

## **Positively Dangerous**

**Joel Osteen may mean well, but when he preaches the power-of-positive-thinking at the Charlotte Coliseum in March, tens of thousands could be led astray**

*By: Jamie Dean*

**CHARLOTTE** – No one can accuse Joel Osteen of pessimism. In fact, the power-of-positive-thinking is the bedrock of the message he preaches each week to more than 30,000 people in the largest church in America. It's the same message he'll likely preach next month to tens of thousands of people at the Charlotte Coliseum.

Osteen's perpetual optimism and populist appeal have made him one of the rising stars of both the charismatic movement and the church growth movement. But critics like Robert Liichow, the founder of Discernment Ministry International, a Detroit-based apologetics ministry that examines and critiques ministries like Osteen's, say the same optimism and appeal that draw hundreds of thousands of people to Osteen's church and preaching events each year may also draw many of the same people away from the whole truth of the Bible.

By preaching nearly exclusively about the "potential of man" and the goodness of God, critics like Liichow say Osteen presents a deficient gospel, devoid of its most essential components: the sinfulness of man and the redemption offered in Christ.

### **All that glitters**

If one could measure Osteen's success numerically, it would appear that everything he touches turns to gold. The 41-year-old Texan is pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston – a church that under his leadership has grown into the largest and fastest-growing congregation in the country, according to Church Growth Today. More than 30,000 people pack into four Lakewood services each weekend.

With Osteen at the helm, the church has negotiated a deal with the city of Houston to lease and renovate the Compaq Center, a 16,000-seat arena and former home of the Houston Rockets. The church is investing \$92 million in renovations and \$12.3 million for a 30-year lease for its new home.

For those who can't or don't want to join the crowds on Sundays, Lakewood broadcasts its services in dozens of television markets, reaching 95 percent of American households with cable, as well as tens of thousands more viewers in 150 countries. Last year, the program gained the number one spot in Nielsen's ratings of inspirational television shows.

Osteen takes the show on the road more than a dozen times a year, selling out the largest arenas in major U.S. cities. Last year, he sold out New York City's Madison Square Garden twice. This month he sold out the 17,000-plus American Airlines Center in

Dallas. Ticket sales for the Charlotte event at the 24,000-seat Coliseum are running strong.

Osteen has also found colossal success in the publishing business, distilling his self-help, positive-thinking philosophy into his first book – “Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps for Living at Your Full Potential.” In a matter of weeks, the book sold more than 1.5 million copies and topped the New York Times bestseller list.

But numerical success isn’t necessarily a sign of spiritual success, according to Discernment Ministry International’s Liichow. “I think Joel views the fact that Lakewood is the largest church in America as a sign of God’s favor,” says Liichow. “But Mormonism is one of the fastest-growing religious groups in America, and Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions in the world. We certainly can’t say that’s a sign of God’s favor.”

Instead of numbers, Liichow says Christians should examine content. And it’s Osteen’s content that troubles critics like Liichow.

### **It’s all about me**

Osteen’s book is the best place to get an overview of his core philosophy. Osteen recently told FaithfulReader.com that his book is “the basic message I’ve been speaking about for the last two or three years.”

The basic message of “Your Best Life Now” is how to achieve happiness by getting what you want and developing “your full potential.” Again and again, Osteen defines happiness and success in terms of earthly blessings: a better job, a better house, a stronger marriage, better health, even a good parking spot at a crowded mall. The reader begins to ask: How can I get all these things? Osteen provides an answer: positive thinking.

“To experience this immeasurable favor,” Osteen writes, “you must rid yourself of that small-minded thinking and start expecting God’s blessings...you must make room for increase in your own thinking, then God will bring those things to pass.”

Osteen calls this method “declaring God’s favor,” and says that it will work even in the most mundane circumstances. For example, if you find yourself in a crowded restaurant and you’re in a hurry, Osteen suggests saying: “Father, I thank You that I have favor with this hostess and she’s going to seat me soon.”

Osteen’s focus on personal prosperity overshadows any talk of personal piety in a biblical context. In fact, the average bookstore browser who picks up Osteen’s work won’t likely realize he is looking at a “Christian” book at first glance.

Osteen acknowledges that the book’s title and subtitle are devoid of Christian language, and says there’s a good reason. “I don’t want to just preach to the church, and I just feel like I have a broader message,” Osteen told Beliefnet.com. “I’d like to think I can help everyday people who don’t necessarily go to church.”

Curiously, though, it isn't just the book's title and subtitle that are devoid of the biblical language of the gospel. The rest of the book is largely devoid of such content as well. Osteen makes no real mention of the unbeliever's problem of sin or the provision of salvation in Christ, or of the believer's ongoing struggle with sin. While on the last page Osteen offers a three-sentence prayer for becoming a Christian, he offers no explanation of what salvation really means.

In fact, Osteen apparently doesn't insist a person must be a Christian in order to apply the principles in his book. FaithfulReader.com posed this question to Osteen: "Do you need to have a personal relationship with Christ or even be a Christian in order to benefit from what you write?" Osteen replied: "I think these principles will work in anybody's life."

Playing up "happiness" and downplaying sin is a calculated move, according to Osteen. "I just don't believe in condemning people and being judgmental," he told FaithfulReader.com. "It's the goodness of God that leads to repentance."

### **Dangerous territory**

By admittedly downplaying half of the gospel message, and focusing on the pursuit of God's gifts instead of God Himself, Liichow says Osteen is putting both Christians and non-Christians in serious danger.

Michael Horton, a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary agrees. "God is not the center of his theology," says Horton. "The center is me and my happiness."

Horton says Osteen "trivializes the Christian faith" on a number of levels. "First he trivializes God by making Him out to be some sort of cosmic bellhop, as if God exists for us instead of us existing for Him," says Horton. "Secondly, he trivializes the Bible by turning it into a collection of fortune cookies to be opened and used for whatever we want. And thirdly, he trivializes human beings and their real problems by trivializing sin."

Horton likens Osteen's feel-good, sugar-sweet theology to cotton candy. "Cotton candy won't kill you if you eat it a couple of times a year, but if you make it the only thing in your diet it will kill you," he says. "It won't just stunt your growth, it will kill your growth."

Liichow agrees, except he compares Osteen's theology to Twinkies. "The biggest danger for believers who listen to Osteen is that they will not grow in their spiritual life with the Lord Jesus Christ," says Liichow. "It's like eating spiritual Twinkies. They're sweet, light and taste good, but a steady diet of them will stunt your growth and rot you from the inside out."

But Osteen's theology isn't just dangerous for Christians, according to Liichow and Horton. It's also dangerous for unbelievers who they say may never hear the whole Gospel by listening to Osteen.

“The danger for unbelievers is that they will never come to a genuine saving faith because they are never going to hear the full gospel – that they are totally depraved people without any hope in this world apart from Christ,” says Liichow. “I don’t hear Joel preaching that.”

“He’s basically telling people: ‘You’re okay, but you could do so much better with Jesus,’” Liichow continues. “But that’s not the truth. People are not okay. They are sinners in need of redemption.”

Osteen’s critics say there is nothing wrong with temporal prosperity, but that the Bible emphasizes spiritual joys over earthly ones.

“The only thing we can look to in order to know whether or not we are truly prospering is Christ,” says Horton. “The abundant life Jesus said he came to give is Himself.”

Liichow agrees. “It’s true that God wants us to live an abundant life,” he says. “We’re called to have an abundant spiritual relationship with the Lord and to store up treasures in heaven.”

That’s not the message Osteen’s followers hear, Liichow says. “I’m not saying that God couldn’t use Osteen’s preaching to convert someone because conversion is a work of the Holy Spirit,” he says. “The Bible says God does use the foolishness of preaching. But I just don’t know how much He uses foolish preaching. And there is a difference.”

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