

Edward Luce in Houston APRIL 18, 2019

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*'Bring to the storehouse a full tenth of what you earn... I will open the windows of heaven for you and pour out all the blessings you need' – Malachi 3:10*

I met Dustin Rollo one evening in Houston in an airless classroom at Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church. About 25 men, mostly middle-aged, had gathered for their first session in the church's Quest for Authentic Manhood night class. Rollo, a 35-year-old warehouse supervisor with a wispy beard and calligraphic tattoos on each hand, was supervising.

Tell us who you are, Rollo asked, motioning me to the front of the class. I am a journalist at a global business newspaper, I said. I was here at Lakewood to learn about the so-called prosperity gospel.

Most of the men were dressed in tracksuits, cargo pants or jeans and T-shirts. There was a faint hint of deracination. The only refreshment to be found was moderately caffeinated hot water in styrofoam cups. My purpose, I went on, was to discover what drew people to Joel Osteen, the "smiling preacher", who runs the largest megachurch in America. There was a mildly quizzical look on some of the faces.

Two elevator levels below us in this giant corporate building, more than 50,000 people stream each week into a converted basketball arena to hear Osteen's sermons. Millions more watch on TV or online. My hope was to gain insight into what drives Lakewood's allure: their help would be gratefully received. To my surprise, my conclusion was greeted with yells of "Yeah brother!" and "Right on!" I felt a stirring of optimism as I sat down.

Optimism, hope, destiny, harvest, bounty — these are Lakewood's buzzwords. Prosperity too. Words that are rarely heard include guilt, shame, sin, penance and hell. Lakewood is not the kind

of church that troubles your conscience. “If you want to feel bad, Lakewood is not the place for you,” said Rollo. “Most people want to leave church feeling better than when they went in.”



A Joel Osteen service at Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, last month: 'Had he chosen the life of a preacher, Trump would surely have designed his church like Lakewood — with its curved stage, glitzy video screens and rotating golden globe' © Brandon Thibodeaux

Hardline evangelicals dismiss the prosperity gospel as unchristian. Some of Lakewood’s more firebrand critics even [label it “heresy”](#). They point to the belief, which Osteen seems to personify, that God is a supernatural ally whom you can enlist to help enrich your life. There is scant mention of humanity’s fallen condition in his motivational talks.

Yet the market share of US churches run by celebrity prosperity preachers such as Osteen, [Creflo Dollar](#) (*sic*), Kenneth Copeland and Paula White keeps growing. Three out of four of the largest megachurches in America subscribe to the prosperity gospel. Formal religion in the US has been waning for years. Almost a quarter of Americans now profess to having none. Among the Christian brands, only “non-denominational charismatics” — a scholarly term for the prosperity preachers — are expanding.

Though precise numbers are hard to find, one in five Americans is estimated to follow a prosperity gospel church. This offshoot of Christianity is quintessentially American — a blend of the Pentecostal tradition and faith healing. It is also expanding worldwide. Among its largest growth markets are South Korea, the Philippines and Brazil.

“Preachers like Osteen know how to work the modern marketplace,” says John Green, a political scientist specialising in religion at Ohio’s University of Akron. “They are like the mega mall of

religion with an Amazon account added on. They are at the cutting edge of consumer trends.”

Joel Osteen is a maestro of high-tech religious marketing. I met him behind the scenes before one of his Nights of Hope — a two-and-a-half-hour, all-singing-and-dancing show that he takes on the road every few weeks. Donald Trump is a big fan of Osteen’s. The pastor has sold out New York’s Madison Square Garden no fewer than seven times. This Night of Hope took place at the Giant Centre in Hershey, Pennsylvania — the home of American chocolate. The sermon he was about to give turned out to be as candied as anything the town produces.

The first thing that struck me was Osteen’s jitters. Even on the 194th Night of Hope, his nervous energy was palpable. Thousands were queuing outside in the rain for the \$15 tickets to hear him preach. The second thing that struck me was his stature. Profiles list Osteen’s height at anywhere between 5ft 9in, which is my height, and 5ft 11in. He was at least two inches shorter than me.



Joel Osteen and his wife Victoria greet Lakewood's 16,000-strong congregation © Brandon Thibodeaux

The third thing was his hesitancy. Osteen, a youthful 56-year-old, is said to practise his sermon for days until he gets it pitch perfect — when to turn to which camera to deliver the money line; which part of the stage to occupy at any given moment; when to vary his cadence; how to make the most of all the bling. Had he chosen the life of a preacher, Trump would surely have designed his church like Osteen’s Lakewood — with its curved stage, glitzy video screens and rotating golden globe.

Osteen’s flawless performance and megawatt smile draw in seven million TV viewers a week and many more on satellite radio, podcasts and online streaming. Without a script, he seemed painfully shy. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. How did he manage to keep sin and redemption out of a Christian message, I asked. “Look, I am a preacher’s son so I’m an optimist,” Osteen said after a pause. “Life already makes us feel guilty every day. If you keep laying shame on people, they get turned off.”

But how does telling people to downplay their consciences tally with the New Testament? Osteen smiled awkwardly. “I preach the gospel but we are non-denominational,” he replied. “It is not my aim to dwell on technicalities. I want to help people sleep at night.”

Half an hour later, a divinely self-assured Osteen bestrode the stage, telling the packed stadium that each and every one of us was a “masterpiece”. We should “shake off the shame” and open our hearts to God’s bounties, he said. We were like the biblical prodigal son, who left home to indulge in a dissolute life, only to return to the welcoming arms of his father: “God is not interested in your past,” Osteen assured us in his mild Texan twang. “The enemy will work overtime trying to remind you of all your mistakes, making you feel guilty and unworthy. Don’t believe those lies.” Yeah brother! I thought, along with 10,000 others.



A Sunday service at Lakewood Church, Houston © Brandon Thibodeaux

Osteen knows his audience. We want fatted calves slaughtered in our honour. There was no hint in his message of the fire and brimstone of a Billy Graham or a Jerry Falwell — two of America’s most celebrated 20th-century evangelists. Osteen is more like Oprah Winfrey in a suit. He is not peddling the opium of the masses. It is more like therapy for a broken middle class. If God had a refrigerator, Osteen said, your picture would be on it. If He had a computer, your face would be the screensaver.

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**At Lakewood’s Quest for Authentic Manhood** class a few weeks later, I saw the impact of Osteen’s message. One man, a market day trader, had been to a Night of Hope in Cleveland. He packed his bags there and then moved to Houston. He now attends Lakewood every day. “What’s not to like about Texas?” he asked. “It’s got Joel Osteen and zero taxes.” Others nodded at the man’s story.

Two years ago, in the midst of Hurricane Harvey, which pummelled the city, Osteen suffered a [social-media backlash](#) for having kept the doors of Lakewood closed. The multi-storey megachurch sits on elevated ground next to a freeway. Yet it stayed shuttered to the tens of thousands of Houstonians washed out of their homes.