

## Some Concerns about Norman Vincent Peale

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Norman Vincent Peale is the author of the best-selling book *The Power of Positive Thinking*.<sup>1</sup> This book has experience enormous popularity within the Christian community. It is regrettable how much of the Christian community has considered Peale's teachings to be consistent with the Christian world view. A few references should suffice to show that the doctrines of *The Power of Positive Thinking* not Christian.

Many mistakenly think that Peale's "Positive Thinking" is merely an encouragement to be optimistic in one's outlook on life. Many mistakenly think that all Peale is saying is that one should try to look for the good in every situation. This is not "Positive Thinking." But even if it were, I contend that it still is not a Christian attitude, for several reasons. First, the Bible encourages us to think truly, not optimistically. Philippians 4:8 ff says "Finally brethren, whatever things are true ... meditate on these things." In the Bible, sometimes God was very "negative." "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'" (Genesis 2:16-17) In the Bible, sometimes Satan was very "positive." "Then the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die.'" (Genesis 3:4) As I will argue later, the categories of 'positive' and 'negative' do not necessarily track the categories of 'good' and 'evil.' The second problem with Peale's position even if he were talking about being optimistic (which I contend he was not) is that we have no right to encourage anyone to be optimistic unless and until that person has believed on Christ for eternal life. If we help the lost person to gain an optimistic attitude, we may be keeping him from ever seeing his need for a Savior. The lost person should not be optimistic because he is doomed without Christ. But there

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<sup>1</sup>Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1952).

is a conspicuous lack of the cross is Peale's "Positive Thinking." He does not necessarily link the fruits of "Positive Thinking" to an acknowledgement of one's own sin and the provision that God has made through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. So, even if Peale's point were that one should have an optimistic attitude toward life, this would be misguided because of the greater need that one have a realistic or true attitude and the recognition that one is entitled to optimism only if one has believed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As I have contended, however, an optimistic attitude toward life is not what Norman Vincent Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking* is all about. Rather, this "power" is something by which one can "rise above obstacles which ordinarily might defeat you"<sup>2</sup> by "channeling spiritual power through your thoughts."<sup>3</sup> For Peale, this power is not merely an attitude, but is a real power that resides in us. Peale encourages his readers to "believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities! Without a humble but reasonable confidence in your own powers you cannot be successful or happy."<sup>4</sup> Peale likens this power to a "Higher Power" that "is constantly available. If you open to it, it will rush in like a mighty tide. It is there for anybody under any circumstances or in any conditions." (Even in the condition of unbelief?) Tragically, Peale wants to relate this power to God. He credits a friend of his in making him realize that he should "practice resting ... in God [for] His support and power. Believe that He is giving it to you now and don't get out touch with that power. Yield yourself to it—let it flow through you."<sup>5</sup> One more quote should suffice to illustrate that the ideas of Norman Vincent Peale depart from an orthodox Christian world view. In relating this power to God, Peale comments "Contact with

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<sup>2</sup>Peale, *Power*, ix.

<sup>3</sup>Peale, *Power*, ix.

<sup>4</sup>Peale, *Power*, 13,

<sup>5</sup>Peale, *Power*, 213.

God establishes within us a flow of the same type of energy that re-creates the world and that renews springtime every year. When in spiritual contact with God through our thought processes, the Divine energy flows through the personality, automatically renewing the original creative act."<sup>6</sup> This type of thinking should sound familiar to anyone who has studied New Thought, New Age, or Occult Philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Christians should be careful when consulting or referencing Peale's material. Its proximity to New Age philosophy can be misleading at best and potentially heretical at worst.

### **Some Comments about the Categories of "Positive" and "Negative"**

The use of the terms 'positive' and 'negative' is replete throughout our culture and, unfortunately, within the Church. People, even Christians, use these categories to talk about the positive and negative influences on our lives, our positive and negative influence on others, positive and negative words and attitudes, and positive and negative thoughts. I contend that this is regrettable. To put it as directly as I can, the categories of 'positive' and 'negative' are impotent to capture a proper understanding of reality vis-à-vis our personal and spiritual lives. Rather, 'positive' and 'negative' are better suited to a discussion of energies like electricity. In terms of a discussion of spiritual matters, 'positive' and 'negative' bespeak more of New Age and Occult philosophy. Because New Thought, New Age and Occult philosophy holds that the spiritual realm is an "energy" of sorts, one finds the categories of 'positive' and 'negative' used extensively

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<sup>6</sup>Peale, *Power*, 41.

<sup>7</sup>There are a number of good Christian books that critique New Age Occult philosophy. See, Douglas Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986); Dave Hunt, *Occult Invasion: The Subtle Seduction of the World and Church* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998); and Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1985).

in literature of the New Thought and New Age Movement.<sup>8</sup> Instead of 'positive' and 'negative,' the Bible speaks in terms of 'true' and 'false,' 'good' and 'evil,' 'righteous' and 'unrighteous,' and 'godly' and 'ungodly.' I contend that in a discussion of things like influences and attitudes, these biblical categories serve us much better than the categories of 'positive' and 'negative.'

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<sup>8</sup>The New Thought Movement was the 19<sup>th</sup> Century prototype of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's New Age Movement. Its principle thinker was Earnest Holmes. His seminal work was *The Science of Mind* (New York: R. M. McBride, 1938), republished (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1997).