

# Positive influence: The gospel of reward fills a mainline vacuum

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

The [article in the previous issue](#) on megachurch pastor Joel Osteen set me to thinking about the members of my congregation who are watching Osteen on television and reading his books. The situation reminds me of the lament of the Reverend John Ames (in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*): 40 years of careful, literate, theologically sound preaching could be undone in a 20-minute sermon by a radio preacher.

In his review of Osteen's "gospel of reward," Jason Byassee noted that Osteen is something of an "easy target" for theological critique. During my seminary years a similar target was Norman Vincent Peale. Peale was a friend of prominent business and industry leaders and U.S. presidents. His books were hugely successful. Just about everybody read *The Power of Positive Thinking*. But professors had a field day with him, pointing out that his books were light, his sermons not biblical, his theology shallow to nonexistent, his positive thinking the opposite of the realistic assessment of the human condition as described by Augustine and Calvin, not to mention Nietzsche, Freud and Marx.

I shared this view until I met John Boyle. He came to Chicago to direct a counseling center at the church I serve, one of the first of its kind and a critically important resource in our community. Peale had been his pastor. Peale baptized Boyle when he was 12 and began to show an interest in his spiritual development. When it came time for college, Peale helped him gain admittance to Bucknell. When World War II interrupted Boyle's college career Peale continued to follow him by mail through infantry battles in France and Germany and the liberation of Dachau. After the war, friendship with Peale led Boyle to theological seminary, a doctorate in psychology and a very distinguished ministry.

Of course, Peale's books *were* light. But they also were the way thousands upon thousands of people first considered the possibility that they mattered to God, that

whatever suffering or unhappiness they might be experiencing was not caused by God, that God's will for them was a full and joyful life. We mainliners have always been a little reticent about saying those kinds of things. And so people turn to the Peales and Osteens like thirsty people to water.

The other day I heard from a young parishioner, recently married, who had just received devastating news from her doctor. She was asking me to pray for her. She added: "I've been reading a book by Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*. I have slowly begun to realize that I am in God's favor."

Any theology that promises success as a reward for faithfulness and fervent prayer is misleading at best, and it deserves a forceful critique. At the same time I've learned not to dismiss ministries, however different from mine, that can lead people to their vocation or to a new sense of God's love.