

Joel Osteen

By Robert M. Bowman, Jr.

Founding Date: Joel Osteen became pastor of Lakewood Church in 1999.

Organizations: Lakewood Church, founded in 1959 by Joel's father John Osteen; Joel Osteen Ministries.

Official Publications: Osteen and the Lakewood Church affirm that the Bible is the Word of God. Osteen's bestselling books are *Your Best Life Now* and *Become a Better You*.

Other Names: Osteen is a Word of Faith evangelist; commonly identified as a preacher of the "prosperity" gospel (an identification he disputes).

HISTORY

Joel Osteen was born in 1963. His father, John Osteen, had been an ordained Southern Baptist pastor, but in 1958 became a charismatic and dissociated himself from the Baptists. In 1959 he started Lakewood Church as an independent, nondenominational church out of an abandoned feed store in northeast Houston, Texas. From 1982 until 1999, his son Joel was the producer of John's television ministry. Joel, who had attended Oral Roberts University for one semester and who had preached his first sermon the week before John died, succeeded his father as pastor.

When John passed away in 1999, Lakewood had about 6,000 members. In 2007, the church claimed over 38,000 were attending its services weekly, making it the largest church in America. Osteen packs other amphitheaters as well, regularly drawing crowds in the tens of thousands as he speaks about once a month in cities all over North America (and occasionally overseas).

In 2005, Lakewood Church began leasing the Compaq Center, a 16,000-seat sports arena that had been the home of the Houston Rockets. The church performed renovations to the facility carrying an estimated \$100 million price tag. The move actually made sense: attendance had more than doubled in the first five years of Joel Osteen's tenure as pastor, even before the move to the Compaq Center and before his book *Your Best Life Now* catapulted him to stardom. Joel's youth, understanding of television, and "positive" message are likely all factors in the explosive growth of Lakewood Church since he became its pastor.

Osteen is, not surprisingly, one of the broadcasters on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), which is infamous for its lineup of Word-Faith evangelists alongside more mainstream evangelical pastors such as Charles Stanley. Osteen also broadcasts on other networks, including ABC Family, CNBC, USA, Discovery, and the Black Entertainment Network (BET), as well as networks in Canada, Australia, Europe, and the Middle East. Osteen began podcasting his sermons in early 2006, and by early 2007 they were in the top ten audio podcasts on iTunes, with typically a million or more downloads each month.¹

Osteen's book *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*,² published in November 2004, has sold between four and five million copies. This does not even count the study guide, devotional, journal, and calendar associated with the book, or the many foreign-language editions. According to *Publishers Weekly*, his book *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life*, released in October 2007, was to have a first printing of three million.³

The January 2007 issue of *The Church Report* identified Joel Osteen as the "most influential Christian in America," ahead of (for example) Billy Graham, Focus on the Family's founder James Dobson, and U.S. president George W. Bush.⁴ Although the list derives from a poll of the periodical's readers, it confirms just how popular Osteen is. Indeed, in 2006 Barbara Walters profiled Osteen as one of her "10 Most Fascinating People in America," describing him as "rich, famous, handsome, and adored by millions of fans on television each week"—which explains how he made it into a lineup that included Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Patrick Dempsey, and the rapper Jay-Z. Osteen's popularity provoked *Time* magazine to run an article asking, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" that highlighted Osteen's controversial message.⁵

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DOCTRINES

Lakewood’s doctrinal statement: Lakewood Church’s doctrinal statement is for the most part theologically inoffensive. It affirms the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible; the Trinity (“one God who exists in three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit”); the death, resurrection, and second coming of Jesus Christ; salvation “by placing our faith in what Jesus did for us on the cross”; the practices of Baptism and Communion; and the importance of growing in Christ. All of these affirmations are orthodox, and Osteen does not seem to contradict them in his teaching, although he rarely addresses these topics. Only Lakewood’s affirmation of growing in Christ is problematic, because of how it is interpreted in Osteen’s actual teaching: “We believe . . . as children of God, we are overcomers and more than conquerors and God intends for each of us to experience the abundant life He has in store for us.”⁶ The motto or slogan of the church, “Discover the Champion in You,” may actually be more informative of what the church teaches week by week than its doctrinal statement.

Osteen’s preaching: Before Osteen preaches, he leads his congregation every week (as did his father John) in reciting the following affirmation: “This is my Bible. I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do. Today I’ll be taught the Word of God. I boldly confess my mind is alert, my heart is receptive. I’ll never be the same, in Jesus’ name.” Both in style and in substance, this affirmation or “positive confession” is a typical Word-Faith liturgy. The problem with the affirmation is not so much in what it says (we are, of course, what the Bible says we are), but in its focus (which is entirely on what the individual is, has, and can do) and in its implied meaning (that the individual is promised wealth and material success in this life).

The body of Osteen’s sermon (after an opening joke or story) typically focuses on a perceived negativity in contemporary society—people are worried, or anxious, or lacking in confidence, or expecting failure—and the proposed solution of thinking and believing positively that God wants us to succeed, to be confident, to be at peace. Osteen backs up his prescription with a couple of biblical quotations (see below) and generous illustrations, typically drawn from his own life or from the recent successes of his church. The biblical quotations may be merely tacked on to the sermon at the end, as even Osteen admitted on Larry King Live: “I may not bring the scripture in until the end of my sermon and I might feel bad about that.”⁷

At the close of his sermon, Osteen typically issues a brief old-fashioned gospel invitation. He encourages his listeners to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. However, the sermon typically says little or nothing to prepare listeners for such an invitation.

Osteen’s Word-Faith message: Osteen, like some other popular advocates of Word-Faith doctrine to emerge recently, rarely focuses on the doctrinally controversial elements of that doctrine. In fact, he rarely talks about doctrinal matters at all. His preaching and writing consist primarily of folksy illustrations of people succeeding in life through thinking positive thoughts. Nevertheless, he has explicitly taught various key elements of Word-Faith theology.

Words of faith: Osteen credits his wife Victoria with “speaking words of faith and victory” that led to their eventually building themselves a large, elegant home (*Your Best Life Now*, 7).

Positive and negative confession: According to Osteen, people “usually get what they expect; they become what they believe” (*Your Best Life Now*, 73). He says, “Our words have tremendous power, and whether we want to or not, we will give life to what we’re saying, either good or bad” (*ibid.*, 122). “Words are like seeds. They have creative power. . . . Our words tend to produce what we’re saying” (*Become a Better You*, 109). Therefore, we ought to speak “words of faith” and “faith-filled words” (*ibid.*, 110, 111). “Something supernatural happens when we speak it out” (*ibid.*, 115).

Faith as visualization: Right in the opening page of his book, Osteen asserts: “As long as you can’t imagine it, as long as you can’t see it, then it is not going to happen for you” (*Your Best Life Now*, 3, emphasis in original).

To live your best life now, you must start looking at your life through eyes of faith, seeing yourself rise to new levels. See your business taking off. See your marriage restored. See your family prospering. See your dreams coming to pass. You must conceive it and believe it is possible if you ever hope to experience it (*ibid.*, 4).

Positive conception: Some Word-Faith teachers claim that Mary conceived Jesus in her womb by her own act of positively confessing in faith that she would have a child. This doctrine appears to originate from Kenneth Copeland,⁸ and Osteen teaches it:

God is saying something similar to what He told the Virgin Mary and others throughout Scripture. . . . My question to you is: Will you believe? Will you allow that seed to take root? The angel told Mary that she would conceive without knowing a man. In other words, God was

saying it could happen through supernatural means. It can happen without the bank loaning you the money (*Your Best Life Now*, 10, 11).

Health and wealth covenant: Like other Word-Faith teachers, Osteen maintains that prosperity is part of the blessing of Abraham that God promises to his people today, since Abraham “was prosperous, healthy, and lived a long, productive life” (*Become a Better You*, 40).

Faith healing: Osteen gives less attention to healing than he does to financial or material prosperity, but he clearly teaches both aspects of the “health and wealth” message. “You may have been sick for a long time, but this is your time to get well” (*Your Best Life Now*, 10).

Prosperity by faith: Prosperity or material success—in terms of career, finances, housing, and so forth—is a prominent aspect of Osteen’s teaching. The following statements are just a few examples. “God wants to increase you financially, by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, and creativity” (*Your Best Life Now*, 5). “God wants to give you your own house” (ibid., 35). “God wants to make your life easier” (ibid., 38).

Oddly, Osteen denies being a prosperity teacher. He told one interviewer, “I don’t in the least bit consider myself a prosperity-type preacher. I don’t think I’ve ever preached a message on finances.”⁹ He made the same point to Larry King, stating, “As a matter of fact, I’ve never preached a message on money.”¹⁰ Whether this is true or not, financial prosperity through faith is a theme that runs throughout his messages. Admittedly, Osteen qualifies this teaching in some salutary ways, as when he says that he “can’t guarantee that you will become rich or famous” by following his teaching (*Become a Better You*, 14).

De-emphasis of sin and judgment: Osteen’s obsessive emphasis on the “positive” results in a neglect and even avoidance of the themes of sin and judgment. In his interview with King, Osteen admitted that he avoids calling people sinners: “But most people already know what they’re doing wrong. When I get them to church I want to tell them that you can change. There can be a difference in your life. So I don’t go down the road of condemning.”¹¹ In that same interview, Osteen was reticent even to suggest that non-Christians were under condemnation:

King: What if you’re Jewish or Muslim, you don’t accept Christ at all?

Osteen: You know, I’m very careful about saying who would and wouldn’t go to heaven. I don’t know.

King: If you believe you have to believe in Christ? They’re wrong, aren’t they?

Osteen: Well, I don’t know if I believe they’re wrong. I believe here’s what the Bible teaches and from the Christian faith this is what I believe. But I just think that only God will judge a person’s heart. I spent a lot of time in India with my father. I don’t know all about their religion. But I know they love God. And I don’t know. I’ve seen their sincerity. So I don’t know. I know for me, and what the Bible teaches, I want to have a relationship with Jesus.¹²

Reactions from evangelicals to these and similar comments by Osteen prompted him to post a clarification on his ministry web site (since removed): “I believe that Jesus Christ alone is the only way to salvation. However, it wasn’t until I had the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview that I realize I had not clearly stated that having a personal relationship with Jesus is the only way to heaven.”¹³

CHRISTIAN/BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Positive thinking is unbalanced: Osteen’s primary message is to think positive thoughts, a message that is not specifically Christian at all. Consider the “7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential” in his book *Your Best Life Now*:

1. Enlarge your vision
2. Develop a healthy self-image
3. Discover the power of your thoughts and words
4. Let go of the past
5. Find strength through adversity
6. Live to give!
7. Choose to be happy

These seven steps would be at home just as much in Unity or Science of Mind as in the Word-Faith movement. There is nothing essentially Christian, or even particularly religious, about this message at all. In fact, a humanist would have no problem embracing these seven steps. Osteen sprinkles biblical quotations throughout the book (but so would a Unity publication) and relates these seven steps to a generic Christian belief, but these elements appear to be window dressing only. The “7 Keys to Improving Your Life” in *Become a Better You* are similarly generic advice that,

for the most part, almost anyone could affirm (keep pressing forward, be positive toward yourself, and so forth).

The Bible teaches neither positive thinking nor negativism, but rather a balanced realism that recognizes both negative and positive dimensions of human life in this age. Over and over again, it presents a balanced view of the righteous and the wicked (Ps. 1:6), the wise and the foolish (Prov. 10:1), human evil and human goodness (Matt. 7:11), and the future prospects of both eternal punishment and eternal life (Matt. 25:46). Paul was prepared to live or to die, expecting only to honor Christ whatever happened (Phil. 1:19-26). While he remained alive, he expected neither poverty nor prosperity, but learned to honor Christ and to be content in either case (Phil. 4:11-13).

Word-Faith* theology is unbiblical: The doctrine that God expects human beings to be prosperous and healthy in this mortal life by speaking positive “words of faith” is a serious distortion of biblical theology. Our words cannot make things real (Prov. 14:23) except as we or others act on them (Prov. 18:21). God’s word, unlike ours, always produces results (Is. 55:6-11). Indeed, what we “confess” may be false (Rev. 3:17). Perfect health and well-being are promised to Christians, but in the future resurrection life of the age to come (Rom. 8:10-11, 23; 1 Cor. 15:42-45).

Unfortunately, Osteen consistently misrepresents Scripture by partial and out-of-context quotations (typically from paraphrases like *The Message*). Here is a typical example: “The Scripture says that God wants to pour out ‘His far and beyond favor.’ God wants this to be the best time of your life” (*Your Best Life Now*, 5). What the Scripture he cites says is that God “raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace [what Osteen paraphrases as “His far and beyond favor”] in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6-7). Osteen’s partial paraphrase distorts the text in at least two ways. First, he misrepresents the text as a present guarantee (“God wants this to be the best time of your life”) when it states explicitly that God’s best for us is still future, “in the ages to come.” Second, he glosses over the particularity of God’s promise as given to those who are “in Christ Jesus.” Osteen commits similar errors throughout his two books in most of his citations of Scripture.¹⁴

A gospel in which Christ is often excised from biblical quotations about his redemptive work, in which Christ is little more than an afterthought, is not a sound gospel. As Michael Spencer, a Christian blogger known as the “Internet monk,” notes, “Why is a man who doesn’t preach the gospel the most popular preacher in America? Are we going to take note of what kind of message is going to be identified as building the largest church in America?”¹⁵

*For additional information on the Word-Faith, refer to Watchman Fellowship’s Profile on the Word-Faith Movement, by Robert M. Bowman, Jr.

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Notes

- ¹ “Joel Osteen Hits Big on iTunes,” *Christian Post*, March 20, 2007, http://www.christianpost.com/article/20070320/26429_Joel_Osteen_Hits_Big_on_iTunes.htm.
- ² Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now* (New York: Faith Warner, 2004).
- ³ Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You* (New York: Free Press, 2007); see Lynn Garrett, “New Osteen Book at Three Million,” *Publishers Weekly*, April 13, 2007.
- ⁴ “The 50 Most Influential Christians in America,” *The Church Report*, Jan. 2007, http://www.thechurchreport.com/mag_article.php?mid=875&mname=January.
- ⁵ David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You to Be Rich?” *Time*, Sept. 10, 2006.
- ⁶ “What We Believe,” http://joelosteen.lakewood.cc/site/PageServer?pagename=JOM_whatwewebelieve.
- ⁷ Joel Osteen, on *Larry King Live*, June 20, 2005, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/20/lkl.01.html>.
- ⁸ Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *The Word-Faith Controversy: Understanding the Health and Wealth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 155-56.
- ⁹ Joel Osteen, in “Expect God’s Favor: Interview with Joel Osteen,” By Laura Sheahan, Dec. 2004, http://www.beliefnet.com/story/157/story_15735_1.html.
- ¹⁰ Joel Osteen, on *Larry King Live*, Dec. 22, 2006, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0612/22/lkl.01.html>.
- ¹¹ Joel Osteen, on *Larry King Live*, June 20, 2005, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/20/lkl.01.html>.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Joel Osteen, <http://www.joelosteen.com/site/PageServer?pagename=LarryKingLetter>, quoted on various other web sites, but no longer active on Osteen’s site.
- ¹⁴ E.g., *Your Best Life Now*, 13, 51, 76, 82, 83, 109.
- ¹⁵ Michael Spencer, “Outing Joel Osteen: A Challenge to the Evangelical Blogosphere,” Jan. 29, 2005, <http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/outing-joel-osteen-a-challenge-to-the-evangelical-blogosphere>.



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