

During the promotion of his book *Become a Better You*, Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, came to our city for a book signing. The bookstore hosting his appearance reported selling roughly 600 of his books during the two and a half hour signing, attesting to the popularity of Osteen and his message.

However, that popularity does not come without controversy. When CBS aired a report about Osteen on “60 Minutes”, it included concerns that were raised by Osteen’s message, prompting the report to acknowledge: “Many theologians from mainstream churches find Osteen’s message misleading and shallow.” But what are these concerns and, do they have any merit?

Primarily, they center on the belief his message, is at best, a very weak presentation of biblical principles and/or, at worst, a presentation of Word Faith teachings similar to those of his father. Word Faith authority and author of *The Word-Faith Controversy*, Rob Bowman has studied Osteen’s writings and messages and has concluded that Osteen’s primary message is to think positive thoughts, as evidenced in the “7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential” identified in Osteen’s book *Your Best Life*

1. Enlarge your vision
2. Develop a healthy self-image
3. Discover the power of your thoughts and words
4. Let go of the past
5. Find strength through adversity
6. Live to give!
7. Choose to be happy

Certainly, someone might ask, “What is the problem with being positive in the words we speak, or having a positive attitude? Nothing. The problem is not in having a good and positive outlook on life but, teaching or believing that having such an outlook and speaking positive words will actually bind God to provide whatever one speaks.

As Bowman points out in his Profile of Osteen:

“Osteen’s “Seven Steps” would be at home just as much in Unity or Science of Mind (New Age Churches) as in the Word-Faith movement. There is nothing essentially Christian, or even particularly religious, about this message at all. In fact, a humanist would have no problem embracing these seven steps. Osteen sprinkles biblical quotations throughout the book (but so would a Unity publication) and relates these seven steps to a generic Christian belief, but these elements appear to be window dressing only. The “7 Keys to Improving Your Life” in *Become a Better You* are similarly generic advice that, for the most part, almost anyone could affirm (keep pressing forward, be positive toward yourself, and so forth).

“The Bible teaches neither positive thinking nor negativism, but rather a balanced realism that recognizes both negative and positive dimensions of human life in this age. Over and over again, it presents a balanced view of the righteous and the wicked (Ps. 1:6), the wise and the foolish (Prov. 10:1), human evil and human goodness (Matt. 7:11), and the future prospects of both eternal punishment and eternal life (Matt. 25:46). Paul was prepared to live or to die, expecting only to honor Christ whatever happened (Phil. 1:19-26). While he remained alive, he expected neither poverty nor prosperity, but learned to honor Christ and to be content in either case (Phil. 4:11-13).

Word-Faith theology is unbiblical. The doctrine that God expects human beings to be prosperous and healthy in this mortal life by speaking positive “words of faith” is a serious distortion of biblical theology. Our words cannot make things real (Prov. 14:23) except as we or others act on them (Prov. 18:21). God’s word, unlike ours, always produces results (Is. 55:6-11). Indeed, what we “confess” may be false (Rev. 3:17). Perfect health and wellbeing are promised to Christians, but in the future resurrection life of the age to come (Rom. 8:10-11, 23; 1 Cor. 15:42-45).” (Excerpt from *Watchman Profile* by Robert M. Bowman)

One of those who raised concerns about Osteen in the “60 Minutes” piece referred to his message as a “cotton candy gospel”. Maybe that is why so many find it appealing. After all, cotton candy sure does taste good; it is sugary sweet. However it also isn’t very filling and you certainly wouldn’t want a steady diet of it. In fact, it is filled with empty calories. Perhaps it also shouldn’t be lost on us that it is generally sold at carnivals, fairs, and other places of amusement.

Joel Osteen is, without question, energetic and motivating. His message is filled with hope and encouragement. But, is his it consistent with Scripture, or is it more compatible with any of the many motivational speakers making the circuit these days, offering a “quick-fix”? Regardless of how Christians might feel about Osteen and his message, it certainly bears hearing with a discerning ear.

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