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OSTEENIFICATION AND WHAT IT PORTENDS

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Virtually every morning I try to catch up on news and sports while running on my treadmill. Often the running (mostly walking) is accompanied by the vigorous exercise of my remote. Recently, I flipped into an interview involving Singaporean mega-pastor Joseph Prince. The more I tuned in, the faster my heart rate. Disregard for the meaning and context of Scripture was simply breathtaking. It all led up to taking a shower and beginning work on a book now titled *The Osteenification of American Christianity*.¹

Why Osteenification? Because Joel Osteen is the prime provocateur of a seductive brand of American Christianity that reduces God to a means to our ends. A message that beckons multitudes to the table of the Master, not for the love of the Master but for what is on the table. He is the de facto high priest of a new brand of Christianity perfectly suited for a feel-good generation. And while a host of pretenders (including Prince) follow in his train, Osteen is clearly the biggest of the bunch—according to *People* magazine, “twice as big as the nearest competitor.”² And his claim to America’s largest church is just a small part of the story. With *one billion* impressions per month on Facebook and Twitter,³ Osteen is the hip new personification of God-talk in America.

But here’s the problem. Behind Osteenian self-affirmations—“*I am anointed,*” “*I am prosperous,*” “*My God is a ‘supersizing God’*”—there lies a darker hue. Behind the smile is a robust emphasis on all that is negative. If you are healthy and wealthy, words created that reality. However, if you find yourself in dire financial straits, contract cancer, or, God forbid, die an early death, your words are the prime suspect. Says Osteen, “We’re going to get exactly what we’re saying. And this can be good or it can be bad.”⁴ In evidence, he cites one illustration after the other. One in particular caught my attention: the story of a “kind and friendly” worker at the church. He died at an early age, contends Osteen, “being snared by the words of his mouth.”⁵

This illustration serves to underscore a predictable trend. A trend now pandemic in American Christianity. Osteen and company simply use the Scriptures to communicate whatever they want, which is the essence of the Osteenification of Christianity. Again and again, Scripture is tortured in the process of deluding the faithful. As even the most cursory reading of Proverbs 6 makes plain, being “snared by

the words of your mouth” has nothing to do with negatively professing death into one’s own life and everything to do with a divine warning against making rash pledges.

SCRIPTORTURE

Sometimes Osteen’s prostitution of Scripture is so excessive that it quite literally leaves one breathless. Consider his rendering of Adam’s fall in the Garden of Eden. Adam’s offense, according to Osteen, was not rebellion against God but rather believing Satan’s suggestion that there might be something wrong with him. “Back in the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they hid. In the cool of the day, God came to them and said, ‘Adam, Eve, where are you?’ They said, ‘God, we’re hiding because we are naked.’ I love the way God answered them. He said, ‘Adam, who told you that you were naked?’ *In other words, ‘Who told you that something was wrong with you?’*” (emphasis added).⁶ The application from Osteen’s perspective is simply this: as with Adam and Eve in the Garden, God is saying to us, “Who told you that you don’t have what it takes to succeed?” To get good grades, to flourish in your career, to have a good marriage, to get a promotion, and so on.⁷

Osteen, however, is as subtle as Satan—as Satan twists God’s words, so does Osteen. What he leaves out in his quotation of the Genesis passage reveals his utter disregard for the meaning of the text: “And [God] said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?’” (Gen. 3:11). Osteen has turned the quintessential voice of judgment in the whole of Scripture into a primer on self-esteem. This is not about success through positive affirmations but the sin that results in all of the evil the world experiences to this very day—the sin that would ultimately lead to the crucifixion of Christ. Osteen acts as though God were trying to encourage Adam, when in reality the text conveys the thunder of His judgment.⁸

NEW THOUGHT METAPHYSICS

While in *The Osteenification of American Christianity* I highlight the Osteenian proclivity for scriptorture, atonement atrocities, and obsession with anecdotes on generational curses and frequent use of urban legends, what Osteen has most popularized in Christian circles is a baptized version of New Thought metaphysics. In essence, a version of “the law of attraction” popularized by Rhonda Byrne in her runaway bestseller *The Secret*.⁹ For Byrne, the genie is the “law of attraction,” which, for Osteen, is rejiggered “the Word of Faith.” As such, he is committed to the notion that faith is a force, that words are the containers of the force, and that through the force of faith people create their own realities. As he explains in his mega-bestseller, *Your Best Life Now*, “You have to begin speaking words of faith over your life. Your words have enormous creative power. The moment you speak something out you give birth to it. This is a spiritual principle, and it works whether what you are saying is good or bad, positive or negative.”¹⁰

Byrne and her contributors are remarkably open to dangerous hues of “the secret’s” dark underbelly. As such, she points out events in history “where masses of

lives were lost." Says Byrne, "If people believe they can be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and they have no control over outside circumstances, those thoughts of fear, separation, and powerlessness, if persistent, can attract them to being in the wrong place at the wrong time." She emphatically concludes, "Nothing can come into your experience unless you summon it through persistent thoughts."¹¹ Likewise, when Osteen describes the horrific genocide of nearly one million Rwandans, the implications are never far from the surface.¹² Wherever tragedy strikes, thoughts and words are at the center of the narrative.

And Osteen does not only use modern-day anecdotes. With great bravado, he impugns biblical characters, including a hapless paralytic in the Gospel of John. In Osteen's twist of the text, Jesus encounters a man by the pool of Bethesda just "lying around feeling sorry" for himself. In response to Jesus' "simple, straightforward question," the paralytic begins "listing all of his excuses. *'I'm all alone. I don't have anyone to help me. Other people have let me down. Other people always seem to get ahead of me. I don't have a chance in life.'*" With nary a hint of mercy, Osteen continues: "Is it any wonder that he remained in that condition for thirty-eight years?"¹³ In sharp contrast, Osteen says his sister Lisa arose from the ashes of a painful divorce and remarried. Unlike the paralytic, she "wasn't going to sit around by the pool for thirty-eight years feeling sorry for herself."¹⁴

For Osteen, words are downright magical. "In the physical realm, you have to see it to believe it, but God says you have to believe it, and then you'll see it." Exhorts Osteen, "Think about it. Your words go out of your mouth and they come right back into your own ears. If you hear those comments long enough, they will drop down into your spirit, and those words will produce exactly what you're saying."¹⁵ As proof, Osteen invokes the Bible: "The Scripture tells us that we are to 'call the things that are not as if they already were.'"¹⁶ As he must surely know, Scripture says nothing of the sort. Indeed, the very passage Osteen references (Rom. 4:17) clearly communicates that it is "the God who gives life" — *not we* — who "calls things that are not as though they were."

Osteenian scriptorture is not unique. His words and phrases are now mimicked in pulpits throughout the land. As a result, Christianity has been plunged into an ever-deepening crisis. If occult sources such as those referenced in *The Secret* pose the greatest threat to the body of Christ from without, the deadly doctrines disseminated through the Osteenification of Christianity pose the greatest threat to Christianity from within. To avert the carnage, a paradigm shift of major proportions is desperately needed — a shift from perceiving God as a means to an end, to the recognition that He is the end.

While we may legitimately engage in collegiate debates over such "in-house" matters as the perpetuity of spiritual gifts, not so the dogmas espoused by Osteen, which involve essential matters with real consequences for this world and the next. The reality is this: Osteenification has subverted the very essence of biblical faith in exchanging the glory of the cross for the glory of consumerism — a fast-food Christianity long on looks, dreadfully short on substance.

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NOTES

- 1 Hank Hanegraaff, *The Osteenification of American Christianity* (Charlotte: Christian Research Institute, 2014).
- 2 Patrick Rogers and Vickie Bane, "Joel Osteen Counts His Blessings," *People*, December 17, 2007, 96.
- 3 Joel Osteen Ministries press release, in PR Newswire, "Joel & Victoria Osteen Announce Yankee Stadium in NYC for Next 'America's Night of Hope,'" *The Business Journals*, January 22, 2014, http://www.bizjournals.com/prnewswire/press_releases/2014/01/23/DC51065.
- 4 Joel Osteen, *Discover the Champion in You* program, Trinity Broadcasting network, May 3, 2004.
- 5 Joel Osteen, *I Declare: 31 Promises to Speak over Your Life* (New York: FaithWords, 2012), viii–ix. Osteen is referring to Proverbs 6:2.
- 6 Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 9.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Cf. Michael S. Horton, "Become a Better You: Reflections on Joel Osteen's Latest Book," <http://www.whitehorseinn.org/free-articles/become-a-better-youreflections-on-joel-osteen-s-latest-book.html>.
- 9 Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (New York: Atria Books, 2006).
- 10 Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Warner faith, 2004), 129.
- 11 Byrne, *The Secret*, 28.
- 12 Chris Lehmann, "Joel Osteen Worships Himself," *Salon*, April 30, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/05/01/joel_osteen_worships_himself/.
- 13 Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 148–49. Osteen is referring to John 5:1–18.
- 14 Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 151.
- 15 Osteen, *Become a Better You*, 111.
- 16 Ibid., 112.