The rise of smiling preacher Joel Osteen

By Phillip Luke Sinitiere
July 21, 2015

On June 28 a handful of fundamentalist hecklers from the Church of Wells, located in the piney woods of East Texas about three hours northeast of Houston, disrupted services at Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church. As reported in national and local media outlets, and astutely analyzed by historian Charity Carney, security removed the activists after they shouted at the popular preacher and they were arrested. While that June Sunday was not the first time the Wells hecklers visited Lakewood, it represented a bold and memorable confrontation with America's smiling pastor, not unlike the one evangelist Adam Key had with Osteen in 2007.

It is easy to dismiss the Wells hecklers and Key as fundamentalist partisans whose messages appeal to a small number of like-minded followers. However, as my book *Salvation with a Smile* argues, their actions are part of a longer history of public castigation of popular preachers. And Molly Worthen's insightful description of evangelicalism's crisis of authority speaks powerfully to the rhetorical combat between Osteen and his critics, as does Todd Brenneman's post for this blog.

Lakewood's heckler episode this summer, while documenting one way to understand Osteen's popularity, also prompts historical reflection about the summer of 2005 when Joel and his congregation moved into Houston's Compaq Center, a sports-arena-turned-megachurch. The last decade encompassed Joel Osteen's ascendancy to the peak of American evangelicalism.

The anticipation was electric as people poured into Lakewood on the weekend of July 16, 2005. For several years previous, the church had announced its intention to upgrade its facilities, a plan that led to Lakewood's acquisition of the arena where the NBA's Houston Rockets once played. According to Osteen, obtaining the former Compaq Center involved much prayer and, ultimately, divine favor. Yet legal and political maneuvering, along with a lot of money and the assistance of a powerful lobbyist named Dave Walden, converged during one of Lakewood's signature moments.

Lakewood's grand opening at its new location, with its production splendor and exciting, scripted programming, mirrored the emerging public persona of the "smiling preacher," a moniker that *Washington Post* writer Lois Romano gave Osteen in 2005. At the time, Osteen was a minister only six years into his tenure but had established the core tenets of his message: positive thinking and positive confession. Since then, Osteen has arguably become the successful embodiment of his message with the largest church in America, numerous best-selling books, and rock star status in the broader world of spiritual teachers and proponents of self-help.

In 2005, Osteen was a familiar name in Houston, but only mildly recognizable outside of the Bayou City and Lone Star State. However, that would soon change. He had published his first book, *Your Best Life Now,* in 2004, a *New York Times* best seller, and in June 2005, an appearance on *Larry King Live* garnered wide attention. After King queried Osteen about the exclusive claims of the Christian message—in essence if non-Christians could expect a residence in paradise—Osteen said that the decision was in God's hands. Evangelicals such as R. Albert Mohler and Michael Horton bellowed in disapproval at Osteen's answer, claiming he had denied Christ on national television. Osteen took note of his critics, and issued a public apology that clarified his evangelical credentials. Nevertheless, detractors have continued to target Osteen for shallow theologizing.

While the *Larry King Live* episode defined Osteen at a particular historical moment in his ascendance to evangelicalism's pinnacle, the ensuing years witnessed additional *New York Times* best-selling books. He also made more high-profile television appearances that cemented "Joel" as a household name, including stops at Oprah's *Next Chapter* and *Lifeclass*, the *Dr. Oz Show*, and *60 Minutes*. While popular books and celebrity television spots are not the primary evidence of success, in the smiling preacher's career they give us at least some indication of how Joel Osteen became *Joel Osteen*.

Osteen's increasing prominence over the last decade was neither inevitable nor, as he likes to suggest, divinely guaranteed. His rising significance had everything to do with historical and cultural factors in American religious history. One of these factors was his family's enduring connection to neo-Pentecostalism, established by his father John Osteen. Another was Joel's first career as a television producer, which allowed him to shape a message that easily moved between traditional televangelism and new media such as Facebook and Twitter. Finally, his politics of

positive thinking, while functionally conservative on issues such as abortion and marriage equality, did not conform to either the expected narrative of the Christian right or the social agenda of religious progressives. His approach rendered a popular message that connected to a wide diversity of individuals.

Regardless of whether one embraces Joel's message or dismisses his individualistic prosperity gospel—to make sense of Osteen *now*, we have to understand something about Lakewood's past.

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