

Joel Osteen

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Joel Osteen (b. 1963), the pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, is a popular author and television preacher.

Statistics:

In 2005, Lakewood Church (founded in 1959 in a remodeled store) opened a 16,800 seat megachurch in Houston's Compaq Center, a former sports arena. More than 40,000 people attend weekly worship at Lakewood Church, with its four services in English and two in Spanish. Others listen to Joel Osteen's teaching through online and television broadcasting, which reaches more than 100 countries and attracts an estimated 7 to 10 million viewers each week.¹

Lakewood Church brings in about \$1 million each week in offerings during services, with more than \$20 million sent in by mail; the church issues financial statements that are "notable for their accountability."² This income supports a staff of 300 people, pays down the remaining debt for the 30 year lease on the Compaq Center, buys television time and supports ministries in other parts of the world.³ Osteen stopped taking his \$200,000 annual salary after the sale of his first book, *Your Best Life Now* (2004), which sold over 10 million copies.⁴

History:

¹ Daniel Kalder, "Joel Osteen: The New Face of Christianity," *The Guardian* (U.S. Edition), March 6, 2010, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/07/joel-osteen-america-pastor>, accessed March 12, 2020.

² Ralph Blumenthal, "Joel Osteen's Credo: Eliminate the Negative, Accentuate Prosperity," *New York Times*, March 30, 2006, at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/30/books/30oste.html?_r=0&pagewanted=print, accessed January 6, 2020.

³ Daniel Kalder, "Joel Osteen: The New Face of Christianity," *The Guardian* (U.S. Edition), March 6, 2010, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/07/joel-osteen-america-pastor>, accessed March 12, 2020.

⁴ Ralph Blumenthal, "Joel Osteen's Credo: Eliminate the Negative, Accentuate Prosperity," *New York Times*, March 30, 2006, at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/30/books/30oste.html?_r=0&pagewanted=print, accessed January 6, 2020; Natalie Finn, "Come Hell or High Water: Inside Joel Osteen's \$60 Million Megachurch Empire," *ENews*, August 30, 2017, at <https://www.eonline.com/news/876802/come-hell-or-high-water-inside-joel-osteen-s-60-million-megachurch-empire>, accessed March 12, 2020.

Lakewood Church in Houston was founded by Joel Osteen's father John Osteen, a Baptist minister who embraced Pentecostal beliefs. John Osteen combined teachings on the prosperity gospel with charismatic views on speaking in tongues and miraculous healing to form his message.⁵ In 1981, Joel Osteen left Oral Roberts University after one year of study to develop the church's television ministry. He became the pastor of Lakewood Church after his father's death in 1999. Joel Osteen's message emphasizes positive thinking, encouraging listeners to focus in a positive way on biblical promises in order to bring divine intervention.⁶

Osteen's wife Victoria serves as a co-pastor at Lakewood. The church sponsors groups such as "Griefshare: From Mourning to Joy" and the "Quest for Authentic Manhood." In November of 2019, Osteen hosted rapper Kanye West at Lakewood for a conversation in the morning service and a free evening concert.

Texts:

Osteen has written a number of books, including *The Power of Favor: The Force That Will Take You Where You Can't Go on Your Own* (2019), *Think Better: A Victorious Life Begins in Your Mind* (2016), *I Declare: 31 Promises to Speak Over Your Life* (2013), *The Power of I Am: Two Words That Will Change Your Life Today* (2015) and *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (2004).

Beliefs and Practices:

According to the Lakewood Church website, the church's beliefs are based on the authority of Scripture, believed to be inspired by God and without error. They confess the Holy Trinity and believe that salvation is "found only by placing our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead and is coming again. *See Romans 5:1; 5:8-9.*"⁷ Baptism is said to be "a symbol of the cleansing power of the blood of Christ and a testimony to our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. *See 1 Peter 3:21.*"⁸ Communion is received as an act of remembering Jesus' death on the cross. Every believer should grow in a relationship with Jesus "by obeying God's Word, yielding to the Holy Spirit and by being conformed to the image of Christ."⁹

Osteen sees himself as a "life coach" and motivator. He says, "God is not pleased when we drag through life, defeated, depressed, perpetually discouraged by our circumstances. No, God is

⁵ Concerning the prosperity gospel, see *Evaluation of the Word-Faith (Positive Confession) Movement*. St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2007, at www.lcms.org/ctcr.

⁶ See the 2007 evaluation by the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations on the word-faith (or positive confession) movement, available at www.lcms.org/ctcr, accessed December 30, 2019.

⁷ <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/about>, italics in the original, accessed December 11, 2019.

⁸ <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/about>, italics in the original, accessed December 11, 2019.

⁹ <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/about>, accessed December 11, 2019.

pleased when we develop a prosperous mindset.”¹⁰ Osteen believes that people should choose to be happy and positive. “Understand this: God will help you, but you cast the deciding vote.”¹¹ Ordinary examples of God’s favor may include getting faster seating in a restaurant, a better parking space or being upgraded to first class while traveling. Osteen prefers to focus on everyday issues rather than controversial ones. Concerning difficult times in life, Osteen has said, “You know God’s in control and we don’t understand everything. I don’t have to understand why my mother got healed and a lot of people, they’re in the hospital and they’re not going to make it. But I look at them and say this: ‘God’s got you in the palm of His hand. You won’t leave one second before your time. If God wants you to be here, then you’re going to be here.’ So I try to see it like that.”¹²

When an interviewer commented that Jesus Christ is not a part of Osteen’s positive message, Osteen responded, “That’s just my message. There is scripture in there that backs it all up. But I feel like... I’m called to help people... how do we walk out the Christian life? How do we live it? And these are principles that can help you. I mean, there’s a lot better people qualified to say, ‘Here’s a book that’s going to explain the scriptures to you.’ I don’t think that’s my gifting.”¹³

Osteen has said, “Billy Graham, his gift was to go out and win people to Christ. It’s different being a pastor. I’m trying to teach people—how do you live the abundant life? That’s my gift. Some people are good at taking the scripture line by line and talking about how it was written, but that’s not my gift...I believe you’ve got to repent of your sins; you’ve got to have a relationship with Christ. So I believe all the fundamental things, I just don’t focus on that.”¹⁴ Osteen does not want to focus on sin because he thinks people are beaten down enough and it is better to encourage them instead of condemning them.

Osteen does not speak on political issues: “I feel like I’m called to reach the general public. And if you start dividing yourself, saying, ‘I’m a Democrat, I’m a Republican,’ fifty percent don’t agree. I want to throw a broad message of hope to everyone and not have someone turn me off because of my political preferences.”¹⁵

In his 2007 book, *Your Best Life Now for Moms*, Osteen wrote, “When you think thoughts of mediocrity, you are destined to live an average life. But when you align your thoughts with God’s thought... you will be propelled toward greatness, inevitably bound for increase and God’s supernatural blessings.”¹⁶ Osteen does not like the term “prosperity gospel” because it suggests

¹⁰ Quoted in Jason Byassee, “The Health and Wealth Gospel: Be Happy,” *Christian Century*, July 12, 2005, 20.

¹¹ Byassee, 21.

¹² Daniel Kalder, “Joel Osteen: The New Face of Christianity,” *The Guardian* (U.S. Edition), March 6, 2010, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/07/joel-osteen-america-pastor>, accessed March 12, 2020.

¹³ Byron Pitts, “Joel Osteen Answers His Critics,” *60 Minutes*, October 11, 2007, at <https://www.cbs.news.com/news/joel-osteen-answers-his-critics>, accessed December 20, 2019.

¹⁴ Daniel Kalder, “Joel Osteen: The New Face of Christianity,” *The Guardian* (U.S. Edition), March 6, 2010, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/07/joel-osteen-america-pastor>, accessed December 20, 2019. Billy Graham (1918-2018) was an internationally known American evangelist.

¹⁵ Larson, at <https://juicyecumenism.com/2012/09/20/joel-osteen-americans-cheerful-waffler/>, accessed December 18, 2019.

¹⁶ Quoted in Leanna K. Fuller, “Perfectionism and Shame: Exploring the Connections,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 18:1 (Summer 2008): 54.

a focus on money, something he does not do. He comments, “Prosperity is having good relationships, having peace in your mind, being able to sleep at night. But I do believe God wants you to be blessed. He wants you to excel in your career.”¹⁷ The popular preacher wants to keep his message simple and uncomplicated. He says, “The phrase I use a lot is: ‘God’s dream for your life is bigger than your own.’ You don’t know what He has in store if you’ll just keep being your best, keep being faithful.”¹⁸

A Lutheran Response

With the apostle Paul, Lutherans confess, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). The Scriptures focus on faith that receives from the Lord Jesus Christ what He has given to us by his death and resurrection for sinners—the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. We recognize that the Christian life is not an unbroken chain of personal triumphs, but a life lived through the promises of our Savior.

Jesus comes to us not as a life coach but as our Savior, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). “The first words Jesus spoke were not, ‘Why can’t we all just get along?’ but rather, ‘Repent and believe in the gospel.’ Message: We’re not permitted into God’s presence on our terms—but only God’s.”¹⁹ Lutheran teaching distinguishes between a “theology of glory,” that is, seeking to experience the glory of God through our own efforts and on our own terms, and the “theology of the cross,” the understanding that God is hidden—and revealed—in suffering and the cross.

The Lutheran Confessions teach that the doctrine of repentance “ought to be as clear and plain in the church as possible.”²⁰ Osteen says that “God is pleased when we develop a prosperous mindset,” but Scripture teaches that “a broken and contrite heart” is the sacrifice pleasing to God (Ps. 51:16-17). In true repentance, an individual hears words of judgment: “‘You are all of no account—whether you appear publicly to be sinners or saints. You must become something different from what you are now’... the New Testament immediately adds the consoling promise of grace through the gospel. This we should believe.”²¹

Jesus said that repentance and forgiveness must be preached in His name to all nations (Luke 24:46-47), but the good news of Christ’s saving work is not the focus of Osteen’s preaching. In

¹⁷ Leonardo Blair, “Joel Osteen on Why He Avoids Political, Social Issues: ‘It’s Not What I’m Called to Do,’ Says Message is ‘Lifting People Up,’” *Christian Post*, July 1, 2015, at <http://www.christianpost.com/news/joel-osteen-on-why-he-avoids-political-social-issues-its-not-what-im-called-to-do-says-message-is-lifting-people-up-141058>, accessed December 17, 2019.

¹⁸ Kalder, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/07/joel-osteen-america-pastor>, accessed December 30, 2019.

¹⁹ David Boyd, *Take Up Your Cross: Devotions for Lent* (Fenton, MO: Creative Communications for the Parish, 2019), 2.

²⁰ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXI, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 244.41.

²¹ Smalcald Articles, *The Book of Concord*, 312-313.3-4.

contrast to this, Scripture teaches that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are of “first importance” in the teaching of the Church (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Apart from Christ, we were lost in sin, “dead in our trespasses.” Then God “made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:5). Our new life in Christ is not the result of positive thinking. The “new human will is an instrument and tool of God the Holy Spirit, in that the will not only accepts grace but also cooperates with the Holy Spirit in the works that proceed from it.”²²

Lakewood Church teaches that Baptism and Holy Communion are merely symbols and human actions. In contrast to this, Holy Scripture teaches that Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are means, or channels, of God’s grace, which He has instituted not merely as symbols but as instruments by which He imparts the blessings He has promised. Baptism is “a washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5), an act of God in which we are buried with Christ and raised to new life (Rom. 6:3-4). In Holy Communion we remember the Lord’s death (Luke 22:19) and receive Jesus’ true Body and Blood in, with and under the bread and wine (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 10:16-17).

God has not promised earthly prosperity to those who trust in Christ. Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation,” but through His death and resurrection, He has overcome the world (John 16:33). Positive thoughts are pleasant and often helpful, but such thoughts will not win forgiveness of sins and save us from eternal death. The gifts of forgiveness and eternal life are ours only by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the good news that is the heart and center of the Church’s teaching.

For Further Reading

Wolfmueller, Brian. *Has American Christianity Failed?* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016.

Mattes, Mark. “Discipleship: A Lutheran Perspective.” *In The Mercy of God in the Cross of Christ: Essays on Mercy and Human Care in Honor of Rev. Glenn Merritt*, ed. Ross Edward Johnson and John T. Pless. St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2016.

Links and Websites

Evaluation of the Word-Faith (Positive Confession) Movement. St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2007.
www.lcms.org/ctcr.

www.lakewoodchurch.com

²² Epitome of the Formula of Concord, *The Book of Concord*, 494.18.