

JOEL OSTEEN AND THE GLORY STORY: A CASE STUDY

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This article is a part of a collection of essays written recently by Dr. Horton after his interview on 60 Minutes which aired on October 14, 2007.

"Name it, claim it"; the "health-and-wealth" or "prosperity gospel": these are nicknames for a heresy that in many respects is only an extreme version of perhaps the most typical focus of American Christianity today more generally. Basically, God is there for you and your happiness. He has some rules and principles for getting what you want out of life and if you follow them, you can have what you want. Just "declare it" and prosperity will come to you. (1) God as Personal Shopper.

Although explicit proponents of the so-called "prosperity gospel" may be fewer than their influence suggests, its big names and best-selling authors (T. D. Jakes, Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen, and Joyce Meyer) are purveyors of a pagan worldview with a peculiarly American flavor. It's basically what the sixteenth century German monk turned church reformer Martin Luther called the "theology of glory": How can I climb the ladder and attain the glory here and now that God has actually promised for us after a life of suffering? The contrast is the "theology of the cross": the story of God's merciful descent to us, at great personal cost, a message that the Apostle Paul acknowledged was offensive and "foolish to Greeks."

Joel Osteen: Another Verse of a Really Long Song

The attraction of Americans to this version of the "glory story" is evident in the astonishing success of Joel Osteen's runaway best-seller, *Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. Beyond his charming personality and folksy style, Osteen's phenomenal attraction is no doubt related to his simple and soothing sampler of the American gospel: a blend of Christian and cultural elements that he picked up not through any formal training, but as the son of a Baptist-turned-prosperity evangelist who was a favorite on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). However, gone are the eccentric caricatures of "prosperity" televangelism, with its flamboyant style and over-the-top rhetoric.

In the Wal-Mart era of religion and spirituality, every particular creed and any denominational distinctives get watered down. We don't hear (at least explicitly) about our being "little gods," "part and parcel of God," or the blood of Christ as a talisman for healing and prosperity. The strange teachings of his father's generation, still regularly heard on TBN, are not explored in any depth. In fact, nothing is explored in any depth. Osteen still uses the telltale lingo of the health-and-wealth evangelists: "Declare it," "speak it," "claim it," and so forth, but there are no dramatic, made-for-TV healing lines. The pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, which now owns the Compaq Center, does not come across as a flashy evangelist with jets and yachts, but as a charming next-door-neighbor who always has something nice to say.

Although remarkably gifted at the social psychology of television, Joel Osteen is hardly unique. In fact, his explicit drumbeat of prosperity (word-faith) teaching is communicated in the terms and the ambiance that might be difficult to distinguish from most megachurches. Joel Osteen is the next generation of the health-and-wealth gospel. This time, it's mainstream.

As community philosopher Karl Marx said of a consumer-driven culture, "All that is solid melts into the air." Religion, too, becomes a commodity—a product or therapy that we can buy and use for our personal well-being. Exemplifying the moralistic and therapeutic approach to religion, Osteen's message is also a good example of the inability of Boomers to mourn in the face of God's judgment or dance under the liberating news of God's saving mercy. In other words, all *gravity* is lost—both the gravity of our problem and of God's amazing grace. According to this message, we are not helpless sinners—the ungodly—who need a one-sided divine rescue. (Americans, but especially we Boomers, don't take bad news well.) Rather, we are good people who just need a little instruction and motivation.

"Law-Lite": Salvation From Unhappiness By Doing Your Best

There is no condemnation in Osteen's message for failing to fulfill God's righteous law. On the other hand, there is no justification. Instead of either message, there is an upbeat moralism that is somewhere in the middle: Do your best, follow the instructions I give you, and God will make your life successful. "Don't sit back passively," he warns, but with a gentle pleading suggests that the only reason we need to follow his advice is because it's useful for getting what we want. God is a buddy or partner who exists primarily to make sure we are happy. "You do your part, and God will do his part." (2) "Sure we have our faults," he says, but "the good news is, God loves us anyway." (3) Instead of accepting God's just verdict on our own righteousness and fleeing to Christ for justification, Osteen counsels readers simply to reject guilt and condemnation.(4) Yet it is hard to do that successfully when God's favor and blessing on my life depend entirely on how well I can put his commands to work. "If you will simply obey his commands, He will change things in your favor."(5) That's all: "...*simply* obey his commands."

Everything depends on us, but it's easy. One wonders if he has ever had a crisis of doubt or moral failure that stripped him naked in God's presence. Osteen seems to think that we are basically good people and God has a very easy way for us to save ourselves—not from his judgment, but from our lack of success in life—with his help. "God is keeping a record of every good deed you've ever done," he says—as if this is *good* news. "In your time of need, *because of your generosity*, God will move heaven and earth to make sure you are taken care of." (6)

It may be "Law Lite," but make no mistake about it: behind a smiling Boomer Evangelicalism that eschews any talk of God's wrath, there is a determination to assimilate the gospel to law, an announcement of victory to a call to be victorious, indicatives to imperatives, good news to good advice. The bad news may not be as bad as it used to be, but the good news is just a softer version of the bad news: Do more. But this time, it's easy! And if you fail, don't worry. God just wants you to do your best. He'll take care of the rest.

So who needs Christ? At least, who needs Christ as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29)? The sting of

the law may be taken out of the message, but that only means that the gospel has become a less demanding, more encouraging law whose exhortations are only meant to make us happy, not to measure us against God's holiness.

So while many supporters offer testimonials to his kinder, gentler version of Christianity than the legalistic scolding of their youth, the only real difference is that God's rules or principles are easier and it's all about happiness here and now, not being reconciled to a holy God who saves us from ourselves. In its therapeutic milieu, sin is failing to live up to our potential, not falling short of God's glory. We need to believe in ourselves and the wages of such "sins" is missing out on our best life now. But it's still a constant stream of exhortation, demands, and burdens: follow my steps and I guarantee your life will be blessed.

A *TIME* story in 2006 observed that Osteen's success has reached even more traditional Protestant circles, citing the example of a Lutheran church that followed *Your Best Life Now* during Lent, of all times, "when," as the writer notes, "Jesus was having his worst life then." Even churches formally steeped in a theology of the cross succumb to theologies of glory in the environment of popular American spirituality. We are swimming in a sea of narcissistic moralism: an "easy-listening" version of salvation by self-help.

This is what we might call the false gospel of "God-Loves-You-Anyway." There's no need for Christ as our mediator, since God is never quite as holy and we are never quite as morally perverse as to require nothing short of Christ's death in our place. God is our buddy. He just wants us to be happy, and the Bible gives us the roadmap.

I have no reason to doubt the sincere motivation to reach non-Christians with a relevant message. My concern, however, is that the way this message comes out actually trivializes the faith at its best and contradicts it at its worst. In a way, it sounds like atheism: Imagine there is no heaven above us or hell below us, no necessary expectation that Christ "will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead" and establish perfect peace in the world. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find anything in this message that would be offensive to a Unitarian, Buddhist, or cultural Christians who are used to a diet of gospel-as-American-Dream. Disney's Jiminy Cricket expresses this sentiment: "If you wish upon a star, all your dreams will come true."

To be clear, I'm not saying that it *is* atheism, but that it sounds oddly *like* it in this sense: that it is so bound to a this-worldly focus that we really do not hear anything about God himself—his character and works in creation, redemption, or the resurrection of the body and the age to come. Nothing in the past (namely, Christ's work) nor in the future (namely, Christ's return in judgment, raising our bodies in everlasting life) really matters. Maybe I haven't heard enough of his talks on TV, but I have never heard anything that approached a proclamation of any article mentioned in the Apostles' Creed. Despite the cut-aways of an enthralled audience with Bibles opened, I have yet to hear a single biblical passage actually preached. Is it possible to have evangelism without the evangel? Christian outreach without a Christian message?

If God matters, it is for the most trivial concerns—or at least those quite secondary to the real crisis that the gospel addresses. One could easily come away from this type of message concluding that we are not saved by Christ's objective work for us, but by our subjective "personal relationship with Jesus" through a series of works that we perform to secure his favor and blessing. God has set up all of these laws and now it's up to us to follow them so that we can be blessed. I can think of no better illustration of what sociologist Christian Smith has identified as "moralistic, therapeutic deism": the gospel of American Religion.

As the New Testament repeatedly affirms, those who want to be saved by their own obedience need to know that God doesn't grade on a curve. His record-keeping is bad news, not good news, unless *Christ's* obedient record has been credited to us *through faith alone*. God's law says, "If you want to be saved by your own effort, here are the terms: Do all these things and you'll go to heaven; fail to do them and you'll go to hell." The revivalists of yesteryear came up with their own list, but it was basically the same threat: "Do or die." The kinder, gentler version is, "Try harder and you'll be happier; fail to do them and you'll lose out on God's best for your life here and now." No heaven, no hell; no condemnation or salvation; no perfect obedience of Christ credited to us: Just do your best. Remember, God is keeping score! Christ becomes totally unnecessary in this message.

Osteen reflects the broader assumption among evangelicals that we are saved by making a decision to have a personal relationship with God. If one's greatest problem is loneliness, the good news is that Jesus is a reliable friend. If the big problem is anxiety, Jesus will calm us down. Jesus is the glue that holds our marriages and families together, gives us purpose for us to strive toward, wisdom for daily life. And there are half-truths in all of these pleas, but they never really bring hearers face to face with their real problem: that they stand naked and ashamed before a holy God and can only be acceptably clothed in his presence by being clothed, head to toe, in Christ's righteousness.

This gospel of "submission," "commitment," "decision," and "having a personal relationship with God" fails to realize, first of all, that *everyone* has a personal relationship with God already: either as a condemned criminal standing before a righteous judge or as a justified co-heir with Christ and adopted child of the Father. "How can I be right with God?" is no longer a question when my happiness rather than God's holiness is the main issue. My concern is that Joel Osteen is simply the latest in a long line of self-help evangelists who appeal to the native American obsession with pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Salvation is not a matter of divine rescue from the judgment that is coming on the world, but a matter of self-improvement in order to have your best life now.

Footnotes

1 This position is extensively documented in Michael Horton, ed., *The Agony of Deceit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990) [back to text]

2 Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (NY: Warner Books, 2004), 41-42 [back to text]

3 *Ibid.*, 57 [back to text], 4 *Ibid.*, 66 [back to text], 5 *Ibid.*, 119 [back to text], 6 *Ibid.*, 262 [back to text]

