

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Pastor/Teacher

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THE PURPOSE FOR THE INCARNATION

Joel Osteen, who leads the largest church in the United States and reaches millions of Americans through his televised Sunday sermons, is developing a reality show with the producer of "Survivor," the televangelist said Tuesday.¹ Osteen has become a *Christian celebrity*. His best selling books include: *Your Best Life Now*, *Seven Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*, *Become a Better You*, *Stress Free Living* and most recently *Every Day a Friday: How to Be Happier 7 Days A Week*. Mike Horton observed that beyond his charming personality and folksy style, Osteen's phenomenal attraction is no doubt related to his simple and soothing sampler of the American gospel: A blend of Christian and cultural elements that he picked up not through any formal training, but as the son and television producer of a Baptist-turned-prosperity evangelist who was a favorite on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). The pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, which now owns the Compaq Center, does not come across as a flashy evangelist with jets and yachts, but as a charming next-door neighbor who always has something nice to say. There are no televised healing lines, blessed prayer cloths, or other eccentricities of yesterday's televangelism. Nevertheless, the key tenets of Word of Faith dominate his teaching, although it is communicated in terms and ambiance that might be difficult to distinguish from most mega churches and other seeker-driven ministries. There is no *condemnation* in Osteen's message for failing to fulfill God's righteous law. On the other hand, there is no *justification*. Instead of either message, there is an upbeat moralism that is somewhere in the middle: Do your best, follow the instructions I give you, and God will make your life successful. "Don't sit back passively," he warns, but with a gentle pleading he suggests that the only reason we need to follow his advice is because it's useful for getting what we want. God is a buddy or partner who exists primarily to make sure we are happy. "You do your part, and God will do his part." "Sure we have our faults," he says, but "the good news is, God loves us anyway." Instead of accepting God's just verdict on our own righteousness and fleeing to Christ for justification, Osteen counsels readers simply to reject guilt and condemnation. Yet it is hard to do that successfully when God's favor and blessing on my life depend entirely on how well I can put his commands to work. "If you will simply obey his commands, He will change things in your favor." That's all: simply obey his commands. Everything depends on us, but it's easy. Osteen seems to think that we are basically good people and God has a very easy way for us to save ourselves – not from his judgment, but from our lack of success in life – with his help. "God is keeping a record of every good deed you've ever done," he says – as if this is *good news*. "In your time of need, *because of your generosity*, God will move heaven and earth to make sure you are taken care of." It may be *Law Lite*, but make no mistake about it: behind a smiling Boomer evangelicalism that eschews any talk of God's wrath, there is a determination to assimilate the gospel to law, an announcement of victory to a call to be victorious, indicatives to

imperatives, Good News to good advice. The bad news may not be as bad as it used to be, but the Good News is just a softer version of the bad news: Do more. But this time, it's easy! And if you fail, don't worry. God just wants you to do your best. He'll take care of the rest. So who needs Christ? At least, who needs Christ as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29)? The sting of the law may be taken out of the message, but that only means that the gospel has become a less demanding, more encouraging law whose exhortations are only meant to make us happy not to measure us against God's holiness.² According to Osteen, Christ came into the world in order that we might be successful. This, he says, is God's dream for each of us.³ The Apostle Paul had an entirely different understanding of the purpose for Christ's coming. In I Timothy 1:15 we have what C.H. Spurgeon called "The Whole Gospel in a Single Verse."⁴ And I can assure you that it has absolutely nothing in common with the preaching of Joel Osteen.

I. THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL IS TRUE

The expression *This is a faithful saying* occurs only in the pastoral epistles (This is the first occurrence followed by 3:1, 4:9, II Tim. 2:11 and finally Titus 3:8.) The word translated *faithful* is PISTOS and in this context implies *trustworthy* and *reliable*. The Apostle is underscoring the absolute certainty of the Gospel message in contrast to the speculations and myths alluded to in I Tim. 1:3, 4. This is grounded in the trustworthiness of the scriptures as the Word of God (II Tim. 3:16). It is declared to be *deserving of full acceptance*. The puritan great Thomas Goodwin declared, "He means that it deserves hearty entertainment and receiving by faith. And of this faith in Christ the apostle had proposed himself an example in the preceding verse 14, so that this faithful saying had been the ground of his own faith."⁵

II. THE SCOPE OF THE GOSPEL IS FOR SINNERS

Note the emphasis. The Gospel message is *NOT* about helping people be successful or achieving their full potential. The Gospel is addressed to *sinners* who are lost and under the judgment and condemnation of a holy righteous God. This is where the Law of God comes in. Bavinck wrote, "Sin does indeed presuppose some knowledge of the law. A person without any moral sense would not be responsible but would also cease to be human (Rom. 2:14-15), and in fact sin is usually accompanied by some sense of guilt. Nonetheless, the standard of sin is not the consciousness of guilt but the law of God. There are sins that are concealed not only from others but also from ourselves (Job 11:4f.; Pss. 19:13; 90:8) or are only later recognized and confessed as guilt (Pss. 25:7; 51:5). Often ignorance itself is sin, and the consciousness of sin weakness to the degree that sin has been pursued for a shorter or longer period (Amos 2:11f.; Hosea 4:6; Mic. 3:1; 6:8; Prov. 24:12; Eccles. 5:1). For that reason the subjective consciousness of guilt cannot define the character of sin. So, though ignorance can never make up for sin itself, it does frequently, when unintentional, conduce to exoneration. Paul writes that he was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an oppressor, but adds that he received mercy because he acted in ignorance (1 Tim. 1:13)."⁶ To people who do not see themselves as sinners and Law-breakers, the Gospel has no appeal.

III. THE FOCUS OF THE GOSPEL IS ON CHRIST AS SAVIOR

The Gospel centers on the mission of Christ. The message stems from the eternal decree of God to send His Son into the world to redeem lost sinners. Rightly did Warfield observe, "We despair of finding an English phraseology which will reproduce with exactitude the nice distribution of the stress. Suffice it to say that the strong emphasis falls on the fact that it was specifically *to save sinners* that Christ Jesus came, and that the way for this strength of emphasis is prepared by the use of phraseology which implies that there was no other conceivable end that He could have had in view in coming into such a place as the world except to deal with

sinners, of which the world consists. He might indeed have come to judge the world; and in contrast with that the emphasis falls on the word “to save.” But He could not conceivably, being what He was, the Holy One and the Just, have come to such a place as the world is – the seat of shame and evil – save to deal with *sinners*. The essence of the whole declaration, therefore, is found in the joyful cry that it was specifically *to save sinners* that Christ Jesus came into this world of evil. And if that be true – simply true, broadly true, true just as it stands, and in all the reach of its meaning – why, then, from that alone we may learn what man is and what God is – what Christ Jesus is and His work in this world of ours – what hopes may illumine our darkness here below, and what joys shall be ours when this darkness passes away.”⁷

CONCLUSION: Spurgeon in his sermon on this text proclaimed, “I do not feel that I have any need to find any words of mine to try to garnish this Gospel of the Glory of the Blessed God. It is the greatest theme on which a man ever spoke! It needs no oratory to set it forth! The story, itself, is marvelous, “the old, old story of Jesus and His love.” God could not in justice pass over human sin without an atonement, but He made the Atonement, Himself! Jesus, who is One with the Father, came here and offered Himself as a Sacrifice that He might save sinners. *Now if He does not save sinners, His coming here is a failure.* Do you believe, can you imagine, that Christ’s coming into the world could be a failure? In my very soul I believe that all He meant to accomplish by His coming here He will accomplish – that no man shall ever be able to point to any failure in this grandest of Divine enterprises! There is no failure in Creation – there will be no failure in Providence! And when the whole story is ended, there will be no failure in this great work of Redemption! “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” and sinners shall be saved. Will you be among them, my dear Hearer? Why should you *not* be among them?”⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/11/30/joel-osteen-developing-rality-show-with-surviv...>

² M. Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Baker Books, 2008,) p. 69

³ Online Extra: Meet the Prosperity Preacher. God wants you to be successful in business, says Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church. It’s a message that has made him the leading TV evangelist

http://www.businessweek.com/print/magazine/content/05_21/b3934014_mz001.htm?chan...

⁴ *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*. Thurs. Evening, Feb. 28, 1884 www.spurgeongems.org

⁵ *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* VIII (rpt. Tanski, 1996) p. 216

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ III* (Baker, 2006) p. 150

⁷ B.B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (rpt. P & R, 1950) p. 552

⁸ Spurgeon, op. cit.