

# *From the Oasis of Love to Your Best Life Now: A Brief History of Lakewood Church*

*By Phillip Luke Sinitiere*



Houston is known for its leading role in energy, oil, and medicine. Texas' largest city is also the home of Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church. One of the city's most ubiquitous features is its megachurches—large, Protestant places of worship with over 2,000 regular attendees. Houston is home to over fifty megachurches, and of the largest twenty-five megachurches in the United States, Houston claims three with Lakewood Church headlining the list. If, as Rice sociologist Stephen Klienbergl claims, Houston is the “city of the future,” then Houston may well be the megachurch capital of twenty-first century metropolitan areas.<sup>1</sup>

This article presents a brief history of Lakewood Church, currently the nation's largest megachurch with nearly 50,000 regular attendees. Dubbed the “Oasis of Love” when its founding pastor John Osteen was alive, within the last decade—particularly upon the publication of *Your Best Life Now* (2004)—the name Lakewood Church has become

synonymous with Joel Osteen. Journalists have chronicled the rise of the “smiling preacher,” a designation popularized in 2005 by *Washington Post* writer Lois Romano. Talk shows such as *Larry King Live*, *The View*, and *Piers Morgan* further established the Joel Osteen brand. And Joel's three *New York Times* best sellers helped to disseminate his message of encouragement and positive thinking.<sup>2</sup>

Paving the way for Joel's ascendancy, John Osteen established a reputation as a fiery preacher, impassioned evangelist, charitable giver, and prolific writer. In addition to serving his Houston congregation, John held preaching revivals across the world. Remarkably, John authored over fifty books and edited two magazines, *Praise* and *Manna*. Understanding John Osteen's Lakewood Church as part of his six-decade ministry puts Joel's meteoric rise in historical context while chronicling an important chapter in Houston's religious history.



After contract negotiations and a Houston City Council vote, Lakewood Church moved into the former Compaq Center in July 2005. Lakewood Church seats 16,000 people and a typical weekend welcomes nearly 50,000 attendees. In May 2010, Lakewood completed the purchase of its property for \$7.5 million.

Photo courtesy of Lakewood Church.

## FINDING FAITH IN FORT WORTH AND THE HOLY SPIRIT IN HOUSTON

It was 1939. World War II commenced with Hitler's blitzkrieg invasion of Poland. African American singer Billie Holiday recorded "Strange Fruit," a haunting song about the brutality of lynching. The classic film *The Wizard of Oz* appeared in theatres. And John Steinbeck published his Depression-era, Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Grapes of Wrath*, capturing the rugged realities of economic calamity.

In 1939, John Osteen, a seventeen-year-old theatre employee and frequent nightclub patron, found an anchor for his wandering heart. After the patient prodding and faithful evangelism of a boyhood friend named Sam Martin, Osteen recalled in an autobiography, *Rivers of Living Water* (1975), that at a Southern Baptist church in Fort Worth, "I sur-

rendered all to the Lord Jesus and passed from death into life. I became a new creature in Christ Jesus." In another autobiographical testimony in 1977, Osteen claimed that as a teenager he was "living for the world," but upon considering the possibility of his eternal future responded to an alter call and "gave Jesus Christ my heart."<sup>3</sup>

John Osteen's conversion in 1939 took him to churches and other venues throughout the U.S. where he would preach, asking others to find faith in Jesus. A committed Baptist, Osteen's newfound faith proved inspirational on other levels. He completed a bachelor's degree at John Brown University, and his 1944 Master's thesis at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary explored the formalities of the Baptist Sunday morning service and formulated a strategy for Christian education curriculum. Osteen applied

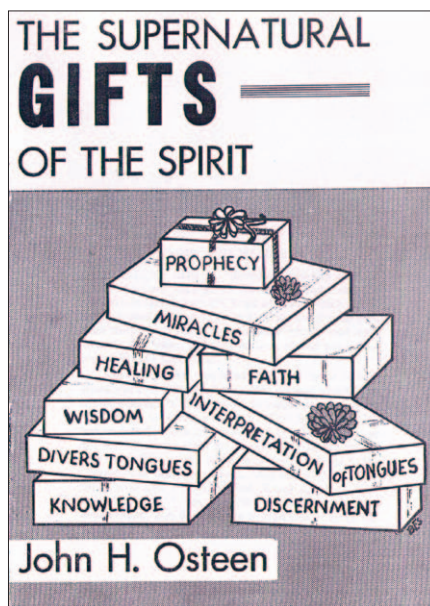
these insights as an assistant pastor at First Baptist Church in San Diego, then in the late 1940s as a minister at First Baptist Church in Hamlin, Texas. During Osteen's tenure in Hamlin, church membership increased by 400 people and nearly 150 members were baptized. A deacon remarked that Osteen was "sound in doctrine, humble and always willing to be led of the Lord." Osteen left Hamlin in 1948 to become a traveling preacher, inaugurating a lifelong itinerancy. But a year later, he quickly found steady employment as pastor at Central Baptist Church in Baytown, Texas.<sup>4</sup>

Success marked Osteen's tenure. He expanded Central Baptist's Christian education program and classroom space in addition to inaugurating a building program that resulted in the construction of an 800-seat sanctuary. Moreover, Osteen played a leading administrative role in the San Jacinto Baptist Association from 1950-1955. He served on multiple missionary committees, including a program focused on evangelism in Mexico. Osteen left Central Baptist in 1956, his resignation likely the result of marital unrest that led to a divorce. He nevertheless continued to minister in official capacities in the late 1950s. At Hibbard Memorial Baptist Church, Osteen added a new building, and under his preaching membership had soared to nearly 1,000. However, new and ecstatic religious experiences in 1958 along with modifications in theological beliefs led to Osteen's resignation. The following year Osteen founded Lakewood Church.<sup>5</sup>

The first daughter of John and Dodie Osteen entered the world in 1958 with what appeared insurmountable health problems. Both doctors and parents feared Lisa would never have full mobility of her limbs nor live at full mental and cognitive capacities. "When our little girl was born we saw immediately she was not a normal child," Osteen wrote in 1961, "We thought her neck was broken. She couldn't hold up her head. She couldn't hold her arms up. She couldn't hold her legs up. She was just a little blob of quivering flesh." In desperation, John started to study the concept of physical healing in the New Testament and began to imagine the possibility that Lisa could be healed. In time, Lisa began to lead an active, normal life, something Osteen attributed to divine influence and supernatural activity. These changing convictions, which contrasted sharply with Southern Baptist teaching, proved instrumental in Osteen experiencing what he called "baptism of the Holy Ghost." After reading the New Testament account of Pentecost in Acts 2, at a prayer retreat in Houston, Osteen exhibited *glossolalia*. This term refers to speaking in tongues, and is a defining religious experience for Pentecostal, or charismatic Christians. Osteen's emerging charismatic Christianity began to reshape his sermons and books, which largely focused on speaking in tongues and offering reports of physical healing. Osteen brought this message to his church in Houston, and, in time, traveled far and wide to teach about spiritual power.<sup>6</sup>

**"PENTECOST IS NOT A DENOMINATION BUT AN EXPERIENCE FROM GOD FOR EVERYONE"**

Attaining more flexibility, John Osteen began to operate outside of a denominational framework. Although he had been preaching for nearly two decades, in 1961 Osteen left Lakewood Church to pastor Marvin Crow and began to



One of John Osteen's earliest publications. Complementing the contents of his magazine *Praise*, Osteen's books published in the early 1960s emphasized healing, speaking in tongues, and other charismatic gifts. Photo by author.

travel the world. He held revival meetings in India, Europe, the Philippines, and Mexico. He plugged into existing neopentecostal preaching networks, collaborating with Tulsa-based healing evangelists such as T. L. Osborn and Oral Roberts. Osteen published several articles in Osborn's ministry magazine *Faith Digest* throughout 1961 and 1962. He pledged support for Osborn's Juarez, Mexico, preaching tour and discussed Osborn's revival in Houston. In these articles Osteen revealed that Osborn's book *Healing the Sick* "showed [me] how to believe" in divine healing in relation to his daughter's health concerns. So Osteen was excited to host Osborn in Houston; he longed for Osborn's message to take root in a city he believed was overly concerned with "wealth and sophistication." "Thousands of other attractions beckoned nightly," Osteen observed, "for the attention of the Gospel hardened multitudes in this great city." Osteen was not disappointed. "I was trembling with emotion as th[e] first service ended," he said. "The mighty Word of God had its effect anew upon me" as Baptists and Methodists experienced healing, including members from Osteen's former Baytown church. Not only did *Faith Digest* introduce an unknown Houston healing evangelist to readers, but Osteen's articles, under Osborn's ministry, further legitimated his place among neopentecostals, which historian David Edwin Harrell calls "new breeds."<sup>7</sup>

Much like other independent ministers, Osteen established his own evangelistic agency that distributed materials, solicited donations, and organized preaching revivals. Between 1961 and 1964, for example, Osteen published five books on the work of the Holy Spirit and divine healing. In many of these early works Osteen interweaved his own personal transformation from a rational-minded Southern Baptist to passionate charismatic. The John H. Osteen Evangelistic Association began to distribute *Praise*, a bimonthly periodical. Osteen often reminded readers, as he did on the fall 1964 cover: "Pentecost is Not a Denomination but An Experience from God for Everyone (Acts 2:39)."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to Osteen's publishing ventures, his impassioned, mature preaching impressed established minis-



*John and Dodie Osteen often ministered together at Lakewood Church and throughout the world. Dodie remains a formidable presence at Lakewood by leading a weekly healing service, speaking at Evening of Hope events, and sharing her testimony of divine healing.*  
Photo courtesy of Lakewood Church.

ters. His horizons widened further when he met Demos Shakarian, the founder and leader of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International (FGBMFI). Shakarian founded the FGBMFI in the 1950s to provide a place of worship, fellowship, and encouragement for working men and women of Pentecostal conviction. Osteen first met Shakarian through Houston businessman A. C. Sorelle, who sent Osteen to an FGBMFI meeting in Los Angeles. In the summer of 1963, the FGBMFI held its annual convention at the Shamrock Hotel in Houston. Osteen soon became a regular speaker at FGBMFI meetings and continued his involvement with the organization into the 1980s.<sup>9</sup>

Achieving national stature in post-World War II charismatic circles throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Osteen published a dozen books and Lakewood Church expanded its worship space twice. In 1972, Lakewood's sanctuary grew to seat 500, and in 1979, the church expanded to accommodate 5,000 members. This exponential growth was a sign of things to come.<sup>10</sup>

### THE OASIS OF LOVE

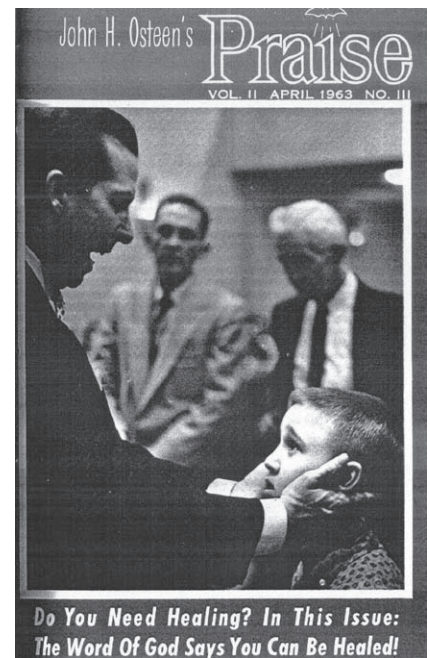
The growth of Lakewood Church in the 1980s mirrored the prosperity associated with Houston's oil boom. John Osteen became a televangelist, and by the decade's end, when Houston's oil fortunes plummeted, Lakewood opened a new sanctuary. Finally, the "Oasis of Love," as Lakewood became known in the 1980s, emerged as one of the leading churches in Word of Faith Movement (WOFM).<sup>11</sup>

John added another family member to Lakewood's operations when Joel left Oral Roberts University in 1982 to help his father start a television ministry. John's friendship with televangelist Oral Roberts proved useful as a team of

Roberts's producers assisted the church in establishing a presence in local, national, and international television markets. John became a fixture on local religious television. A marketing campaign, extensive mailing list, and distribution networks allowed the dissemination of Osteen's messages at home and abroad. But it was often Houstonians who most felt the impact of his television ministry. For example, Osteen's message resonated with Houston federal judge and Democrat Woodrow B. Seals, a committed and influential layperson at St. Stephen's United Methodist Church. "My dear Brother Osteen," Seals began an April 1987 letter; "I turned on the television Saturday night while I was preparing my church school lesson for Sunday [and] you were walking out to that small pulpit and starting a sermon." Despite a condescending tone about the working-class neighborhood where Lakewood was located, Seals found Osteen's sermon meaningful. "Like everyone in Houston, I have noticed those bumper stickers, 'Lakewood Church—Oasis of Love,' for two or three years." Seals continued, "I have always wondered how anyone could start a church out where you started yours. But after hearing your sermon Saturday night... I agreed with everything you said, and I especially appreciated what you said two or three times, 'Tell

*Through the magazine Praise, the John H. Osteen Evangelistic Association documented the post-World War II neopentecostal revival during the early 1960s. John reported association news, advertised books, and provided stories of baptism in the Holy Ghost and divine healing.*

Courtesy of Holy Spirit Research Center, Oral Roberts University.



the untold and reach the unreachable." Seals again mentioned the Lakewood bumper stickers as a testimony to an active and vibrant church. "[T]he Lord is raising up people like you who will save the world," he said.<sup>12</sup>

Lakewood's numerical growth in the 1980s necessitated the construction of a new building in 1987 to seat over 8,000 members. The dedication ceremonies lasted a week in early April 1988. A full-page ad in the *Houston Post* featured distinguished invitees such as Mayor Kathy Whitmire, Congressman Jack Fields, along with leading Charismatics Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, and T. L. Osborn. Prominent Houston clergy who made the ad included First United Methodist's William H. Hinson and Second Baptist's Edwin Young. Coupled with the publication of Osteen's two dozen books in the 1980s, Lakewood became Houston's premier



Lakewood Church as it looked during the 1970s. The church grew significantly under John's ministry, expanding its worship space twice, so that by 1979 the sanctuary could accommodate 5,000 members. Photo courtesy of Lakewood Church.

church and served as a model megachurch across the nation and throughout the world.<sup>13</sup>

Lakewood Church's growth allowed John to launch the Lakewood Bible Institute (LBI) in the mid-1980s. An unaccredited school devoted to biblical training from a charismatic perspective, LBI offered classes for lay-people in New Testament, Old Testament, principles of Bible study, healing, spiritual growth, faith, conversion, and prayer. In addition to daily chapel services, students were required to attend all of Lakewood's missions and pastor's conferences, and taping of Lakewood broadcasts. LBI promised that students "would learn how to apply the life-changing truths of God's Word in a practical way . . . you'll enjoy Spirit-filled services while you learn in a supernatural atmosphere of worship, teaching, and world evangelism." LBI also provided unique access "to observe firsthand the pastoral ministry of John Osteen and learn from his powerful message of faith and great love." Osteen served as LBI's president and emphasized practical application of religious knowledge. While LBI did not survive the 1980s, it served as one manifestation of Osteen's focus on Christian education.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1980s, Osteen family circumstances tested nerves and stretched faith. The family's faith in redemption and belief in second chances fueled persistent convictions that troubles would always turn around for the better. Lisa Osteen, one of her father's assistant ministers, underwent marital difficulties that ended in divorce. Raised on her father's teaching, Lisa turned tragedy into triumph by publishing *Six Lies That the Devil Uses to Destroy Marriages* (1988). This book attributed marital strife to demonic influence and counseled regular, consistent prayer as a remedy. Lisa taught this philosophy under Lakewood's marriage enrichment program.

Survival also marked Dodie Osteen's life. The mother of five children and a regular minister by her husband's side, Dodie was diagnosed with cancer in 1981, and doctors gave her only a short time to live. Just as the couple prayed for their daughter, John and Dodie's charismatic faith shaped the prayerful response to this situation. Medical professionals eventually gave Dodie a clean bill of health, unable to find cancer. Relieved, the Osteens attributed these medical reports to divine intervention and passages about healing found in the Bible. In her autobiography, *Healed of Cancer* (1986), Dodie wrote, "The Word of God is extremely important to people who are fighting a battle with their health, for often it's the only hope they have. I know I would have died if it had not been for the Bible." Dodie also linked her healing to verbal confession of Bible verses. "Day by day," she remembered, "I gained hope and encouragement from the precious promises that God revealed to me through His Word. I clung to my Bible and its healing promises." While the Osteens emphasized the spiritual dimensions of her bout with cancer, the family's Houston residence proved fortuitous as increased funding and research allowed doctors to "make cancer history" at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center.<sup>15</sup>

#### FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

Lakewood Church's history took another historical turn in January 1999 when John Osteen died of a heart attack. John had often asked Joel to preach, yet Joel routinely dismissed the suggestion, wishing to focus on the church's behind-the-scenes duties. "I always loved working in production," Joel reflected in 2004, "with the cameras and editing and all that, even when I was a teenager." Although Lakewood's ministerial leadership team ordained Joel in 1992, he never expected to assume pastoral responsibilities. In the midst of his 1999 illnesses, John asked his son once again to fill

in one Sunday; again Joel adamantly refused. Joel wrote in *Your Best Life Now*:

*Daddy's words kept flitting through my mind, and with no other provocation, I began to have an overwhelming desire to preach. I didn't really understand it at the time, but I knew I had to do something. Keep in mind, I had never even prepared a sermon, let alone considered standing up in front of thousands of people to speak.... I studied all week and prepared a message, and the next Sunday I spoke at Lakewood Church for the first time.*

Not only did the congregation welcome the newer Osteen with open arms and rapturous applause, his siblings Lisa Comes and Paul Osteen, also ministers at Lakewood, quickly confirmed his ministerial calling. Reticent to embrace the ministerial task of his father, Osteen submitted to what he now believes is his life's calling.<sup>16</sup>

Building on his father's legacy, Joel retained aspects of John's ministerial vision. For example, Joel situated a rotating globe behind the pulpit at Lakewood, signifying the church's commitment to evangelism and missionary outreach. Joel has maintained the "This is my Bible" confession at the beginning of services, a Lakewood tradition John started in the 1980s. "My dad's whole message was that you can rise higher," Joel writes, "you can overcome, and with God all things are possible. He lived it out before us, and for more than forty years he pastored Lakewood Church with great love and faithfulness." Joel's calling has transcended John's work too. Lakewood experienced exponential growth on many levels—virtually embodying sociologist Joe Feagin's description of Houston as a "free enterprise city." Most notably, Osteen helped to obtain an initial lease of the Compaq Center for \$12 million over thirty years, and the church agreed to spend approximately \$90 million to renovate the former sports arena, which seats 16,000 people. In May 2010, Lakewood completed the purchase of its property for \$7.5 million. Moving from its working-class roots to the upscale Greenway Plaza area, Lakewood church opened in its new location in July 2005. "For nearly thirty years they've crowned champions in the sports field in this building," preached Joel at Lakewood's grand opening service, "but I believe for the next thirty years we can crown people champions in life. We're going to let them know that they are victors and not victims, we're going to let them know they can do all things through Christ." While John once said he'd eventually preach in the Astrodome, his son fulfilled that dream on a much larger scale.<sup>17</sup>

Not only has Lakewood Church increased in numbers, the dissemination of Joel's message has followed publication paths blazed by his father. To date Osteen has published three New York Times best sellers. Joel's wife and Lakewood co-pastor, Victoria Osteen, has found her niche as well, with a self-help book for women along with a series of children's books. In 2012, Lisa Osteen Comes, Joel's sister, will publish her first book in over two decades. From one generation to the next, the family's message of faith, forgiveness, and second chances has impacted Houston and the world.

The creation of "Evening with Joel" events in 2004 marks another way that Joel expanded Lakewood's reach. Regularly sold out, these events consist of a concert by Lakewood's musicians, Dodie's testimony of healing (or one by another special guest), a recitation of Lakewood's history, and Joel's message of God's plan for self-improvement. The inaugural event took place at Madison Square Garden in 2004, the site of Billy Graham's 1957 revivals. More recently, the monthly services were renamed "Evening of Hope," with well-publicized events at Dodger Stadium, Yankee Stadium, and, in early 2011, in Jerusalem. Other "Evening of Hope" events took place in Killeen (2006) and Corpus Christi (2011). Joel succeeding in establishing the camp meeting of the twenty-first century by holding monthly services at arenas in select U.S. cities and around the world.<sup>18</sup>

While Lakewood maintains the multiracial composition that John ushered in during the 1970s after Houston's civil rights struggles, acquiring the Compaq Center allowed the church to expand its thriving Spanish ministry. In a strategic move in 2002, Joel hired Latin Grammy Award winner Marcos Witt. An accomplished musician and talented speaker, Witt was an established presence in Latin America who expanded Lakewood's Spanish service. Born in San Antonio, Witt grew up in Durango, Mexico, where his parents worked as missionaries. After Witt's father died, his mother remarried and continued to preach in Mexico. With a name many Spanish speakers recognize, Witt rarely gets enough credit for solidifying Lakewood's presence in Houston—particularly since Houston is a hub for Latin American immigration. Below the surface, Witt's hire had a deeper connection to Lakewood Church's history. In the 1960s, Witt's parents spoke at Lakewood about plans to



*Known as the "smiling preacher," Joel Osteen's messages emphasize self-improvement, second chances, and faith that God can change one's circumstances. Joel's teaching is broadcast on major television networks, available at iTunes, and published in three New York Times best sellers: *Your Best Life Now* (2004), *Become a Better You* (2007), and *It's Your Time* (2009).*

Photo courtesy of Lakewood Church.

travel to Mexico, and John Osteen was “stirred and moved” to help with a \$600 offering toward their missionary endeavors. Witt stated, “The seed that Lakewood sowed in that ministry lives to this day.” Witt is also an author who writes about Christian leadership, music, and spiritual growth.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these successes, the growth Lakewood Church has experienced under Joel has also precipitated a flurry of criticism. Critics spoke up most forcefully beginning in 2005 after Joel’s appearance on *Larry King Live*. The extent to which critics analyze Osteen’s ministry attests to his popularity, and offers an alternative way to document his rise to fame. Moreover, it complicates the public image of the smiling preacher: Osteen is not passive when it comes to his critics. Armed with determination and biblical passages, Osteen responds by invoking the ministries of the Apostle Paul and Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup>

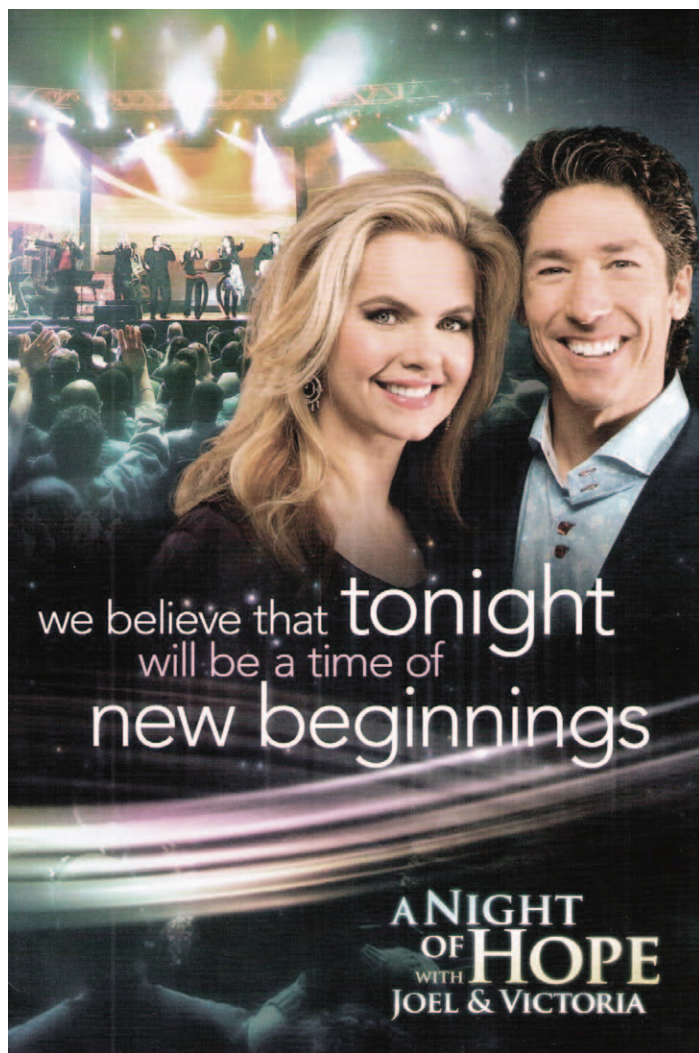
When pressed about the eternal fate of non-Christians on *Larry King Live*, Joel’s answer that it was in God’s hands left evangelical viewers unsatisfied, suspicious, and angry. Many balked that Joel did not emphasize the Christian claim that salvation centers on Jesus Christ. In the days that followed, Osteen received numerous phone calls, questions, and complaints regarding his statements. After reading the program’s transcript, Osteen posted a letter on his website apologizing for his unclear statements. He stated categorically his convictions about the evangelical doctrine of salvation. “It was never my desire or intention to leave any doubt as to what I believe and Whom I serve,” Osteen wrote. “I believe with all my heart that it is only through Christ that we have hope in eternal life. I regret and sincerely apologize that I was unclear on the very thing in which I have dedicated my life...I believe that Jesus Christ alone is the only way to salvation.” Chastised and true to his philosophy of ministry, Osteen promised, “I will use this as a learning experience and believe that God will ultimately use it for my good and His glory.” Osteen observed, “I am comforted by the fact that He sees my heart and knows my intentions. I am so thankful that I have friends, like you, who are willing to share their concerns with me.” The following December, Osteen again appeared on *Larry King Live*. King noted the controversy surrounding Osteen’s earlier comments, in effect giving the humbled minister a second chance. “I believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven,” Osteen reiterated, “I believe in a personal relationship with Christ...the foundation of the Christian faith is that Christ came as a sacrifice so that we can receive forgiveness...So I do believe that. It’s the foundation of our faith.” Despite Osteen’s clarification of his beliefs, critics continue to lambast his message as shallow. Evangelicals such as John MacArthur, Hank Hanegraaff, and Michael Horton tackle Osteen’s message in sermons and books, cautioning followers to steer clear of Osteen’s “cotton candy gospel.”<sup>21</sup>

Closer to home, theologian, minister, and seminary professor J. B. Hixson is one of Osteen’s foremost Houston critics. Preaching at Brenham Bible Church just outside Houston, he is a dean and professor of systematic theology at Grace Theological Seminary and utilizes this area of expertise to analyze Osteen.<sup>22</sup>

Hixson’s self-published book, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About* (2008), is a

study of evangelical ideas about salvation. Hixson decries the WOFM because the prosperity gospel “elevates personal prosperity to a place of centrality in the gospel.” It emphasizes the power of faith itself rather than the object of faith in evangelical teaching, Jesus Christ. “Because reaching one’s *full potential* is couched in terms of a declarative attitude of the heart,” writes Hixson, “the reader is inclined to think that eternal salvation is likewise built upon the power of positive thinking.” According to Osteen, one can find *peace* and *happiness* in life simply *by asking Jesus to come into his heart and making Him his Lord and Savior*.” Therefore, in Hixson’s view, Osteen “mischaracterizes faith” because he calls it a “conception of the mind” rather than an act of trust in an object of faith.<sup>23</sup>

Osteen’s most persistent critics highlight Joel’s appearance on *Larry King Live*. By singling out Joel’s missteps in 2005, they overlook subsequent statements that clarified a commitment to the Christian gospel. Osteen’s critics also underestimate change over time that has impacted movements, institutions, and individuals throughout America’s religious history.



“Evening of Hope” flier from Corpus Christi event (February 2011). Started in 2004, “Evening of Hope” events consist of a concert by Lakewood’s musicians, Dodie’s testimony of healing, a recitation of Lakewood’s history, and Joel’s message of God’s plan for self-improvement. Photo by author.

While routinely queried about his critics, Joel has addressed them most directly in his second book, *Become a Better You*. In the chapter “Handling Criticism,” Osteen replies to his critics. “Every one of us will have times when we are criticized,” Osteen admits, “sometimes fairly, but more often unfairly, creating stress in our hearts and minds and tension in our relationships.” By and large, criticism does not come “in the spirit of blessing” but “with an intentional sting.” He teaches that as one becomes more prominent—presumably because of “God’s increase”—one can expect more criticism, which often comes from jealousy. “[I]f someone chooses to misinterpret my message or my motives, there’s nothing I can do about it anyhow,” Osteen contends. “Now I don’t let my critics upset me or steal my joy. I know most of the time it’s not about me. The success God has given me stirs up the jealousy in them.” For example, Osteen wrote of the criticism he received locally during talks for Lakewood’s move into the Compaq Center, remarking that a businessman said, “It will be a cold day in hell before Lakewood Church gets the Compaq Center.” Osteen retorted, “When I heard about that remark, I just shook it off. I knew our destiny was not tied to one dissenter. I knew that remark was nothing more than a distraction.” Osteen writes that “I realize that not everybody is going to understand me. I also recognize that it is not my job to spend all my time trying to convince [my critics] to change their minds. I’m called to plant a seed of hope in people’s hearts. I’m not called to explain every minute facet of Scripture or to expound on deep theological doctrines or disputes that don’t touch where real people live. My gifting



Hired in 2002, Marcos Witt has greatly expanded Lakewood Church’s Spanish ministry. An accomplished musician and Latin Grammy Award winner, in addition to pastoral duties Witt is also an author who writes about Christian leadership, music, and spiritual growth. Photo courtesy of Lakewood Church.

is to encourage, to challenge, and to inspire.”<sup>24</sup>

Osteen finds the life of Jesus and the witness of the Apostle Paul meaningful for dealing with criticism. Osteen recalls that Jesus counted as friends tax collectors and sinners, and as a result was often misunderstood and therefore “perpetually criticized for doing good... Jesus didn’t change in a futile attempt to fit into everybody’s mold. He didn’t try to explain Himself and make everybody understand Him; He stayed focused and fulfilled His destiny.” Turning to the Apostle Paul, Osteen noted that other teachers became jealous of the “great crowds following him” and “ran him out of town.” Paul responded to his critics, argues Osteen, by staying confident that he was using God’s call on his life to the best of his ability and “shak[ing] the dust off his feet.” Osteen invokes the Hebrew prophet Isaiah to defend himself, citing the verse “No weapon formed against us will prosper, but every tongue raised against us in judgment, You will show to be in the wrong.” Again, Osteen appeals to the reality of judgment, but advises the criticized to “stay on the high road and keep doing your best” as “God will pour out His favor on you, in spite of your critics.”<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This short history of Lakewood Church highlights important developments in the congregation’s early years, particularly in the context of Houston’s emergence as a leading Gulf Coast city. It documents the energy with which John pursued his life’s mandate to teach, to preach, and to write. Although based in Houston, John was a prominent member of leading neopentecostal networks that brought him into the global orbit of the WOFM. While John embodied certain elements of the boundless enthusiasm of Houston’s free market philosophy—and certainly benefitted from its money—the church’s original location in an east Houston working-class neighborhood meant that the church welcomed many who experienced the underside of the city’s economic growth. Within this crucible of capital, competition, and conflict, Lakewood Church emerged as a multi-racial, charismatic megachurch. While the church continued to grow during the 1980s and 1990s, coming of age in the twenty-first century when energy and medicine drove the city’s economy, Joel’s vision helped to situate Lakewood in a city and a world defined by technological networks and globalization. His message of God’s plan for positive thinking and self-improvement—not unlike Norman Vincent Peale’s message of positive thinking during the Cold War—offers predictability in unstable, complicated times. If Houston is indeed the city of the future, the religious life embodied in its megachurches (along with other sites of spiritual importance) is integral to understanding the larger meaning of metropolitan areas as the twenty-first century continues to unfold.

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