

SIR KNIGHT NORMAN VINCENT PEALE

A POWERFUL POSITIVE THINKER

By
Sir Knight Ivan Tribe

When discussing influential Protestant clergy of the last half of the twentieth century, two names are likely to dominate the conversation—Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale. The Reverend Graham has, of course, been the leading evangelist. Peale is a more complex figure. An active minister for six decades, he also became known as a writer of self-help books, working “to consciously integrate psychological insights with religious beliefs.” A Mason for sixty-seven years, he served rather proudly as both a Grand Chaplain and Grand Prelate in his ninety-five year lifespan.

The Peale story begins modestly in the small Greene County, Ohio town of Bowersville where a physician-turned-Methodist preacher, Charles Clifford Peale, delivered his firstborn son on May 31, 1898. Three years later the Peales had second son Robert and much later, third son Leonard was born. Methodist ministers frequently shifted from church to church so young Norman lived at various times in Highland, Norwood, and eventually Bellefontaine where he finished high school in 1916. He then entered Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware.

Norman Peale spent four years at O.W.U. graduating in 1920. Initially he worked as a newspaper reporter in Findlay, Ohio and Detroit, Michigan, but in 1921 he entered the Boston University School of Theology. The follow-

ing September, being ordained, Peale pastored a small church in Berkeley, Rhode Island for two years while completing his studies at Boston with both the M.A. and S.T.B. degrees. Moving to Brooklyn, New York following graduation in May 1924, he became assistant pastor at St. Mark’s Methodist Church in Brooklyn. A year later he took charge of the struggling Kings Highway Church also in Brooklyn. During his three years there in the pulpit, church membership increased from forty to about nine hundred. This represents the kind of success that attracts wide attention.

While serving at Kings Highway Church, Reverend Mr. Peale became a Mason in Midwood Lodge No. 1062 in Brooklyn. In following this path, family tradition played a role as father and grandfather, Clifford and Samuel Peale, had Masonic histories dating back to 1869. Norman was initiated an Entered Apprentice on January 6, 1926; passed a Fellowcraft on January 20; and raised a Master Mason on March 3, 1926. Peale’s membership in Midwood Lodge would span sixty-seven years. Thanks to a pair of mergers, Midwood consolidated with Lexington Lodge No. 310 in 1970 and Brooklyn Lodge No. 288 in 1988, ultimately becoming Midwood No. 288 at the time of his passing.

In 1927, the Reverend got a call to the University Methodist Church in Syracuse where he spent the next five years. As a minister, he continued to be successful.

Sunday morning attendance jumped upward and he did well with outreach programs at the University of Syracuse. Perhaps the most significant aspect of his stay in upstate New York occurred when he met a young co-ed at Syracuse University named Loretta Ruth Stafford. A minister's daughter, she had earlier vowed that she would never marry a preacher. However, over the next few months, Ruth had a change of heart. The couple was married on June 20, 1930, and subsequently parented three children in a union that endured for sixty-three years.

In Syracuse, the Reverend Peale sought additional Masonic light when he joined the Valley of Syracuse, AASR, completing degrees on February 27, 1928. No specifics on how active Brother Peale was in his early years in the fraternity have been recorded, but the following statement made some years later suggests going to meetings frequently: "Attending Lodge and participating in Masonic activities gave me confidence. I learned to work with people.... All I had to do was bring it out."

A dramatic change occurred in Peale's life in the spring of 1932 when on a March Sunday he was asked to deliver a guest sermon at Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, a Dutch Reformed congregation. This church had encountered decline over the previous two years and their board, impressed by Peale's preaching, hoped



William Vincent Peale

he could revive it. Accepting this pastorate required changing denominations, but he accepted the challenge and began his service there in October. Marble Collegiate would be Peale's ministerial home for the next fifty-two years. Those decades also saw his rise to national prominence and a vast expansion of his religious activity in new directions. For instance, he had done some radio programs in Syracuse but in 1933 initiated a regular radio program, *The Art of Living*, which gave him a large new audience. Both in the pulpit and over the air, he aspired "to show" people "the

practical advantages of Christianity.” According to scholar Gardiner H. Shattuck, “rather than preaching in obtuse theological terms,” Peale was “determined to talk in simple language that anyone could understand.”

The Reverend Mr. Peale also became one of the earliest ministers to “consciously integrate psychological insights with religious concepts.” Some hold that having a father who was both a physician and a preacher no doubt influenced his ideas in this area. By the later thirties, he worked with a psychiatrist, Dr. Smiley Blanton, and they ultimately co-authored two books, *Faith Is the Answer* (1940) and *The Art of Real Happiness* (1950). In the summer of 1940, Peale spent a vacation in Hollywood as technical advisor on a Fredric March film, *One Foot in Heaven*.

As war clouds began to gather, Norman Vincent Peale found himself in an awkward situation. From the beginning, he had denounced such individuals as Hitler (“a maniac”) and Mussolini (“a buzzard”) but reflecting his conservative rural Ohio background, had little use for the New Deal. When war came, he first wanted to enter the service as an army chaplain, but Ruth who was expecting her third child talked him out of it. So the Peales spent the war years on the “home front.” In January 1944 they purchased a place of their own in Pawling, New York, a twenty-acre small farm, for \$25,000 which they paid for through lecture fees. Their neighbors included such Masonic notables as Governor Thomas Dewey and Lowell Thomas as well as noted newsman Edward R. Murrow. Pawling would be the Peales’ home for the remainder of their lives.

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Right after the war, the Peales started another endeavor with the little inspirational magazine *Guideposts* which grew from humble beginnings to a 2008 paid subscription of 2,195,000. Since several persons often read a single copy, one estimate gives it an approximate readership of about fifteen million. Within a decade, *Guideposts* had grown to a subscription list of 800,000. In that same positive period, Brother Peale also had his first best-seller with *A Guide to Confident Living* (1948).

The end of the decade also saw Norman Vincent Peale expand his Masonic activity. He had moved his Scottish Rite membership to the Valley of New York in 1934. In 1949 he was appointed Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of New York, a position he held for three years. A life member of Crescent Shrine temple in Trenton, New Jersey, Noble Peale served as Imperial Chaplain in 1955. On September 23, 1959, the AASR, NMJ coroneted him a 33° Mason, but this would not be the last of his fraternal activity.

In 1952, Brother Peale reached a new zenith of influence with the publication of what would become a multi-million selling volume, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. The book remained on the best-seller lists for more than three years and made the name Norman Vincent Peale household words. However, fame and success can often be accompanied by criticism and controversy. Such was the case with the now widely-acclaimed pastor of Marble Collegiate Church.

Critics of Brother Peale charged that his approach was intellectually shallow as well as too reliant on optimism. Others held, according to Gardiner Shattuck, that he was “converting belief in God into belief in human potential and of dis-

torting Christianity into a gospel of self-reliance." Hurt by these charges, Peale considered giving up his pastorate. At one point he even wrote a letter of resignation. On top of all that, his father was on his deathbed. Younger brother Leonard told him to continue as "he owed his loyalty to the millions who believed in him not to the handful who criticized." However, his decision to hold on came in a message his stepmother Mary told him after Charles Peale had passed on as quoted in Arthur Gordon's *Norman Vincent Peale: Minister to Missions* (1958). His father said, "tell Norman I've read every word he's ever written... and... it's in harmony with the basic truths of Christianity and the teachings of Jesus...." As for his critics, the dying father related, "tell Norman I said they were just a bunch of jackasses, and to pay them no heed... and never quit." That settled it. Peale handed his letter of resignation to his wife with the words "here, tear it up." Norman Vincent Peale kept on preaching and writing.

At Marble Collegiate Church membership had grown from six hundred to three thousand. Crowds waited in line each Sunday morning to hear his sermons, thousands read his advice column in *Look* magazine, and millions heard his radio and television programs. His friends and admirers ranged from President Eisenhower to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, baseball executive Branch Rickey, publisher Frank Gannett, and western film star Roy Rogers. Well-known religious figures who befriended and defended him included Billy Graham and his own predecessor at Marble Collegiate, Daniel A. Poling, who wrote a positive editorial in *The Christian Herald*. A Hollywood film, *One*

Man's Way in 1964, starring Don Murray in the lead role, brought Peale's life to the silver screen.

Although Brother Peale avoided heavy participation in politics, he did not remain totally aloof from it generally reflecting the views of his Midwestern Republican heritage. This brought some criticism from failed presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson who once said that he found St. Paul appealing and Peale appalling. Peale opposed the election of John Kennedy as a Catholic and did not criticize the Viet Nam War. Less partisan in performing marriage ceremonies, he officiated at the nuptials of both David Eisenhower and Julie Nixon, and Kentucky Governor John Y. Brown and former Miss America Phyllis George.

As perhaps the best-known American Mason in the pulpit, Brother Peale spoke often of his membership and pride in the fraternity, commenting at one point "to me it means a personal relationship with great historical personalities... and also with the finest body of men whom it is possible to assemble anywhere." In 1971, he again became General Chaplain in New York and so remained until awarded Chaplain Emeritus status in 1985. The Grand Lodge presented him the Distinguished Achievement Award in 1972. The Scottish Rite NMJ accorded him the Gourgas Medal in 1973 and the SMJ, the Grand Cross in 1987.

While continuing into his fourth decade as minister at Marble Collegiate, still another Masonic honor came to Reverend Peale in 1970 when G. Wilbur Bell of Illinois, Grand Master of the Grand Encampment, Knights Templar, appointed him Grand Prelate for the 1970-1973 triennium. Since he had not been a prior York Rite member, it neces-

sitated that he be “knighted at sight by a Grand Master before being appointed Grand Prelate.” Following the fulfillment of his duties, he received the York Rite degrees in Evanston, Illinois in February 1974 with Sir Knight F. William Young, Grand Commander of New York, among those present. Shortly afterward, Companion and Sir Knight Peale affiliated with the bodies in upstate New York in which Young held membership: Excelsior Chapter No. 164, R.A.M., now in Shortville; Palmyra Council No. 26, R. & S. M., in Palmyra; and Red Jacket Commandery No. 81, K. T., in Canandaigua. In February 1975 Peale was presented with a plaque certifying membership “in these bodies” by Sir Knight Alvin I. Crump, Past Department Commander.” Red Jacket Commandery No. 81 in 1996 merged

with Jerusalem No. 17, Geneva No. 29, and Zenobia No. 41 to become Sagoyewatha Commandery No. 17 of Phelps, New York. Sir Knight David W. Taber, who currently serves as Recorder of both Palmyra Council and Sagoyewatha Commandery, recalls the above events and as the source of the preceding quotes concludes that “we were very proud to claim such a distinguished gentlemen and spiritual giant as a fellow Companion and Sir Knight.”

Although Norman Vincent Peale continued to preach at Marble Collegiate well into his eighties, not retiring until 1984, he also still received numerous honors and endured criticism from some circles. As new waves of Mason-bashing gained support in the early 1990s, the sixty years-plus proud



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member remained unflinching. (For a typical bashing of Peale and Masonry, see www.letusreason.org.) In the February 1993 *Scottish Rite Journal*, he responded to criticism as follows: "To me, Freemasonry is one form of dedication to God and service to humanity. I am proud to walk in fraternal fellowship with my Brethren. Why am I a Freemason? Simply because I am proud to be near [a Brother] who wants to keep the moral standards of life at high level and leave something behind so others will benefit. Only as I personally become better can I help others to do the same."

These were the characteristics that defined Reverend Peale, striving for self-improvement, maintaining a positive outlook with a realization that man is fallible while holding to conservative social values, and urging mankind to do their best. He held to it until his death on December 24, 1993. Ruth Peale carried on with much of his work—including *Guideposts*—until her own passing in 2008. Brother Peale's ultimate achievement was explained by J. Harold Ellens, editor of the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*. Ellens said: "Norman Peale saw psychology and Christian experience as very compatible . . . he had the courage to stand pat on this position in spite of the opposition of the entire Christian church for nearly half a century. His genius was that he... translated psycho-theology into the language of the people."



Notes

Biographies of Rev. Peale are: Arthur Gordon, *Norman Vincent Peale: Minister to Millions* (1958) and Carol V. R. George, *God's Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (1993). His autobiography is the *True Joy of Positive Living* (1984). Shorter sketches can be found in American National Biography Online (www.anb.org); Ohioana Authors (www.ohioana-authors.org) and *Current Biography* 1946 and 1974. For his Masonic records, I am indebted to Thomas Savini of the Livingston Library, William Holland of the Scottish Rite Museum, and David W. Taber, Recorder of Palmyra Council No. 26 and Sagoyewatha Commandery No. 17, both in New York.

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