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The Leaven of Lakewood Joel Osteen's Appealing But Aberrant Message

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Many would look at Houston's Lakewood Church, with its 30,000 people attending services each Sunday in a 16,000-seat arena that once was the home of the Houston Rockets basketball team, as the epitome of church success. But that success was achieved at a cost to sound doctrine and spiritual integrity.

Lakewood, a Charismatic, Word Faith powerhouse in the 21st century, was founded by the late John Osteen, who started his pastoral career as a Southern Baptist. After receiving "the baptism in the Holy Ghost in 1958,"¹ he became enamored with the Charismatic renewal movement. In 1959, he left the Southern Baptist Convention and described his exodus in these terms:

"One day I was sailing through life in my little Baptist boat. I began to study the Bible in my search for deeper things. As I read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, I saw the Son of the Living God. He was healing the sick. He was casting out demons. He was setting the captives free. He was bringing men to God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Oh,



how it thrilled me! I cried, 'Jesus, I want to do what I see You doing.' He said, 'Come!' Thank God, I marched out of my little

Baptist boat and walked out to do what Jesus was doing. Others have stayed in the boat where it is safe. They are not in danger of sinking, but they are not out where the miracles are. Oh, for men and women who will risk all for Jesus. Oh, for people who will rise up and walk out, trusting only in the power of Jesus!"²

Osteen eventually became associated with the Word Faith movement. "A Tribute to Pastor John Osteen," found on the church's web site, offers further details of the church's genesis, mission, and history:

"John Osteen began Lakewood Church in a dusty, abandoned feed store on Mother's Day 1959. ... John Osteen was driven by an amazing love for people of all ages, races, nationalities and walks of life. ... The late John

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Osteen served the Lord Jesus Christ as pastor, evangelist, author, and teacher for sixty years. Ordained as a Southern Baptist, he received the baptism in the Holy Ghost in 1958, an experience which revolutionized his ministry into a worldwide outreach for Jesus Christ."³

In a time of racial division, John Osteen opened wide the doors of his church to all people, and all shades and classes of people came. Although John Osteen rejected Southern Baptist theology — he received a Master's degree from Northern Baptist Seminary — he never lost sight of the need for foreign missions and his congregation still supports a great deal of mission work. At the time of his death in 1999, Lakewood Church claimed 6,000 members.⁴

Those who may have had the opportunity to survey the ministry and legacy of the late Osteen probably will agree that he appeared to have a genuine pastor's heart and a desire to see people come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps it was his legitimate seminary education that helped keep Osteen from espousing some of the more heretical doctrines common among Word Faith teachers today.

BEWARE OF THE LEAVEN

We should never fall under the illusion regarding the Word Faith "leaven" that he propagated, and which is being magnified through his son Joel, who assumed pastoral responsibilities at Lakewood upon his father's death. The elder Osteen was a leading crusader for the erroneous doctrine of positive confession: the idea that we can speak our desires into existence. This is also known as the "health and wealth gospel." This metaphysical belief deludes many, convincing them that they can either create or change their reality by the power of their words. For example, John stated the following:

"The miracle is in YOUR MOUTH. Dare to speak those

promises out loud. Say them to yourself! Say them to the devil! Say them to the sickness! Say them to your mountain of trouble! Confess them in the face of all contrary evidence! Say them while the pain is there!! Say them while you are so sick you can hardly think!! God is smiling down on you. He delights for you to 'put Him in remembrance' of His Word. The Lord will surely make His promises come true in your life. When we SAY and CONFESS His Word, He brings the miracle to pass!!"⁵

A few pages later in the same publication, he wrote:

"In your heart of hearts, picture yourself completely delivered from sickness, suffering and all trouble. YOU ARE!!! Now, take God's promises without fear and boldly confess them day and night. When people ask you how you feel, don't tell them. TELL THEM WHAT GOD SAYS ABOUT YOUR CASE!!! TELL THEM ABOUT THE PROMISES OF GOD!!! TELL THEM YOU DON'T GO BY FEELING BUT BY WHAT GOD SAYS!!!"⁶

SAD CONSEQUENCES OF BAD THEOLOGY

It's impossible to know if the late Osteen was deceived by, or knowingly forged the "health and wealth" message. In any case, he was no poster boy for his message. *Charisma* magazine reported, "In January 1999 John Osteen wound up in the hospital with kidney trouble."⁷ He could not speak himself well, but resorted to medical help.

But it was more than kidney trouble. On Jan. 18, 1999, Lakewood Church began a frantic attempt to "confess" John Osteen well. The church sent, via e-mail, what it called a "RED ALERT PRAYER REQUEST." The e-mailed prayer request revealed the grave nature (which had a heretofore unrevealed history) and the terminal condition of John Osteen:

"Pastor Osteen began kidney dialysis last Fall 1998 because his

kidneys were not properly clearing the toxins out of his body as they are designed to do. He had a heart catheterization in August that determined all was well with his heart at that time. Nearly three weeks ago, doctors performed surgery to put in a pacemaker for his heart as the upper and lower chambers were not in synch, and his heart rate was low."⁸

Apparently, John Osteen could not tell his body how to feel. However, as the truth was being revealed, the situation grew worse:

"The past two weeks or so Pastor Osteen has experienced excruciating pain in his chest. Doctors said it could be caused by the dialysis, or possibly a degenerated disc in his neck, but that they had to do more extensive tests this week to determine the cause of the chest pain."⁹

The complications mounted:

"Now doctors believe that smaller arteries feeding into the larger arteries of the heart are blocked and constricted. A new procedure will be available in mid-February to do balloon surgery on the smaller arteries, which they feel he may be a candidate for. Yesterday Pastor Osteen had a nuclear test done on his heart, and the test results showed his heart was greatly weakened."¹⁰

Clearly, John Osteen was dying. Perhaps God was giving him time to repent and renounce his false positive confession error, but he did not relent. He continued to give himself and others false hope:

"Pastor Osteen asks that you 'wait' on the Lord with him, and agree with him for a creative miracle for the kidneys and the functions of the heart to be normal. He is believing God for new kidneys, a new heart and circulatory system, and that he will have an appetite for food. He also needs strength in his body. Pastor Osteen's faith is strong.

His confession is strong. He is not asking for prayer out of desperation. He is a man of faith."¹¹

Even more tragic was John Osteen's failure as a prophet. The e-mail went on to state what were said to be divine promises for John Osteen and his staff, which would go unfulfilled:

"He knows God has promised him that he will be preaching into his early 90's, and he is only 77 now. God gave him a vision for 'Seven Years of Harvest', and we are just beginning our 6th year of this special thrust for world evangelism. God has promised our staff that He will bring our pastor's kidneys on a platter of praise."¹²

John and the staff were grossly misled. Less than a week later, John Osteen died. No new kidneys, no preaching into his early 90s. He never even made it to his 78th birthday. When the announcement for "Pastor Osteen's Memorial service" was made, it closed with:

"The Osteen family and Lake-wood Church will continue to serve humbly and faithfully, as we believe to see more miracles, healings, and the greater works of Jesus."¹³

The ailing "healer" was unable to speak himself or be spoken into health. He was living proof of the fallacy of his own teaching.

IT'S MINE FOR THE ASKING

John Osteen also believed he had the power to make his children what he wanted through his positive confession. Many would wish child-rearing were as easy as he made it out to be:

"I am the sum total of what I have been confessing through the years. My children are the best children that ever lived on the face of the earth. They are blessed of God. They are the sum total of what Dodie and I have confessed and loved them into being. **CONFESS THE WORD OF GOD INSTEAD OF NEGA-**

TIVE THINGS. You may say, 'How long do I have to confess it?' All of your life."¹⁴

Additionally, John Osteen is on record as fully endorsing the errant Word Faith concepts surrounding financial prosperity:

"I look at the great truths of Almighty God and with the sixth sense in my spirit-man, I believe and I have a consciousness that they are mine. I see and believe salvation is mine. Healing is mine. Prosperity is mine. All of God's blessings are mine. On the basis of this information from the sixth sense of faith, I can confidently say, 'I am healed! I am blessed! I am redeemed! I am prosperous!'"¹⁵

In the citation above, he summed up the "health and wealth gospel" in just a few short sentences. So despite the good things that John Osteen did as a pastor, he was ensnared by the subtlety of false teaching and ended up misleading many before his death. Jesus warned His disciples:

"Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.' ... 'How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? — but to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6, 11-12).

Even though it seems to us that His disciples were, at times, a little slow on the uptake, Jesus made His point clear. He was warning them to "beware,"¹⁶ to be on guard against the danger of doctrinal errors, which Jesus likens to leaven in bread. Jesus knew that if left unchecked, like leaven in bread, doctrinal error would spread. The leaven of false doctrine, which John Osteen instilled in his son Joel, is now expanding and misleading more people than the elder Osteen could have ever imagined.

Sadly, Joel Osteen has never denounced the errors of his father, but

perpetuates them by his silence and the sale of his father's books.

THE MASTER OF MARKETEEING

Joel Osteen had no biblical training or experience to be a pastor, which seems to be more the rule than the exception within the Charismatic camp. Its pulpits are filled with men and women who "feel called" to the pastorate. They attempt to build congregations on the "strength" of their calling. Some Charismatic leaders may go on to an unaccredited "Bible School" for a year or two, such as Rhema Bible Training Center started by the late Kenneth Hagin. However, for the majority of Word Faith ministers, schooling at a legitimate seminary would be an anomaly.

Few people would allow a surgeon to operate because he "felt called" to be a surgeon as a child, but never went to medical school. Nor would many allow someone to build a house who firmly believed God had "called" him to be an architect, yet had never gone to a college or university to study architectural design.

Yet, thousands upon thousands of professing Christians are more than willing to follow a man or woman who professes a divine calling, but has never studied Church history, hermeneutics, systematic theology, and Greek and Hebrew. They claim to hear directly from God. This is especially true for the sign-gift pastors.¹⁷

Consider Joel Osteen's own words to *Charisma*:

"'Make church relevant,' he says. 'Give them something to be able to take away. I find today people are not looking for theology. There's a place for it. [But] in your everyday life you need to know how to live.'"¹⁸

While Joel Osteen acknowledges there's a place for theology, we must inquire where it is. Theology is the study of God, His attributes, His character, and His works. We surely need to know those things in our everyday life, lest we follow false gods. The minimizing of theology by Joel Osteen makes way for his clearly

humanistic message loaded with seeker-sensitive buzzwords.

THE UPBEAT GOES ON

Charisma describes Osteen with having an "upbeat style." Of course his "style" is "upbeat." It is safe to say he really believes much of the Word Faith elements his father cultivated in him all his life. Add to this whatever offbeat spirituality Joel Osteen may have gleaned from his two years at Oral Roberts University, where he studied television production and marketing. And he is authentic: what you see is what you get. Joel Osteen is a man without any biblical education, but an admitted talent for marketing and with a definite stage presence.

To be a success in marketing, one has to know where people itch and how to scratch it. Or, one has to create a hunger for something they currently do not have, nor formerly knew they needed.

So to become a megachurch, a pastor has to make church relevant. He has to give the people what they want, something that soothes that spiritual itch. In order to be a "success" (many in attendance and lots of money), pastors must preach unchallenging messages that uplift rather than convict. He must pander to the lowest common denominator and make sure that whatever is taught does not offend anyone at anytime. This is simply a fulfillment of Paul's warning to Timothy:

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

This is exactly where multitudes of people are spiritually today. The above text also helps explain the phenomena of people like Robert Schuller, Rod Parsley, Joyce Meyer, Paul Crouch, Benny Hinn, Robert Tilton, and now Joel Osteen.

Recall Joel Osteen's statement, "I find today people are not looking for

theology." That fact is quite obvious, because if they were, they would have to look elsewhere. Although he did not reveal to *Charisma's* readers where he derived this astonishing fact, it appears the folks he shepherds have no interest in theology.

Lest you think such a criticism a bit harsh, it is helpful to remember that theology simply means "the knowledge of God." In essence, Joel Osteen has said that people are really not interested in learning about God. Perhaps, due to his lack of biblical education, he has made a distinction between knowing the God of the Bible through sound biblical theology and knowing "how to live." The truth is, without a true knowledge of God, we really cannot know "how to live." To separate doctrine from duty is a major error addressed all through the book of Titus. Likewise, an important issue addressed by the Apostle Peter is that true doctrine and holy living are inseparably linked:

"His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue" (2 Peter 1:3).

Peter then adds:

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins" (2 Peter 1:5-9).

GROWTH FROM TRUE KNOWLEDGE

Scripture repeatedly declares that the more accurately one understands God, within the biblical context, the better life one will live before Him.

Nearly every parent who has a child who does not like to eat vegetables will, with regularity, make the child eat the vegetables. As good parents, they know that eating vegetables is beneficial and necessary.

The same is true for every man who stands behind a pulpit. Jesus told Peter, "feed My sheep" (John 21:16). He said, "feed" the sheep, not "entertain" them! Pastors are to give them the Word of God in its totality. In Jesus' last commission, He told them to teach "all" that He commanded (Matthew 28:20). Any pastor can fall into the trap of becoming a people-pleaser. This is why Paul, through the Holy Spirit, warned young Timothy:

"I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

Timothy was warned to be steadfast in his proclamation of the Gospel, to be ready to do so at all times (i.e., "in season and out of season"), and in his preaching to: 1) convince (or reprove), 2) rebuke, and 3) exhort the people according to the Scriptures. A minister is to preach with all long-suffering because preaching with sound teaching or doctrine is unpleasant to people's carnal nature. This is in spite of the hue and cry of seeker-sensitive pundits who lament, "Oh come now, surely you know preaching doctrinal messages is passé?" Yet Joel Osteen would do well to heed the word of the Lord from a genuine prophet who stated:

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the LORD God to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock"' (Ezekiel 34:2-3).

There are many biblical themes which are very unpopular and even politically incorrect, yet the faithful pastor-teacher will illuminate these topics so that the flock under his care is receiving a balanced spiritual diet and is able to walk in the full light of God's Word, and not in the shadows.

Joel Osteen's ascent to the pulpit of this large congregation was an unusual one. He did not take a traditional path to pastoral work, but perhaps his training was ideal for modern, media-oriented Christendom:

"Meanwhile, son Joel, one of six children, was learning the business of television ... 'Growing up, I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be involved in TV production,' he says. 'That was just my passion.' In 1981 he came home from Oral Roberts University (ORU) to start the Lakewood TV ministry. 'I did that for 17 years, working behind the scenes,' Osteen says. 'My dad, he always wanted me to preach. It just wasn't in my heart.'"¹⁹

Thus, for 17 years, Joel Osteen was behind the scenes, handling all the television and marketing aspects of his father's ministry. The *Charisma* article further reveals the impact of the abilities of this father-son team:

"The younger Osteen's television-marketing talents and his dad's preaching skills resulted eventually in the church's services being aired on stations nationwide and in more than 100 countries."²⁰

No doubt, the combined talents of this dynamic-duo of folksy preaching-teaching and television-marketing was a chief cause for the growth of Lakewood Church into megachurch status.²¹

TELLING TALES

As John Osteen lay sick and dying in the hospital, he asked his son to preach for him on Sunday. Initially, Joel Osteen said, "No." He then relented and described for *Charisma's* readers his preaching efforts that day:

"I spoke for him that Sunday for the first time in my life," he says.

"I just got up there and told stories. I was so glad when it was over. I said, 'I'll never do this again in my life.'" Well, that was the last Sunday of my dad's life."²²

That was the beginning of his public ministry: he just got up and "told stories." Joel Osteen has been telling stories that have been tickling the ears of the multitudes ever since. Consider these descriptions of his preaching style:

"Everyone agrees Osteen's preaching is a key ingredient. Descriptors of his style include 'simple,' 'down-to-earth,' 'practical,' 'relatable,' 'easy,' 'folksy,' 'humble.'"²³

"The appealing style of Osteen's personality in the pulpit is unmistakable. It is part of the reason for Lakewood's current level of success."²⁴

"It's 10 a.m. when he begins his sermon. The theme is *practical* as he gives example after example of the importance of following God's timing rather than one's own. He keeps the tone cheerful, optimistic. 'God doesn't want anybody walking out of here today heavy-hearted and down-cast,' Osteen says."²⁵

Some may object and say, "Well, Jesus told stories." Yes, He did. However, the notable distinction is that Jesus told stories to teach doctrine and theology.

Indeed, Joel Osteen is charismatic in his personality. His delivery is as non-threatening as the positive messages he delivers. Considering an agglomeration of Joel Osteen's statements — with his emphasis on being "practical" — it is a logical conclusion that perhaps he believes teaching theology is somehow "impractical." His words to *Charisma*, "I find today people are not looking for theology," loudly resonate. In reality, "practical" means he tells story after story, uses numerous anecdotes, and then tries to use a proof text to bolster his point.

Surprisingly, some of *Charisma's* readers picked up on and negatively responded to these issues:

"Joel Osteen says he does not preach theology. According to the dictionary, 'theology' is the study of God, His nature, attributes and His relationship with man and the universe. Considering the above definition, what is the message coming from his pulpit at Lakewood?"²⁶

"His 'relevant' sermons are all about individualism and consumption. The implication is, 'If I just do the right things or pray the right way, God will give me happiness — especially as it relates to finances.'"²⁷

"I just finished reading about Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church. I am more convinced than ever that pragmatism dominates the church of Jesus Christ. Lakewood and pastor Osteen clearly embrace a Word-Faith theology that is not based on sound doctrine but rather represents the spirit of this age."²⁸

LET ME ENTERTAIN YOU

It should also concern the discerning Christian when a pastor can make the statement that God does not want anybody walking out of here "heavy-hearted." In contrast, Scripture declares, "godly sorrow worketh repentance" (2 Corinthians 7:10). At times, God may well want us to walk out of a service "heavy-hearted" if we have been sinning. We should allow the Word, when properly expounded, and the Spirit, when genuinely present, to break us and to convict us of sinful attitudes and practices. James concurs and states that, at times, we must humble ourselves and even weep and mourn (James 4:7-10).

However, if all one hears is "up-beat," "cheerful," and "optimistic" messages, there is little opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work conviction in the hearts of the hearers. This folksy, down-home, non-confrontational type of message also goes a long way in explaining the large crowds that gather to be entertained. Read the Old Testament prophets. They thundered, but did not tickle ears. They did not entertain.

Lakewood Church's music is an important factor in drawing crowds. Once Joel Osteen took command after the death of his father, he began to expand the musical talent as well:

"Four years ago, when Cindy Cruse-Ratcliff — former member of the Dove Award-winning Cruse Family gospel group — became Lakewood's minister of music, the church had only one Sunday morning service. ... Soon after Cruse-Ratcliff arrived, Lakewood expanded when two Sunday morning services were added and, eight months later, a Saturday night worship service. ... 'The growth was extremely rapid,' says Cruse-Ratcliff, who still serves on the 200-member Lakewood staff."²⁹

"Star power" brings people to churches as well, especially musical stars, and Joel Osteen, with his television-marketing training, is not ignorant of this fact. Ms. Cruse-Ratcliff knows people in the contemporary music scene and, as Lakewood's minister of music, she no doubt helps add to the musical strength of this megachurch by bringing in some more musical talent. According to *Charisma*:

"Helping to spice up that mix are two of the most prominent names in worship music. Marcos Witt, who fills stadiums in Latin America for worship concerts, was tapped in 2002 to pastor Lakewood's 3,000-member Hispanic congregation. Also adding diversity to the Lakewood staff is Israel Houghton, whose soulful worship anthems are sung around the world."³⁰

The music at Lakewood is excessively contemporary. They have musical stars who appeal to Hispanic (Witt), African-American (Houghton), and Caucasian members (Cruse-Ratcliff). The musical team writes many of their own songs, yet the *Charisma* article never mentions hymns.

This is not surprising when one considers that the rule among Word Faith and seeker-sensitive congregations is the absence of hymnals. Apart from the occasional singing of

"Amazing Grace," contemporary songs and choruses rule the day. Sadly, the Charismatic movement's brand of music has infiltrated many evangelical congregations, leading to an abandonment of the use of the historic hymns. It could be that hymns are, in fact, rhymed theology. It is not uncommon for seeker-sensitive churches to utilize songs and choruses that originated from the Toronto Revival or the Vineyard movement, which are two examples of some of the wildest expressions of extremism within the Charismatic renewal movement.

Musically speaking, there is a method to the madness at Lakewood and other megachurches. They work hard to cut all ties with traditional Christianity. The classic, highly theological hymns and hymnals virtually scream out the dreaded word "traditional."³¹

THE KEY TO SUCCESS?

Joel Osteen is probably the leading example of a Word Faith adherent who has combined the successful marketing techniques of the seeker-sensitive megachurches with a positive confession, health and wealth message. The blend becomes a potent hybrid that appeals to both sign-gift believers (sort of "Charismatic lite") and baby-boomer seekers.

The message that God wants to bless His children with complete physical health, give them great financial wealth, and demands little of them in return regarding their spiritual life is a highly appealing message. Also combining popular Gospel singers with highly orchestrated praise and worship teams creates a decidedly non-church atmosphere which appeals to an even wider audience.

Additionally, marketing strategies and their successes seem to run in the Osteen family. Smuggled within the confines of a recent parody of Joel Osteen in the satirical *The Door Magazine*, was the revelation of a firm operated by Joel's brother, Justin. The publication, in its spoof-interview of Joel Osteen and his feel-good gospel message, disclosed:

"Oh, that's my brother Justin. He's real smart. He's president of Justin Osteen and Associates, Inc. They're the guys who set the 'independent reasonable compensation' limits for many of today's top televangelists and preachers. I don't really understand it myself, but it has to do with tax stuff. For instance, I know he got the IRS to approve an annual compensation package of \$1.75 million for Archbishop Robert Tilton and his current wife, even though Mr. Tilton doesn't really do anything but sit around Miami eating stone crabs, re-running his old programs and mining his mailing list. He doesn't even have a church!"³²

Even though the interview was fictitious, *The Door's* publisher, Ole Anthony, told PFO that the information regarding the company operated by Justin Osteen was factual. The magazine's lampoon was based on actual interviews and documented fact.

Of further concern is that one hears little, if any, Law and Gospel proclaimed at Lakewood Church. The reality is that 30,000 people are *not* being fed a biblically balanced spiritual diet which will promote true growth in their lives. What one hears is a synthesis of Word Faith concepts wrapped up in a seeker-friendly environment by a young man with a winsome smile. One can preach grace, but if only grace is preached, it becomes something else, as Jude 4 indicates.

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

Lastly, we cannot lose sight of the fact that a certain synergy builds with any church when it begins to reach such a size. People who have no solid doctrinal foundation will want to attend the place where "something" is happening. So adding a coffee bar, marketplace, and gym to the church facility will be a dynamic for such a bustling fellowship. *Charisma* reports:

"Lakewood's new International Center allows the church to ex-

pand its ministries even more. An ice rink and a basketball gym are available for use by families and city sports leagues. The church hosts concerts, sporting events, family conferences, conventions, business workshops, receptions and seminars. Plans for the future include a fitness center, and a dining and retail plaza."³³

In America, bigger is better. After all, many presume, if Joel Osteen was not being used of the Lord, then why would God allow all these people to come to Lakewood Church? The rub is that the same logic could be applied to the Latter-day Saint (Mormon) church, Islam (with its more than a billion adherents), or any other fast-growing cult. The previously cited *Charisma* reader hit the nail on the head with his comment, "I am more convinced than ever that pragmatism dominates the church of Jesus Christ."

In reality, could this, in fact, be a sign of God's judgment on His people who have forsaken His ways? We often think of God's judgment as some divine catastrophe. Yet repeatedly — and just as catastrophic — is when He simply allows people to have their own way. God gave the Israelites their desire, but sent leanness to their souls (Psalm 106:15). The words of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah are applicable to many in the Church today:

"Be astonished, O heavens, at this, And be horribly afraid; Be very desolate," says the LORD. 'For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns; broken cisterns that can hold no water'" (Jeremiah 2:12-13).

A pastor who was into gimmicky church-growth philosophy once proposed, "If you can run a McDonald's, you can grow a church — it is not much different than hamburgers." As much as Joel Osteen believes the growth they've experienced is due to the blessing of God, it really boils down to three simple things, which have nothing at all to do with God:

- His father's legacy and an already existing megachurch.
- His own honed marketing abilities.
- A biblically errant, but hugely popular message which appeals to the masses seeking to have their ears tickled and experience a "good time" in church.

Please pray for Joel Osteen. He has a tremendous impact on many people. Pray the Lord opens his eyes to biblical truth and that he may take as bold a stand to expose error — whether his father's or others. Paul instructed to "purge out the old leaven" (1 Corinthians 5:7). It is our prayer that the leaven of Lakewood will be exposed and done away with.

Endnotes:

1. "A Tribute to Pastor John Osteen." Document available at: www.lakewood.cc/john_osteen_tribute.htm.
2. John Osteen, *How to Release the Power of God*. Houston: A John Osteen Publication, 1968, pp. 44-45.
3. "A Tribute to Pastor John Osteen," op. cit.
4. Ernest Herndon, "How a BIG Church Grew Bigger," *Charisma*, June 2004, pg. 44. Elsewhere in the article, a figure of 8,000 members for 1999 is given. It is of further interest to note that in 1985, *Charisma* reported that "more than 12,000 people attend [Lakewood Church] each Sunday" (see *Charisma*, August 1985, pg. 132). Also, the 1988 edition of the *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, citing the 1985 *Charisma* magazine as its source, claimed "a membership of 20,000" for Lakewood Church (pg. 656).
5. John Osteen, *There is a Miracle in Your Mouth*. Houston: A John Osteen Publication, 1972, pp. 6-7, upper case in original.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18, upper case in original.
7. "How a BIG Church Grew Bigger," op. cit., pg. 44.
8. Document sent to "Lakewood Church E-List" from Renee Branson (Pastor's Secretary), Monday, January 18, 1999, under the subject heading of "Prayer request for Pastor John Osteen." Copy on file.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Document sent to "Lakewood Church E-List," dated Sunday, January 24, 1999, and sent Monday, January 25, 1999, under the subject heading of "Pastor Osteen's Memorial service." Copy on file.

14. John Osteen, *The ABC's of Faith*. Houston: A John Osteen Publication, 1981, pp. 31-32, bold and upper case in original.
15. John Osteen, *The 6th Sense ... Faith*. Houston: A John Osteen Publication, 1972, pp. 14-15.
16. The Greek word, *prosecho* ("beware"), is defined "to be in a continuous state of readiness to learn of any future danger, need, or error, and to respond appropriately - 'to pay attention to, to keep on the lookout for, to be alert for, to be on one's guard against'" (Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, editors, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, from *Bible Windows 5.0*. Cedar Hill, Texas: Silver Mountain Software, 1997, version 5.0).
17. The term *sign-gift* has been used in place of *Charismatic*, because all Christians are "charismatic" believers in that each one of us have been gifted with some gift or gifts from the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 12:7). It should also be noted that most "seeker-sensitive churches" are led by individuals who are seminary educated.
18. "How a BIG Church Grew Bigger," op. cit., pp. 44-45, emphasis added, brackets in original.
19. *Ibid.*, pg. 44.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Yet, the discerning reader has to wonder if Charismatic preachers stretch reports of membership figures purposely. Lakewood Church, as earlier noted in endnote 4, reported figures ranging from 6,000 members and 8,000 members (both in 1999), to attendance of 12,000 (in 1985), to membership of 20,000 (in 1988).
22. "How a BIG Church Grew Bigger," op. cit., pg. 44, emphasis added.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 45.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 46.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 50, emphasis added.
26. "Letters," *Charisma*, August 2004, pg. 8.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. "How a BIG Church Grew Bigger," op. cit., pg. 44.
30. "A Little Piece of Heaven," *Charisma*, June 2004, pg. 46.
31. It is interesting that as hard as megachurches have tried to distance themselves from established "traditional" forms of Christian worship, they have created their own liturgies of a sort. Many have banners which are marched around, and/or have praise dancers. They have altar calls, and other aspects which have become standard practices, and thus *traditions*.
32. Chris Whitehead, "If You're Happy and You Know It..." *The Door Magazine*, July/August 2004, pg. 37.
33. "How a BIG Church Grew Bigger," op. cit., pg. 50.