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Successful or Justified? The North American Doctrine of Salvation by Works¹

Robert A. Kelly

Introduction

The discussion about Lutheran identity in North America is not new. Since at least the American Lutheran controversy of the middle nineteenth century, North American Lutherans have been trying to decide how to communicate Lutheran doctrine and live a Lutheran way of life within a culture formed by an English Reformed approach to Christianity.² During the latter half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth, this discussion was very much in the background as Lutheranism on this continent welcomed huge numbers of immigrants from Germany, then Scandinavia, and finally Eastern Europe after World War II. The question of survival eclipsed the question of assimilation. Since the 1950s, Lutherans have once again entered a period much more similar to the period from 1793 to 1840. Once again the majority of Lutherans in Anglophone North America are culturally and linguistically assimilated. The question about religious assimilation has again come to the fore and has already produced battles much like those of the American Lutheran controversy. As was true in the debate between Samuel Simon Schmucker and Charles Porterfield Krauth, the arguments today tend to revolve not around whether we should assimilate, but how we should assimilate.

¹The research for this article was supported by a grant from the Lutheran Life Insurance Society of Canada and by a grant from Wilfrid Laurier University, which included funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

²The classic study of this controversy, Vergilius Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology: A Study of the Issue between American Lutheranism and Old Lutheranism* (New York: Century, 1927), has been enhanced by Paul P. Kuenning, *The Rise and Fall of American Lutheran Pietism: The Rejection of an Activist Heritage* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988) and David A. Gustafson, *Lutherans in Crisis: The Question of Identity in the American Republic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

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Successful or Justified?

One option that has been put forward is that Lutherans should assimilate to North America's Anglophone cultures by adopting the style of American Evangelicalism. In the words of David Luecke, we should maintain our Lutheran substance but adopt an Evangelical style.³ The "Evangelical style, Lutheran substance" argument is that Lutherans need to adopt forms that are culturally relevant to North America. The argument begins from the point that matters of liturgy and polity – what Luecke calls "style" – are not matters of the confession of the gospel, but adiaphora. Only the issue of requiring certain adiaphora is an issue of the confession of the gospel. Luecke then argues that, given that issues of "style" are adiaphora, Lutherans are free to and ought to adopt a style that works to communicate the gospel to modern Americans. To know what works we need to look around at which churches are growing and which are declining. We then determine what the reasons for the growth and decline are, and we adopt those styles that do not compromise our basic theology – what Luecke calls "substance" – and that produce growth.

Luecke argues that we cannot use our traditions as an excuse for losing touch with people. We need to risk change from our immigrant past so that we can continue to communicate the gospel to contemporary people so that they can understand our message as gospel for them. Luecke also points out that many of the changes in North American Lutheranism since World War II have moved us in a more elitist and less populist direction. He advocates that we look at the Evangelicals and their appeal to a wider spectrum of Americans.

An opposing point of view is that Lutherans should assimilate themselves to North America by adopting a more Anglican or even Roman Catholic approach to being American or Canadian. Richard John Neuhaus, for example, believes that style and substance are intimately linked, that questions of style are questions of substance. For that reason he believes that the best future for Lutherans who really accept the Lutheran view of the gospel and the gospel's place in the world is within the Roman Catholic Church. In *The Catholic Moment* Neuhaus argues that the best way to be an evangelical Christian today is to be a Roman

³David S. Luecke, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance: Facing America's Mission Challenge* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988).

Catholic and that the best way to be an American today is to be a Roman Catholic.⁴

It would be possible to psychologize both Neuhaus's Americanism, including his antipathy to liberation theology, and his Roman Catholicism, but this would be a mistake. *The Catholic Moment* is a serious proposal for Christian identity in contemporary America. While Neuhaus's personal answer seems unlikely to attract many imitators — as one wag put it, "I'll kiss the Pope's ring when she's a Lutheran" — there is a significant number of clergy and seminary faculty in North American Lutheranism who are formally sympathetic. This movement refers to itself as "Evangelical Catholic." Evangelical Catholics believe that the ecumenical future of Lutheranism lies in rapprochement with Canterbury, Rome, and Constantinople, rather than Geneva. They believe that the catholic substance of the liturgy is essential to what it means to be a Lutheran. Beyond the serious theology that is done by Evangelical Catholics, there is increasing interest in adopting ancient or medieval liturgical practices among some clergy and, Roman Catholic styles of piety seem to have captured the agenda of those interested in "spirituality."

If we are to make thoughtful and theologically sound decisions about expressing Lutheranism in Canada or the United States, we need to understand the ideology that drives our two Anglophone cultures. We need to make an informed evaluation about how the religious forms of those cultures, with their roots in the English Reformation, relate to central affirmations of Lutheran theology and ethics. One way in which we can approach the ideological foundations of our cultures is to examine how they have understood what makes for a successful life. If we ask what we are taught about success, we might well discover some of the underlying theology of the whole culture, including its peculiar expressions of Christianity.

The literature of success shows us what we are taught to believe about salvation in North American culture. Over the years, we North Americans have come to merge success and salvation in our thinking. When most readers of success tracts were anticipating a heavenly home outside this world, the focus was more on serving God through successful living.

⁴Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

Now, as fewer and fewer of us think of heaven as our current home or eventual destination, success is not the result of salvation, but salvation itself. Even for many Fundamentalist televangelists, being saved means being healthy and prosperous here and now. Thus, in our beliefs about success we can see the soteriology of North American culture in bold relief.⁵

The Literature of Success: Virtue and Character

Cotton Mather's tract *A Christian at His Calling*, from 1701, shows that religious leaders in New England were concerned to instruct people about how to be successful in this life as well as the next. Mather also shows how closely temporal success and eternal salvation were connected in the American mind.

There are *Two Callings* to be minded by *All Christians*. Every Christian hath a GENERAL CALLING; which is to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, and Save his own Soul in the Services of *Religion*. . . . But then, every Christian hath also a PERSONAL CALLING; or a certain *Particular Employment*, by which his *Usefulness*, in his Neighborhood, is distinguished We are Beneficial to *Humane Society* by the Works of that Special OCCUPATION, in which we are to be employ'd, according to the Order of God.

A Christian at his *Two Callings* is a man in a Boat, Rowing for Heaven; the *House* which our Heavenly Father hath intended for us. If he mind but one of his *Callings*, be it which it will, he pulls the Oar

⁵So far I have not been able to locate historical studies of the idea of success or success literature in Canada. For that reason this essay will focus on American material. Several studies, such as Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1935) have shown that the success idea in England's Puritan and Enlightenment colonies is little different from that in the mother country, so we might assume that Canadian visions of success are similar to American. At least two examples of Canadian success tracts that I have come across, William E. Blatz, *The Habit of Success*, A 1929 Edith Butler Pool Lecture (Chicago: The Visiting Nurse Association of Chicago, 1930), and Jack H. McQuaig, *Challenge Yourself and Live* (Toronto: Hunter Carlyle Publishing, 1973), develop the same themes as their American counterparts of the same eras. This may be why Blatz, at the time associated with Saint George's School for Child Study in Toronto, was asked to lecture on success to visiting nurses in Chicago. A historical study of the idea of success in Canada would be valuable.

but on one side of the Boat, and will make but a poor dispatch to the Shoar of Eternal Blessedness.⁶

If Mather is the godfather of success literature, the secular parent of all American writers on how to get ahead in business and life is Benjamin Franklin. Franklin was born and raised in Boston, but his thinking differs from the Calvinism of the New England Puritans at a significant point. The original Puritans saw a connection between God's grace and prosperity. Later Puritans such as Mather began to use words loosely and speak of people being responsible to save their own souls, but originally prosperity was a sign of election. Since election was not something that could be earned, living a successful life was a response of the elect person to God's gracious providence. Franklin, on the other hand, like the Enlightenment generally, embraced an Arminian view of providence. Franklin really did believe that prosperity was a function of the exercise of free will, not of election. Success was earned, not given, and virtuous success in this life was sure to be rewarded in the next.

Franklin's essays, "Advice to a Young Tradesman" and "The Way to Wealth," along with *Poor Richard's Almanack*, set the patterns that the genre of success literature followed for at least 150 years and that still influence self-help authors even in an age when they contradict most of Franklin's advice. He was the master of the aphorism—"Time is money"; "The sleeping Fox catches no Poultry"; "A Small Leak will Sink a great Ship"—and the philosophy that he expressed caused Max Weber to make Franklin the centerpiece of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, though Franklin's own version of the religion of his Boston forebears was, at best, Deism.⁷

The son of a candlemaker, out of school at ten to help in the family business, on his own and penniless at seventeen, rich enough to retire from business at forty-two, Franklin is everyone's favorite self-made man. In many ways he is the prototypical American. He was an inventor, a philanthropist, a public servant. He believed that by industry, frugality, and closely watching one's development in virtue, any young man could emulate his success in life.

⁶Excerpted in Moses Rischin, editor, *The American Gospel of Success: Individualism and Beyond* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 23-24.

⁷Translated by Talcott Parsons, with a foreword by R. H. Tawney (New York: Scribner, 1930).

In this Franklin was no different from most other Americans in the decades following independence from Britain. Americans believed that they had not only created a new society, a new promised land, but that they had also provided the context for a new humanity – the self-made man. By the 1840s Franklin became the chief saint in the cult, the prime exemplar for those who strove to fulfill the promise of the new land. Not far behind came the earliest of the nineteenth century's millionaires, men like John Jacob Astor and Cornelius Vanderbilt who rose seemingly by nothing but their own efforts from obscurity to unbelievable wealth – Astor arrived in New York in 1780 with seven flutes and twenty-five dollars; Vanderbilt was the son of a Staten Island boatman and farmer.⁸ Here was success writ large. Not every American before the Civil War believed that such wealth was within range, but most believed that virtue and hard work would bring at least comfortable prosperity.

If we can trust the self-help literature they read, Americans in most of the nineteenth century agreed with Mather and Franklin that success was a matter of character. If anything, low origins and lack of education were a help, for they forced the development of character and the habit of industry. Americans believed that character was developed through strenuous effort. Natural endowments did not matter, nor did an adverse origin. The successful were those who developed a character that featured the virtues of frugality, loyalty, industry, humility, and so on and so on. These virtues would be rewarded with success.

Among the most active success and self-help writers in the nineteenth century were Protestant ministers, especially Congregationalists, with Unitarians and Methodists, some Presbyterians and Baptists, and a few Episcopalians. Two prime examples were William Makepeace Thayer, a Congregationalist, and Russell Herman Conwell, a Baptist. Thayer wrote primarily biographies of successful people for children and young adults. His theory of success is summed up in *Turning Points in Successful Careers*: "The favorable opportunity presents itself, . . . and the observant and aspiring behold and seize it, and move on to fortune; while the indifferent and shiftless let it slip, and thereby invite failure."⁹ Part of beholding the

⁸For studies of Franklin, Astor, Vanderbilt and others, see Peter Baida, *Poor Richard's Legacy: American Business Values from Benjamin Franklin to Donald Trump* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990).

⁹Quoted in Richard M. Huber, *The American Idea of Success* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 52.

favorable opportunity is having developed the virtuous character that makes one observant and aspiring. Thayer also produced text books for schools which promoted virtues such as self-reliance and perseverance and discouraged vices such as chewing tobacco and drinking. In all of his books, Thayer also promoted a pragmatic view of religion: Religion makes for success. In fact, said Thayer, religion demands success.¹⁰

Russell Conwell was probably the most successful clerical success writer of them all. His world-famous lecture "Acres of Diamonds" told the story of Al Hafed, a prosperous farmer in ancient Persia who began to think himself poor because he had no diamonds. As a result he sold his farm and set out to search for diamonds. In the end, destitute and diamondless after years of searching across Asia and Europe, he committed suicide in the sea at Gibraltar. Meanwhile, the man who bought his farm discovered right there the fabulous diamond mines of Golconda and became the richest man in Persia. Conwell then interpreted the story to make sure no one missed the point: Any and everyone listening to him that very night in (here he inserted the city or town in which he was lecturing) could become richer than they were. The opportunity was there for the good citizens of wherever to "get rich quickly and honestly."¹¹ None could accuse Conwell of not practicing what he preached. He delivered "Acres of Diamonds" over six thousand times, which earned him several millions of dollars.¹²

Catholic priests and Lutheran pastors wrote no, or almost no, books on success in North America. Why? Irvin Wyllie speculates that Luther's strictures against usury and social mobility influenced the Lutherans. He also states that Catholics formed at best seven percent of the business leaders of the United States in the post-Civil War period, in large part because most Catholics were first generation immigrants at that time.¹³ I believe that Wyllie is mistaken about Luther's influence on Lutherans. Between 1860 and 1900 what was true of Catholics was also true of Lutherans—most were first or second generation immigrants and, as such, suffered from the anti-immigrant sentiments of the time. The guides

¹⁰Huber, *American Idea*, 54-55.

¹¹Huber, *American Idea*, 59.

¹²Conwell is discussed in Huber, *American Idea*, 55-61, and Baida, *Poor Richard*, 239-240.

¹³Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New York: The Free Press, 1954), 56-57, 183.

to success of the era, and even down into the 1920s, were written not only by, but for the English Protestant native-born and show more than a little prejudice against immigrants. For example, Richard Weiss quotes success writer Bolton Hall who had no qualms about calling immigrants "the Dagos and Huns and Kikes."¹⁴ Many others saw immigrants as one of the biggest threats to traditional definitions of and opportunities for success. The images of success presented to Americans in the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century were white, English Protestant, middle class, and nativist.

Now, when we think of the stereotypical self-help writer of the nineteenth century, we usually think of Horatio Alger Jr., son of a New England Unitarian minister and graduate of Harvard Divinity School.¹⁵ He actually did not write straight "how to be a success" tracts. Rather, he wrote novels for young people and a few biographies of "log cabin to White House" presidents such as Lincoln and Garfield. It is the novels, which told the stories of boys who had risen from poverty to middle-class respectability, for which Alger is known. The plots of many of his novels follow the same pattern: A boy is for some reason beyond his own control at the bottom of the social ladder. Perhaps he hawks newspapers, perhaps he shines shoes. He is in an environment that makes virtue difficult, even next to impossible. But this boy is different than others—he is virtuous, industrious, and well mannered. At some point in the story a bit of luck comes his way. His character is noticed and a prosperous merchant takes him under his wing. From there the boy rises into the middle-class and is now both virtuous and moderately well off.

What is historically interesting about Alger and his novels is that when he wrote them, the world that he described was almost gone and when the books became particularly popular—after Alger's death, between 1900 and World War I—was completely gone. By that time the small-town merchant and yeoman farmer were fading fast and most people lived in cities and worked for ever larger companies. Alger's novels were more nostalgia for the success offered by an earlier America than they were

¹⁴Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 132, citing Bolton Hall, *Thrift* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1916), 6-7.

¹⁵On Alter, see Huber, *American Idea*, 43-50; Weiss, *American Myth*, 48-63; and Rex Burns, *Success in America: The Yeoman Dream and the Industrial Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 176-180.

examples of how one could get ahead in the present. But Alger still stands in the line that extends back to Benjamin Franklin. During the latter years of his life a new kind of success literature arose. In the new self-help books of the last decade of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century success was presented not as the product of a virtuous character, but as the product of a disciplined mind or a winning personality.

The Literature of Success: Mind and Personality

Richard Huber distinguishes three types of American success literature, that based on a character ethic, that based on a mind-power ethic, and that based on a personality ethic.¹⁶ While the former was dominant from Mather and Franklin to the beginning of the twentieth century, the latter two began to come to the fore toward the end of the nineteenth century and have dominated the self-help books written since the 1920s. This is not to say that the older model quickly or completely disappeared. For example, Russell Conwell continued to deliver "Acres of Diamonds" to appreciative audiences into the 1920s, and the lecture was published in book form in 1915.¹⁷ Alger's novels sold well into the first decades of the twentieth century. The ideal of hard work has remained very much alive in the United States right up to the present. The mind-power school shifted to the work necessary to shape one's thoughts for success through positive thinking and the personality school focused on the work of winning friends and influencing people, but both continue to believe that self-reliant work is at the heart of success.

The roots of the mind-power ethic are similar to the roots of interest in psychology in the United States, the mind-cure movement that began in New England in the middle nineteenth century and spread from there. The point of mind-cure was to use the patient's thoughts and beliefs to cure sickness in an age when medical doctors were often unable to affect the course of disease or infection.¹⁸ The earliest popularizer of such mind-power seems to be Phineas Quimby, a New Englander born in the first decade of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ He believed that disease is the result

¹⁶Huber, *American Idea*, 502, note 1.

¹⁷Huber, *American Idea*, 471, note 23.

¹⁸Weiss, *American Myth*, 195-196.

¹⁹On Quimby, see Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: Religion as Pop Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Oral Roberts*, reissue (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 33-38;

of mistaken beliefs or ideas and can be cured by mind-power. Quimby's mental healing disciples divided into two camps. The more disciplined group was led by Mary Baker Eddy and organized Christian Science; the rest were always much looser in organization and are generally called New Thought. While the ideas of New Thought sound familiar to any student of the variety of Gnostic and Neo-Platonic philosophies of the ancient world, the slant given to the mix is peculiarly American, adding Emerson and James to Plato and Hegel, and then basing the appeal on "proven" results.

New Thought was appealing to the Protestant middle classes of New England and certain western cities, especially to women and to those for whom more traditional forms of American Protestantism were beginning to lose their appeal. Within New Thought groups the idea that disease as a product of false beliefs soon evolved to encompass any setback in life as a product of false beliefs. By the 1880s New Thought success literature began to appear in profusion. Just as mind-cure attempted to use the mind to cure patients who seem immune to the treatments of physicians, so mind-power success literature served as both therapy and inspiration for a generation of Americans moving out of the age of the self-made entrepreneur and into the age of corporate middle management. The same unspoken concern for giving people the resources to cope with forces beyond their control appears in both the therapeutic and the success literature of New Thought.²⁰

New Thought was related to the Transcendentalist philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, himself the author of several success tracts and one of America's most popular lyceum lecturers. In Emerson's opinion, true success was not a chase after luck, but self-reliance and an "embracing of the affirmative." The purpose of life is to "make life and nature happier to us."²¹ Emerson believed that such success ought to be pursued, for the improvement of individuals would lead to the reform of society. Self-culture was more important than political action. Self-reliance was the way of life that enabled a person to live in tune with the Oversoul, the

Huber, *American Idea*, 128-129; and Weiss, *American Myth*, 196-199.

²⁰Weiss, *American Myth*, 195-196.

²¹John O. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 92, citing Edward W. Emerson, editor, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), volume VII, 308.

“universal spirit immanent in all things.”²² The ideal of such self reliance was the self-made man, vigorous, confident, enterprising. Both discipline of the body and cultivation of the soul were part of what Emerson believed went into being self-made. Thus Emerson combined the sense of virtue that was typical of the success literature of his own time and also anticipated the mind-power success writers of New Thought.

While the New Thinkers saw themselves as the antithesis of the Puritans that had gone before them, there were parallels. For New Thought divinity and redemption reside in the person, not outside the person in God, and the person controls his or her own destiny. Yet the connection between divinity and prosperity remains; transcendence and worldly success are part of a whole. For both Puritan and New Thinker, success shows whom God favors. Whereas the Puritan believed that divine providence and election had some role in who became prosperous, New Thought agreed with Deists such as Franklin that God favors those who do what is required.²³

What changes in the transition from character-ethic success literature to mind-power success literature are the requirements. The focus shifts from virtuous action in the world to powerful thoughts in the mind. No longer does the practice of virtues such as industry and thrift play the major role. What makes for success in the opinion of New Thinkers is mental self-mastery and power.²⁴ According to New Thought advisers, the person who wants to be successful cannot become possessed with the idea that conditions prevent or even impede success. Successful people are people who believe that they will succeed, not the thrifty or industrious.²⁵

Success literature under the influence of New Thought completes the confusion of success and eternal salvation. The Reign of God is equated with success in a world from which pessimism has been eliminated. Human society is inevitably evolving into a world where death gives way to incorruptible life. The way to help bring this about was to be cheerful and expectant. The deadliest sin for New Thought was pessimism.²⁶ This

²²Cawelti, *Apostles*, 86.

²³Weiss, *American Myth*, 149.

²⁴Weiss, *American Myth*, 195-196.

²⁵Weiss, *American Myth*, 132-133.

²⁶Weiss, *American Myth*, 158, citing Orison Swett Marden—a mid-life convert and

eschatology was related to New Thought's equally optimistic view of human nature. All problems would ultimately be solved because evolution had brought human nature to the point where salvation was already determined.

New Thought's view of original sin was connected to this view of human nature and human destiny. In the view of the older New England theology, original sin was pride, attempting to make oneself like God. Mind-power turned this on its head—the original sin was humility, not taking one's own divinity seriously. Humility and self-depreciation were not natural, but had been bred into people by centuries of wrong thinking. What was necessary was a total rebuilding of the self-image so that ideas of sin and sickness—which had no reality of themselves, but were only constructs of wrong thinking or ignorance—could be rooted out.²⁷ The point was to stop thinking like a servant of God and start thinking like the god that you are. This doctrine shows most clearly how New Thought's shift from a success literature of virtuous character to a success literature of positive thinking was part of the shift that began around the turn of the century from a culture that valued thrift and industry to today's North American culture that values consumption and leisure.

All this happened during the period when the economy of the United States shifted from the individually-operated companies and partnerships of the early and middle nineteenth century to the huge corporations that still dominate our economic life. Readers of success literature at the turn of the century were people who were moving into what is now called middle management. New Thought encouraged people to be gods in their own minds at precisely the moment when independence became almost

then one of the most prolific disciples of New Thought—and Elizabeth Towne. Marden might also be cited as the originator of a "church of joy" version of Christianity: "Melancholy, solemnity, used to be regarded as a sign of spirituality, but it is now looked upon as the imprint of a morbid mind. There is no religion in it. True religion is full of hope, sunshine, optimism, and cheerfulness. It is joyous and glad and beautiful. There is no Christianity in the ugly, the discordant, the sad . . . 'Laugh until I come back' was a noted clergyman's 'good-by' salutation. It is a good one for us all." Marden, *Peace, Power and Plenty* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1909), 299-300, cited in Weiss, *American Myth*, 158.

²⁷Weiss, *American Myth*, 164-165, citing James Allen, *The Path of Prosperity* (New York: R. F. Fenno, 1907), 61-62.

impossible in the external world of work. In this way, though sharply critical of the virtues of the nineteenth century, New Thought success literature was instrumental in keeping alive the illusions of the earlier centuries for a new age. New Thought enabled Americans to continue to believe that the United States was a land of unlimited opportunity and that anyone who had the proper frame of mind could succeed.

At one crucial point New Thought agreed completely with Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin: We are each responsible for achieving our own success in the world.²⁸ By 1900 this belief was becoming harder to maintain, so New Thought moved from virtue in the external world to virtue in the mental world. For mind power success literature the sins were fear, especially, and other "such mentally debilitating moods as apprehension, timidity, cowardice, depression, superstition, self-depreciation, doubting and worry." As Weiss states, in New Thought, "The faults of character were thus extended to include unpleasant states of mind. Conversely, happiness held first place on the . . . list of virtues."²⁹ We each remain responsible to do our best for our own salvation, but now doing our best means holding the proper frame of mind rather than exhibiting the proper behavior.

After something of a drought during the depth of the Depression of the 1930s—how does one maintain positive thoughts in a breadline?—New Thought enjoyed a revival in the 1950s. The post-Depression, post-War form of New Thought is expressed by one of the two central success writers of the twentieth century, Norman Vincent Peale. While there were "secular" mind-power success writers in this era, none were as well known nor struck such a responsive chord as Peale's connection of mind-power to mainline Protestant "faith." The title of Peale's most famous book sums up the theme of the mind-power approach to success: *The Power of Positive Thinking*.³⁰ This book ranked number five on the non-fiction lists in 1952, number one in 1953 and 1954, and number two in 1955. In 1956, it moved past Lloyd Douglas' *The Robe*, to become the bestseller in both fiction and non-fiction. No wonder that an advertisement from Prentice-Hall in that year called it "the best-loved

²⁸One may also see Cawelti, *Apostles*, 168.

²⁹Weiss, *American Myth*, 165. Citation on mentally debilitating moods from John Herman Randall, "The Conquest of Fear and Worry," *A New Philosophy of Life* (New York: Dodge, 1911), 24.

³⁰(New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952).

inspirational book of our time.”³¹ Here is a book on how to live a successful life for Ozzie Nelson and Ward Cleaver.

What was the message that took the new suburbs by storm? Peale believed that there was no problem that could not be overcome by faith, positive thinking – and Peale was never too clear about whether there was any distinction between the two – and prayer. He offered techniques for successful living, the purpose of which is to clear away disease and failure-producing thoughts and replace them with creative and healthy thoughts. These techniques would enable his readers to control the circumstances around them, improve their relationships, and gain esteem. If they would but master the principles of positive thinking they could live a happier, more successful life. Whether you were an unhappy failure or a happy success was dependent on your thoughts.³² The basic creed is Believe and Succeed. The principles include prayer based on the New Thought “laws” of attraction, affirmation, and Divine supply and using the law of visualization to hold a mental picture of yourself succeeding.

Clearly, positive thinking is the New Thought of the 1880s–1920s expressed in the forms of 1950s homiletics. Peale appeals to the classic New Thought “laws” of attraction (positive thoughts attract positive results, negative thoughts attract negative results), visualization (if you picture yourself succeeding, you will succeed), and Divine Supply (God wants to make you healthy and wealthy, so demand success and health from God) that had been put forth since the beginning. But Peale is more than just one more follower of Phineas Quimby. *The Power of Positive Thinking* was the finest hour for New Thought and the mind-power ethic in general. With his ability to take the often obtuse metaphysics of New Thought and express them in the native American language of technique and practicality, and then combine them with the general 1950s faith in faith, Peale made New Thought – though he probably never, ever admitted the real source of positive thinking – more popular than its original apostles had accomplished. Perhaps the most fitting symbol of Peale’s version of success and its cultural importance was that it was he who was selected to preside over the marriage of David Eisenhower and Julie Nixon.

³¹Huber, *American Idea*, 316–317, citing Alice Payne Hackett, *60 Years of Best Sellers, 1895–1955* (New York, 1956) and *New York Times Book Review*, April 8, 1956 and October 11, 1959.

³²Huber, *American Idea*, 317, 325.

The second line of success literature that developed out of the changes that industrialism brought at the end of the nineteenth century was that based on what Huber calls a "personality ethic." In this case it is not the person's virtuous character or mind power – though mind-power advice and personality advice could be, and often were, mixed – but a "winning" personality that guaranteed success. Unlike the mind-power ethic, the personality ethic was not so much a rebellion against as an evolution from the character ethic under the conditions of mass-production, and the related need for mass sales. The virtue of "industry" evolved into the personality characteristic of "pep" or "vim" as the economy came to depend more and more on mass sales of products mass produced by machines in the factory system. When the Depression of the 1930s revealed that "failure to consume" could lead to economic catastrophe, the death notice was delivered to the virtue of frugality. The growing popularity of psychology and psychoanalysis after the turn of the century was also influential. While the central figure of this line of thought was Dale Carnegie (the second of the twentieth century's central success writers), he was the culmination of an evolution toward personality as the key to success.

One early example of this evolution from character to personality is Bruce Barton. The son of an influential Congregational minister, Barton was one of the founding partners of the B. B. D. & O. advertising agency and wrote a number of success tracts. None of Barton's writings became so well known as his presentation of Jesus as the best salesman in history. *The Man Nobody Knows* was number four on the best-seller list for 1925 and became the run-away nonfiction best seller of 1926.³³ According to Barton, Jesus is the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem, a muscular hero whose parables showed a genius for advertising. Jesus was able to gain the crowds' attention because he advertised himself by service. In Barton's view, to use one of his chapter titles, Jesus was "The Founder of Modern Business."³⁴ It is hard to believe that Barton's super salesman was the same Jesus executed by the Romans for sedition and blasphemy.

The efficiency approach to success was also part of the evolution. Beginning in the 1880s, under the influence of the nineteenth-century infatuation with science and the increasing mechanization of the work

³³(Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925); Huber, *American Idea*, 209.

³⁴Huber, *American Idea*, 196-209.

place, Frederick W. Taylor had developed “scientific management” with the goal of forcing human workers to be as “efficient” as their machines. By the 1910s and 20s success writers were incorporating scientific management’s ideal of machine-like efficiency into advice on how to succeed. One of the pioneers was Edward Earle Puriton, director of the Independent Efficiency Service and Dean of the American Efficiency Foundation. Perhaps the father of modern “time management,” Puriton believed that “not genius, nor influence, nor affluence, but a scientific work schedule, makes the great man or the great business.”³⁵ The one who could efficiently manage his time through organization and standardization would be a success. This branch of success writing contributed two elements to the evolution of the character ethic. The first was an emphasis on technique, which also influenced the power of positive thinking. Puriton and others claimed that simply by applying their efficiency techniques faithfully you could make a success of yourself. The second was an increase in the pragmatic appeal. The characteristics that were encouraged were not so much good in and of themselves, but were good insofar as they contributed to success. For many nineteenth century success writers liquor, for example, was to be avoided because it was in itself evil. For Frederick Taylor liquor was to be avoided because it was inefficient. In the 1920s the argument was not that industry was a virtue to be practiced for its own sake, but that pep and efficiency produced sales.

The Depression brought the personality ethic’s approach into full flower. From 1929 until World War II, neither character nor mind-power could do much for the thousands of unemployed. When success writers committed to these approaches supported Hoover’s idea that cutting government spending and reducing the deficit were the best ways to deal with economic crisis and recreate the conditions of limitless opportunity – or, in the case of mind-power, advised the unemployed simply to think the Depression away – both lost adherents by the droves.

³⁵Huber, *American Idea*, 220, citing E. E. Puriton, *Puriton Practical Course in Personal Efficiency* (New York, 1919). Academics might be interested that Puriton also seems to be a pioneer in the production model of higher education. He proposed that any university sixty-percent of whose graduates were not fully employed within the first year after graduation be cut off from all public support until the curriculum is changed to produce employed graduates. This proposal is symptomatic of the shift that occurred in nineteenth-century America away from the classics-oriented curriculum to the more pragmatic modern curriculum.

What is especially interesting is the number of Americans who, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, wanted to go on believing that an almost infinite space for personal success still existed and that they could, through the exercise of free will, attain success. Such people adopted the personality ethic as the means to success.

The most famous, and probably the determinative, statement of the personality ethic was written in 1936 by sometime teacher of public speaking Dale Carnegie: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, possibly the most influential self-help manual ever written.³⁶ The popularity of this approach to success is indicated in the sales record of Carnegie's book – by 1970 it had sold approximately eight million copies in English, plus translations had been made into over thirty languages.³⁷ How does Dale Carnegie believe people become successful? The title of the book sums up his advice: We become successful when we develop the sort of personality that enables us to win friends and influence the people around us. Hard work is still part of the package, and there is a bit of mind-power involved, but the focus is not on virtue or thought per se. The work and thinking necessary is that which enables us to present ourselves so that people will like us and do what we want them to do. Success in the personality ethic means making advertizing a philosophy of life.

In Carnegie's view, the problem that must be overcome to be successful is other people. Unlike previous ages, when one could work hard without much concern for relational ability, the modern age is one in which almost all work is accomplished through people. The person who wants to be successful will either have to supervise people or sell things to people, and everyone must work under supervision and is dependent on the supervisor's assessment in order to advance. Thus success depends on your ability to deal with people. The more popular and self-confident you are, not the more virtuous, the more successful you become and the more money you earn.

Behind Carnegie's view of success and how to achieve it is an anthropology based in late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century psychology. Human beings are not logical, but emotional. They are filled with needs and cravings. The most important of these—and here

³⁶(New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936).

³⁷Huber, *American Idea*, 231, citing figures supplied by Simon and Schuster.

Carnegie makes reference specifically to Freud and John Dewey – is the need to be important. This makes people maneuverable. We can make people want to do what we want them to do if we know how to make them feel important. Being a success in life is like being a success in fishing. We must bait the hook with just the right bait that will make the fish want to bite, even if it means using a bait that is not very appetizing to us.³⁸ The point of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is to teach Carnegie's students how to bait the hook. The book is filled with a variety of six-ways-to-this and ten-ways-to-that; Carnegie is very much the child of the evolution toward presenting the way to success as technique. His "Six Ways to Make People Like You" shows the heart of the way to success.

- Rule 1: Become genuinely interested in other people.
- Rule 2: Smile.
- Rule 3: Remember that a man's name is to him the sweetest and most important sound in the English language.
- Rule 4: Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves.
- Rule 5: Talk in terms of the other man's interests.
- Rule 6: Make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely.³⁹

While the Dale Carnegie approach may seem just to be a course in how to be a door-to-door salesman, Carnegie himself did not see it in this light. He believed that he was presenting Depression and post-Depression Americans a new way of life that could bring success and advancement under the new conditions present in modern corporate life. In this he was not alone, and the phenomenal sales of his own books were only part of the story. Apostles of the personality ethic sprang up across America. Elmer "Don't Sell the Steak—Sell the Sizzle" Wheeler and Frank "How I Raised My self from Failure to Success in Selling" Bettger were just two of the best-selling authors and popular lecturers that came to the fore to tell people how anyone could be a success just like they were. Publisher Prentice-Hall made a commitment to books presenting the personality

³⁸Huber, *American Idea*, 238-239.

³⁹Huber, *American Idea*, 239-241, citing Carnegie, *How to Win Friends*, various chapters.

ethic and passed Thomas J. Crowell, preeminent publisher of books based on mind power, as the major self-help book producer in North America.⁴⁰

What Carnegie never addressed is the seemingly insoluble problem that if winning friends and influencing people is based on the six ways (and the ten this and twelve that), then genuine interest in other people becomes just a technique and is never really genuine. While the techniques of the personality ethic demanded sincerity, their nature as techniques precluded exactly what they required. Perhaps here we can see clearly the shift from relationships as relational to relationships as instrumental that so plagues modern society. Even sincerity becomes something that can be turned on depending on desired results. Carnegie's man on the make even has to become technical about choosing the proper wife who can contribute to his success.

One of those who showed the possibilities of combining the mind-power and personality ethics is W. Clement Stone, the founder of the Combined Insurance Company and developer of "Positive Mental Attitude," put forward in *The Success System That Never Fails*.⁴¹ Stone was very much a product of both the ideas that success means following a step-by-step technique and that selling is a way of life. As late as 1987, Combined Insurance was requiring its agents to use the techniques of Positive Mental Attitude and sales pitches designed by Stone.⁴² Positive Mental Attitude was based on Emile Coué's "Power of Conscious Autosuggestion." Stone's company cheer of "I feel healthy, I feel happy, I feel terrific," was the equivalent of Coué's "Day by day in every way I am getting better and better" mantra. Stone also instructed employees, "Direct your thoughts . . . Control your emotions . . . Ordain your destiny." People are not to be held back by timidity and fear, but are to keep on working toward their goals. If properly self-conditioned, one can suppress negative thinking fully. The successful person believes that any task faced can be and will be done. Even "I think I can, I think I can" is

⁴⁰Huber, *American Idea*, 253-259.

⁴¹(Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1962).

⁴²Robin Leidner, *Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) is a study of the work routines used by McDonald's and Combined Insurance and their impact on workers in those companies. As Leidner points out, Combined, through teaching Stone's philosophy of success, attempts to control work routines by controlling employees' beliefs in the same way that other companies control employees by determining processes.

not enough. We must say, "I can and I will." In this it is easy to see the influence of the mind-power ethic on Stone and Positive Mental Attitude, but he also includes the personality ethic. Other slogans such as, "To be happy, make others happy," and "I dare you to develop a winning personality" go along with instruction on sales techniques that could have been copied out of any Dale Carnegie book. At Combined Insurance agents were trained to talk to potential customers about the customer's interests as a means to close a sale.⁴³

Conclusion

This history would seem to support Charles Taylor's conviction that we have undergone a debasing of the core value of authenticity in North American culture.⁴⁴ What began as a means by which the average person could express worship to God in daily life has become a system of techniques for selling oneself. The successful Ben Franklin, for whom the whole point of acquiring wealth was to retire from business in middle age and devote one's life to community service, has become the hot-slot stockbroker who looks out for Number One. Authenticity, whether defined in Cotton Mather's Puritan terms or Franklin's Enlightenment terms, as the means for success has become selfishness as the means to success. In the process, the definition of what makes up a good life has changed significantly. Authors of tracts or novels showing people how to be successful have not so much been the cause of these changes, as they have reflected them and shown how our culture has tried throughout the last several hundred years to maintain a consistent set of beliefs about the world and how we make our way in it.

This history also supports one of the insights of Robert Bellah and his co-workers that today North Americans tend to understand more about the means to success than the content of a successful life.⁴⁵ The success tracts of the character ethic were quite clear that the means to success were intimately related to the content of success. Virtue was its own reward in more ways than one. The earlier mind-power writers also saw a distinction between the goal, health and prosperity, and the means,

⁴³Leidner, *Fast*, 86-124.

⁴⁴Expressed in, for example, Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, The 1991 CBC Massey Lectures, (Concord, Ontario: House of Anansi, 1991).

⁴⁵Robert N. Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 21.

thought. Since the advent of the personality ethic, though, the emphasis in success literature has come to focus more and more on means alone. Looking at this shift in advice on living a successful life, the problem identified by the authors of *Habits of the Heart* may not reside in the roots of our tradition of moral discourse, but in the evolution of that tradition under the influence of the modern infatuation with technology and technique—with what Taylor sees as the malaise related to the role of instrumental reason and its application in technology.

For Lutherans, though, the problem resides at a different level. We are no doubt sad to see the debasement of the value of authenticity, but even the way that people were taught to achieve authenticity at the height of the character/virtue ethic is problematic for us theologically. We do not believe that a person obtains what is important in life through achievement of any sort. We do not believe that hard work, character, positive thinking, or a winning personality will gain us anything important. Rather, we believe the opposite. With Augustine and Luther, we believe that it is just when we are at our hardworking, positive-thinking, people-influencing best that we are at our arrogant worst and farthest from God. The Lutheran Confessions teach that justification, that meaning in life, that our place in God's economy is a gift, given to us unconditionally in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. To hold that a person's worth is determined by hard work or a virtuous character or positive thinking or a winning personality that results in success contradicts the very center of confessional Lutheran theology. To hold that people are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone contradicts the American doctrine of success.

So there is our quandary. How can we assimilate to a culture that contradicts the very core of who we are as a theological movement? Given that the American view of success is just as Episcopalian—and not very far removed from the Medieval *facere quod in se est*—as it is Puritan or Methodist, is the choice between “Evangelical Style” and “Evangelical Catholic” really a choice at all? Should we perhaps put a hold on debating how to assimilate and go back to debating whether to assimilate? These are questions that Lutherans need to address openly and in community with one another. If what has been reported above accurately reflects the religion of North America, then it is possible that any assimilation to any form of North American Christianity will involve softening our commitment to the core Lutheran doctrine of justification in favor of a

doctrine that allows a place for free choice and moral living in deciding a person's favor before God.

And yet, most of us are native-born North Americans whose primary personal and theological language is English. We are no longer really Germans or Swedes or Norwegians. We live and move and have our being in Christ as Americans and Canadians – mostly white and middle class. We cannot simply walk away from our own culture or live as if it were something other than what it is. Are we trapped on the treadmill of theological assimilation, or is there a way forward toward a unique North American way of being Lutheran that is both different from European ways of being Lutheran and also founded on our unique understanding of the gospel of God's grace communicated by the Holy Spirit through word and sacrament?