

Who Is Joel Osteen, and Are His Teachings Biblical?

Joel Osteen is the pastor of the largest church in the United States, Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. His wife, Victoria, is co-pastor. The Osteen's teach a message of "hope, healing, and forgiveness." Koorong stock a number of his books while Osteen's television program is viewed by 20 million people each month in almost 100 countries around the world.

Joel Osteen's parents, John and Dodie Osteen, founded Lakewood Church in 1959 and promoted the ministry through a television broadcast. Joel got involved in media production, overseeing the church's broadcasts starting in 1982, but, when John died in 1999, Joel accepted the position of senior pastor of Lakewood.

The basic doctrine of Joel Osteen, as summarised on his church's website, is orthodox enough: the inerrancy and inspiration of the Bible, the triune nature of God, and salvation by faith in Christ are all affirmed. The doctrinal problems come in other areas.

Although Lakewood Church is non-denominational, Osteen's teaching is rooted in Pentecostalism, and he teaches that physical healing and wellness were provided in Christ's atonement. "Jesus came that we might have a more abundant life. He came to carry our weaknesses our sickness, our pain, so that we can walk in total freedom, peace, power and purpose" (from Lakewood Church's official website).

Overarching all that Joel and Victoria Osteen teach is the prosperity gospel: God's will is that we be blessed with material things, a view that contradicts 1 Timothy 6:6. As the Lakewood Church's website says, "To be successful in your walk with God, commit to honour God with your finances. When you commit to give the Lord the first 10% of your income, God promises He will pour out blessings you cannot contain. Tithing is the first key to financial prosperity." Lakewood's website then quotes the favourite proof-text for this teaching, Malachi 3:10. It is a prime example of taking Old Covenant promises to Israel out of context to apply them to New Covenant believers.

Another problem in Osteen's message is his promotion of name-it-claim-it or word-faith theology: "We have to conceive it on the inside before we're ever going to receive it on the outside," Osteen writes. "If you don't think you can have something good, then you never will. The barrier is in your mind... Your own wrong thinking can keep you from God's best... To experience [God's] immeasurable favour, you must rid yourself of that small-minded thinking and start expecting God's blessings, start anticipating promotion and supernatural increase. You must conceive it in your heart before you can receive it. In other words, you must make increase in your own thinking, then God will bring those things to pass" (from *Your Best Life Now*, chapter 1). There is nothing biblical about such teaching. There is no power inherent in positive thinking, and we do not create our own realities. God is not our servant, standing by and waiting for us to fire up our imaginations so He can lavish us with material goods. Jesus told His followers to "give up everything you have" (Luke 14:33), not to seek to get more.

More often than not, Osteen sounds like an inspirational life-coach, instead of a herald of the gospel. He often preaches about how people can improve their lives, be prosperous, and experience happiness. Noticeably absent in Osteen's optimistic message is any mention of sin or repentance. The atonement of Christ provides us with healing and the abundant life, according to Osteen, but apparently receiving forgiveness from a holy God is not necessary.

In numerous interviews and writings, Osteen has failed to proclaim that Jesus is the only way to heaven. He has repeatedly refused to agree with the teachings of the Bible that certain

behaviours are sinful. This is not a new convert being interviewed; it's the leader of a church of tens of thousands. Osteen can't bring himself to support fundamental doctrines of the faith he claims to preach. His words communicate relativism and demonstrate a profoundly poor understanding of the Bible.

When you don't talk about sin - and Osteen purposefully does not - you're not preaching the whole gospel. When you barely, if ever, call sin what it is, you're not helping anyone, least of all the sinner who is enslaved to sin (John 8:34; 2 Corinthians 4:3). Joel Osteen teaches that we are being saved from unhappiness and failure in life, not from sin and God's wrath? Osteen does not teach that we need a divine rescue from judgment, but rather simply a self-improvement plan.

Listening to Osteen, a person would think God primarily wants to make poor people wealthy, sad people happy, and insecure people self-confident. But, according to the Bible, God primarily wants to make dead people live (John 5:24), wicked people righteous (Matthew 9:13), and His enemies His friends (Romans 5:10). Happiness, self-assurance, and eternal prosperity, according to the Bible, come as a result of submission to God's will, starting with salvation (Matthew 6:33), and always in the context of His will (Hebrews 10:36).

New Testament believers are never promised health and wealth in the here-and-now. Our inheritance "is kept in heaven" for us (1 Peter 1:4). Preaching a gospel of self-motivation and financial gain is short-sighted in that its focus is on this world, which is passing away (1 John 2:17). Better to preach the need for repentance and faith and leave the rest to God (Mark 1:15).

Osteen's message is sweet, attractive, and pretty. It comes with the million-dollar smile, a heaping helping of the feel-goods, and all of the motivation of the best self-help gurus. That message is also hollow, weak, and devoid of any real value. The most important parts of the gospel are left out, supposedly to broaden his ministry's appeal. Anyone depending on that message, without recognising what's missing, is going to find himself spiritually hungry, frustrated, and in dire straits when a real tragedy strikes.

A true preacher of the gospel does not avoid any topic, especially crucial ones such as sin and morality, simply because some people don't like to hear it. And true men of God don't emphasise material success and positive emotions over the truth. Sincere or not, honest or not, well-intended or not, Joel and Victoria Osteen are not preaching the gospel, and neither are other prosperity teachers. Osteen and his ilk should not be supported by those with a love for spiritual truth and a concern for the lost.