Garwood Anderson would write a book on that specific topic and lead a social media campaign to spread this Good News for the 21st century.

15. Ibid. Chapters 6-8, pp 226-378.

16. Ibid. 233.

17. Vaillant 66.

2. Salvation interfaces with hope. Anderson provides a table, *Temporal references with "Salvation"* (7.2), that shows the high frequency using future-eschatological tense for salvation, "almost completely to the exclusion of past uses," and concludes "the absence of part-referring 'salvation' language is striking... In this regard, 'salvation' is a mirror opposite to 'justification.'"¹⁸ Vaillant writes, "Hope reflects the capacity for one's loving, lyrical, limbic memory of the past to become attached to the 'memory of the future'."¹⁹

Reflection: High school kids applying for college will typically say, "I hope to get in." If we ask them what they will do if they are accepted, they will reply, "I will work hard to stay in." If this is true and if Sanders is correct that Christianity is concerned about "getting in" and Judaism is concerned about "staying in," then it may be that early Christianity grew more quickly than Judaism because Christianity provided a greater sense of hope. I say this because our postmodern world today has a deficiency of hope. So what are we hoping for? For some, it may be an afterlife in heaven, but nearly no one is hoping to survive an imagined apocalyptic end of the world. We live in a time and world where people hope for a better life, for them, for all people, for all sentient life, and all creation. That is salvation for our time. So, how are we saved? I do not believe we are saved by confession. Instead, we are saved by transformation. And in my tradition, we are saved by transformation of our mind (Romans 12:2). My tradition, and the tradition from which it came (Christian Science), grew rapidly because it provided hope to those in churches that had ceased to believe in the power of spiritual healing and those in churches overrun by excessively negative 19th century evangelical judgment. A successful Christian ministry today will focus more on hope for a better world than on salvation.

3. Justification interfaces with forgiveness. The title of Anderson's section on justification (7.1 From Justification to Salvation) reveals Paul's underlying message: there can be no salvation without justification. Anderson notes that justification is binary and nonprogressive (either you are or are not justified) and that Paul's use of justification is almost entirely applied to the status of Gentiles, his concern being "the equal standing of Gentiles with Jews in the Abrahamic covenant and a concomitant Jew-Gentile rapprochement."²⁰ Vaillant opens his chapter on

18. Anderson 301.

19. Vaillant 103.

20. Anderson 290-1.

Forgiveness with an epigraph from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “Without forgiveness, there is no future.” He defines forgiveness as “a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment [and] negative judgment.” He concludes that “surprisingly, peace of mind comes more in forgiving others than in being forgiven.”²¹

Reflection: Despite the complexity of the Greek word and its cognates for justification, we have a deep, subliminal need for justification (to be “justified”) because we make regretful mistakes. When we become aware of our mistake or trespass, we have a choice: to ask for forgiveness or to justify our mistake. Our justifications are incessant: “I deserve, I had no choice, I’m privileged,” or “he should have, she was, they are.” While Paul writes about justification by God, the context is the conflict between Jews and Gentiles. I sense that Paul’s anger toward the Jews was less about their rejection of Jesus than about their rejection of the Gentiles. The context for today is also social conflict. Why do we reject and marginalize others? Is it not possible that what we need to do is lay down our justifications? Is there no better way than to forgive those who have trespassed against us? The point we most often forget is that forgiveness releases justifications. As Vaillant has said, forgiveness is the quickest way to a peaceful mind.

4. Crucifixion interfaces with joy. Anderson summarizes Michael J. Gorman’s understanding of Paul’s “master narrative, most directly articulated in the Philippians Christ hymn,” as the “self-emptying ‘kenosis’ of Christ ... as the pattern for those who are in Christ.”²² Paul, Gorman, and Hogan (quoted above) tie the feeling of joy to overcoming the lived experience of crucifixion. Vaillant’s chapter on joy opens with an epigraph from William Blake: “Joy and woe are woven fine.” He says, “The apostles had thought that Christ’s death would be the end of everything, and then suddenly their lives had just begun.”²³

Reflection: I experience crucifixion as a form of sanctification, the next stage for me after justification. If so, then forgiveness, the quickest way to a peaceful mind, prepares me for conformity of my entire being (heart, soul, and strength) to Christ-likeness. That process can be painful. The mistake that I and others most often make is entering into sanctification without having released our judgments. We live in today’s world, filled with conflict and pain. It may

21. Vaillant 135.

22. Anderson 107.

23. Vaillant 119.

seem like an apocalyptic moment. What we want is a sanctified world. Perhaps we are amid a cultural crucifixion. What is the way forward? There is a place for protest and fury, but if we have released our judgments, if we have forgiven ourselves and others, we will find an opening in sanctification for joy.

5. Reconciliation interfaces with love. In his treatment of Reconciliation in Romans (7.3.2), Anderson writes, “Humans do not reconcile themselves to God; God reconciles humans to himself, at great cost, for no advantage other than for the satisfaction and demonstration of love.”²⁴ The passage most commonly associated with reconciliation is Galatians 5, where the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles is the primary concern. Here, the concern is God’s love for humanity. Vaillant says love is an attachment that is selective and enduring. It differs from compassion, which is not an attachment and is neither selective nor enduring.²⁵

Reflection: Human love is a bonding experience, and bonding is the first developmental task for the newly born child. It is also the first developmental task of the newly reborn Christian. We, like the infant baby, must ask, “To whom do I go to get my needs met? Who will listen when I cry?” For the infant, the reply is the attentive gaze of the mother (or father). For the Christian, the reply is the attentive gaze of the heavenly Mother-Father God: “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19).” This reply from Paul’s writings is focused by Vaillant’s assertion that love is selective: God is reconciling me to himself; God is personally involved in my life; God has selected me for some particular purpose; I have a place in the world that is mine. I do not adhere to Augustine’s doctrine that we are born in sin. We are born, and reborn, not in sin, but in bondedness.

6. Grace interfaces with compassion. Anderson devotes a half chapter to “The Evolution of Grace” (6.2); however, I find his summary of John Barclay’s work in “Getting Past the New Perspective” (3.1.6) far more helpful for understanding grace as a positive emotion.²⁶ Anderson summarizes Barclay’s understanding of grace as unconditioned (“unmerited, undeserved, not requiring that prior conditions have been met”) but not unconditional (“without expectation of return, nonreciprocating, with no strings attached”).²⁷ Vaillant defines compassion as “a human

24. Anderson 314.

25. Vaillant 84,88.

26. Anderson 110-114 (footnote 61); 264-280

27. Anderson 110-114 (footnote 61); 264-280

response to suffering” and further declares it to be “a desire to separate someone, even if unappealing, from his suffering.”²⁸

Reflection: Barclay’s “unconditioned but not unconditional” aligns remarkably well with Vaillant’s assertion (stated above, distinguishing love and compassion) that compassion is neither selective nor enduring. Compassion, being non-selective, is undeserved by the recipient. Compassion, being not enduring, is conditional; it expects an outcome. This is a profound insight, sorely needed because grace and compassion are popular in today’s culture. Bonhoeffer’s concept of “cheap grace/costly grace” has resonated with a wide range of Christians, from liberals to conservatives, for over 50 years. An American president declared himself to be a “compassionate conservative.” Grace and compassion are terms that bridge cultural and political divisions. Thankfully, they are also terms that bridge the gap between theology and spirituality.

7. Participation in Christ interfaces with awe and mystical union. Anderson says, the first thing “(We Should) Have Learned From The New Perspective” (1.1) is that Paul’s conversion was unusual. The uniqueness of his conversion is summarized in his Conclusion as “not a characteristic conversion from irreligion to religious devotion, nor a change in religions; it was a vocation to bear the good news of the crucified and raised Messiah of Israel especially to the Gentiles, which would require a complete revision of Paul’s religious inheritance, but not its rejection.”²⁹ Although Vaillant defines awe as “the most ‘spiritual’ of the positive emotions, much of his chapter on Awe and Mystical Illumination links awe (in the limbic brain) with conscious communitarian ideas and beliefs (in the neocortex). He stresses “the brain is a coordinated whole (of rational thought and emotional heart). Highlighting Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, Viktor Frankl, M. L. King, Gandhi, and Tolstoy, Vaillant declares “all used their highly evolved neocortexes to focus, channel, and transmute their limbic passion for the betterment of others.”³⁰

Reflection: Paul, like the many notable people listed above, remained faithful to his faith tradition. He, like the others, did not leave Judaism (or become a “none”). He did not fall into Gnosticism or Hellenistic philosophy. Instead, he participated in his faith tradition at a deeper

28. Vaillant 151, 153.

29. Anderson 16, 380.

30. Vaillant 164-7.

level. This is a profoundly important insight for today's spiritual seeker: the "spiritual but not religious." The insight is that one does not need to find a new faith tradition to have a richer spiritual life experience. My calling and ministry are primarily to those who have left the church or who feel spiritually unfulfilled in their current church. My mission to them is to raise them up, illuminate their path, see them become spiritually whole, preferably in their own tradition, and return them to their God, family, friends, and spiritual community.

Conclusions. Hopefully, I have presented evidence that asserts positive emotions provide the "category of reality" that *Sanders found lacking in our understanding of participation in Christ*. At first glance, we might assume positive emotions are somehow related to the nine fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-24). *My first conclusion is that positive emotions are not fruit of the Spirit, but rather seeds of the Spirit*. The closest thing we have as a compilation of these "spiritual seeds" is Phillipians 4:8, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (NRSV). From Paul, we learn that we nurture the seeds of Spirit by thinking about them. Further, that they are positive, lovely, true, and pleasing is the work of God's grace. I hope this study has established that God, the Holy Spirit, is the one who sprouts these seeds.

My second conclusion is that, for the propagation of the faith and the life of the church, we must embrace scientific research and bring its findings into our understanding of Christian spirituality. Paul's call to "think on these things" is an imperative; it is not an explanation of how positive emotions work, how they embrace, seize, spread, and burst things open. Our world is postmodern and scientific. Spirituality today is far more demanding for explanations than it is for imperatives. Books on Christian spirituality that rely solely on theological claims and biblical exegesis are often limited in the depth of explanation they can provide to those desiring the fullness of Christian participation. Science is good at explaining things, and we must incorporate its findings into our understanding of spirituality.

Reflection: Why is this study important for my tradition and the Christian church as a whole? The short answer is that it provides an *interface* that connects human experience with Christian experience. In theological terms, it connects the vertical reconciliation with God and

the horizontal reconciliation with humanity³¹ with what has become the core of contemporary experience—the inner experience of the human mind. It provides an interface to the human mind, not an amalgamation of mind and religion; positive emotions are a gateway, not a substitute, for theological understanding and Christian spiritual experience. Referring back to the guardrails gleaned from Raymond Brown, I claim the domains of Christian experience and positive emotions are separate. However, unless Christian theologians wish to create an entirely new understanding of the human mind, competing with neuroscience, they should do exactly what I have done in this study — to equip their theological claims with an interface so that modern people can relate their experiences to theological assertions.

31. Anderson 13.

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