

boondoggles and the prosperity gospel in general, the comedian John Oliver launched a foundation three years ago called [“Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption”](#).

But Lakewood is by no means the most egregious monetiser among the megachurches. Osteen and his wife no longer draw their \$200,000 salaries from the church. Nor, unlike some televangelists, do they own a private jet. They leaned heavily on congregants, however, to fund the church’s [lavish \\$115m renovation](#). In their appeal to followers, the Osteens wrote: “Remember these gifts are above and beyond your regular tithes.”



Victoria Osteen greets congregants in the church lobby – up to 50,000 people flock here every week to attend its services © Brandon Thibodeaux  
In his latest book, *Next Level Thinking*, Osteen writes: “If you do your part, God will do His. He will promote you; He’ll give you increase.” Osteen writes from experience. The television broadcasts on which Lakewood spends tens of millions each year provide a lucrative platform for his books and a rolling investment in his global brand. He is reported to have received a \$13m advance on his second book, *Become A Better You*, which came out in 2007. He has written several since then.

When I asked Don Iloff, Lakewood’s spokesman and Joel’s brother-in-law, how Osteen’s riches squared with Christian theology, he laughed. “Poverty isn’t a qualification for heaven,” he said. “Look at how wealthy Abraham was.” Iloff pointed out that all royalties from Osteen’s books that are sold at Lakewood’s bookshop, or from its website, go to the church.

Lakewood’s detractors are not confined to southern Baptists and the like. On the left, the prosperity gospel is attacked for encouraging reckless spending by those who can least afford it. Among Lakewood’s night classes is Own Your Dream Home. Leaps of financial faith fit into Osteen’s view that God will always underwrite true believers. “Trust God to provide what He lays on your heart to give, even if the amount is more than your current resources can readily identify,” read one appeal to Lakewood’s followers.



Osteen believes that a lack of self-belief holds us back: 'God spoke worlds into creation,' he says. 'He didn't google it to see if it was possible' © Brandon Thibodeaux

Some of the home repossessions in the 2008 crash were blamed on irresponsible advice from the prosperity churches, which are concentrated in the Sun Belt. In her book *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, [Kate Bowler](#) says the churches have created a “deification and ritualisation” of the American dream. “The virtuous would be richly compensated while the wicked would eventually stumble,” she writes. This conforms with surveys of attitudes in the US. Almost a third of respondents told Pew Research Centre last year that people were poor because of “lack of effort”. They get their just deserts.

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**It is a theme** that runs through Osteen’s sermons. One of his favourite stories is about his father, John Osteen, who, at 17, left the hardscrabble life of a cotton farm in Paris, Texas, to seek his calling as a preacher. He had “holes in his pants and holes in his shoes”. All he had to eat was a biscuit in his pocket. “John, you better stay here on the farm with us,” his parents warned him. “All you know how to do is pick cotton.”

Ignoring their advice, Osteen’s father left home and became a highly sought-after preacher. He married a woman called Dodie Pilgrim and moved to Humble, Texas, where Joel was raised. Osteen senior’s rise is Lakewood’s foundation miracle. Much as John Osteen refused to accept his lot, so people who are depressed should shun the company of other depressed people, says Joel. Addicts must steer clear of other addicts. The poor should avoid others who are poor.

“If you’re struggling in your finances, get around blessed people, generous people, people who are well off,” Osteen advises. Misery loves company, he says. Avoid miserable people. Osteen seals his message with a parable about Jesus. When he was on the cross, Jesus’s last words were: “It is finished.” The Son of God was not declaring his imminent death, Osteen explains. “In effect” what Jesus was saying was: “The guilt is finished. The depression is finished. The low self-esteem is finished. The mediocrity is finished. It is all finished.”

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## **Just like that, I had a job with a \$55,000 salary. God works fast when you work for him**

A man who donated \$50 to Lakewood

Osteen has equally fecund insights into what other biblical characters were thinking. When the sinful Old Testament character Jacob was down on his luck, his divine creator told him: “Jacob, I like your boldness. I like the fact that you shook off the shame. You got rid of the guilt. Now you’re ready to step up to who I’ve created you to be.”

Likewise, when Sarah, the nonagenarian wife of Abraham, was told to keep trying to have a baby, she said: “Me have a baby? I don’t think so!” Jesus’s siblings said: “Oh it’s just Jesus. There’s nothing special about him. We grew up with Him.” And so on.

My personal favourite is Osteen’s idea of whether God would have hesitated before creating the universe. “He didn’t check with accounting and say, ‘I am about to create the stars, galaxies and planets,’” says Osteen. He just went ahead and did it. All that is holding the rest of us back is a lack of self-belief: “God spoke worlds into creation,” says Osteen. “He didn’t google it to see if it was possible.” We, too, can achieve anything we set our sights on.

The more one listens to Osteen, the harder it is to shut out Trump. Their mutual guru, Norman Vincent Peale, seduced a generation with his positive thoughts. He was the preacher-celebrity for the 1950s — the decade modern consumer branding took off. Believe in yourself like others believe in their product, was his message. “Stamp indelibly on your mind a mental picture of yourself as succeeding,” wrote Peale. “Hold this picture tenaciously. Never permit it to fade.” He added: “You’re going to win so much you’re going to get sick and tired of winning.” Sorry, that was a typo — it was [Trump who said that](#).

But Peale’s mark on America’s president goes deep. Peale once said that Trump had a “profound streak of honesty and humility”. It is a safe bet that Trump agreed. During the 2016 campaign, Trump was asked whether he had ever asked God for forgiveness. “I am not sure that I have,” Trump replied. The audience laughed. Trump looked genuinely baffled. He was only distilling what he had been taught in his formative years.



Congregants leaving Lakewood after a service – the church's income in 2017 was \$89m but just one per cent of that was spent on charitable causes © Brandon Thibodeaux

People often ask why so many blue-collar Americans still support Trump in spite of his failure to transform their economic prospects. They might need to widen their aperture. To many Americans, Trump's wealth and power are proof of God's favour. That alone is a reason to support him. I asked Rollo the same question. He thought carefully — as he did with all my inquiries. Rollo is as honest and sincere as they come. He betrays no signs of prejudice. He is one of the “poorly educated” Americans whom Trump professes to love.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” says Jesus in the Book of Luke. Rollo's gritty origins could hardly be further removed from Trump's privileged upbringing. Yet he shares a fundamental trait with the US president: neither of them believes in luck. They have faith in the Godly justice of the marketplace. “I look at the fruits of each individual's labour,” Rollo replied, after some deliberation. “Trump is enjoying the fruits of his. I honour our president and I believe that God put him where he is today.”

*Edward Luce is the FT's US national editor. This is the first of a series of three features he is writing on Trump's America. Look out for the second in the summer and the last in the autumn*

*This article has been [amended](#) to reflect the fact that Joel Osteen does not own a Ferrari*

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