

Some Concerns about John C. Maxwell

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Introductory Comments

There are certainly many resources available to the Christian community for contributing to a number of aspects of the building of the Kingdom of God. I do not believe that it is necessary that we agree one hundred percent with everything a particular resource has to say. It may very well be that we not only have to choose among the individual resources but also choose among the ideas and suggestions within a particular resource. However, Christian leaders and churches should keep several concerns in mind when considering particular resources. First, they should be concerned whether the particular ideas gleaned from the resource are true and godly. Just because certain ideas contribute to the success of a given initiative does not mean that the idea is predicated upon something true or godly. The danger is that a false idea may initially yield seemingly beneficial results but later may become ingrained into one's worldview and yield unhealthy results.

Second, Christian leaders and churches should take care about what signals they are sending to the church family when they tacitly endorse certain ideas or individuals. While a particular idea may appear benign, that resource may be attended with or be proximate to other ideas that are antithetical to the Christian worldview and Christian life.

I decided to look through some material written by John C. Maxwell after I had agreed to be on a "team" to help implement a new initiative at my local church. I was invited to consult a web site to avail myself to leadership and teamwork principles supplied by an internet ministry headed by Maxwell. What I found on the website gave me pause. With my concern aroused, I

decided to look more closely at some materials that John Maxwell had written.¹ I was even more dismayed at what I found. My main concerns about the Maxwell material, broadly speaking, are: First, the manner in which Maxwell handles the Scriptures to "teach" his principles is sometimes egregiously mistaken. It is my contention that the Bible is not necessarily teaching the principles that Maxwell thinks. His handling of the Scripture indicates that Maxwell does not know (or at least is not utilizing) the proper methods of biblical interpretation.² This is not to say that I necessarily disagree with the principles themselves. I might agree with some of them and disagree with others. But I believe that it is of paramount importance that we let the Bible teach what it does and not try to justify our own ideas (even if those ideas are true) by a violation of sound principles of biblical interpretation. I regret that the use of Maxwell's materials sends the wrong signals to the church family as to how to use and interpret the Bible. This is especially of concern regarding the younger Christians in the church family.

Second, Maxwell either implicitly or explicitly endorses some New Age teachers and doctrines. Even if Maxwell himself (or the church leadership) understands the dangers of New Age doctrines, it is a dangerous thing to give such tacit endorsement in front of a church family, especially considering those who are younger in their faith.

¹The works by Maxwell that I mention in this paper are *The Winning Attitude: Your Pathway to Personal Success* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993) (TWA); *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork: Embrace Them and Empower Your Team* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001) (ILT); *Becoming a Person of Influence: How to Positively Impact the Lives of Others* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997) (BPI); and *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999) (IQL).

²For a synopsis of principles of biblical interpretation, known as hermeneutics, see Thomas A. Howe "How to Interpret Your Bible Correctly, Part 1" *Christian Research Journal* 25 No. 4 (2003): 42-50 and "How to Interpret Your Bible Correctly, Part 2" *Christian Research Journal* 26 No. 1 (2003): 22-31. Howe discusses principles such as "Meaning and Use of Words in Context," "Grammar and Syntax of Biblical Languages," and "The Historical-Cultural Settings of the Bible." For a more in-depth treatment of the philosophical grounding of the elements of hermeneutics see, Thomas A. Howe *Objectivity in Biblical Interpretation* (n.c., Advantage Inspirational, 2005). See also Robert A. Traina *Methodical Bible Study* (Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary, 1980) and J. Robertson McQuilkin *Understanding and Applying the Bible: An Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983).

Third, in addition to the New Age elements peppered throughout his material, Maxwell also employs questionable theological doctrines such as a mistaken notion of the miraculous, a conspicuous absence of the cross and questionable psychological doctrines including self-esteem psychology and temperaments psychology. It is to each of these concerns that I would now like to direct my attention.

Specific Concerns

Maxwell's Misuse of Scripture

Bear in mind that my concern in this section is not whether a particular conclusion is true or false. Rather, my concern here is whether these passages of Scripture teach what Maxwell employs them to teach. I contend that they do not. The danger, therefore, is how Maxwell models an inappropriate way of handling the Scriptures.

Proverbs 29:18 "Where there is no vision the people perish."

In *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork* Maxwell asserts that "vision gives team members direction and confidence." (ILT, p. 96) The context shows that Maxwell is thinking of a vision as the ability of the team to "look beyond current circumstances and any obvious shortcomings of current teammates to see the potential of the team." (ILT, p. 95) Maxwell's use of this verse displays a common misunderstanding that is perhaps created by the ambiguity of the English term 'vision' used in the King James Version. The word translated 'vision' in the King James Version is the Hebrew word 'hazon.' According to Hebrew scholar Thomas Howe it is "primarily used in the OT to refer to a divine communication, i.e., when a prophet receives a vision."³ The Hebrew is better translated in more modern versions as (with the complete verse) "Where *there is* no revelation, the people cast off restraint; But happy *is* he who keeps the law." (New King James Version) Notice the parallelism of the verse. The "revelation" (vision) is

³Personal correspondence, 10/25/01.

parallel to "law" (Hebrew, *Torah*) and the "casting off restraint" is parallel to "happy." One can see that this verse is teaching that without the Word of God, God's people become unrestrained and only with instruction (*Torah*) can God's people be happy or blessed. Thus, the verse has nothing to do with what Maxwell is discussing. Howe comments, "There does not seem to be a single instance where this word is used in the OT according to the popular way the word 'vision' is used (the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination or wisdom, or a mental image of what the future will or could be like)."⁴

My criticism here should not be misunderstood. I am not necessarily disagreeing with Maxwell about the importance of the team being able to have such insight and foresight. Rather, my criticism is that, whether Maxwell's point is true or false, Proverbs 29:18 has nothing to do with it.

John 2 – Jesus at the Cana wedding

In *The Winning Attitude*, pp. 12-13, Maxwell uses the story of Jesus at the Cana wedding to illustrate several principles. Whether these principles are true or not is not my concern at this point. (I criticize below Maxwell's view of miracles from this context.) His discussion here is illustrative of how many Christians misuse their Bible, especially if the passage in question is historical narrative. Rather than taking the narrative at face value and trying to understand what it is saying, Christians often "allegorize" or "moralize" the text. This means taking the elements of the story and trying to make each element symbolize some aspect of the Christian life. Here, for example, Maxwell takes the overall "lesson" of the story to be obedience. This lesson of obedience, according to Maxwell, tells us that we are to obey Jesus even if "you are not in the right place" (TWA, p. 12) and takes the fact that Jesus performed His miracle at a wedding instead of a church to mean that we can expect that "some of God's greatest blessings will be at

⁴Personal correspondence, 10/25/01.

'other places' if we are obedient to Him." Maxwell goes on to point out how other elements of the narrative illustrate obedience in our Christian lives. One should be obedient (i) when "you have lots of problems," (ii) when "you are not encouraged," (iii) when "you have not walked with Him very long," (iv) when "you have not seen Him work miracles in your life," and (v) when "you don't understand the entire process." (TWA, p. 13) These principles supposedly are taught in the narrative when the characters (i) run out of wine, (ii) when Jesus says "My hour has not yet come," (iii) because the disciples had just met Jesus, (iv) because this was Jesus' first miracle, and (v) because the characters did what Jesus commanded even in light of not knowing what Jesus was up to. While these might be useful points in some sense, it is my contention that these have nothing to do with Jesus at the Cana Wedding.⁵

1 Samuel 17 – David and Goliath

In *The Winning Attitude* Maxwell says "When Goliath came up against the Israelites, the soldiers all thought, *He's so big we can never kill him.* David looked at the same giant and thought, *He's so big I can't miss.*" (TWA, p. 31, emphasis in original) This again is an example of missing the real reason why the narrative tells us a story. To take Goliath as if he is illustrative of problems or obstacles in our lives, the Israelite's reaction as negative thinking, and David's reaction as positive thinking, is again to completely violate sound principles of biblical interpretation regarding historical narrative. It is my contention that Maxwell's use of this passage has nothing to do with why God's Word tells us this story.⁶

⁵One may ask what this passage of Scripture does teach. It is beyond the scope of this treatment to give a thorough examination of the text. Suffice it to say that the focus of this passage is on Jesus, not on us. His performing this miracle is telling us something about who He is. But even if one was not sure what the passage was teaching, it should be clear to anyone who understands the principles of biblical interpretation that the way Maxwell takes the passage is not the proper way to treat historical narrative.

⁶Again, the question might present itself "What is this story about?" In each case, my response is designed to point out Maxwell's ignoring of sound principles of biblical interpretation. As a matter of principle, I would suggest that most of the Bible's stories are to tell us something about God. What they are telling us about God will be discovered only by treating the text according to the sound principles of interpretation. These principles will vary according to whether the text is an historical narrative, a parable, a poem, or a teaching passage. Then, the proper

Romans 10:7 "Faith comes by hearing ..."

In *The Winning Attitude* pp. 56-57 Maxwell discusses how the negative and positive words we hear can either encourage or discourage us. What he thinks Romans 10:7 has to do with this is not clear in his discussion. I can only assume that he thinks it is relevant since he quotes part of the verse as a heading introduction to this discussion. I take issue later on with the categories of 'positive' and 'negative' in these discussions. Let it suffice to say here that Paul's point in Romans 10 has nothing to do with positive or negative words and the impact they might have on us being encouraged or discouraged. Rather, Paul is concerned with the truths that are contained in the Word of God and how the hearing of God's truths can give rise to faith in God. Taking Romans 10:7 the way Maxwell does ignores the context, reduces Paul's words to a mere platitude and misses Paul's meaning altogether.

Proverbs 23:7 "For as he thinks within himself, so he is."

Here is another example of a verse that is commonly taken out of context to say something that it clearly does not mean. In *The Winning Attitude*, Maxwell discusses one's self-image. He comments, "It is impossible to perform consistently in a manner inconsistent with the way we see ourselves. In other words, we usually act in direct response to our self-image." (TWA, p. 61-62) Whether this is true or not, I contend that this passage from Proverbs has nothing to do with one's self-image. When one reads this verse, a question he should ask is "Who is the 'he' referring to?" In answering the question about what is the antecedent of the

application to us as God's children will be easier to see once we have learned what the text is telling us about God. Here it must be remembered that David dealt with Goliath in the context of David's understanding of God's covenant relationship with and promises to the nation Israel. David understood that Goliath was not a party to that relationship or those promises. (The text points out David's observation that Goliath was uncircumcised.) David understood that Goliath would not be able to thwart God's purposes for the nation. The problem with taking the story as an allegory of how we deal with our own personal "Goliaths" is that many invariably apply the supposed lesson to things about which God has made no promises, for it surely is the case that Christians are not promised victory over any of life's problems. Rather, it is often the case that it is precisely because of certain problems that God's purposes for our lives is realized. But throughout all this, I contend that it is improper to treat historical narratives as if they were allegories.

pronoun, we have to look to the context. Consider the fuller citation "Do not eat the bread of a miser, Nor desire his delicacies; For as he thinks in his heart, so *is* he. 'Eat and drink!' he says to you, But his heart is not with you." (vv. 6-7) It should be clear that this passage has nothing to do with self-image. Rather, the writer is warning that though the miser outwardly seems to be hospitable, inwardly he resents the fact that you are eating his food. So, the counsel goes, do not be deceived by his hypocritical outward actions, but be aware that how he is inwardly toward you (as he thinks in his heart) is his true disposition.

Further, on pp. 132-134, Maxwell recounts a testimony where one uses this passage as a commentary on how one sees the world around him; how one's attitude can make a difference. Again, it should be clear that this has nothing to do with the passage. At the risk of being too redundant, my criticism here is not whether Maxwell's point is true or false. Rather, I am contending that the passage in question has nothing to do with his point.

Numbers 13 and 14 – Israel's Failure to Enter the Promised Land

In *The Winning Attitude* Maxwell uses the story of Israel's failure to enter the Promised Land in Numbers 13 and 14 as illustrative of how "negative thinking limits God and our potential." (TWA, p. 122) I do not want to anticipate my criticisms of the notions of "positive thinking" and "negative thinking." At this point I want to simply contend that Maxwell's use of this passage misses the real reason why Israel failed to reap God's promises. It had nothing to do with being "positive" or "negative." Rather, Israel's failure was due to unbelief. There was no question that God had repeatedly promised Israel that He was going to give them this land. This promise constituted God's inauguration through Abraham of His relationship with His chosen people. (Genesis 12:1-3) The difference between the two reactions of the spies and the nation was that Caleb and Joshua believed God's promise and the others did not. It is as simple as that.

The lesson is profound. The issue of believing God redounds throughout the entire Bible. In fact, our very salvation is a function of believing God. "For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness." (Romans 4:3-5) To reduce the Numbers passage to the categories of positive and negative thinking rather than belief and unbelief in God is to tragically miss the whole point of the passage and neglect a perfect opportunity to teach one of the most important doctrines of the entire Bible.

Matthew 21:21 "If you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall ... say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and it shall happen."

In *The Winning Attitude* Maxwell takes this passage to mean that "the only thing that will guarantee the success of a doubtful undertaking is the faith from the beginning that you can do it." (TWA, p. 139) There are several things wrong with taking the passage this way. First, one's faith is not to be in one's self. I need not have faith that I can do it. Rather, faith should be directed toward God. He is the one that can do it. But what is it that He can or will do? This is the second problem with Maxwell's use of Scripture here. Faith is believing what God has said. If the mountain is to be cast into the sea, it will only be because that is God's will. We do not bring it about simply because we believe it. First John 5:14 says "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." If something is not God's will, then no amount of my believing it or having "faith" in my ability to do something will be able to bring it about. But, how are we to know whether God has willed it? A full discussion of God's will is not possible here. I contend that God's will is fully revealed in His word, the Bible. If we pray and ask according to the Bible, we can know that God will grant our

petitions. This is not to say that we cannot pray for things about which the Bible is silent. We are invited to cast our cares upon Him (1 Peter 5:7). However, we must be willing to accept God's will even if it conflicts with ours. We cannot presume that God would give us anything we ask if He has not promised it in His word.

Maxwell's Questionable Doctrines

New Age

Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*: On several occasions (TWA, p. 47, 172) Maxwell seems to favorably quote or refer to Norman Vincent Peale. In fact, in *The Winning Attitude* Maxwell recounts an episode that, to my mind, illustrates one of the dangers of endorsing writers such as Peale. He says "My father has always been a positive influence in my life. Once, while visiting my parents back east, I noticed he was reading Norman Vincent Peale's book *The Power of Positive Thinking*. When I noted that he had read this book previously, he replied enthusiastically, 'Of course! I must keep building my attitude.'" (TWA, p. 47) It is regrettable how much of the Christian community has considered Peale's doctrine to be consistent with the Christian worldview. Space will not allow a thorough examination of Peale's teachings. A few references, however, 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 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. 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"⁷ by "channeling spiritual power through your thoughts."⁸ 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

⁷Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1952): ix.

⁸Peale, *Power*, ix.

successful or happy."⁹ Peale likens this power in other places as 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 for 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."¹⁰ One more quote should suffice to illustrate that the ideas of Norman Vincent Peale depart from an orthodox Christian worldview. 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."¹¹ This type of thinking should sound familiar to anyone who has studied New Thought, New Age, or Occult Philosophy.¹² For Maxwell to favorably mention Peale in his material is misleading at best and potentially heretical at worst.

The Categories of Positive and Negative: In both *The Winning Attitude* and *Becoming a Person of Influence*, Maxwell uses the categories of 'positive' and 'negative.' He talks about the positive and negative influences on us (TWA, p. 44), our positive and negative influence on others (BPI, p. 8-11), positive and negative words and attitudes (TWA, pp. 57-58), and positive and negative thoughts (TWA, pp. 119 ff.). 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

⁹Peale, *Power*, 13,

¹⁰Peale, *Power*, 213.

¹¹Peale, *Power*, 41.

¹²There 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).

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 in such literature.¹³ 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.'

Positive Mental Attitude Pioneer Napoleon Hill: My concerns about Maxwell quoting Napoleon Hill (IQL, p. 69) are similar to my concerns about him quoting Norman Vincent Peale, except that Napoleon Hill is much more overtly occult. Admittedly, Maxwell does not here give an overall endorsement of Napoleon Hill, but my concern is how a young or undiscerning Christian might read this reference and mistakenly conclude that Napoleon Hill is a safe resource from which a Christian might draw safe advice. Hill is the author of *Think and Grow Rich* which is probably one of the most widely read Positive Mental Attitude and success motivational books around. The thrust of the book is that success is a function of one's attitude. Specifically, Hill teaches that there is a "Supreme Secret" that is the key to life. The secret is "Anything the human mind can believe, the human mind can achieve."¹⁴ In other words, the power of mind is the key to bring what is needed in life. This is classic occult philosophy. But what is worse is Hill's testimony as to how he learned this secret. An extended quote should suffice to show that this book is anti-Christian.

Now and again I have had evidence that unseen friends hover about me, unknowable to ordinary senses. In my studies I discovered there is a group of strange beings who

¹³See the reference to Ernest Holmes in footnote 31.

¹⁴Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1967): 176.

maintain a school of wisdom which must be ten thousand years old ...I was alone in my study and all was very still. A voice spoke. I saw nobody. I cannot tell you whence the voice came. ... "I have come," said the voice, "to give you one more section to include in your book. ..." I whispered: "Who are you?" In a softened voice ... the unseen speaker replied: "I come from the Great School of the Masters. I am one of the Council of Thirty-Three who serve the Great School and its initiates on the physical plane." ... The School has Masters who can disembody themselves and travel instantly to any place they choose in order to acquire essential knowledge, or to give knowledge directly, by voice, to anyone else. Now I knew that one of these Masters had come across thousands of miles, through the night, into my study. "You have earned the right to reveal a Supreme Secret to others," said the vibrant voice. ... Now you must give to the world a blue print
....¹⁵

Clearly, Hill is in contact with something that is not holy. No Christian leader should reference such material without clearly indicating the dangers contained in it. But, tragically, Maxwell, to my knowledge, never warns his readers of these occult teachings when he references Napoleon Hill.

Mystical Christian Writer Richard Foster: In *The Winning Attitude*, Maxwell quotes Christian writer Richard Foster. (TWA, pp. 174-175) Foster is the author of, among other works, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*.¹⁶ Again, while Maxwell does not necessarily give a wholehearted endorsement of Foster's writings, because of the troublesome doctrines in Foster's material, one should be careful not to quote an author without disclaiming an endorsement of that writer's other ideas. A few comments should suffice to show that some of Foster's doctrines are problematic. First, Foster teaches techniques of meditation saying that "the imagination is stronger than conceptual thought and stronger than the will. In the West, our tendency to deify the merits of rationalism—and it does have merit—has caused us to ignore the value of the imagination."¹⁷ He goes on to advocate listening to our dreams. "For fifteen centuries Christians overwhelmingly considered dreams as a natural way in which the spiritual

¹⁵Hill, *Think*, pp. 158-160.

¹⁶Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

¹⁷Foster, *Celebration*, p. 22.

world broke into our lives."¹⁸ He suggests that "we can specifically pray, inviting God to inform us through our dreams. We should tell Him of our willingness to allow Him to speak to us in this way." But then Foster adds, "At the same time, it is wise to pray a prayer of protection, since to open ourselves to spiritual influence can be dangerous as well as profitable."¹⁹ Foster appeals to the fact that many of the Church Fathers looked to dreams to encourage the reader to give dreams a try. Conspicuously, he makes little appeal to the Bible to justify these teachings. Further, Foster thinks that if one practices at meditation, he can develop his skills in order to internalize and personalize the Scriptures. He claims that in meditating on, for example, a parable of Jesus you enter "not as a passive observer but as an active participant, remember that since Jesus lives in the Eternal Now and is not bound by time, this event in the past is a living presentment experience for Him. Hence, you can *actually* encounter the living Christ in the event, be addressed by His voice and be touched by His healing power."²⁰

Second, Foster advocates what looks to me like out of body experiences. He teaches "In your imagination allow your spiritual body, shining with light, to rise out of your physical body. Look back so that you can see yourself lying in the grass and reassure your body that you will return momentarily. Imagine your spiritual self, alive and vibrant, rising up through the clouds and into the stratosphere. Observe your physical body, the knoll, and the forest shrink as you leave the earth. Go deeper and deeper into outer space until there is nothing except the warm presence of the eternal Creator."²¹

Third, Foster also endorses the New Age writer Agnes Sanford,²² author of the book *Healing Gifts of the Spirit*.²³ He says "This advice, and much more, was given to me by Agnes

¹⁸Foster, *Celebration*, p. 23.

¹⁹Foster, *Celebration*, p. 23.

²⁰Foster, *Celebration*, p. 26, emphasis in original.

²¹Foster, *Celebration*, p. 27.

²²Foster, *Celebration*, p. 36.

Sanford. I have discovered her to be an extremely wise and skillful counselor in these matters. Her book *The Healing Gifts of the Spirit* is an excellent resource."²⁴ To my mind, this is an extremely careless statement for a Christian to make. Agnes Sanford is a pantheist. She says, regarding the earth, the sea, the clouds, the birds and the sun, "all these God made and He made them out of Himself."²⁵ Further, Sanford teaches "You see, God is actually *in* the flowers and the growing grass and all the little chirping, singing things. He made everything out of Himself and somehow He put a part of Himself into everything."²⁶ Regarding the baptism of the Holy Spirit, she says "But no experience ever equaled in bliss this baptism of pure light and power that came to me from God, not through the medium of man counseling and praying with me, but through the sun and the waters of the lake and the wind in the pine trees."²⁷ Sanford appeals to the New Age writer Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's works *The Phenomena of Man* and *The Divine Milieu* as an authority for her own teachings.²⁸ The fact that Foster likes her as much as he does, says something to me about his own discernment and worldview.

Last, Foster seems to include himself in the New Age Movement. He says "We of the New Age can risk going against the tide. Let us with abandon relish the fantasy games of children. Let's see visions and dream dreams."²⁹ Now, perhaps I cannot be sure what Foster means by the term 'New Age,' but it is important to note that his book came out at the time that the New Age movement was propagating similar views. Thus, the fact that Maxwell quotes Foster without any disclaimer is troubling.

²³Agnes Sanford, *The Healing Gifts of the Spirit* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1966).

²⁴Foster, *Celebration*, p. 136.

²⁵Sanford, *Healing*, p. 24.

²⁶Sanford, *Healing*, p. 31, emphasis in original.

²⁷Sanford, *Healing*, p.26.

²⁸Sanford, *Healing*, p.29.

²⁹Foster, *Celebration*, p. 170.

New Age Psychologist James Allen: In *The Winning Attitude*, Maxwell quotes James Allen. (TWA, p. 13) Allen is the author of, among other works, *As a Man Thinketh*.³⁰ Allen is another installment of those Positive Thinking New Age writers who carelessly weaves verses from the Bible with New Age Occult philosophy. In the grand tradition of the New Thought Movement³¹ Allen claims that "all that a man achieves and all that he fails to achieve is the direct result of his own thoughts."³² Further, Allen maintains that "as a being of Power, Intelligence, and Love, and the lord of his own thought, man holds the key to every situation, and contains within himself that transforming and regenerative agency by which he may make himself what he will."³³ The contrast to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ should be obvious. Again, while Maxwell nowhere indicates that he wholeheartedly embraces the teaching of James Allen, I contend that it is dangerous for him to have an unqualified quote from such a resource without disclaiming the occult worldview that informs Allen's material.

Theological

I have already dealt with some theological problems, such as Maxwell's confusion about faith in his use of Matthew 21:21. (See p. 8 above) A few other theological problems need mentioning.

Maxwell's Notion of the Miraculous: In *The Winning Attitude*, Maxwell give a "four-step formula to handle fear" from Acts 4:29-30. (TWA, pp. 139-142) While this could also serve as another example of Maxwell taking verses out of context, the application here is more serious since not only does he take these verses out of context, but he also uses these verses to

³⁰James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.).

³¹The 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).

³²Allen, *Thinketh*, p. 47.

³³Allen, *Thinketh*, p. 12

teach a troublesome doctrine. Maxwell takes v. 30 to say that just as the First-Century Apostles had their ministries attended with miracles "This must happen in your life." (TWA, p. 141) But the Christian should not expect his life and ministry to be attended with the miraculous the way the Apostles' lives and ministries were attended with the miraculous. This is not to say that God cannot perform a miracle in someone's life as God see fit. But it is to say that Maxwell here is missing the significance of the presence of miracles in the ministries of the Apostles. It is beyond the scope of this work to explore fully the doctrine of miracles.³⁴ Let me state my position as succinctly and directly as I can. Primarily, miracles are God's supernatural intervention in the affairs of humans in order to vindicate His special revelation and messenger. Throughout the Bible, God used miracles to prove that a given prophet or apostle was speaking in God's name. God used miracles to vindicate the ministry of Moses, the Prophets, the Apostles of Jesus, and most significantly, of Jesus Himself. To teach that any Christian should expect the miraculous in his life is to dilute the significance of the miracles in the Bible.

A Conspicuous Absence of the Cross: In Chapter 14 of *The Winning Attitude* (TWA pp. 169-179) titled "The God Above You," Maxwell ostensibly turns to a discussion about how, with one's security in Christ, "I can afford to take a risk in my life. Only the insecure cannot afford to risk failure. The secure can be honest about themselves. They can admit failure. They are able to seek help and try again. They can change." (TWA, p. 169) Maxwell discusses how one can draw strength from God's Word, Prayer, and the Holy Spirit. What is disturbing about his discussion is that nowhere does Maxwell clearly link these prerogatives to having eternal life through trust in what Christ did for us on the cross. Though he mentions a number of verses,

³⁴For a discussion about the nature, function, and reality of miracles see: Norman L. Geisler, *Sign and Wonders: Healings, Miracles, and Unusual Events – Which Are Real? Which Are Supernormal? Which Are Counterfeit?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1988); *Miracles and the Modern Mind: A Defense of Biblical Miracles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992); and R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

including Paul's discussion of our security in Romans 8, he says little that could not have been said by a liberal Christian or someone speaking from a generic religious perspective. Maxwell summarizes the change wrought in the disciples' lives by the Holy Spirit as "changing an attitude." (TWA, p. 178) Maxwell remarks:

They were filled [with the Holy Spirit]. The early Church was launched! The theme of this growing group of believers was "forward through storm." Seven difficult problems confronted this New Testament Church of the book of Acts. After each obstacle, we read that the Church was enlarged and the Word of God was multiplied. Setbacks became springboards. Obstacles were turned into opportunities. Barriers turned out to be blessings. Cowards became courageous. Why? Those within the Church were filled with the Holy Spirit. That same power can be given to you. (TWA, p. 178)

But how, according to Maxwell, is this power made available? One might think that because Maxwell uses terms such as 'conversion to Christ' and 'experience of salvation' he is discussing the empowerment that comes from the gospel. But a closer look shows that for Maxwell, the key to living life is a change in attitude. In recounting a story about a man named Jim, Maxwell tells us how Jim had an early conversion to Christ, later fell away, returned to God and had a genuine experience of salvation. But, according to Jim, something was missing. Jim comments "However, it was more than two years before I began to see a light at the end of the tunnel for my rotten attitude. It was during class at Bible college when the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart. I raised my hand and was recognized. I said 'Professor, would you pray for me? My attitude stinks.'" (TWA, pp. 178-179) Throughout Maxwell's discussion of the power that the Holy Spirit gives, Maxwell characterizes that power as a power to be successful rather than a power to live a righteous life and witness for Christ. Perhaps someone may say that I am being too harsh on Maxwell here. But I contend that when the power of the gospel is relegated to merely a change in attitude, rather than to a saving relationship with God through the Cross of

Christ and being conformed to the image of Christ through the exigencies of life (cf. Proverbs 15:31, Phil. 3:7-15, James 1:2-4), then something is missing.

Psychological

Self-esteem Psychology: In *The Winning Attitude*, Maxwell assumes a self image psychology. (TWA, p. 61 ff.) Self-image and self-esteem are ideas that are widespread throughout the evangelical church. I am perhaps in a minority in my criticisms. Suffice it to say that I believe that such an encroachment of psychology is unhealthy for a growing Christian life. Rather, the Gospel of Christ admonishes us to deny ourselves (Matt. 16:24). It is telling that Paul's "self-image" seems to deteriorate as he grew closer to Christ. In 1 Cor. 15:9, Paul describes himself as the "least of the apostles." Later in his life he says that he is the "least of all the saints" (Eph. 3:8). Near the end of his life, Paul's self-assessment was that he was "chief of the sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). Paul understood that the key to his relationship with God was an increasing love for Christ and an increasing disregard for himself.³⁵

Four Temperaments Psychology: In *The Winning Attitude*, Maxwell endorses Tim LaHaye's Four Temperaments teachings. (TWA, p. 54) What is disturbing about such an approach is that not only is the four temperaments psychology not taught in the Bible, but one would be hard pressed to find such teaching in any academic textbook on psychology.

Educational Psychologist Martin Bobgan and his wife and co-writer Deidre comment "Christian authors promoting the four temperaments and similar typologies base their ideas on unproven

³⁵For a discussion of these matters see Jay E. Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-esteem, Self-love, Self-image* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1986); Martin Bobgan and Deidre Bobgan, *Psychoheresy* (Santa Barbara: Eastgate Publishers, 1987); Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion - The Cult of Self Worship*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprint, 1994); and perhaps the best treatment, Paul Brownback, *The Danger of Self Love* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982).

psychological theories and subjective observations which are based on neither the rigors of scientific investigation nor the rigors of exegetical Bible study."³⁶

Conclusion

This work has been an attempt to alert the reader to the explicit and implicit dangers in the writing of John C. Maxwell. As I understand it, I have no problems with the initiative at my local church that prompted the leaders to seek Maxwell's material. I have no reason to doubt that Mr. Maxwell is a sincere Christian who cares deeply for the Church. But his misuse of Scripture, his tacit endorsements of New Age writers and doctrines, and his questionable doctrines of psychology and theology should give any Christian concern in the use of his material in otherwise legitimate local church initiatives. It is with that concern that this paper is offered.

³⁶Martin Bobgan and Deidre Bobgan, *Four Temperaments, Astrology, and Personality Testing* (Santa Barbara: Eastgate Publishers, 1992), 15.