

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Saving Faith and the Identity of God

The Washington Post recently ran a piece entitled “The Negative Power of Positive Thinking” by Bob Carden (April 12, 2014) that examined the wide-spread influence of the power of positive thinking – that has disastrous consequences. What if the power of positive thinking turns out to be simply a numbing drumbeat that actually reinforces a positivity delusion leading people to make blockheaded business and investment decisions?

Optimism is firmly rooted in American culture. The spiritual father of the positive thinking movement was a 19th-century spiritualist, teacher and healer by the name of Phineas Quimby. Quimby rebelled against old-style Calvinism, thinking its austere nature depressed people and caused “disease-inducing guilt.” He disregarded conventional medicines and instead relied on positive thought to heal the body and foster a clear mind. There is a distinct line of descent from Quimby to Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale to Robert Schuller to the ever-grinning Joel Osteen who pastors Lakewood Church in Houston, TX. The congregation now owns what used to be the Compaq Center, the 16,000-seat former home of the Houston Rockets. Nearly 40,000 people attend each week, making Lakewood Church America’s largest congregation.

Since *Your Best Life Now*, Osteen has authored several other books, most of which have appeared on the lists of bestsellers. They include *Become a Better You*, *It’s Your Time*, *Every Day a Friday*, *I Declare*, and *Break Out*. *Your Best Life Now* catapulted Osteen to new heights of exposure and influence. Barbara Walters declared him one of her “10 Most Fascinating People of 2006” and in that same year readers of *Church Report Magazine* named him “Most Influential Christian in 2006.” He was invited to make many appearances on television programs including *60 Minutes*, and he made much-publicized visits to Oprah Winfrey and Larry King. Osteen has been dubbed “America’s Pastor” and the heir of Billy Graham. He recently served as the “theological expert” for the new Jesus movie *Son of God!* *Your Best Life Now* quickly debuted on the *New York Times* list of bestsellers and remained there for more than two years. By December, just three months after its release, *Your Best Life Now* had tallied over 500,000 sales and was awarded the Gold Book Award. In May 2005 it achieved 1 million sales and received the Platinum Book Award. To date it has sold over 4 million copies.

Osteen’s book was widely criticized by Christian leaders for ignoring the gospel of salvation through Christ’s atoning sacrifice in favor of a gospel of financial and life-wide prosperity. While Osteen claimed to be teaching biblical principles, he was instead picking and choosing isolated verses of the Bible to teach self-empowerment must as Norman Vincent Peale and so many others had done before him. In a helpful review of the book, Greg Gilbert summarizes it well: “Yes, Osteen talks about God throughout, but it is not the God of the Bible he has in mind. Osteen’s God is little more than the mechanism that gives the power of positive thinking. There is no cross. There is no sin. There is no redemption or salvation or eternity.” He continues: “If Joel Osteen wants to be the Norman Vincent Peale of the twenty-first century, he has every right to give it a shot. But he should stop marketing his message as Christianity, because it is not. You cannot simply make reference to God, quote some Scripture, call what you’re saying ‘spiritual principles’ and pass it off as Christianity. That’s the kind of thing that will have people ‘enlarging their vision’ and ‘choosing to be happy’ all the way to hell.” Despite such critiques, the book

proved extremely popular among Christians and non-Christians alike and was followed by a series of similar works.¹

In Osteen's theology *faith* is simply a synonym for positive thinking. It is noteworthy that while Paul never reduces God to a function of human faith, Romans 4 is exclusively concerned with God AD EXTRA, with God as He is to be believed in and not as we would have Him be.² This has not often been sufficiently stressed, but is in fact the case for each of Paul's "definitions" of God in Romans 4. To put it the other way around, for Paul in Romans 4 human faith is inseparable not only from God, but also from God understood in a certain way. The anti-trinitarian God as set forth in the Koran or the Book of Mormon will not do. For Paul there is no true saving faith that is not faith in "the God who justifies the ungodly" (4:5), "the God who gives life to the dead and calls non-entities to be entities" (4:17), and finally "the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (4:24). We have already seen above how central the "justification of the ungodly" is to Romans 3:21-4:8. We can take this further, however, and show that in fact this is the first of a triad of "definitions" of God in Romans 4. In addition, it is noteworthy that the action that is crucial to the description of God is governed by the participle "believing" (*PISTEUONTI*): Paul's theological statement here comes in the context of human belief about God – but again not God in some generic sense – but particularly the God of the Bible. Therefore, each of these three designations of God in Romans 4 comes in the context of human faith: these actions of the justification of the ungodly, giving life to the dead, and the raising of Jesus, for Paul, define God as He reveals Himself to be believed in. The other description of God that is integral to faith is Abraham's belief that God was able actually to do what he had promised (4:21). It is *this* faith, which truly means that "we uphold the Law" (Romans 3:31). The Law as witness is more than established by this faith in God as he really is. There is no *tension* here for Paul, but rather a conflict between Paul and his Jewish contemporaries over how the Law, God, and faith were to be interpreted.³

I. PAUL'S ILLUSTRATION AND APPLICATION

A. The twofold application of the Old Testament (Romans 4:23-24a)

The apostle here makes the point that the story of Abraham is not written for the sake of Abraham alone, that is, as a memorial of him. Or that he might live on in the memory of men. It is written for others, for us, since the manner in which the patriarch was justified is the same method by which we, too, are justified by a just God and a Savior. The imputation of righteousness is secured by us in the same way, faith in the God of Abraham and in His promises concerning the Redeemer. Cf. I Corinthians 10:6-11.

B. The essence of saving faith (Romans 4:24b)

The essence of saving faith, Paul says, is found in believing on Him who raised up Jesus, our Lord, from the dead. It is no vague, indefinite, amorphous feeling; it is the conviction that a set of facts concerning Christ is true. There are few, if any, promises from God to the unsaved man. There is the offer of salvation in Christ. An offer, however, is not a promise. Promises pertain to the ones who have responded to the universal offer of salvation in Christ. Incidentally, the "if we believe" of the Authorized Version is in the original text simply, to us who believe. The expression "that raised up Jesus, our Lord, from the dead," points to the essence of faith. It is in the God of the resurrection, or in the God who, in this context, "quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which are not, as though they were" (cf. v. 17). Cf. v. 19 (the deadness of Sarah's womb). There is a harmony of essence between the begetting of Isaac and the resurrection of Isaac's Seed, the Lord Jesus Christ.

C. The rationale of the saving acts (Romans 4:25)

Who was delivered for [better, *on account of*] *our offences*, and was raised again for [better, *on account of*] *our justification*. The apostle, after discussing the case of Abraham as a ruling instance in proof of justification by faith alone, proceeds at the close of the chapter to describe faith as it is exercised on its proper object. "He uses a striking name or title of God

when he describes Him as the Christ-raiser, and represents faith as exercised on God in this capacity; that is, on God as the source of the atonement, and the acceptor of it at the hands of the Surety.” In this expression, which by its balance suggests that it was used by Paul and became something like a formula, and which seems to clearly recall Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (cf. 53:11-12, 5, 6, etc.), the apostle expounds the meaning of the cross and the resurrection. His death took place because of offenses, while His resurrection took place because justification had been completed.⁴ G.C. Berkouwer, in his masterful book on the work of Christ sums up the thrust of our passage by saying, “Christ’s victory over death was not a spectacular event in order to convince Jerusalem and the whole world of its undeniable truth and reality, but to reveal its saving power. There is no arbitrariness in the progress from cross to resurrection. All arbitrariness has been taken out of it by the essence of what took place in Christ’s suffering and death. When the Lamb of God was nailed and killed on the cross ‘by wicked hands’ it was God who raised him up and who loosed the pains of death, not arbitrarily, but in accordance with the reconciling power of this holy suffering and death ‘because it was not possible that he should be holden of it’ (Acts 2:24). These words ‘not possible’ presage and imply the *progress* from cross to resurrection. They, too, show that God’s activity was *new* and yet not arbitrary, just as Paul says when he writes that Christ died for us when we were yet sinners, adding: ‘while we were enemies; we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, *much more*, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life’ (Rom. 5:10). By saying ‘much more’ Paul does not minimize the significance of Christ’s death, judging by the ring of joy, thanksgiving, and adoration in the words ‘in due time... for the ungodly’ (Rom. 5:6). ‘Much more’ is a pre-eminently *historical* indication, pointing out the power and fruit of the suffering and death of Christ in whose resurrection our eternal life is safeguarded. Indeed, this Christ is ‘declared to be the Son of God *with power*, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead’ (Rom. 1:4), but this resurrection is not an illustration of a timeless idea, not a revelation of a general truth, but the historical actuality of Christ’s victory by the majesty of the Father. The resurrection is more than a sign of the significance of the cross; it is a historical reality which itself becomes the sign, the pledge of our absolute victory over death in the resurrection of the body (Lord’s Day XVII, Heidelberg Catechism). It is a pledge, but at the same time the foundation, and therefore the guarantee of our faith. The angel said on the resurrection morning: ‘*Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified.*’ This proved that guilt had been removed. And that fact is the basis of primitive-Christian joy, in which there is no dilemma between the removal of guilt and the delivery from death and corruption, a joy which rests on the unity of Christ’s reconciling work. The dilemma disappears in the certainty of his promise: ‘He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.’”⁵

CONCLUSION: Some of you may remember that long before he became famous as the co-author of the best-selling *Left Behind* series (which combines bad fiction writing with equally bad theology), Tim LaHaye first rose to prominence in Evangelical circles for his book *Transformed Temperaments* (Tyndale, 1970).⁶ LaHaye was one of the first, as David Wells points out, to tap into pop psychology preoccupation with self-actualization.⁷ LaHaye, despite his claim that the book was Bible-based, swallowed hook, line and sinker, the Freudian concept of personality (introvert, extrovert, with these being developed further by Freud’s disciple Carl Jung into: Sanguine, Choleric, Melancholy and Phlegmatic). Christians in evangelical churches around the country began trying to determine their particular temperament with the help of LaHaye’s “Biblical” portraits. The Apostle Peter, according to LaHaye’s facile labeling, was a “Sanguine” (outgoing, life of the party type). The Apostle Paul was “Choleric” (strong-willed, type A and quick tempered). Moses, well he is supposedly a “Melancholy” (perfectionist, introspective) and as it turns out, Abraham is LaHaye’s example of the “Phlegmatic” (easy-going, adapts to his circumstances and, so we are told, trusting). As it turns out, according to LaHaye’s uncritical acceptance of secular psychology, (which he superimposed on the Bible),⁸ Abraham, by temperamental make-up was *pre-disposed* to exercise his free will and trust God. Given LaHaye’s

hostile attitude towards all things Reformed,⁹ it is not surprising to find him serving up this warmed-over brand of Arminianism. Far better to listen to the wisdom of John Calvin. “Let us also remember, that the condition of us all is the same with that of Abraham. All things around us are in opposition to the promises of God: He promises immortality, we are surrounded with mortality and corruption: He declares that He counts us just; we are covered with sins: He testifies that He is propitious and kind to us; outward judgments threaten His wrath. What then is to be done? We must with closed eyes pass by ourselves and all things connected with us, that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true.”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. Tim Challies, *The False Teacher: Joel Osteen*, www.challies.com (April 13, 2014).

² Thomas Goodwin in his classic work *Of The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith* made this point centuries ago when he noted that due to the difficult nature of faith “the consideration of the mercies in God’s heart and nature is the strongest, the most winning and obliging” of all the divine attributes. However, Goodwin was not even content to allow faith’s gaze to rest upon an abstract attribute of mercy in God, but took it yet a step further: “And God hath minted his mercies forth from out of his purposes into promises where they lie exposed, and to be given forth to every one that will come in for grace, and take them from mercy’s hands, even ‘redemption from all iniquity.’” In short, the mercy of God is evident in his revealed promises. As cited by Michael Horton, in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics* eds. K.M. Kapic and R.C. Gleason (IVP, 2004), p. 110.

³ See S.J. Gathercole’s article “Justified by Faith, Justified by His Blood: The Evidence of Romans 3:21-4:25” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume II, The Paradoxes of Paul* eds. D.A. Carson, P.T. O’Brian, M.A. Seifried (Baker, 2004), pp. 165-168.

⁴ I am indebted to the lectures of my late prof. of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. for the substance of my analysis.

⁵ G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1967), p. 193.

⁶ LaHaye committed the cardinal sin for a writer: plagiarism. His book was practically taken verbatim from a work written years before by the Norwegian theologian Ole Hallesby entitled *The Temperaments*. LaHaye made no mention of Hallesby in the first edition of his best seller, something that did not sit well with the trustees of Hallesby’s estate. LaHaye did make a settlement and in subsequent editions of this book he acknowledges his extensive reliance on Hallesby.

⁷ D.F. Wells, *No Place For Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993), p. 175.

⁸ Recent studies have shown that much, if not all of this, turns out to be seriously flawed psychology. “Millions of Americans take personality tests each year: to get a job, to pursue an education, to settle a legal dispute, to better understand themselves and others. But where did these tests come from, and what are they saying about us? In *The Cult of Personality*, award-winning psychology writer Annie Murphy Paul reveals the surprising and disturbing story behind the tests that claim to capture human nature. Combining cutting-edge research, engaging reporting, and absorbing history, Paul uncovers the way these allegedly neutral instruments are in fact shaped by the agendas of industry and government. She documents the dangers of their intrusive questions, biased assumptions, and limiting labels. And she exposes the flawed theories and faulty methods that render their results unreliable and invalid. Personality tests, she contends, produce descriptions of people that are nothing like human beings as they actually are: complicated, contradictory, changeable across time and place. ‘The widespread use of these tests has deeply troubling consequences. Students are being consigned to narrow categories even as they’re still growing and developing. Workers are having their privacy invaded and their rights trampled. Companies are wasting hundreds of millions of dollars, only to make ill-informed decisions about hiring and promotion. Our judicial system is being undermined by inaccurate evidence. Perhaps most distressing, we are all increasingly implicated in a ‘cult of personality’ that celebrates the superficial over the substantive, the static over the dynamic, the standard and average over the distinctive and unique’” (excerpted from *The Cult of Personality* by Annie Murphy Paul: Free Press, 2004, inside jacket cover).

⁹ LaHaye is very explicit about his dislike for Reformed theology. He wrote the forward for Dave Hunt’s book *What Love Is This?* a strongly anti-Calvinistic book calling it the most important book of the century. For a refutation see *Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views*, D. Hunt & J. White (Multnomah, 2004) where White and Hunt debate the issues and Hunt comes out looking badly and resorts to simply ad hominem arguments.

¹⁰ Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries VIII* (Eerdmans, 1976), p. 99.