

Positive Thinking And Possibility Thinking In The Church: What Does Scripture Say?

[South Central District Pastor/Teacher/Delegate Conference
Lord of Life Evangelical Lutheran Church Friendswood, TX January 28-29, 1988]

By Pastor Michael J. Albrecht

Not long ago a rumor got around that Thomas Harris, author of *I'm OK, You're OK* and founder of transactional analysis, had committed suicide. Somehow this got into the hearing of a prominent American Bible teacher, and then into one of his messages, in which he pointed to Harris's suicide as proof of the bankruptcy of his psychology. Much to his dismay, this teacher discovered that the rumors of Harris's death had been greatly exaggerated. Harris, very much alive, filed a lawsuit for slander and won a considerable out-of-court settlement.¹

Whenever we set out to evaluate and to criticize people with whom we find ourselves in disagreement, it behooves us to remember not only that slander is a crime, but also that no matter who they may be, they are protected by God's Eighth Commandment. Whether he be a heretic or a pagan, each and every one of my fellow human beings deserves for me to put the best construction on what he says and does.

In researching and writing this paper I have tried to maintain a level of Christian decency and integrity by asking myself this question: If I were face to face with the person I am criticizing, would I be willing to look him in the eye and say what I am writing? And I would like to suggest that as we discuss this paper here this morning, and as you return to your respective homes and churches and discuss this topic, that we all make a special effort to practice the Golden Rule.

Born on May 31, 1898 in Bowersville, Ohio, Norman Vincent Peale was the son of a Methodist minister. After graduating from Ohio Wesleyan College in 1920, he spent a year working as a newspaper reporter before enrolling at Boston University to study theology and ethics. His first pastorate was at Kings Highway Methodist Church in Brooklyn, New York. During the three years he served there, the membership grew from forty-six to a thousand. In 1927 he moved to the University Methodist Church in Syracuse, New York. Among the highlights of his ministry in Syracuse was his marriage to Ruth Stafford.

In 1932 Peale went to New York City to become pastor of Marble Collegiate Church, which required him to leave the Methodist Church and join the Reformed Church in America. Our country was in the depths of the Great Depression. The church had a building that would seat 1,450 people, but the average Sunday morning attendance was about 250. And for two years Peale preached with little visible effect.

It was in this context that Peale developed the emphasis on positive thinking that was to become his trademark. As he changed his approach to preaching, people responded in phenomenal numbers. At the peak of his career, Peale preached to approximately 5,000 people each Sunday morning. In addition to his pastoral duties, he also served as president of the New York City Council of Churches and headed up the American Foundation of Religion and Psychiatry, as well as overseeing the publication of *Guideposts* magazine. A widely sought after speaker and a prolific writer, his most famous book was *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which first appeared in 1952. It sold three million copies. "Among American preachers of this century, only Billy Graham, Bishop Sheen, and Harry Emerson Fosdick have had as wide an audience."²

Obviously Norman Vincent Peale has exerted a considerable influence upon a generation of Americans. His prominence has inevitably attracted both ardent support and bitter criticism. One of Peale's more outspoken defenders is Grove Patterson who wrote an article for *Christian Herald* which was entitled "What Motivates Peale's Critics?" One valid point that Patterson made in support of Peale is that too few of his detractors had

devoted any time or attention to his sermons.³ So let's take a brief look at some of Peale's preaching before we go to an examination of his best-selling book.

His sermons are short, averaging about twenty-five minutes in length of delivery.... Peale always speaks extemporaneously. He believes that reading or memorizing a sermon blocks spontaneity and interferes with the audience empathy. He believes in leaving the exact expression to the inspiration of the moment.⁴

Mrs. Ruth Peale has given us a detailed description of her husband's sermon preparation routine that explains further:

I have never known Dr. Peale to write a manuscript for his sermons, but he always prepares an outline. Usually it consists of an introduction and three points, which are put down in such a way that he has freedom of selection as he speaks. Depending on how much time he devotes to the first section, he decides as he is preaching whether to use all three points or only two, and which point he will eliminate....

He never takes his outline into the pulpit...

A Biblical text, usually from the New Testament, is always the foundation for the sermons. Seldom if ever is the text stated at the outset, being introduced instead as a supportive element after the theme of the sermon has been stated in the introduction. From then on, throughout the sermon, the text is referred to often, and all of the material is closely related to it.⁵

Having just heard Mrs. Peale's description of her husband's homiletical method, I find it extremely interesting to compare the remarks of Fant and Pinson that Peale "does not provide expositions of the Scripture in his sermons, nor can it be said that he usually develops his sermon in any textual way."⁶ Several pages later they characterize his sermon titles as "not particularly creative" and then go on to say,

There is seldom a discernible outline in Peale's sermons, but his development is always logical. His formula: state the issue, show its importance, relate it to the audience, illustrate it, and apply it. Peale is more interested in inspiring self-confidence than in conveying a body of information.

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As I read such comments, I can't help thinking how those words would sound if they were coming out of the mouth of my homiletics professor at the seminary as he critiqued my sermon work. But perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves that these men evidently share neither our theological perspective nor our liturgical approach to worship, and so they can say such things without intending them to be as harsh as they sound in our ears .

I must confess to having read only five of Peale's sermons, but they were the five included in Fant and Pinson's anthology, so I like to think they were at least representative of his preaching even though it is bound to be a matter of opinion if they are five of his best.

The sermon I would like to quote from is titled "Believe You Can and You Can." The text is Philippians 2:5, 4:13. The first sentence reads like this: "You know, friends, it occurs to me that preaching is a rather strange business." There follows four paragraphs about the danger of preaching becoming a dull routine over the years, and then he says, "The purpose of these rather rambling remarks is to stress the fact that we preach for a purpose." And half a page later he explains,

Today we hope to reach you, really reach you, with one basic fact, and that fact is this: You never need to be overwhelmed or defeated by anything in this world.... You have within you the capacity to handle anything. You may not think you have much capacity, for we All have a great tendency to minimize ourselves. But we must learn to stop that minimizing. It is an affront to Almighty God who created us.⁸

After a lengthy illustration in which he cites Thomas Edison as support for the idea that we are all capable of astounding ourselves with our own accomplishments, Peale goes on to tell a story about his wealthy friend W. Clement Stone. Mr. Stone's motto was "What the mind can conceive and believe, the mind can achieve." And Peale enthusiastically seconds the motion with the following logical progression:

The mind is a great thing. It is what makes you immortal. It is what gives you victory over circumstances. The Bible says, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." You have this mystical perceptive mind; you have this mind full of strength. If you take charge of your mind, you will take charge of your body and of your emotions; you will take charge of your environment and of your circumstances. A Christ-motivated mind has limitless power.⁹

After reading this sermon, I can't help wondering about the summary of his theological position which Peale published in one of his books in 1961.

I always was and still am an orthodox Christian. I believe in the Bible as the word of God as sincerely as the most dyed-in-the-wool fundamentalist, apart from the stilted vocabulary and mechanistic approach some of them insist upon. I accept completely the plan of salvation. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Divine Son of God and our Lord and Savior. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Birth of Christ and, indeed, in all the statements of the Apostles' Creed.

I go right down the line with the historic doctrines of the Christian Church but I also believe that this ancient faith can be taught in new and fresh thought and language forms and applied scientifically and with creative power in people's lives; that it can solve the toughest problems of human nature and society, too.¹⁰

I hope we are being fair to Dr. Peale if we now move on to a brief evaluation of his most popular book, assuming that we have sufficient background to understand his words as he intended them to be understood. In the introduction to *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Peale writes,

The purpose of this book is a very direct and simple one.... It is written with the sole objective of helping the reader achieve a happy, satisfying, and worthwhile life. I thoroughly and enthusiastically believe in certain demonstrated and effective principles which, when practiced, produce a victorious life....

If you read this book thoughtfully, carefully absorbing its teachings, and if you will sincerely and persistently practice the principles and formulas set forth herein, you can experience an amazing improvement within yourself ... you can modify or change the circumstances in which you now live ... You will become a more popular, esteemed and well-liked individual.... You may attain a degree of health not hitherto known by you and experience a new and keen pleasure in living. You will become a person of greater usefulness and will wield an expanded influence....

It is no speculative series of extravagant assertions that I make, for these principles have worked so efficiently over so long a period of time that they are now firmly established as documented and demonstrable truth. The system outlined is a perfected and amazing method of successful living.¹¹

This remarkable introduction concludes with a statement that is perhaps even more remarkable still. "This book teaches applied Christianity; a simple yet scientific system of practical techniques of successful living that works." So let's take a look at the table of contents. There are 17 chapters with titles like "Believe in Yourself," and "How to Have Constant Energy," and "How to Create Your Own Happiness," and "Expect the Best and Get It," and "I Don't Believe in Defeat," and "How to Break the Worry Habit," and "How to Get People to Like You," and last but not least "How to Draw upon That Higher Power."

Chapter one begins, "Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities ... this book will help you believe in yourself and release your inner powers." Some five pages later Peale writes,

Go to a competent spiritual adviser and let him teach you how to have faith. The ability to possess and utilize faith and gain the release of powers it provides are skills and, like any skills, must be studied and practiced to gain perfection.

The skills we are encouraged to master are what Peale calls "positive thinking." He quotes Karl Menninger that "Attitudes are more important than facts." Therefore, he reasons, "a confident and optimistic thought pattern can modify or overcome the fact altogether."

The chapter concludes with ten steps for "overcoming inadequacy attitudes and learning to practice faith." Permit me to quote four of them in order to give you a taste of what they are like.

1. Formulate and stamp indelibly on your mind a mental picture of yourself as succeeding. Hold this picture tenaciously. Never permit it to fade. Your mind will seek to develop this picture. Never think of yourself as failing; never doubt the reality of the mental image. That is most dangerous, for the mind always tries to complete what it pictures. So always picture "success" no matter how badly things seem to be going at the moment.

5. Ten times a day repeat these dynamic words, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) (Stop reading and repeat them NOW slowly and confidently.)

7. Ten times each day practice the following affirmation, repeating it out loud if possible. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." (Philippians 4:13) Repeat those words NOW. That magic statement is the most powerful antidote on earth to inferiority thoughts.

9. Put yourself in God's hands. To do that simply state, "I am in God's hands." Then believe you are NOW receiving all the power you need. "Feel" it flowing into you. Affirm that "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21) in the form of adequate power to meet life's demands.

Much of the book is devoted to testimonials and stories of people who have tried these methods and experienced a profound change in their lives. And Peale never claims any particular credit for his role in bringing these miraculous transformations about.

I would like to give you a sample of one more chapter, because like the sections I have already quoted, I believe it lays the foundation for some of the ideas we will be discussing shortly. Chapter 4 is called "Try Prayer Power." The following definition is offered:

Prayer power is a manifestation of energy. Just as there exist scientific techniques for the release of atomic energy, so are there scientific procedures for the release of spiritual energy through the mechanism of prayer.

This obviously fits right together with the principle expressed earlier that there are certain skills that need to be mastered in order to live a happier and more productive life. And that is precisely how the chapter continues.

If you have not experienced this power, perhaps you need to learn new techniques of prayer. It is well to study prayer from an efficiency point of view. Usually the emphasis is entirely religious, though no cleavage exists between the two concepts. Scientific spiritual practice rules out stereotyped procedure even as it does in general science. If you have been praying in a certain manner, even if it has brought you blessings, which it doubtless has, perhaps you can pray even more profitably by varying the pattern and by experimenting with fresh prayer formulas. Get new insights; practice new skills to attain greatest results....

New and fresh spiritual techniques are being constantly discovered by men and women of spiritual genius. It is advisable to experiment with prayer power according to such methods as prove sound and effective. If this sounds new and strangely scientific, bear in mind that the secret of prayer is to find the process that will most effectively open your mind humbly to God. Any method through which you can stimulate the power of God to flow into your mind is legitimate and usable.

At this point it is certainly tempting to stop and respond to some of the terminology and the theology that we have heard from Dr. Peale, but I would like to save that for later, because I think if we move right on into the section on Robert Schuller, it will become clear that he represents a further development of many of Peale's ideas.

POSSIBILITY THINKING -- ROBERT SCHULLER

Robert H. Schuller was born September 16, 1926 and raised on "a typical midwestern farm." His father had lost his parents as a teenager and was forced to drop out of school in the sixth grade in order to go to work as a hired hand for a local farmer. Being a thrifty young man, he eventually saved enough to make a down payment on a 160-acre farm. But then came the Great Depression and the even more devastating drought of the early 1930's. But the elder Schuller was able to talk his banker into giving him an extension on his mortgage, and they managed to hang on to the farm.

Some years later, when the younger Schuller was home from college for the summer, on a quiet June afternoon a killer tornado struck the family farm. The family fled in their car, and just barely got away ahead of the twister, but when they returned to survey the damage after the storm had passed,

Everything was gone. Where only a half-hour before there had been nine buildings, freshly painted, now there were none. Where there had been life, there was the silence of death. It was all gone -- all dead.

Only white foundations remained, lying on a clean patch of black ground. There was no debris. Everything had simply been sucked up and carried away. Three little pigs, still living, suckled the breasts of their dead mother, lying in the driveway. We could hear the sickening moan of dying cattle, the hiss of gas escaping from a portable tank of butane used to provide fuel for our

stove. Then I saw my riding horse -- lying dead with a fourteen-foot-long two-by-four piercing his belly.¹²

Twenty-six years of hard work had been wiped out in ten minutes. His father was past sixty, but even in the midst of this catastrophe he refused to give up. Of the nine farms that had been demolished in that tornado, the Schuller farm was the only one to be rebuilt. A few years later prices rose sharply and within five years the mortgage was paid off. His father died a successful man, and the younger Schuller never forgot his example of perseverance and determination.

Today Dr. Robert Schuller has become one of America's most widely known churchmen. Every Sunday morning more than 10,000 people crowd into his Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. His television program, "The Hour Of Power," is broadcast on 187 stations to an audience of 2.4 million viewers. That makes him the nation's most-watched televangelist.

Schuller is a minister in the Reformed Church in America, which is the same denomination Norman Vincent Peale joined when he moved to New York City. The board of directors that oversees his TV ministry includes Chicago insurance magnate W. Clement Stone; Richard De Vos, president of the Amway Corporation; and Dr. Peale, among others.

According to a Los Angeles Times article,

Schuller is moderately compensated by corporate standards (\$123,550 last year in salary and housing allowances), but his book royalties and his work on the global lecture circuit have earned him millions. He lives well, though not extravagantly ... He drives a 1979 Cadillac; his wife, Arvella, drives a 1983 Lincoln provided by a book publisher....

Schuller and his wife own a well-appointed house on 1 3/4 acres in Orange, as well as condominiums in Honolulu; Winter Park, Colorado; and Laguna Beach. Schuller uses the Laguna Beach home as a private writing studio. According to Schuller ministry officials, all these properties are mortgaged and were purchased from book royalties or with family inheritances.¹³

Schuller is the author of 32 books, and was the first religious writer to have two titles on the *New York Times* best-seller list in the same month. He is also a highly paid lecturer, drawing \$15,000 for an appearance. The \$35 million that poured into his TV ministry in 1986 came mostly from small contributors, with the average gift being \$20.66.

In 1982 Robert Schuller published *Self-Esteem The New Reformation*, which is probably the closest thing to a systematic presentation of his theology yet to appear in print. "Through the generosity of an anonymous donor," a complimentary copy was mailed to nearly every pastor in America.

In the introduction Schuller writes,

I am convinced that the deepest of all human needs is salvation from sin and hell. I see sin as all pervasive in humanity, infecting all human behavior and polluting the social institutions and systems at every level. The result of sin is death and hell.

When I first read those words, I was forced to pause in amazement. I had heard that Schuller refused even to mention the word sin in his preaching, but suddenly I had encountered the word three times in three consecutive sentences -- and the message sounded orthodox! But my euphoria quickly evaporated as I read on.

What do I mean by sin? Answer: Any human condition or act that robs God of glory by stripping one of his children of their right to divine dignity.

I could offer another complementing answer, "Sin is that deep lack of trust that separates me from God and leaves me with a sense of shame and unworthiness."

I can offer still another answer: "Sin is any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self-esteem." And what is "hell"? It is the loss of pride that naturally follows separation from God ... A person is in hell when he has lost his self-esteem.

Perhaps this makes you wonder what he means by "self-esteem." Half a page later he offers the following italicized definition. *"Self-esteem is the human hunger for the divine dignity that God intended to be our emotional birthright as children created in his image."*

Jay Adams gives Schuller credit for "the courage and the insight to see the implications" of this self-esteem theology. Many of Schuller's admirers and imitators "hesitate to carry those principles to their logical extreme." But if his ideas are all he claims them to be, then nothing short of a New Reformation will do. "You cannot have a panacea that does not affect everything." ¹⁴

Two areas that require immediate attention, according to Schuller, are our preaching and our evangelism.

We cannot speak out with a "Thus saith the Lord" strategy when we are talking to people who couldn't care less about the Lord! We cannot start with "What does the text say?" if we're talking to persons who aren't about to affirm respect for or unquestioning obeisance to "the text."

When I hear talk like that, I can't help wondering what ever happened to the idea that we are simply to preach the Gospel, because it is the power of God unto salvation -- both for the Jew and for the Greek. It is neither new or surprising that that the unchurched and the unbeliever should start out with no respect for the Word of God. The Bible clearly says that every one of us is hostile toward God and dead in our sin. And it is through the Word that the Holy Ghost works the miracle of conversion in a sinner's heart. The sword of the Spirit is living and active; it is the most powerful weapon in our arsenal. So why should we abandon "Thus saith the Lord"?

Schuller simply states, "For the church to address the unchurched with a theocentric attitude is to invite failure in mission." Rather than focusing our attention on God, Schuller would have us concentrate our attention on the people we are trying to reach. He says,

The most important question facing the church is: "What are the deepest needs felt by human beings?" Religious institutions who ignore this question will remain what they are -- dying churches.

The reason why this is so all-important is that "when a human being's self-esteem is stimulated and sustained ... in a redemptive relationship with Christ, we are truly saved from sin and hell." But on the other hand, "if we lose our self-esteem, we will cease to be possibility thinkers."

Robert Schuller writes:

I don't think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality and, hence, counterproductive to the evangelism enterprise than the often crude, uncouth, and unchristian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition.¹⁵

In an appearance at the headquarters of the Unity School of Christianity, which is located near Kansas City, Missouri, Dr. Schuller spoke about possibility thinking and how it had helped his church grow. Afterwards there was an opportunity for questions from the audience.

"Dr. Schuller," he was asked, "we hear a lot of talk these days about the New Age, the Age of Aquarius, the type of New Age thinking that we are involved in with Holistic healing and various other things that are part of what is called the New Age. Will you describe the role of what you might consider the New Age minister in the 80's and beyond?" Schuller made no protest that he knew nothing of the New Age or that he wasn't a "New Age minister." Without hesitating, he replied:

Well, I think it depends upon where you're working. I believe that the responsibility in this Age is to "positivize" religion. Now this probably doesn't have much bearing to you people, being Unity people, you're positive. But I talk a great deal to groups that are not positive ... even to what we would call Fundamentalists who deal constantly with words like sin, salvation, repentance, guilt, that sort of thing.

So when I'm dealing with these people ... what we have to do is positivize the words that have classically only had a negative interpretation.¹⁶

Similarly, in his manifesto, Schuller complains that "Christian liturgies, hymns, prayers, and scriptural interpretations have often insensitively and destructively offended the dignity of the person." Thus one of the most urgent tasks that lies before the church today is to find a way to relate to those whose dignity has been offended.

Many sincere students within the larger body of believers are turned off by a theology that offers nothing more than a classical heaven and hell proposition.

The alternative theology of mission focuses on peace, brotherhood, and economic equality. And the tension between these two theologies of mission is strong in the church today. Somehow a strong fresh theology of mission must be articulated that will allow sincere followers of both points of view to merge mind, motive, method, and message.

Just how far Schuller is willing to go with this syncretism becomes clear when he is discussing various forms of meditation. Evidently sincerity is a more significant criterion than orthodoxy.

A variety of approaches to meditation ... is employed by many different religions as well as by various non-religious mind control systems. In all forms ... TM, Zen Buddhism, or Yoga or ... meditation ... of Judaeo-Christian tradition ... the meditator endeavors to overcome the distractions of the conscious mind....

It is important to remember that meditation in any form is the harnessing, by human means, of God's divine laws.... We are endowed with a great many powers and forces that we do not yet fully understand.... Transcendental Meditation or TM ... is not a religion nor is it necessarily anti-Christian.¹⁷

This same inclination to blur the lines between Christianity and other world religions has recently appeared in conversations with Norman Vincent Peale. At a party given in honor of Spencer Kimball's 85th

birthday, Peale praised the Mormon patriarch as a great man of God and a true prophet of Jesus Christ. And in a guest appearance on the Phil Donahue TV show Dr. Peale told a questioner from the audience, "I know a Shinto temple in Japan where I found eternal peace one day in my soul."¹⁸

This is just one more reason to say, "Robert Schuller's *possibility thinking* is the same product as Peale's *positive thinking* marketed under a different brand name."¹⁹

IN THE CHURCH -- VARIATIONS ON THE SAME THEME

In an attempt to bring this topic a little closer to home, I would like to devote a little time and space to other personalities who echo many of the ideas we have just covered. And it struck me as I was doing my reading in preparation for this paper, that it so happens that we can stay within the geographic confines of our own South Central District and still hit most of the big names.

So let's begin in the north. "It appears that unmistakable supernatural interventions are less common in most places than is reported in Tulsa."²⁰ Although Oral Roberts has gotten most of the ink lately, Tulsa is also the home of Kenneth Hagin, who is now in his sixth decade of ministry. From April 22, 1933 until August 8, 1934 Hagin was confined to bed with an incurable heart deformity. Finally, as he was meditating on Mark 11:24 "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them," it dawned on him that the believing had to come before the having. So instead of believing that he would be healed eventually, he declared that he was already healed. Two days later he climbed out of bed, miraculously and permanently healed.

Originally a Baptist, Hagin received the baptism in the Holy Spirit in 1937 and joined the Assemblies of God. On the basis of his own experience he developed what came to be known as "positive confession." In 1974 he and his son Kenneth, Jr. founded the Rhema Bible Training Center which by the fall of 1980 had an enrollment of more than 2,000. There are also 11,400 students who participate in correspondence courses. Their annual summer Campmeeting has been known to attract as many as 20,000 people to Tulsa. As Kenneth Hagin's ministry has expanded into the positive confession movement, the Bible passage quoted again and again has been Mark 11:23-24 "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

Moving south to Fort Worth, we find the headquarters of Kenneth Copeland Ministries. Kenneth and his wife Gloria became Christians two weeks apart in the fall of 1962. Three months later they received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. For the next five years they struggled both financially and spiritually, before finally deciding to move to Tulsa so Kenneth could enroll at Oral Roberts University. According to Gloria, one of the highlights of their stay in Tulsa was getting ahold of a tape by Kenneth Hagin in 1967 that moved them to start their own evangelistic association in 1968. They expanded into radio in 1975, TV in 1979, and satellite productions in 1981. If there is one Bible passage which has become the motto of their ministry, it would have to be III John 2 "Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health."

In one service recorded for cable TV, fellow evangelist Jerry Savelle handed the Copelands 10 checks for \$1,000 each and said,

Each of these \$1,000 checks I am now giving to you will return one hundredfold to me, according to God's Word. One for my church, one for my school, one for my mission work, ... and this last one for my wife and myself personally. Folks, these checks will return a total of \$100,000 each! Can you say "Praise the Lord"? What are you waiting for? Get on our feet and get in on this! Let's take the biggest offering ever! I want it now! Who will do what I did? Who will sow in famine and reap one hundredfold?²¹

Staying in the Metroplex, we don't have to go far to find Robert Tilton's Word of Faith Satellite Network.

It is possible that the most influential faith teacher of the 1990's will be Bob Tilton, who has taken full advantage of the opportunities inherent in this high-technology age. Tilton's Word of Faith Satellite Network, based at his huge church near Dallas, is beaming seminars and revivals into nearly two thousand churches that have hooked up by satellite dishes.²²

Tilton's efforts seem to be directed toward a synthesis of two similar but distinct groups. On the one hand there are the positive/possibility people who have followed Peale and Schuller for years. On the other hand there are the positive confession people who have been followers of the Hagins and the Copelands. The device that seems to be bringing them together is what Tilton is calling Success 'N' Life Clubs. Monthly meetings are held wherever there is a satellite dish hooked up to receive the broadcasts from Dallas. Within 6 months of the first meeting, in November 1984, about 800 clubs were set up across the country, and that number is growing steadily.

The monthly club meetings and other activities and benefits are designed to raise up an army of successful and wealthy Christians who can finance and otherwise help in a takeover of the world for Christ²³

Some of the fund drives that have been broadcast in the past have caused some observers to wonder whether Tilton really practices what he preaches about trusting God to supply wealth and prosperity. On one night of his "Holy Ghost God-sent Miracle Revival," which was transmitted nationally in the spring of 1985, his appeal for money lasted longer than the sermon.

Charles Capps is a retired Arkansas farmer who has become one of the leading proponents of the positive confession movement in America. Through a series of bad business decisions, Capps had become "so poor I couldn't pay attention." But then after twenty-five years of struggling in prayer, he came across a copy of one of Kenneth Hagin's books. In 1973 he established his own teaching ministry, and his own book is now reported to have sold more than a half million copies. His emphasis is on immediately answered prayer. Some people who know some Greek have pointed out to him that the Greek verb for ask in Luke 11:9 is in the present tense, which denotes repeated action. (Keep on asking and it will be given to you.) But Capps, who has not studied Greek, insists that such people are guilty of giving people "a false impression that will defeat them in their prayer life."²⁴

Finally, our tour of the South Central brings us here to Houston. At the First Baptist Church that sits near the intersection of the Katy Freeway and the 610 Loop, Pastor John Bisagno serves as senior pastor of one of the largest congregations in Houston. In 1965 he published a slender volume entitled *The Power of Positive Praying*.

The following statement, while opposed to what many believe, is in effect the key to this entire book: No prayer, to be a perfect prayer of faith, can contain the expression: *if it be Thy will!* (To pray "if it be Thy will," is quite different from "Thy will be done.") ... When Jesus prayed, "Not my will but Thine be done," in the Garden of Gethsemane, was He trying to teach us to pray in faith? Was He trying to find His Father's will? No, He was trying to submit His will to that of the Father. It was one last struggle of the flesh against the spirit.²⁵

Toward the end of the book, Bisagno describes positive praying in terms that sound like some kind of combination of positive thinking and positive confession.

If you pray for a person who is ill, don't labor over thoughts and prayers of his sickness, but think and pray of the health that Christ gives. When you think of one with a broken arm, don't think of the break, but pray and thank God for the healing power of Calvary and the use to the glory of God that the healed arm can effect. This is positive praying....

So when you have finished your prayer of intercession, do not get up, but rather stay on your knees and affirm over and over the answer to your prayer. Thank God in advance that He is going to answer and then get up and go your way, acting as though it had already happened. Do not check up on God or make other provision in case He doesn't do it. Merely believe Him, thank Him for the answer, receive it in faith and leave it with Him.²⁶

WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY?

In 2 Timothy 3:2 St Paul says that one of the signs of the last days will be that "people will be lovers of themselves." The list continues with "lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control..." And the list goes on. Every item on that list is obviously something God and St Paul disapprove of.

The one emphasis on self that we do find in Scripture is epitomized by Jesus' invitation to be his disciples. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) The cross never was and never will be a means of self-gratification; the cross is an instrument of torture and death. When you shoulder your cross and follow in your Master's footsteps, you do well to remember that Jesus warned us ahead of time, "No servant is greater than his Master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15:20) And the same emphasis is prominent also in 2 Corinthians 5:15 "He died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." Likewise we read in Romans 14:7-8 "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."

Back in the stone age when I was a boy, I remember hearing that pride was one of the seven deadly sins. Lower self-esteem is not our problem, it ought to be our goal. Romans 12:3 "By the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought."

One of the most common reasons cited by advocates of self-esteem why we should love ourselves, is that we are created in the image of God. But stop and think about that for a moment. The image that is reflected in a mirror has no intrinsic value. When the mirror gets dirty or cracked, it will not reflect the image as well as it should, but the image is not what needs attention.

Perhaps the most dangerous implication that comes out of this idea is that the image of God made us so precious to God that he could not bear to see us perish, so he sent his only Son to die for us. If there is anything in me that motivated God to redeem me, then grace is mingled with merit. It was only and entirely due to the fact that God is love that he chose to sacrifice his only begotten Son.

Donald Bloesch observes that

Christianity itself ... is, especially in its American setting, in danger of falling under the spell of positive thinking, where efforts are focused on methodically cultivating a positive attitude toward life for the purpose of gaining peace and security.... Spiritual progress charts and prayer chains play an important role in this enterprise. Faith healing becomes less an act of faith than a technique to bend the will of God.²⁷

So what is the solution? What are we to do in the face of this plague? Bloesch asserts, "The surest way to reaffirm orthodoxy is to rediscover heresy."²⁸ Since false prophets most often appear in sheep's clothing, it

should not surprise us to discover this phenomenon in the church. It is hardly unprecedented. But it need not be all gloom and despair either.

The crumbling of the moral and spiritual foundations of Western culture may be a divine opportunity offered to the church to rediscover its mission, to regain its momentum, and to become again the vital missionary force that it was intended to be at Pentecost. 29

ENDNOTES

1 Bruce Barron *The Health And Wealth Gospel* p.64

2 Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William E. Pinson, Jr. *20 Centuries of Great Preaching* Vol. 11 p.226

3 Grove Patterson "What Motivates Peale's Critics?" *Christian Herald* Vol. 79 (January 1956) p. 25

4 Fant and Pinson op. cit. p. 229

5 Ruth Peale "How does Dr. Peale Prepare his Sermons?" *Christian Living Today* January 1969

6 Fant and Pinson op.cit. p.227

7 Ibid. p. 231

8 Ibid. P-245

9 Ibid. P-247

10 Norman Vincent Peale *The Tough-Minded Optimist* pp. 29-30

11 Norman Vincent Peale *The Power of Positive Thinking* pp.x-xi

12 Robert Schuller *Tough Times Never Last, But Tough People Do!* pp. 26,28

13 Leslie Berkman and Mark I. Pinsky "Evangelist Schuller Keeps Distance from PTL Scandal" as published in the *Houston Chronicle* July 25, 1987

14 Jay E. Adams *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image* pp. 21-22

15 *Christianity Today* October 5, 1984 p. 12

16 Dave Hunt and T.A. McMahon *The Seduction of Christianity* pp. 152-153

17 Robert Schuller *Peace of Mind Through Possibility Thinking* pp. 131-132

18 Hunt and McMahon Op.cit., pp.68, 152

19 Ibid., p.24

- 20 Barron Op.cit., p.124
- 21 Ibid., p. 140
- 22 Ibid., p. 59
- 23 Hunt and McMahon Op.cit., p. 218
- 24 Barron Op.cit., p.102
- 25 John Bisagno *The Power of Positive Praying* pp. 18-19
- 26 Ibid., pp.68-69
- 27 Donald G. Bloesch *Crumbling Foundations* p.87
- 28 Ibid., p. 107
- 29 Ibid., p. 26

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