Be happy: The health and wealth gospel

by Jason Byassee in the July 12, 2005 issue

When she came to church it was a big event. She wore her nicest dress and a grand Sunday hat. But then she wouldn't appear again for months. Every time I visited her she would assure me that she wasn't backsliding. "Don't worry—when I'm not at church on Sunday I'm watching Joel Osteen on TV."

Then, to curb my disappointment, she said, "You remind me of him. I bet you'll have a church like his one day."

That would have been quite a change from our 80-member rural congregation. With some 30,000 attending, Osteen's Lakewood Community Church in Houston has recently purchased the 16,000-seat Compaq Center, formerly used by the NBA's Houston Rockets, for its new home. Osteen appears before millions more on television. "The smiling preacher," as he is referred to, has also charmed his way into a longtime presence on the *New York Times* best-seller list with *Your Best Life Now*: *Seven Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (Warner Faith).

Osteen has reason to smile. He has taken the congregation started by his father and turned it into what is reportedly the largest church in the U.S. And he has (as he is quick to tell us) an elegant home, well-adjusted kids and an adoring "partner in ministry." A dozen celebrities from the realms of politics, sports and entertainment praise him on the book jacket.

Like most religious-television and -publishing moguls, Osteen has received scant attention in the mainline church world. And even evangelical commentators have not been complimentary. One has referred to Osteen's "cotton-candy theology."

Indeed, there's not much substance here. *Your Best Life Now* is another entry in the long list of American contributions to the prosperity gospel: just improve your attitude, keep your chin up, and God's blessings will rain down on you. Russell Conwell said it a century ago, Norman Vincent Peale said it 50 years ago and Bruce

Wilkinson said it with *The Prayer of Jabez* a few years back.

Still, one has to acknowledge that something is working for Osteen, and that it isn't all quackery. A quick glance at his television audience shows his church to be a model of multiethnic ministry. Osteen doesn't talk about race much, but his church is full of people of different races. He's a good storyteller, helped by a caramel drawl and an aw-shucks Texas manner. He's not only affable but genuinely funny, with humor not infrequently directed at himself. Whereas many televangelists spew judgment and hate, Osteen seems like someone you'd like to meet, and who'd make you want to go to church and bring a friend.

In some ways Osteen echoes an ancient and venerable Christian tradition that borrows from Aristotle in calling itself "eudaemonistic." That is, Christianity offers the happiest life possible. The church fathers and medieval thinkers who picked up this philosophical tradition did have ample biblical material with which to integrate it. "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart," the psalmist promises. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you," Jesus says. What Christian could fail to agree that our faith claims to offer the fullest life of joy and abundance possible?

Osteen certainly thinks so. He takes aim at all those who are content with "mediocre" lives and who think such negative thoughts as: My marriage never will get better. My finances never will improve. I never will get promoted or be respected at work. I'd better get used to not having friends. My health will never be fully restored. Pain will always be the final word on our lives. That family member never will get right with God.

To such people Osteen says, "Friend [few lines go by without him calling the reader this], you have to start believing that good things are coming your way, and they will!"

The secret is to enlarge your vision. Are you satisfied with that little house you're in? You shouldn't be. You should want the sort of mansion the Osteens live in (his example). You should expect people to go out of their way to help you—then they will.

You must also "discover the power of your thoughts and words." If you beat yourself up all the time, if you don't think yourself worthy of divine abundance, God won't give it. God helps us, to be sure, but we must help ourselves first. You must "let go

of the past.” Rather than being consumed with bitterness, you have to forgive and move on.

Finally, you must “choose to be happy.” You can’t put it off till tomorrow or till that next financial milestone is reached. You should smile a lot, and good things will come your way. You also must work hard, for God won’t bless someone who’s slothful. You have to be a person of excellence. Arrive at work early, leave late, respect your boss, don’t waste time on the job—then you’ll be promoted and then you’ll be happier.

Osteen imagines an objection: “You may be thinking, ‘this sounds too good to be true, Joel.’” To which he replies: “I know it’s true! I saw the power of our thoughts and words turn an impossible situation in my own family into a modern-day medical miracle.” His mother was diagnosed with cancer and given only weeks to live. She overcame the disease by claiming victory over it, firing scripture verses at adversity and thumbing her nose at death. She is still living, decades later.

Osteen describes one occasion of a fairly direct encounter with God. It happened when he was about to run an errand while still wearing his ratty work clothes: “God spoke to me. I mean, if God has ever spoken to me, He spoke to me right there! . . . He said, ‘Don’t you dare go in there representing me like that! Don’t you know that I’m the King of kings?” Osteen went home, cleaned up and represented God in a more princely fashion.

As these examples indicate, Osteen’s illustrations are often less than compelling. Naturally, we cannot rule out God’s speaking to us dramatically, but the claim that God took an active interest in Osteen’s weekend attire seems to overreach a bit. Other examples seem even more dubious.

Osteen speaks of remaining positive as a teenager when police would pull him over for speeding around Houston. In several cases they recognized his father’s name and let him off with a warning. Whether his attitude or the privilege of a famous father’s name did the trick, the chief lesson he should have learned was to *slow down*. He frequently mentions a legal dispute that arose when Lakewood originally moved to purchase the Compaq Center. A lawsuit was brought by an opponent with deep pockets and fancy lawyers that could have prevented the church’s move. But Osteen stayed positive, prayed and won. Never mind that his church had its own deep pockets and fancy lawyers.

Nevertheless, Osteen has winning moments throughout his book. He speaks tenderly of his relationship with his dad, of his hesitation to enter the ministry and step into his father's large shoes, and of overcoming observers' assumptions that Lakewood would die with its founder. He suggests that we respond to a bad day or discouragement by helping others—for in giving we receive. One way of developing the sort of attitude God blesses with abundance is by giving money away, for it shows our trust. We have to plant seeds abundantly if we want anything to grow. Addressing a scandal close to Houston's heart, Osteen notes that the executives at Enron didn't wake up one morning and decide to bilk investors out of millions of dollars. Small lies accumulated until big ones became acceptable. Christian virtue ethicists would agree and so would their medieval forebears.

Similar examples of good advice appear frequently in the book. One doesn't doubt that his counsel helps people to have better marriages, careers, families and lives. Salespeople, whom Osteen often addresses, will indeed perform better with more upbeat, self-confident attitudes. These claims are true, as far as they go. But that doesn't make them Christian.

It's striking how unnecessary God is to Osteen's project. People can "enlarge their vision" and "choose to be happy" with nary a thought of God. "Understand this: God will help you, but you cast the deciding vote." We have to be positive—only then will God bless us. Of course, since being positive itself gives those rewards, it's unclear what God has to do in the scenario. Even when Osteen speaks of the seemingly most supernatural of events—the healing of his mother's cancer—the accent is on her attitude rather than on divine activity.

Osteen's version of the gospel is full of "ifs." *If* we enlarge our vision, *if* we choose to be happy, *if* we think thoughts and speak words of victory and blessing, *if* we give of ourselves abundantly—then God will bless us with everything we want. The conditional nature of these sentences is telling. This is not a gospel of grace, in which God acts in spite of our lack of faithfulness to redirect our wants. Instead this is a gospel of reward in which God does nothing until we get our act together. In traditional Christian theology, Protestant and Catholic alike, we can do nothing in and of ourselves to merit God's favor. Rather, God comes to us in Christ when we are without merit, without ability to please God and without reason to think we can be saved or helped. Such a view of grace is surely part of the grumpy theology Osteen seeks to upend—but it is central to Christianity.

It's also striking how closely Osteen identifies wealth with divine blessing, to the point where he risks placing a Christian overlay on a pagan gospel of acquisition. In scripture, wealth is a much more mixed blessing, to say the least. It is a source of "peril and obligation," to quote biblical scholar Sondra Wheeler. For the prophets and for Jesus, especially in his Beatitudes, it is the poor who are truly blessed by God. The rich will be measured by standards of justice that demand care for the widowed and orphaned rather than for the ballooning of their own bank accounts. Not a few saints in the history of the church have heard Jesus' words as an invitation to divest themselves entirely of their wealth.

Osteen's book abounds with examples of trivial everyday concerns. Can't get a green light? Pray with faith, and that light will change. Can't find a parking place? Claim God's victory, and see divine favor as someone pulls out and leaves you a space in the front row. Worried that you haven't found the perfect date, someone like Osteen's wife (who is, by the way, praying for us as we read her husband's book, as Osteen promises in an epilogue)? You've guessed the answer by now: pray, stay positive, and God will build up the remarkable list of coincidences to have you meet that special person. Osteen knows enough to say this doesn't always happen. We can't treat God "like an ATM machine." But the qualification doesn't mean much in view of Osteen's repeated references to claiming God's promises for your parking and dating needs.

This theology is politically quiescent, accommodating itself perfectly to an imperial age. That is, it matters not what the government is doing, or what your company does as you work for promotion within it, or where you are driving while praying for green lights. The nature of our desires, and our potential self-deception about them, gets very little attention from Osteen. He assumes the standard set of American middle-class desires for a house, career, spouse, kids, etc. But what if I want a mistress? Or the cruel death of my enemies? What if it's the nature of my desires, or my vision of the abundant life, that is the problem?

If God matters little for this worldview, Jesus matters even less. "If you're always thinking positive, happy, joyful thoughts, you're going to be a positive, happy, joyful person, and will attract other happy, upbeat, positive people." If only Jesus could have heard Osteen's message—things might have turned out much better! His preaching could have been brightened up considerably. And his friends wouldn't have been the sorry bunch of losers he consistently attracted.

Osteen is an easy theological target. He merits attention mostly as an unreflective exemplar of temptations all ministers face—to translate the charged political and theological language of the scriptures into a vague religiosity, or into more easily digestible categories of self-help and self-improvement. His unending smile also reminds us of the ministerial temptation of relying on personal charisma, an upbeat attitude or an eagerness to please rather than the more difficult claims of scripture.

Osteen is absolutely right in saying the gospel promises our “best life now.” He’s just mistaken on what the form of that life is. Jesus, God’s best life lived among us, is the shape of our best life. That shape includes a cross and a totally unexpected triumph in the form of the resurrection. It offers hope rather than mere optimism, and a church gathered in worship to remind each other that God’s promises will come true. In the meantime, those who weep now are truly blessed, for they see the incongruity between the promised kingdom and things as they stand.

This version of the gospel shows the most ironic failure of Osteen’s promises of prosperity—they can’t really lift the luggage psychologically. They may work to make midlevel managers mildly more successful, but in the face of genuine desolation—say, cancer that doesn’t respond to prayer and a positive attitude—they fall to dust.

I wonder then what my parishioner saw in Osteen, and what help he gave her. Her husband had died decades earlier following an accident. He was severely burned and lost both arms, and he died before they could have children. She works in a fairly menial service job, and when not working mostly grumbles about co-workers and the manners of kids these days. Perhaps the dreariness of her life is alleviated somewhat by the smiling preacher, without the difficulty of encountering people in pews around her who would give her more to grumble about. The promises of unabated wealth and illustrations of lawsuits over sports stadiums are so disconnected from her life that they don’t spoil the show. A light shines in her small house for that short hour, and Osteen’s affability makes it possible.

Osteen is fine as one to “rejoice with those who rejoice,” but not as one to “weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). He sounds like the writer of Proverbs in some of his more chipper moments, but not at all like the somber writers of Ecclesiastes or Job, or the psalmists who hit both notes. Without both heights and depths, the gospel offered by the smiling preacher on the screen is simply the same platitude over and over. What the church can offer instead is friendship with others in Christ, the chance to offer service to others, broken bread and wine poured out around a

table, the grace to see in Jesus the promise of restored relationship and a healed creation. Something more like that would be my parishioner’s “best life now.”