



When My Husband Nearly Quit the Church

by Mrs. Norman Vincent Peale as told to Carl Bakal

IT ISN'T NEWS to those who've read "Norman Vincent Peale: Minister to Millions," the recently published biography of my husband, that he decided to give up the pulpit of New York's Marble Collegiate Church several years ago. You may also recall the disturbing incidents which led him, after almost 25 years as pastor of the church, actually to write out his resignation.

Nevertheless I've often been asked to tell the story from a woman's point of view and, more specifically, what it means for a wife to face such a crisis in her husband's life—and her own.

I had suspected and even feared such a serious situation long before that fateful Fall of 1956 when Norman, after nervously pacing our living room, handed me the paper on which he had scrawled his resignation. I had done as much as possible to shelter him from the disheartening criticisms which caused his decision.

It started back in 1952 when Norman's book, "The Power of Positive Thinking," was published. The tremendous success of the book—it has sold approximately 2½ million copies—was a mixed blessing. On one hand, its message was helpful to millions of Americans of all faiths. On the other hand, the book brought Norman into the public spotlight and inevitably attracted the attention of critics. They included intellectuals, religious scholars, and church leaders who believed Norman's message was wanting in theology.

They held that he tended to oversimplify religion. He offered "easy" solutions, they said, for some people who might need psychiatric help. And, they added, he emphasized the material rather than the spiritual rewards of religion.

In reply, Norman said that there are many ways of applying Christ's teachings, which were basically

quite simple. "What could be a simpler guide to everyday conduct than 'Do unto others . . . ?' " he asked. The simple methods Norman had developed on how to get along with one's neighbors, for example, and how to pray, were part of his way of applying the teachings of Jesus.

Although Norman conceded that he had tried to simplify religion in order to help people, he denied suggesting that it is easy. "Anyone who has read what I've written," he said, "should know that I say religion brings results only if you work at it."

He agreed that he may have stressed the values of religion for living a more effective life in this world, but he added that he also has stressed that such values can be gained only as by-products of spiritual changes within a person.

Finally, regarding criticism that "positive thinking" might not be enough for emotionally disturbed people, it is common knowledge that Norman was among the first clergymen to recognize the importance of psychiatry, setting up a religious-psychiatric clinic at his church 20 years ago.

We left the controversy behind us that Summer by visiting Europe, where Norman worked on another book. It was never out of our thoughts, though, and a magazine article we saw upon our return brought the problem to a head.

It was a symposium of criticism of "easy" religion and of Norman by some outstanding figures in the Protestant church—among them Methodist Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam; Dr. Franklin Clark Fry, head of the Lutheran church; and Dr. Liston Pope, dean of the Yale Divinity School. Norman had time to read the article only hurriedly because the day we arrived from Europe he received word that his father was seriously ill. But before taking the overnight train to Harrison Valley, Pa., where

his father lived, Norman came to me, greatly troubled by the article.

"If such leaders of the church feel that I am doing harm," he said, "there is nothing for me to do but resign from the church."

I told Norman that whatever he decided to do would be all right with me because I believed in him. Not that I had any doubts about his work. I knew he was trying to help people with their problems, and trying to teach them how to feel God's presence in their daily lives.

Nor did I have any doubts about the success of his methods. His next book, "The Amazing Results of Positive Thinking," which will be published this Fall, is based on letters from thousands of people whose lives have been changed by the spiritual power of positive thinking. But still I wanted Norman to know that I would stand by him in whatever course he chose.

I did suggest that he give the matter more thought and postpone his decision until he'd returned from visiting his father. During the trip there, however, Norman wrote out his resignation. He had decided it would be best not to tell his father, who had suffered a stroke, although he did discuss the decision with his brothers. Leonard, also a minister, and Bob tried to convince Norman that he was making a mistake. They pointed out that although some Protestant leaders might disagree with Norman, thousands of others believed in him and understood what he was doing. I should also like to make it clear that no officials of our own church, the Marble Collegiate Reformed Church, had ever criticized Norman's message.

But the article had sowed the seeds of doubt in Norman, and he remained unconvinced by his brothers' arguments. Upon his return from Harrison Valley, he told me he was going to present the resignation at the next monthly meeting of the deacons and elders of his church.

Five days later we received word that his father had died. The day before the funeral, Norman and I were in a study off the living room, where his father's casket had been placed, when Norman's stepmother, Mary, came in.

"I have a message your father asked me to give you, Norman," she said. "Just after you left, your father told me, 'Something is bothering Norman, and I think I know what it is. It has something to do with all that criticism. You tell Norman to pay those critics no heed. Tell him that I know his message. I've listened to him preach. I've read every word he's ever written. And his message is the truth. The people need it and the Lord wants him to bring it to them. So you tell him to pay no attention to those critics. Tell him that the Peales never quit!'"

It was a moving experience. Mary was in tears when she finished speaking. When we left the room, Norman took the letter of resignation from his pocket and asked me to tear it up.

Like most people faced with a crisis, he needed the kind of reassurance that his father's words had given him. And I liked to think that the fact that I had left no doubt of my belief in him helped him resolve his doubts, too.

COVER: Food is important to healthy young men outdoors, but so are sports—particularly as played by healthy young women. Today's cover by Art Magee captures a delicious Summer dilemma.

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