

Some Concerns about Norman Vincent Peale and the *Power of Positive Thinking*
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I find Paul appealing and Peale appalling.
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Introduction

Norman Vincent Peale is the author of the best-selling book *The Power of Positive Thinking*.¹ This book has experienced enormous popularity both within and without the Christian community for quite some time. In my speaking on issues related to the content of Peale's book, I have had more reaction to my comments and criticisms of Peale than of any other person I critique. No doubt this reaction stems, at least partially, from the fact that many of Peale's enthusiasts cannot imagine how his philosophy conflicts with anything Christian. This, together with the fact that so many have testified of the life-changing impact positive thinking has had in their own lives, makes many all the more convinced that such a philosophy and approach to life is a very good thing.

I will argue that something else is going on. To me, it is regrettable how much of the Christian community considers Peale's teachings to be not only consistent with the Christian world view but a logical and desirable application of that very world view. In this brief analysis, I will summarize exactly what Peale's *Positive Thinking* is and why its doctrines are not consistent with an evangelical Christian view of reality.

"Positive Thinking" Is Not Merely Being Optimistic

Many mistakenly think that Peale's "Positive Thinking" is merely an encouragement to be optimistic in one's outlook on life. They think that all Peale is saying is that one should try to look for the good in every situation. No doubt Peale does advocate the importance of having an

¹ Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1952). All page references are to this edition.

optimistic attitude in one's endeavors. But as we shall see, this is not fundamentally what Peale's "Positive Thinking" is all about. But even if it were, I contend that it still is not a Christian attitude, for several reasons.

Why Christians Must Be Careful about Preaching Optimism

Optimism vs. Truth

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." Thus, what is important for us as Christians is that we believe what is true about reality. These truths are grounded in understanding both the creation that God has made as well as what God have revealed through His prophets and Apostles and ultimately through His Son Jesus Christ which are contained in the Bible.

Now I fully understand and appreciate the idea that, when it comes to the exigencies of life, in light of sometimes not knowing the truth about a situation (particularly concerning the outcome of certain events), having an attitude of optimism can be a good thing. For example, while driving I might encounter an unexpected delay in the traffic. I certainly have a choice of how I am going to respond to the situation. I can become angry and fret or I can trust that such a delay might actually work out to my benefit. Perhaps had I not been delayed, I might have been on time for a collision at an intersection up ahead. There certainly is no way to know exactly what tomorrow might bring forth (James 4:13-14). Thus, as a child of God, I can choose to trust in His sovereignty and love for me as He conducts the affairs of His will in His creation. But can this be what Peale is teaching in his book? There certainly are places where this seems to be exactly his point. He says, "Learn to take a positive, optimistic attitude toward every problem." (p. 215) If this was the bottom line of thinking positive, what could possibly be wrong with that?

The answer takes me to my second reason why Christians should be careful about teaching such a philosophy.

Only Christians Can be Optimistic

The second problem with Peale's position (even if he were talking about being optimistic; which I contend he is 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 (John 3:18, 36). But there is a conspicuous lack of the cross in 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 (though I am willing to grant that these are Peale's own personal beliefs). So, even if Peale's point was that one should have an optimistic attitude toward life, this would be misguided because it is more important that one have a realistic or true attitude and recognize that one is entitled to optimism only if one has believed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is the "Power" in *The Power of Positive Thinking*?

The "Power" Is a Real Force and Not Merely an Attitude

As I have contended, however, an optimistic attitude toward life is not entirely 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" (p. ix) by "channeling spiritual power through your thoughts." (p. ix) 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." (p. 13)

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." (p. 217) One has to ask whether this means that this power is there "for anybody under any circumstances or in any condition" including unbelief? Does this mean that one need not even be a Christian for Peale's "positive thinking" to work? Clearly for Peale the answer is "yes." A quick glance at the whole "positive thinking" industry shows that it is just as viable, if not more so, outside the Christian community. The question one must ask is: "What exactly is this power?"

According to Peale, the "Power" Is from God

Tragically, Peale wants to relate this power to God. This, no doubt, is why so many Christians resonate with Peale's teachings. 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." (p. 213) But such an understanding of power is not the same notion of power we find in the Christian life. In the Bible, power from God can refer to two things. First, it can be God's ability to work miracles by a suspension of natural physical laws. While it is beyond the scope of this brief paper to unpack the theology of miracles, let it suffice to say that the power of God working miracles in which He suspends the natural physical laws is actually rather rare in the Bible and is confined to those periods where God was working specifically through His prophets and apostles to vindicate His message and messenger.² This clearly is not what Peale's positive thinking is all

² Herbert Lockyer says, "Our enumeration of miracles proves what a very conspicuous feature of the Bible they are. Yet miracles are not abundant in *all* parts of the Bible. ... Bible miracles—not including prophecies and

about. It is noteworthy, however, that Peale's notion of power is some type of force and not merely an attitude. Given that it is not a force that works miracles in the biblical sense of the term, it remains to be seen exactly what the nature and purpose of this force actually is.

Second, power from God also has to do with that inner strength that God gives His own children (i.e., those who believe in Jesus Christ, possess eternal life, and are indwelt by God's Holy Spirit) to walk faithfully with Him even during times of trouble and persecution (Phil. 4:11-13).³ While one might think that this gets closer to what Peale's positive thinking is all about, it must be remembered that what Peale is advocating is not something for which being a Christian is a prerequisite. While references and acknowledgments of God are peppered throughout Peale's book, one is hard pressed to find where Peale unequivocally maintains that such blessings and privileges are based on the work of Christ on the cross and reserved only for those who believe the gospel.

Peale's "Power" and the "Science" of Religion

Peale's notion of power is one of two main doctrines that make his teachings occult. The other is Peale's notion that matters of the spiritual realm operate according to "laws" and constitute a "science" of religion. A fuller explanation of how occult philosophy is characterized by these (and other) doctrines will have to wait for a separate analysis. Here I want to speak only to these two elements, taking them in reverse order.

Spiritual "Laws" and the "Science" of Religion

their fulfillment, which are also miracles—fall into great periods, centuries apart: the establishment of the Jewish nation ... Moses and Joshua ... The crisis in struggle with idolatry ... Elijah and Elisha ... The Captivity ... Daniel and his friends ... The introduction of Christianity ... Christ and His apostles ... The great tribulation." (Herbert Lockyer, *All the Miracles of the Bible: The Supernatural in Scripture—Its Scope and Significance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books, 1961), 17-18, emphasis in original).

³ See also, Rom. 15:13; 2 Cor. 4:7-10, 6:4-10, 12:9; Eph. 3:14-16, 6:10; Phil. 3:8-11; Col. 1:9-12.

First let us look at what Peale has to say about how matters of the spiritual realm operate according to fixed "laws" and how these laws constitutes a "science" of religion. First, throughout his book, Peale describes certain spiritual exercises in terms of techniques and laws. For example, in discussing prayer, Peale has this to say. "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. Exciting demonstrations of this energizing force are evident." (pp. 52-53) Further he says,

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 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. Gen new insights; practice new skills to attain greatest results. (p. 53)

It should strike the mature Christian as strange to see such terms as "energy," "scientific procedures," "spiritual energy," mechanism of prayer," "energizing force," techniques," "efficiency," "scientific spiritual practice," "pattern," experimenting," "formulas," and "skills" in describing prayer. This is very remote from how the Bible describes prayer. It all bespeaks of making prayer a sort of "science" in which it operates according to "laws" of the spiritual realm. Indeed, Peale is quite direct about it. "Materialistic power achievement is a romantic story. Men discover laws and formulas and harness power to do remarkable things. Spiritual power also follows laws. Mastery of these laws works wonders in an area more complicated than any form of mechanics, namely, human nature." (p. 217)

Let me be as direct with the reader as I can. Understanding the spiritual (or immaterial) realm according to the categories of "laws" or regularities that one can master in order to harness a "power" is the *sine qua non* of occult philosophy and Witchcraft. In other words, such a world

view is the very essence of occultism. Take this out of the occult and there is very little left.

Occult writer Isaac Bonewits⁴ describes it this way.

Over the centuries a collection of basic magical and mystical axioms has surfaced in culture after culture throughout the world, even in cultures that were totally isolated. These we can, and will, call the *Laws of Magic*. Like the law of gravity or the law of diminishing returns, these magical laws are not legislative acts (as some theologians have tried to make them) but rather they are descriptions of the ways that phenomena in a field—in this case magic—seem to interact and behave. They are the results of observation, testing, and theorizing until a coherent whole is produced.⁵

While it is perfectly appropriate to understand the physical world according to laws or regularities (the accumulation of which we call 'science'), to understand the spiritual world in such a way is occult. It is certainly not the way the Bible characterizes the spiritual realm. To do so eliminates the concept of grace. This is so because if I get "results" merely because I have experimented and mastered the laws with my skills, then those blessings that come my way can no longer be said to have come by the grace and love of God. It is like the difference between how a child would relate to a vending machine vs. how that same child would relate to his parent. If the child goes to the machine and puts in the appropriate coins, then the machine renders the candy. The machine renders the candy only because of the laws of physics and mechanics. As long that the child has "mastered" the "skills" in putting in the proper coins, the machine will always respond the same way. Remember Peale's words: "It is there for anybody under any circumstances or in any conditions." (p. 217)

Now contrast this with how the child would relate to his parent. Suppose the child approaches the parent for some candy. In this situation, the child is appealing to the will of the parent to decide to give the candy. There is no "law" or mechanism according to which the

⁴ pronounced bon'-a-witz

⁵ Isaac Bonewits, *Real Magic* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1989), 1.

parent operates in the same manner as the vending machine. Instead, the parent will respond to the child according to his love for the child, deciding whether the candy is good for the child at this time and whether the child is deserving of the candy, or whether the parent wants to give the candy as an act of kindness regardless of the child's merit.

The "Power" in the *Power of Positive Thinking*

Second, regarding the "power" of positive thinking; my allegation here is that this power of which Peale speaks fits neither of these notions of power from God in any biblical sense of the term as I discussed above. Instead Peale's "positive" power is a blending of some aspects of both of these biblical (and Christian world view) notions while at the same time being strangely and deficiently different from other aspects. To illustrate this, let us go to Peale himself.

In relating this power to God, Peale comments "Contact with 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." (p. 41)

This type of thinking should sound familiar to anyone who has studied New Thought,⁶ New Age, or Occult Philosophy.⁷ To make this point more clearly in showing that these notions partake of an occult view of reality, I should like to speak more directly to the problems with the categories of 'positive' and 'negative' as it relates to this "power."

Problems with the Categories of 'Positive' and 'Negative'

⁶ The New Thought Movement was the 19th century prototype of the 20th 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).

⁷ In a very relevant sense, the philosophies of the New Thought Movement, the New Age Movement, and the Occult are the same. See the bibliography for both primary sources as well as Christian critiques of this philosophy.

In Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking* we are confronted with the notions of "positive" and "negative." Indeed, such uses of these terms is replete throughout our culture and, unfortunately, within the Christian church. Many, including 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.

The idea is that being "positive" results in a better life and being "negative" hampers a life of joy and happiness. But, taking these notions of positive and negative in their more popular sense, we see that 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) Further, in the Bible, sometimes Satan was very "positive." "Then the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die.'" (Genesis 3:4)

But it should be clear that the categories of 'positive' and 'negative' do not necessarily track the categories of 'good' and 'evil,' or, for that matter, the categories of 'true' and 'false.' Something can be morally good and be positive (in the popular sense of this term) or it can be morally good and be negative. Likewise, something can be morally evil and be positive or it can be morally evil and be negative. The same thing is true of 'positive' and 'negative' verses 'true' and 'false.' As such, the categories of 'positive' and 'negative' are ill equipped to describe the moral truth about reality.

But it is even more serious than this. Sometimes at best these categories can actually be misleading and at worst may lead into a more occult view of reality. 'Positive' and 'negative' are better suited to a discussion of energies like electricity. We are all familiar with the positive and negative poles of a battery. Thus, there are legitimate uses of these categories. But in terms of

discussions of spiritual matters or "things that *pertain* to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3) '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 in literature of the New Thought and New Age Movement. Consider the words by occult writer and philosopher Nevil Drury: "From an occult point of view the power of positive thinking, which underlies many self-help philosophies, is simply white magic."⁸ Noted Shaman⁹ Michael Harner says,

The burgeoning field of holistic medicine shows a tremendous amount of experimentation involving the reinvention of many techniques long practices in shamanism [witchcraft or occultism], such as visualization, altered state of consciousness, aspects of psychoanalysis, hypnotherapy, meditation, **positive attitude**, stress-reduction, and mental and emotional expression of personal will for health and healing.¹⁰

I believe there are two main problems with such philosophy of 'positive' and 'negative' as taught by Peale. First, such a view of power as he describes it is a false view of reality. Further research should convince the reader that the world view within which Peale unpacks his teachings and philosophy is almost entirely in line with the world view of the occult. But since the term 'occult' brings to mind for many ideas of overt evil and harm, some find it difficult to consider the fact that the teachings of Peale are indeed occult. But remember that my concern here is one of truth, not practical application. I am not quarrelling with the assertion that perhaps

⁸ Nevil Drury, *The Occult Experience: Magic in the New Age* (Garden City Park, NY: Avery Publishing Group, 1989), 18.

⁹ According to Drury, Shamanism is a "technique of gaining trance consciousness, in which the medicine-man, healer, or sorcerer undertakes a journey of the soul to encounter the gods or spirits." (Nevil Drury, *Dictionary of Mysticism and the Occult* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985): q.v. "Shamanism.")

¹⁰ Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman* (New York: Bantam New Age Books, 1980): 175, emphasis added. The case can easily be made that for the most part Shamanism is occult. No academic work on Shamanism or the occult that I know of would deny this. Being occult, Shamanism stems from the same world view as witchcraft, a term much more familiar to Americans. For primary research on Shamanism and occultism see the bibliography below. Many more quotations from occult writers could be given to show how this notion of "power" in the occult is the same as the notion found in Peale's book. Such works are listed in the bibliography.

some of Peale's approach to life might seemingly have some benefit. But the Christian must ask himself "At what price?" Are we willing to sacrifice a true view God and His creation for such potential benefits? We cannot let these teachings subtly re-align our thinking such that we begin to regard God as a being who dispenses "power" in accordance with "laws" and certain mental states that we produce without regards to the conditions that God Himself has laid down for us for having a relationship with Him in the first place. While a child of God might want to adopt an approach to life of optimism (since such optimism is undergirded by the fact that we possess eternal life), we need to be careful that we do not suggest to our lost friends and loved ones that such an approach to life is desirable for them irrespective of whether they believe the gospel.

Second, a careful reading of both occult material and how many have lived a life implementing occult philosophy shows that some on this path have opened themselves to demonic forces. I have no doubt that there exist forces that human beings encounter through the use of mind dynamics such as meditation. But I am equally convinced that these forces are not from God. In saying this, I am not suggesting that Peale or anyone who has read his works has or will have a demonic encounter. It nevertheless remains that such encounters have occurred in proximity to New Age and occult practices. These are things with which Christians—indeed every human being—should have nothing to do.

Conclusion

I have argued that *The Power of Positive Thinking* is not merely teaching the benefits of living one's life with optimism. But even if that was the thrust of the book, this philosophy is misleading in that optimism is only appropriate for one who has a saving relationship with God through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Peale never insists on this requisite.

Instead, *The Power of Positive Thinking* teaches two main doctrines of occult philosophy, viz., first, that the spiritual realm (and thus spiritual activities such as prayer) operate according to "laws" and one can master and develop skills in managing for the purpose of enhancing one's experience of the joys in life, and second, that there is a "power" that resides in us that can be activated by following certain "techniques" to release this "power." It is my hope that Christians will see that what Norman Vincent Peale is offering in his book is at best a bankrupt substitute for what God really has for His children and is at worst an excursion into the occult.

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Norman Vincent Peale, one of the most influential clergymen of his time, is the author of forty-six books, including the international bestseller *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Dr. Peale's legacy continues today through the Peale Center for Christian Living, the Outreach Division of Guideposts, www.dailyguideposts.com/positivethinking. Would you like to tell us about a lower price? If you are a seller for this product, would you like to suggest updates through seller support? Start reading *The Power Of Positive Thinking* on your Kindle in under a minute. Don't have a Kindle? Get your Kindle here, or download a FREE Kindle Reading App. Peale's book is a typical positive thinking book. He tells many encouraging stories of how people were helped by positive thinking. And this is really nice to read. Actually, some people just have it easier to be positive whilst many others are naturally drawn to negative thinking and worrying. From an evolutionary perspective this makes perfectly sense, because humans who were very much aware of possibly threats and focused on them were much more likely to survive. So I guess, this book may encourage you to more positive thinking! Speaking specifically of Peale's book, it matters what your purpose in reading it is. If you are interested in it for historical and popular culture reasons then yes- it is a significant artifact of post-war 1950's American culture. Peale also says to spend some quiet time each day relaxing, and not thinking about anything much. He says picture your mind as a pond and see if you can achieve the state of smoothness and no ripples. p.28. "Fill your mind with all peaceful experiences possible, then make planned and deliberate excursions to them in memory." p. 31. [I have been doing this with my traveling. So Peale says, "The happiness habit is developed by simply practicing happy thinking. Make a mental list of happy thoughts and pass them through your mind several times each day. If an unhappiness thought should cross your mind, immediately stop, consciously eject it, and substitute a happiness thought.