

DOES THE BIBLE TEACH POSITIVE THINKING?

By Denver Cheddie

In the latter half of the 20th century with the blooming of the New Age Movement in its various forms, a new brand of philosophy has emerged which features P.M.A. (positive mental attitude) - positive thinking and positive confession. That philosophy has made its way into the church and affected the way certain portions of the Bible are interpreted, and has even altered our very outlook on life. Many prominent leaders in Christianity have embraced what is known as the Word of Faith movement. This article does not seek to refute the teachings of that movement, since this has been ably done elsewhere^[1]. Rather it examines the scriptures that allegedly promote positive thinking and seeks to determine whether the Bible really endorses positive thinking and positive confession.

First let it be said that the Bible has much to say about the mind and tongue. The tongue is one of the most difficult members of the body to control. The mind is critical in that it is never disengaged from our actions. We are influenced by what we see and hear and such is stored somewhere in our minds. When we entertain certain thoughts, our emotions develop an affinity toward them, and finally our volition is convinced that a relevant course of action is needed. This is the process of human decision making. So if we can renew our minds (Rom. 12:1, 2) or change our attitudes we can change our actions and the course of our lives.

Positive thinking however goes beyond this. It teaches that there is a creative aura associated with our thoughts and words. What we think and confess can even change our circumstances, bring prosperity and healing. Practices such as yoga and TM are thought to bring us into the mental state where we can realize our full power and potential. Quite frankly, New Agers can believe whatever they want. I am more interested in what the Bible says. We will analyze those scriptures that allegedly teach positive thinking and demonstrate that, properly interpreted, the Bible does no such thing.

Key Scriptures

On the surface, certain scriptures can appear to promote positive thinking if interpreted from the perspective of a 20th (or 21st) century culture which has been influenced by the New Age Movement. Questions that I will repeatedly ask are "what is the meaning originally intended by the authors of the Bible?", and "what did the original hearers understand by these scriptures?" It is true that based on our culture, upbringing and religious background, we each have a lens through which we read the bible. It is important to be aware of what our biases are. This obviously affects how we read the bible. But because we see the Bible a certain way, that does not make us right. Peter made it clear that because Paul's epistles were hard to understand, unstable men had twisted those scriptures (2 Peter 3:16). Essentially this means that not every interpretation of the scriptures is correct. Because you think it means something, does not mean that is the correct meaning. The correct meaning is the one originally intended by the authors.

Language is a tool used to communicate ideas. It is well known that words and expressions change meaning. For example the expression "What's up?" means one thing to a 1970s African American, another thing to a 16th century Englishman. P.M.A. proponents see positive thinking and positive confession in any passage of scripture that mentions certain trigger words like *mind*, *think*, *tongue*, and *speak*. It is almost as if they are conditioned to read the Bible this way. I've even heard a preacher use Ex. 14:15 to teach that we must "speak to our circumstances" simply because the verse used the word "speak". In fact God was telling Moses to speak to the children of Israel, not the Red Sea. With that said, let us consider a few scriptures.

Mark 11:22-24.

22 And Jesus answering saith unto them, Have faith in God. 23 For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. 24 Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive *them*, and ye shall have *them*.

Some people have overstressed the word "says" in vs. 23. It has even been taught that we are not to pray for mountains to be removed, but to simply speak to our circumstances. Vs. 24 denies such a notion. The "speaking" in vs. 23 is synonymous with the "praying" in vs. 24. Thus the emphasis is not on speaking but on trusting God. The message here is that by trusting God, we can overcome any hurdle (mountain) in our Christian life^[iii].

Consider the following hypothetical anecdote. A man was walking through the hospital, and while he was nearing the emergency room, he heard one of

the nurses call a "code blue". He walked away amazed that even medical persons believed in code blues. He went away telling all of his friends that when patients undergo cardiac arrests, even doctors and nurses go outside, look at the blue sky and pray to God for the person's healing. That was his understanding of the term code blue. In reality, a code blue is simply a medical term where medical personnel attend to a patient undergoing cardiac arrest, perhaps by performing CPR. So is this guy's understanding of the term code blue right or wrong? Stupid question, isn't it? If he wanted to know what a code blue really was, rather than just guess or assume, he didn't even have to look it up. All he had to do was look at how the doctors and nurses responded when the code blue was called, and that would have given him a very good idea.

We could guess the meaning of Mark 11 based on what we think or what feels right to us. But that does not make us right. We only see positive confession in that scripture because of the lens through which we read the bible, a lens which is clouded by the pervading influence of New Age and New Thought philosophies in our culture. But how did the disciples of Christ understand Jesus' remarks? That should give us a good idea of what those verses really mean. Did they go around literally speaking to their circumstances? Or did they believe that through prayer and faith IN^[iiii] God, they could overcome any hurdle they faced. In Acts 4:23-31 when they were threatened not to preach, the disciples prayed to God. They did not speak to their circumstances. In Acts 12:12 when James was killed and Peter imprisoned, they prayed. There is not one instance in the Bible when any disciple of Christ made positive confessions in response to a situation he or she faced. Shouldn't that tell us something about the true meaning of Mark 11?

Mark 11:23 is the closest the Bible comes to teaching positive confession, yet not even Jesus' disciples got that impression. Actually I don't think even Jesus thought so. If Matt. 26:38 "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even to death" is not a negative confession, then what is? Perhaps the next Word of Faith teaching to emerge is that the reason Jesus suffered death is because He made a negative confession in the Garden of Gethsemane. And what about Luke 17:10, where Jesus told his disciples that "when you have done all those things which you are commanded, SAY, 'We are unprofitable servants.' "? I don't think Jesus believed in positive confession.

Prov. 6:2. "Thou art snared with the words of thy mouth".

This verse is used to teach that whenever we say negative things like, "I feel sick", those words ensnare us and cause us to actually feel sick. The context of this passage, however, is unmistakable. When we put up security for our neighbor we put ourselves in bondage to his debt (vs. 1). That pledge (the words we spoke) has brought on us a trap. The idea of negative confession is absent from this text.

Prov. 18:21. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue".

This verse is harder to interpret than the previous one because it does not really have a context. Proponents of positive thinking usually interpret it as follows: if you speak life you will get life, if you speak sickness you will get sickness, etc. But is that the only possible interpretation? Is there another

interpretation that makes more sense in the broader context of Proverbs?
Look at a few other verses right there in Proverbs 18:

6) A fool's lips enter into contention, and his mouth calls for blows. 7) A fool's mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul. 8) The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body.

How do a fool's lips enter into contention? By his confession, or by his lack of wisdom? What are the words of a talebearer? Negative confessions or gossips? It is clear that these scriptures are not dealing with a person's confession but rather the wisdom or lack thereof in the things he says. It is talking about how our words can affect our relationship with others. It is not logical to believe that verse 21 is any different.

Proverbs abound with references to the tongue and the words we speak. Proverbs 15:1 teaches how our words can either stir up or quell anger in others. This book deals extensively with our relations to others. (See 10:21; 11:9; 12:18, 25; 16:24; 18:8; 29:5). In Proverbs 18:19, Solomon expresses how difficult an offended brother is to win back. The next 2 verses discuss the power of our words. The words we speak can either make us friends or enemies. Whether our words offend or please influential persons, like kings, it can literally make the difference between life and death (16:14, 15). Taken out of the context of Proverbs 18:21 may appear to a 21st century reader to be teaching positive confession. But it would never have appeared that way to the original hearers or to Solomon himself.

Prov. 23:7.

Note that this verse does not say "as **a man** thinks in his heart so is he", but "as **he** thinks in his heart ...). It was referring to a specific man or a type of

man mentioned in 23:1 - 6. He is the kind of man who appears friendly and generous on the outside, but inside is stingy and selfish. What he is on the inside is what he is really like, not what he appears to be on the outside. This is simply what the expression means. It's a proverb. But New Agers have taken it literally to mean that if we think positive things, we will eventually become or obtain those things. That is simply not the contextual meaning of this verse.

Rom. 4:17. "Calling those things which are not as though they were".

It is claimed that we can speak healing, prosperity and call forth whatever we want even if we don't see it. How difficult is it to see that this verse is speaking of God, for He alone has such power? There was no need for Abraham to have faith in God (depend on Him) if man had such power. This is one of the significant differences between God and man. And there is no record of Abraham, who is the human being discussed in Romans 4, calling forth anything into being. The only thing Abraham confessed was that he was a pilgrim on the earth (Hebrews 11:13).

James 3:6.

In 3:1,2 James discourages us from presuming to be teachers because of the inherent possibility of offending others by our words. In the next 6 verses, he details how difficult the tongue is to control, re-emphasizing what was stated in 1:26, that a sign of spiritual maturity is the ability to know when to just shut up. Once again the idea is not that negative confession

invites curses but that words can easily offend others (3:9, 10). One would have to read into this passage to get positive confession out of it.

Matthew 21:28-32.

A few years ago, in a Bible class, the teacher (a proponent of the positive confession movement) asserted that the spoken word is the highest form of authority. Had he said the written Word of God, he may have been correct. One student objected by drawing attention to the above parable. The father of two sons instructed both of them to work in the vineyard. The first initially declined but later obeyed. The second initially agreed, but later disobeyed. The student's point was that even though the second had the correct "confession", the first had the correct action, which is what Jesus commended. The teacher acutely responded, "But what were they both responding to?", implying that the father's command was of higher authority than the sons' obedience or disobedience. Had I been a little more knowledgeable back then, I would have pointed out that the purpose of Jesus giving that parable was not to suggest that the father's command was the highest authority, but to commend eventual obedience rather than initial declaration of obedience. This scripture clearly teaches that actions speak louder than words, hence the authority of the spoken word was the last thing on Jesus' mind when He gave this parable.

Rev. 12:11. "They overcame ... by the word of their testimony".

Some have advocated that the word testimony really means confession, even though they do not have the support of any major Bible translation. Does this verse teach that we overcome the devil by positive confession?

The Greek word for testimony, ***marturia*** means testimony, report or witness. It is used 9 times in the book of Revelation (1:2,9; 6:9, 11:7, 12:11, 17; 15:5; 19:10). In every single case, with only one exception, it is referring to the testimony of Jesus which all believers have - that is the public confession or declaration that Jesus is our Lord. In 15:5 (the exception), whatever the "Tabernacle of the Testimony" is, it is certainly not positive confession (duh!). Tribulation saints overcome the devil by the testimony of Jesus which they hold and preach, because in so doing, they never succumb to the mark of the beast and never fall under his power. Even though they are killed, they overcome because they go to be with Christ. May we hold fast to the testimony of Jesus.

Job 3:25. "The thing which I greatly feared has come upon me".

Is this verse teaching that the negative attitude of fear invites the very thing feared? If it did, then Paul should have written an epistle to himself rather than second one to the Corinthians. In 2 Cor. 11:3, 12:20 Paul expressed fear that the believers would not grow to be what he wanted of them. Surely he did not think that fear invited evil. The belief that Job's fear invited his troubles overlooks the simple fact that in God's conversation with the devil, this topic of Job's fear never came up. In fact the Bible clearly stated that "in all this Job never sinned with his lips" (Job 2:10). It was not Job's fear as such that invited his troubles, but his fear may have signified something else. He feared losing his health and wealth possibly because they were his greatest treasure. Perhaps he even had a tendency to value them more highly than God. God will test everyone with the thing they treasure most just so that they would not make an idol out of it (See Gen. 22).

Matt. 15:11. "What comes out of the mouth ... defiles a man."

The contrast Jesus is making here is between 1) what goes into the mouth and where it ends up, and 2) what comes out of the mouth and where it comes from. It is not the mere words that defile us, but the unclean heart. The words are only the fruit of what is in the heart (vs. 17-20). Actually, when Jesus spoke those words, he was not responding to a negative confession made by the Pharisees, but rather their traditional belief that failure to wash hands before eating caused defilement. So He had no intentions of giving a discourse on positive confession. Jesus' emphasis is on what is already in the heart, which will naturally come out as words. He was simply telling them that they rejected him because of the uncleanness of their hearts, and no amount of hand washing was going to make them clean. No positive confession here.

Phil. 4:8. "Whatever things are true etc, ... meditate on these things"

This verse urges us to think about good things. Admittedly it **could** be teaching positive confession. But one of the major purposes of this epistle was to encourage believers to follow Jesus' example of self sacrificing service and make it a way of life to do good to others. A positive confession interpretation of 4:8 is totally out of context with the message of Philippians. It is more likely that what Paul intended was, "Set your minds on these things **so you can put them into practice** (cf. 4:9)" as opposed to imagining and fantasizing about good things. Context! Context! Context!

Conclusion

If the Bible is wrongly interpreted it can be made to teach just about anything, including positive thinking and positive confession. But to do so, one would have to violate every rule of proper exegesis. One would have to ignore the context, the cultural and historical setting, the whole council of scripture, the original intent of the authors, and even the very practice of the authors and speakers themselves. The Bible rightly divided does not embrace positive confession and positive thinking as facets of Christianity.

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^[i] See Gordon Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Beverly, MA: Frontline Publishing, 1985); D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988); Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1993).

^[ii] Naming and claiming, confessing and possessing place the emphasis on us and our words. Asking and receiving places the emphasis on God and His power. The former is presumption, the latter is faith. The former is an act of independence from God, the latter is an act of trust.

^[iii] "Have faith in God" as opposed to "Have the faith of God" or "Have the God kind of faith" is the correct translation of Mark 11:22, as recognized by every major Bible translation. The Greek *theou* is an objective genitive meaning that God is the object of our faith. See A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 1:361.