Are the Osteens evangelical outliers?

By Todd M. Brenneman
October 8, 2014

Recently Victoria Osteen, wife of pastor Joel Osteen, made some comments that concerned many Christians. Apparently, she stated that worship was not for God but for the worshiper, that when people obey God, they should do it for themselves (although she later revised some of these comments).

For many evangelicals, the Osteens are on the periphery of Christianity. They represent the "prosperity gospel"—a message that claims that God will bless the faithful with financial gain. Prosperity preachers often live extravagant lifestyles and point to their wealth as evidence of their message. They often quote biblical passages, taking them very literally, to further their claims that God's desire is health and wealth.

Many evangelicals, however, assert that God doesn't work in this way. Faithfulness to God doesn't mean blessings from above, especially in such worldly pursuits. They try to distance themselves from the prosperity gospel, claiming that it doesn't represent Christianity but a misunderstanding of it.

It is possible, however, that the Osteens represent not the margins but the center of evangelicalism. Considering the Osteens' popularity, they garner a sizable audience that shouldn't be ignored. Additionally, when one compares the Osteens to other popular evangelical authors such as Max Lucado and Rick Warren, several patterns emerge, suggesting that Osteens aren't that far from what most evangelicals are looking for.

Based on the popular culture of the movement, contemporary evangelicalism isn't about belief or politics but about feelings. The writings, the music, and the media of evangelicalism reveal how Christianity should make you feel, not necessarily what to think. Certainly there are evangelical intellectuals out there—pastors, historians, philosophers, and yes, even scientists. Yet the core of popular evangelicalism is found in a type of feeling that says that you as an individual are the most important thing in the world to God. It can be summed up in Lucado's words: "If God had a

refrigerator, your picture would be on it."

Osteen's comments characterize the direction evangelicalism has been heading for quite some time. When evangelicalism started in the 18th century, it was an emotional movement. Older forms of Christianity were thought too dry or too rigid. People wanted preachers who emphasized the heart and God's love. Many turned to this new Christianity throughout the 18th century.

This emotionalism swept the nation. Evangelicals saw their numbers increase due to an individualistic populist gospel. In the middle of the 19th century, this enthusiasm conjoined with rhetoric that sentimentalized the home, women, and children. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, used this type of rhetoric to convince Northerners that the way to achieve the abolition of slavery was to "feel right"—her words—about enslaved African Americans. She did this through writing about sentimental situations in the home and through innocent, childlike characters such as Little Eva and Uncle Tom.

Evangelicals continued to spread their message, incorporating touching stories to target the heart, not convince the head. With these moving stories came an emphasis on the practical effects of the Christian message—Christianity helped you be a better husband, better wife, better citizen. This practicality combined with popular psychology in the 20th century, and is seen in Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* and even Billy Graham's emphasis on individual conversion.

As Christian publishing grew in the 20th century, the inspirational self-help book became a major genre. These books combine emotionality, psychology, an individualistic gospel, and an emphasis on the importance that God places on the reader. One could say that evangelicalism became narcissistic, focused on telling individuals how important they were to God. Because of these trends, Victoria Osteen's comments should not be surprising. It was the next possible step in this historical development.

Evangelicals may assert that the Osteens don't represent them. They may argue that sentimentality isn't what the gospel is about. They might point to a handful of rationalistic pastors. Yet their popular culture says something different. Osteen's comments may be too unbelievable now for some evangelicals, but given evangelical history, future generations will probably find such comments as

commonplace. This is the new evangelicalism, and it appears to be here to stay.

Our weekly feature Then and Now *harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by Edward J. Blum and Kate Bowler.*