

A Critique of the Teachings of Joel Osteen

Beginning around the early to middle of the twentieth century, there has been an alarming trend in America that sees a rise in churches that are considered *Seeker Sensitive* and *Word of Faith* type churches.

Seeker Sensitive or *Seeker Friendly* churches are those churches that lean more towards activities that entertain and environments that are comfortable and non-threatening to the *seeker* (i.e., unsaved visitor) and less towards teaching doctrinal truths of the Bible like sin, the cross, the blood of Jesus, redemption and atonement among other orthodox teachings.

These types of churches often downplay and “soft peddle” the gospel of Jesus Christ, place a strong emphasis on psychology self-help concepts such as increasing your *self-esteem*, having a *positive mental attitude* and preaching only positive type messages; while minimizing sin or not even mentioning it altogether.

Word of Faith churches, on the other hand, teach such concepts as *Health and Wealth* also known as *The Prosperity gospel* or *Name-It and Claim-It*; and they teach concepts such as *speaking faith filled words* or *positive confession* and utilizing *creative visualization* techniques.

A recent trend has been to combine these two types and intermingle or merge the two teachings into a hybrid or a mongrel system that blends the psychology worldview of *increasing your self-esteem* and *reaching your full potential* along with the previously mentioned *Word of Faith* concepts of *positive confession* and *creative visualization*.

Of course the danger here is that these churches are being filled with people who are becoming increasingly Biblically illiterate. They are being fed little to nothing from the Bible or they are given Scripture *out of context* in order to prop up and support bad doctrine.

In other words, the sheep are being fed concepts that come straight out of the psychology worldview as well as the Mind Science cults that originated in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Let's take a look at the early beginnings of the *Word of Faith Movement* so that we can see its dubious beginnings and follow it down to the present day teachings as we take a look at the teachings of one of its most popular disciples and teachers today, Joel Osteen.

Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-1866)

P. P. Quimby, whom many consider the father of *New Thought*, was a metaphysical healer, who practiced mesmerism and mental healing and believed that sin, sickness, and disease exist only in the mind.¹

For example, Quimby says:

- "If I believe I am sick, I am sick, for my feelings are my sickness, and my sickness is my belief, and my belief is in my mind. Therefore all disease is in my mind or belief."²

Quimby wrote and taught about his "Spiritual Science Healing Disease" and called his metaphysical system of healing "Science of the Christ," and called it "Christian Science" in February 1863.³

Quimby was also a student of the occult, spiritualism, hypnosis and many other aspects of parapsychology.

Essek William Kenyon (1867-1948)

E. W. Kenyon was an evangelical pastor during the Pentecostal movement of the middle part of the twentieth century and studied these metaphysical *New Thought* and *Mind Science* teachings of P. P. Quimby.

Mind Science (where "name it claim it" originated) fit well with the emerging Pentecostal movement and its emphasis on the supernatural, so

[Kenyon] combined them and created a peculiar mix of orthodox Christianity and mysticism.⁴

In 1892, Kenyon attended *Emerson College of Oratory* in Boston which at the time was heavily influenced and saturated with metaphysical *New Thought* teachings, teachers and students.

In fact, the founder of Emerson College, Charles Wesley Emerson (1837 - 1908) eventually joined Mary Baker Eddy's *Christian Science* metaphysical cult in 1903 and remained there until his death five years later.

Kenyon is the "true father" of the modern-day Faith movement and many of the phrases popularized by today's prosperity teachers, such as "What I confess, I possess," were originally coined by him.⁵

Kenneth Erwin Hagin (1917-2003)

Kenneth Hagin, often referred to as "Dad Hagin" or "Brother Hagin", was an American Pentecostal preacher who in turn studied under the teachings of E. W. Kenyon and has made the Word of Faith Movement what it is today.

Virtually every Word of Faith teacher has, in some form or another, been influenced by Kenneth Hagin. Teachers like Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, Fredrick Price, Robert Tilton, Marilyn Hickey and Jan and Paul Crouch of the Trinity Broadcasting Network, to name a few.

Dr. John MacArthur says:

- "[E. W. Kenyon] was a faith-healer not in the Pentecostal tradition, but in the tradition of Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science. He attended a college that specialized in training lecturers for the metaphysical science cults. And he imported and adapted into his system most of the essential ideas these cults propagated. [Kenneth] Hagin absorbed them from there."⁶

John Osteen (1921-1999)

John Osteen father of Joel Osteen acknowledges Kenneth Hagin as introducing him to the Faith movement saying, "I think Brother Hagin is chosen of God and stands in the forefront of the message of faith."⁷

We can see the *Word of Faith* message being propagated down through the line as John was even ensnared by it and taught:

- "It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty. It's God's will for you to pay your bills and not be in debt. It's God's will for you to live in health and not in sickness all the days of your life."⁸

Joel Osteen (1963-Present)

When John Osteen died in 1999, the Lakewood Church in Houston Texas had about 6,000 members but today, under his son Joel Osteen, it has grown to roughly 45,000 members as well as having a television and internet audience of millions who watch each week thanks largely in part to its feel-good gospel of self-esteem.

Joel Osteen is very fond of teaching about the *favor* of God or *Increasing in Favor* and *Living Favor-Minded* as seen in his 2004 best seller *Your Best Life Now* and what that means to us.

Osteen defines *favor* as "'to provide with special advantages and to receive preferential treatment.' In other words, God wants to make your life easier. He wants to assist you, to promote you, to give you advantages."⁹

And in order to receive this *favor*, Osteen teaches the *Word of Faith* concept of "speaking forth or declaring" this favor because "faith is a force" in the mind of *Word of Faith* teachers like Osteen.

For example, Osteen teaches: ¹⁰

- “Nevertheless, as odd as it may sound, when you live favor-minded, *declaring* God’s goodness, you’ll be amazed at how people will go out of their way to help you.” (emphasis added)
- “Throughout the day, *declare*, ‘The favor of God is causing this company to want to hire me. The favor of God is causing me to stand out in the crowd. It’s causing me to shine above the rest.’” (emphasis added)
- “When you go to bed, continue thanking God *and declaring* His favor... learn to *declare* it.” (emphasis added)
- “...expect it *and declare it*. Say, ‘I have favor of God.’”

Then Osteen goes on to give examples and stories of *favor* that one should expect to receive from God in our lives such as not getting a speeding ticket, getting a seat in a crowded restaurant and getting a good parking spot in the front row.

Biblically, the word *favor* means God’s unmerited grace, graciousness, and undeserved mercy and we receive God’s grace freely, meaning it’s not earned and we do not “speak it or declare it” in order to receive it.

Matthew 5:45 explains that “[God] makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

Theologians typically refer to this as *common grace* and if it were handed out to the deserving, none of us would receive it.

It does not mean that we have an easier life as we see in the disciples, apostles and early church fathers who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ and who went through tremendous persecution and martyrdom even to the point of giving up their lives.

Paul gave thanks and exhorted the Thessalonians for their *patience* in their *tribulations*.

- 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 4 says, "We are bound to thank God always for you...so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure."

Another meaning of *favor* or *grace* is the *spiritual strength* God provides to His children in the face of extreme trials so they can bear fruit, endure and persevere the trials of the Christian life.

- In 2 Corinthians 12: 8, 9 Paul, speaking about his thorn in the flesh says, "Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, '*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." (emphasis added)

So I'd like to use the acronym *favor* tonight to *Critique the Teachings of Joel Osteen*.

1. **F**aith as a Force
2. **A** Gospel of Self-esteem and Positive Confession
3. **V**isualization
4. **O**ut of Context and Misinterpretations
5. **R**einvents Jesus' Death

Let's start off by looking our critique by looking at the **F** in the acronym **F.A.V.O.R.** – Faith as a Force.

1. Faith as a Force

Word of Faith teachers teach that "faith is a force and words are the containers for the force."¹¹

At the heart of the Word of Faith movement is the belief in the "force of faith." It is believed that words can be used to manipulate the faith-force, and thus actually create what they believe Scripture promises (health and wealth).¹²

This concept of manipulating this “faith force” becomes a formula for getting God to do what you want Him to do.

We can see this “faith as a force” concept and “words can change your circumstances” as taught by Osteen in his 2004 bestseller *Your Best Life Now*: ¹³

- “Our words become self-fulfilling prophecies. If you allow your thoughts to defeat you and then give birth to negative ideas through your words, your actions will follow suit. That’s why we need to be extremely careful about what we think and especially careful about what we say. Our words have tremendous power, and whether we want to or not, we give life to what we’re saying, either good or bad.”
- “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.”

Osteen then carries this concept on into His next bestseller *Become a Better You* which came out in 2007: ¹⁴

- “...start speaking these faith-filled words over your own life.”
- “When you speak such faith-filled words, you will bless your life.”
- “Positively or negatively, creative power resides in your words...”
- “Use your words to bless your life. Look in that mirror and call in what you need.”
- “With our words, we can prophesy our own future...use your words to declare good things.”

Like other *Word of Faith* teachers, Osteen teaches that negative confessions can also have negative impacts or have negative consequences in one’s life.

- “Fear is a force just like faith is a force. If you give into fear and start to dwell on that junk and start to act on it, that fear can actually bring

things to pass just like faith can bring things to pass. Job said, 'the thing I greatly feared came upon me.'¹⁵

- "You can cancel out God's plan by speaking negative words. God works by laws."¹⁶

Osteen unfortunately learned the concept of "faith as a force" from his father John who in turn was into the teachings of other prominent *Word of Faith* teachers such as Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland.

Biblical Teaching

Hebrews 11:1 is the verse cited most often by the *Word of Faith* teachers to show that "faith" is a tangible material.

- Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Word of Faith teachers interpret the word "substance" to mean "something tangible" and as Kenneth Copeland put it:

- "Faith was the raw material substance that the Spirit of God used to form the universe."¹⁷

Biblically, the word *substance* [Greek: *hupostasis*] means "assurance, confident or confidence" so in context the verse says, "faith is the *assurance or confidence* of things hoped for.."

Dr. John MacArthur explains it this way:

- "Faith is living in a hope that is so real it gives absolute assurance... Faith is not a wistful longing that something may come to pass in an uncertain tomorrow. True faith is an absolute certainty... Faith, then, provides the firm ground on which we stand, waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise."¹⁸

For the *Word of Faith* teachers to base their teaching that faith is a tangible substance on one verse violates the *basic interpretive principle* that *Scripture interprets Scripture*.

Other translations of Hebrews 11:1 are:

- "Now faith is *being sure of* what we hope for.." NIV
- "Now faith is the *assurance of things* hoped for.." NASB

Biblical faith has to do with "where we place our faith or who we place our trust in" not in the *Word of Faith* teachers rendering of faith "as a substance that acts as a law."

God alone is the Sovereign creator and sustainer of the universe (Genesis 1:3; 1 Timothy 6:15). God does not need faith *but is the object of our faith*.

In other words, we have faith in God, not faith on our "faith" or faith in our "words" to bring about a change in circumstances:

- Mark 11:22 says, "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Have faith in God.'"

We also have faith in Jesus Christ:

- Romans 3:22 says, "even the righteousness of God, through *faith in Jesus Christ*, to all and on all who believe." (emphasis added)
- Galatians 2:16 says, "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by *faith in Jesus Christ...*" (emphasis added)
- Galatians 3:26 says, "For you are all sons of God through *faith in Christ Jesus*." (emphasis added)
- See also Ephesians 1:15, 3:12; Colossians 1:4, 2:5

As for the Job 3:25 passage that *Word of Faith* teachers use to justify their teaching that negative confession brings about negative circumstances, Hank Hanegraaff rightly notes, "Such an interpretation ignores the fact that Job's lamentation comes *after* his trials (1:6-2:13), not before. His lament was a *product* of his suffering, not its *cause*."¹⁹

As Christians, we have faith in God. Faith in what God will do for us and through us. Our faith is *in* Him, not what we can *get* from Him.

The faith of the *Word of Faith* teachers is a misplaced faith because contrary to what they teach, we cannot speak into existence things, health or wealth – that is God’s prerogative as the Creator.

Let’s move on to the next topic in *A Critique of the Teachings of Joel Osteen* by looking at the **A** in the acronym F.**A**.V.O.R. – A Gospel of Self-esteem and Positive Thinking.

2. A Gospel of Self-esteem and Positive Confession

Osteen teaches the “false” gospel of *Self-esteem* and *Positive Confession* and it’s a major emphasis if not the major emphasis of his ministry. One only has to watch his television show and you’ll hear the number of time’s that the “I’s” and the “you’s” are used in his sermons to understand that his messages are man centered, not Christ centered.

Even the name of his first two books speak volumes as to the emphasis on his ministry, because it’s all about you – **Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential** and **Becoming a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day**.

Self-esteem

Devoting five chapters in Part Two called *Develop a Healthy Self Image* in *Your Best Life Now* and four more chapters in Part Two of *Becoming A Better You*, Osteen again focuses on the Word of Faith concept of “speaking words of faith” into your life with the goal of creating a better *self-esteem* or *self-image* of yourself.

For example, Osteen teaches:

- "Get in agreement with God, and learn to *speak words of faith* and victory over your own life. Not only will you develop a better *self-image*, you will become a better you!"²⁰ (emphasis added)

I think we can all agree that having a healthy self-image of one's self is a worthy cause, but to wrap the gospel of Jesus Christ in a cloak of human psychology and then attempt to apply Bible verses, out of context to support this is not the Gospel that Paul states in 2 Corinthians 15:1-8.

For example, Osteen teaches that one of the reasons that the Hebrews didn't enter the Promised Land and wandered in the wilderness was because of a "lack of self-esteem".

- "Their lack of faith and their lack of self-esteem robbed them of the fruitful future God had in store for them...They never fulfilled their destiny, all because of the way they saw themselves."²¹

Osteen is more concerned about giving his flock something they can "take away" a "believe in yourself" message instead of teaching theology as he states:

- "'Make church relevant.' Give them something to be able to take away. I find today people are not looking for theology. There's a place for it, [But] in your everyday life you need to know how to live."²²

Positive Confession

The positive confession and positive thinking concept has its roots in the metaphysical belief that we can create or change reality by the power of our words.

Joel Osteen received this teaching from his father John Osteen who stated the following: ²³

- "When they say like they did to Smith Wigglesworth, 'How are you feeling today?' He said 'Listen, I don't ask my body how it's feeling; I tell it how to feel.' And your words should not be to describe the

situation; your words should be given to change the situation. And so, read it, meditate upon it, and speak it.”

- “I am the sum total of what I have been confessing through the years. My children are the best children that ever lived on the face of the earth. They are blessed of God. They are the sum total of what Dodie and I have confessed and loved them into being.”

Joel Osteen continues his father’s teaching of *positive confession* and says:

- “...if you are struggling with low *self-esteem*, you need to go overboard in *speaking positive, faith-filled words* of victory about your life. Get up each morning and look in the mirror and say, “I am valuable, I am loved. God has a great plan for my life. I have favor wherever I go. God’s blessings are chasing me down and over taking me. Everything I touch prospers and succeeds. I’m excited about my future!”²⁴

This teaching that you can speak or think and change your circumstances and take charge of your life and pull yourself up by your bootstraps can be seen in Osteen’s use of Matthew 9:29 from *The Message* Bible translation, at best a dubious paraphrase.

Osteen writes:

- “The modern-day biblical paraphrase *The Message* relates the story about the blind men with an interesting twist: “[Jesus] touched their eyes and said, ‘Become what you believe.’” What a powerful statement! *Become what you believe!*...Are you believing to go higher in life, to rise above your obstacles, to live in health, abundance, healing, and victory? You will become what you believe.”²⁵

Osteen then continues:

- “God doesn’t want you to drag through life, barely making it...It is not His preference for you to live in perpetual pain...Become a true believer, knowing that you will *become what you believe.*”²⁶ (emphasis added)

In *Become a Better You*, Osteen says in the first sentence of Part Two entitled, *Be Positive Toward Yourself*:

- "If you truly want to become a better you, it is imperative that you learn to feel good about yourself."²⁷

Biblical Teaching

Sadly, many people are buying into Osteen's concept of having a high self-esteem and applying positive thinking techniques and wrapping it in a cloak of deception and calling it "Christianity".

Dr. John MacArthur comments:

- "One of the most popular and seductive false teachings is the promotion of high self-esteem as a Christian virtue, when, in reality, it is the very foundation of sin. Such destructive notions are inevitable when Christians listen to the world above the Word, and are more persuaded by men's wisdom than by God's."²⁸

But what does the Bible teach about Christians having a high self-esteem of themselves and utilizing positive thinking techniques?

When we look at Jesus' teaching on the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14, we see an entirely different picture of what Jesus is looking for in the hearts of believers.

First, we see the Pharisee who "prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'" (verses 11-12)

- Here we see the Pharisee who appears to think of himself very highly or having a high *self-esteem*.
- Notice here how the Pharisee gives a casual 'nod' to God but then starts talking about himself and continues to lift himself up during his prayer.

Second, we see the tax collector who “would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’”

- Here is a man who recognized he was a sinner and it humbled him to the point of seeking mercy and forgiveness.

And finally, we see Jesus’ response to the two prayers:

- “I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his house justified rather than the other [the Pharisee]; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Let’s go ahead and look at a couple of the verses that Osteen misrepresents in regards to teaching self-esteem and positive confession.

In Osteen’s teaching that one of the reasons that the Hebrews didn’t enter the Promised Land and wandered in the wilderness was because of a “lack of self-esteem”, Hebrews 3:15-19 teaches otherwise:

- Hebrews 3:19 says, “So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.”

As for the Matthew 9:29 verse, Jesus asks the two blind men if they believed Jesus was able to do this, they replied “Yes, Lord” and Jesus touched their eyes, saying, “According to your faith let it be to you.”

- According to the *Message* Bible translation, it says “He touched their eyes and said, ‘BECOME WHAT YOU BELIEVE’” and how this was translated from the Greek which literally reads “According to the faith of you let it be to you” I’ll never know!
- What we read in the Bible is that these blind men were healed not because they chose to see but because “according to [their] faith” in Jesus Christ and His ability, not theirs, they were able to see.
- In verse 28 Jesus asks, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?”

When we look at the Sermon on the Mount, we see Jesus teaching us to have attitudes of humility:

- Matthew 5:3 says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

In other words, blessed are the *poor* [Greek: *Ptochos*] meaning "those who are spiritually bankrupt or in spiritual poverty". They are the ones who own or "theirs" is the kingdom of heaven.

- Matthew 5:4 says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

The word *mourn* [Greek: *Pentheo*] means a continuous action of sorrowfulness caused by the realization of being separated from God due to sin and being constantly broken over that sinfulness.

- Matthew 5:5 says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

The word *meek* or *gentle* [Greek: *praos*] means "soft or mild".

Dr. John MacArthur says:

- "The essential difference between being poor in spirit and being meek, or gentle, may be that poverty in spirit focuses on our sinfulness, whereas meekness focuses on God's holiness. The basic attitude of humility underlies both virtues. When we look honestly at ourselves, we are made humble by seeing how sinful and unworthy we are; when we look at God, we are made humble by seeing how righteous and worthy He is."²⁹

Over and over again, we read of Jesus, who is the example of humility and servant hood:

- In Matthew 20:26-28 Jesus says, "Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave--just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."
- In John 13:1-15, the God who created the universe stoops down to perform the task of a common household servant to clean the feet of His disciples.

The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* gives one definition of a servant this way: ³⁰

- As a term of respectful self-depreciation referring to one's self, "thy servant." or "your servant" is used in place of the personal pronoun of the first person:
 - (a) in the presence of superiors (Genesis 19:2; 32:18, and often);
 - (b) in addressing the Supreme Being (1Samuel 3:9; Psalm 19:11; 27:9; Luke 2:29, and often).

Jesus never taught that it was our lack of *self-esteem* or a low *positive mental attitude* that was mankind's problem. Jesus died on the cross for you and me because of mankind's *sin* – even the sin of *self-esteem*.

Let's move on to the next topic in *A Critique of the Teachings of Joel Osteen* by looking at the **V** in the acronym F.A.**V**.O.R. – Visualization.

3. Visualization

Visualization is defined as consistently and repeatedly forming mental images of an object or a desired goal in order to bring that thing into reality.

Visualization is used by occult groups and metaphysical cults such as *Religious Science*, *Science of the Mind*, *the New Age Movement*, *Wicca* and even *Witchcraft* and taught by Positive Thinking adherents such as the Reverend Robert Schuller, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale and David Cho as well as the *Word of Faith Movement* and the bestselling book, *The Secret*.

Word of Faith teacher Kenneth Copeland explains the principles of positive confession and creative visualization saying:

- "Words create pictures, and pictures in your mind create words. And then the words come back out of your mouth...And when that spiritual force comes out it is going to give substance to the image that's on the inside of you."³¹

Copeland even recognizes that the practice of visualization “sounds like that visualization they do in meditation and metaphysical practices.”³²

The bestselling book, *The Secret* teaches visualization techniques and says:

- “Visualization is the process of creating pictures in your mind of yourself enjoying what you want. When you visualize, you generate powerful thoughts and feelings of having it now. The law of attraction then returns that reality to you, just as you saw it in your mind.”³³

Laura Cabot, a witch offers classes on the “practice and study of aura, visualization, healing and techniques of spell casting...” on her website.³⁴

Wicca offers classes on visualization and says it’s “the ability to see something in your mind that is not there for real...Use of visualization was common among shamans too...Shamans taught that a person must learn not only to see the object but make it alive - to smell, touch, taste and hear the object - to imagine it as a whole and feel that it is real... As you know - the thought can materialize. If you wish for something and visualize it as if it was real, that something will eventually come to you in your real life.”³⁵

Author and Wiccan Scott Cunningham talks about taking a cord and forming it into a shape of an object that you desire on an altar and writes that while you are doing this, “visualize the needed object; raise power and send it forth to bring it to manifestation. So shall it be.”³⁶

So, here we have a practice with occult roots that are admittedly recognized as metaphysical practices by Word of Faith teacher Kenneth Copeland and taught by witches, wiccans and shamans.

Let’s take a look at a few examples of what Joel Osteen teaches:

- "There's power in what you visualize, take a few moments each day to visualize things you want in your life so God can bring them to pass."³⁷
- "As long as you can't imagine it, as long as you can't see it, then it is not going to happen for you...We have to conceive it on the inside before we're ever going to receive it on the outside...The barrier is in your mind...Your own wrong thinking can keep you from God's best."³⁸
- Joel Osteen is discussing vision and says to Joyce Meyer, "If you don't have it on the inside it won't come to pass on the outside."³⁹
- "To live your best life now, you must start looking at your life through eyes of faith, seeing yourself rise to new levels. See your business taking off. See your marriage restored. See your family prospering. See your dreams coming to pass. You must conceive it and believe it's possible if you ever hope to experience it."⁴⁰
- When looking into purchasing the Compaq Center in Houston, Osteen writes "I conceived it on the inside."⁴¹
- "You must conceive it in your heart and mind before you can receive it."⁴²

So here we have it. Osteen brings the teachings of the metaphysical cults, shamans, wiccans and witches into the church passing it off as Christianity and his sheep are eating it up as if it were the Word of God.

Biblical Teaching

Osteen uses self-help terminology sprinkled with just enough Christianese to make it appear as if what he's teaching is Biblical.

In other words, he coats his self-esteem gospel with a thin veneer of Christian terminology to make it palatable.

But the bottom line is neither Jesus nor Paul teaches believers to use creative visualization techniques.

The Bible teaches us that our faith is in God and what God can do; it's God who moves mountains.

- Matthew 17:20 says, "So Jesus said to them, 'Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith [NOT creative visualization techniques] as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'"
- Matthew 6:30 says, "Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith [NOT creative visualization techniques]?"
- Matthew 8:26 says, "But He said to them, 'Why are you fearful, O you of little faith [NOT creative visualization techniques]?' Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm."
- Matthew 14:31 says, "And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, 'O you of little faith [NOT creative visualization techniques], why did you doubt?'"
- Matthew 16:8 says "But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, 'O you of little faith [NOT creative visualization techniques], why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread?'"

It's our faith in God, our trust in God and our hope that lies with God that He is in control of all our circumstances because "[His] grace is sufficient for [us], for [His] strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7); this is where the Christian gets his strength.

We cannot create wealth and/or health with our thoughts or words:

- Proverbs 14:23 says, "In all labor there is profit, but idle chatter leads only to poverty."

In other words, by the grace of God, it is the work of our hands that produces income that enables each one of us to put gas in the car, pay our bills and send our kids off to college.

If we can bring things into existence with our own thoughts and then voice those thoughts into words creating our own reality – why do we need God?

If we draw this out to its logical conclusion, why don't we just create an environment where we're all happy and never age or get sick or indeed, never die? And if we did die, we can just use creative visualization techniques to create and bring into reality our own heaven!

Only God has the ability to create – because He's God and we're not:

- Isaiah 55:11 says, "So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."
- Genesis chapter 1 says "Then God said..." nine times demonstrating Gods creative power of bringing things into reality by His power, by His words.

When discussing the great faith that we as Christians should have towards our God who controls all things, Dr. John MacArthur says:

- "Great faith trusts God when there is nothing in the cupboard to eat and no money to buy food. Great faith trusts God when health is gone, work is gone, reputation is gone, or family is gone. Great faith trusts God while the windstorm is still howling and persecution continues."⁴³

Let's move on to the next topic in *A Critique of the Teachings of Joel Osteen* by looking at the **O** in the acronym F.A.V.**O**.R. – Out of Context and Misinterpretations.

4. Out of Context and Misinterpretations

One sign of a teacher to avoid is one who cannot rightly divide the Word of God.

In 2 Timothy 2:14-16, Paul charges young Timothy, and by extension all pastor/teachers to teach right doctrine to their congregations:

- “Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness.”

Paul then goes on to say that false teaching “will spread like cancer” while another translation says “gangrene”.

The picture we get here is of a disease that is so deadly that if not treated quickly, can lead to amputation and even death.

Often times in Osteen’s books, he will use Bible passages and force his *Word of Faith* theology and worldview onto Scripture effectively teaching verses *out of context* and *misrepresenting* Scripture.

Out of Context can be defined as removing and isolating a passage from its surrounding text in order to distort or twist its intended meaning.

Let’s take a look at a few examples, as space permits, of Osteen’s teaching *out of context* and *misrepresenting* Scripture.

1. Psalm 91:7

In the chapter *Plan a Blessing* from *Become a Better You*, Osteen talks about commercials and getting the flu and writes “‘A thousand may fall at my side, ten thousand at my right hand; but it will not come near my dwelling.’ Everybody at work may be getting the flu, everybody at school may have it, but I believe God has put a hedge of protection around me, and I’m going to stay in faith and not make plans to get it.”

Osteen’s focus here is on negative faith and says, “They take it even further and put actions behind their negative faith, by purchasing the flu

medicine. Not surprisingly, a few weeks later they come down with the flu. Their faith worked, albeit negatively.”

Biblical Teaching in Context

Psalm 91 speaks of abiding in the shadow of the Almighty (verse 1) because we make the LORD our refuge and our dwelling place (verse 9) in times of trouble.

This passage doesn't gloss over life but lets us know that there are harsh realities and dangers in this life but not to be afraid (verse 5) and the writer of Hebrews tells us in 11:36-38 that even "others" were tormented, tortured, and martyred but yet their faith was just as strong or even stronger than believers today.

But this verse has nothing to do with negative faith or speaking negative words into our lives and circumstances or thinking negative thoughts over our lives. The fact is we all get sick because of the physicality of our lives and our bodies and that's just the *de facto* way of life and just because we don't make "plans to get" the flu; the hazards of life happen – but our trust is in the Lord (verses 1 and 9).

The *Bible Exposition Commentary* breaks down Psalm 91 as:

- Faith in God (verses 1-4)
- Peace from God (verses 5-13)
- Love for God (verses 14-16)

Our faith lies in God, not in what words come out of our mouths or thoughts that we think to create a reality of our own making.

2. Psalm 118:17, 18

In the chapter *Speaking Life-Changing Words from Your Best Life Now*, Osteen writes "If you are facing sickness today, you should confirm God's word concerning healing. Say something such as, 'Father, I thank You

that You promised me in Psalms that I will live and not die and I will declare the works of the Lord.”

Biblical Teaching in Context

Psalm 118:17, 18 says, “I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD. The LORD has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death.”

In context, the writer of this psalm is talking about being severely chastised by the Lord but in God’s grace and mercy, he was not handed over to death.

Osteen’s motives for using this verse to teach healing by “speaking words of faith” is revealed not only in the title of the chapter *Speaking Life-Changing Words* but also when he says ‘*Say something such as...As you boldly declare it, you are confirming that truth in your own life.*’

3. Matthew 9:17

In the chapter *Enlarging Your Vision in your Best Life Now*, Osteen relates the story and Jesus’ answer of putting “new wine in old wineskins” when asked by the disciples of John why His “disciples do not fast?”

Osteen then goes on to discuss “thinking bigger” and “enlarging your vision” and then relates Jesus’ teaching “new wine in old wineskins” teaching to his wife, Victoria, seeing a new home being built and then wanting a new home and stating “Joel, one day we’re going to live in a beautiful home just like that!”

Biblical Teaching in Context

This is a classic example of Osteen missing the perfect opportunity to expound the teaching of Jesus Christ in a proper hermeneutical way.

In context, Matthew 9:14-17 is about Jesus being questioned by the disciples of John the Baptist and asked "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?"

Jesus, never missing an opportunity to teach and to state a truth by using word pictures, goes on to explain that religious rituals and routines always emphasis self and replace true humility and godliness.

In other words, the old Pharisaical system of traditional Judaism, a rigid religion of self-righteousness, rituals and legalism (old wineskins) was being replaced by Jesus' gospel of forgiveness, grace and mercy (new wine).

Jesus isn't talking about the Old Testament because He didn't come to replace the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17-19). Jesus is talking about replacing the rabbinical legalism that was placed upon the people by the religious leaders of the day.

For example, in regards to fasting, the Old Testament required fasting only one time a year during Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29, 31) but Jewish tradition required fasting twice a week (Luke 18:12).

4. John 4:1-20

In the chapter *Stretching to the Next Level* from *Become a Better You*, Osteen recounts the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the well and says "I wonder how many times God tells us that He wants to do something great in our lives, *that we are going to be healthy and well; we are going to get out of debt.* We feel strongly, but like the woman at the well, we start thinking about what we don't have, and all the obstacles in our path, and before long, we've talked ourselves out of God's best." (emphasis added)

Biblical Teaching in Context

Osteen takes Jesus' presenting Himself as the living water that leads to repentance and everlasting life and turns it around to lower it to the *Word of Faith* gospel of "health and wealth" and getting out of debt.

Osteen says we can "talk ourselves out of God's best" but God offered His best to the Samaritan woman at the well and Osteen talked his readers out of God's best by equating the verse to "health and wealth" and getting out of debt.

5. Romans 4:17

In the chapter *Making Your Words Work for You* from *Become a Better You*, Osteen writes "The Scripture tells us that we are to 'call things that are not as if they already were.' In other words, don't talk about the way you are; talk about the way you want to be."

Here we can see that Osteen teaches "speaking these faith filled words over your own life" because "positively or negatively, creative power resides in your words."

Biblical Teaching in Context

Romans 4:17 says, "(as it is written, 'I have made you a father of many nations') in the presence of Him whom he believed--God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did;"

Verses 16-18 speak of Abraham's faith that was reckoned or accounted to him for righteousness (Galatians 3:6) and that through the promise that God made to Abraham that he would be the "father of many nations" (Genesis 17:5).

The key is when it says that it's "God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did"

Again, notice that it's God who does these things. To equate this verse to speaking things into existence and "making your words work for you" is a gross misrepresentation of the text.

When asked why he doesn't "go deeply into your sermons into scripture", Osteen replied "that's not my main calling".⁴⁴

Here is a Shepherd of God's people who oversees a church of 45,000 and millions who watch on TV and the internet and it's not his "main calling" to go deep into scripture, rightly dividing the Word of God?

This is opposite from the teachings of the apostle Paul:

- Acts 20:26-28 says, "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. *For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.* Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." (emphasis added)
- 1 Corinthians 2:1, 2 says, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. *For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.*" (emphasis added)
- 2 Timothy 2:4-6 says, "Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because* they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."
- 2 Timothy 2:15 says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

There are many good, theologically sound Bible teachers out there who "rightly divide the word of truth" and it's these teachers and Shepherd's we should listen to and do as the Bereans did and search the Scriptures daily to find out whether what they teach holds up to the Word of God (Acts 17:11).

The bottom line is who we listen to impacts the way we think. If we listen to bad theological teaching or unsound doctrine, we'll walk away with unsound theological thinking.

And finally, let's move on to the last topic in *A Critique of the Teachings of Joel Osteen* by looking at the **R** in the acronym F.A.V.O.R. – Reinvents Jesus' Death.

5. Reinvents Jesus' Death

Many *Word of Faith* teachers hold to the belief that Jesus' death on the cross is insufficient to atone for the death of mankind.

They teach that Jesus only partially succeeded and had to finish what He started by going to hell and "whipping the devil in his own backyard" and then He was "literally reborn [born-again] before the devil's very eyes."⁴⁵

Joel Osteen holds to this popular *Word of Faith* teaching that Jesus did battle with the devil in hell and says:

- "For three days Jesus fought with the enemy. It was the battle of the ages, light versus darkness, good versus evil. But thank God Satan was no match for Jesus."⁴⁶

Osteen further elaborates: ⁴⁷

- "Satan says, Listen, Jesus, you're on my turf now. You don't have a chance down here. You're surrounded by my demons."
- "The Bible indicates that for three days, Jesus went into the very depths of hell. Right into the enemy's own territory. And He did battle with Satan face to face. Can you imagine what a show down that was? It was good vs. evil. Right vs. wrong. Holiness vs. filth. Here are the two most powerful forces in the universe have come together to do battle for the first time in history. But thank God. The Bible says, "Satan was no match for our Champion". This was no contest."

- "He went over and ripped the keys of death and hell out of Satan's hands. And He grabbed Satan by the nap of his neck and He began to slowly drag him down the corridors of hell. All beat up and bruised because He wanted to make sure that every single demon saw very clearly that Jesus was indeed the undisputed Champion of all time!"

So, as we saw earlier, Osteen takes Scripture *out of context* and *misrepresents* it; but he also compounds his errors by imposing his own flawed interpretations of Scripture on Jesus' death and atonement on the cross.

Biblical Teaching

John 19:30 says, "So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit."

- The phrase "it is finished", [Greek: *tetelestai*] is an example of *Koine* or common everyday street language Greek. It's an accounting term that means "paid off; the debt has been paid in full."
- A Strong's Concordance lookup on the word says, "to end, complete, conclude, accomplish, make an end, finish."
- The *Bible Knowledge Commentary* says, "Papyri receipts for taxes have been recovered with the word *tetelestai* written across them, meaning "paid in full." This word on Jesus' lips was significant...He meant His redemptive work was completed."
- Likewise, J Vernon McGee says, "'It is finished!' What was finished? Your redemption and my redemption was finished."

Osteen says that "The Bible indicates that for three days, Jesus went into the very depths of hell", he is most likely referring to the following passages often used by other *Word of Faith* teachers to teach this flawed interpretation:

- Matthew 12:40 says, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

- Ephesians 4:9, 10 says, "(Now this, "He ascended" – what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)"

First, the Matthew 12:40 passage speaks of Jesus spending three days and nights in the grave – buried in a cave – his burial plain and simple. There is no mention of being tortured by Satan and his minions.

Second, the Ephesians 4:9, 10 passages can be interpreted two ways:

- One position is that while Jesus' body was in the grave, His spirit visited those Old Testament believers who were in "Abraham's bosom" and that He spoke to the "spirits in prison" according to 1 Peter 3:19. This is the place called *hades* or *sheol* that is mentioned in Luke 16:19-31 in which believers and unbelievers were separated by a "great gulf" (Luke 16:26).
- The second position is that Jesus and the Old Testament prophets went directly to Heaven as indicated in Luke 23:46 where Jesus said on the cross, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" as well as Luke 23:43 where Jesus told the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Further more, saying that Jesus "descended into the lower parts of the earth" does not mean that Jesus descended into hell, but to the grave.

Ron Rhodes says that, "the phrase simply means *caves, graves, or enclosures on the earth*, as opposed to higher parts, like mountains."⁴⁸

Either way, Osteen is guilty of reading into the text that Jesus went to hell and was tortured by Satan and the demons.

Osteen also says that "[Jesus] went over and ripped the keys of death and hell out of Satan's hands."

- Revelation 1:18 says, "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death."

- First, Satan did not steal the keys from Adam as *Word of Faith* teachers espouse. It's just not in the Bible!
- Second, nowhere in the bible does it say that Jesus took them from Satan – again, it's not in the Bible!
- Third, Jesus says "I have the keys..." not "I took the keys from Satan..."
- Fourth, Hades is mentioned here, not Hell; and the "keys" are a metaphorical way of saying that Jesus has all access, control, authority, and power over death. Jesus Christ has the ultimate authority over who lives and who dies.
- Fifth, hell is not even populated at this time. Here's the breakdown of when hell gets populated at the end of the Tribulation according to the Bible:
 1. Revelation 19:20 – The beast and the false prophet are cast into hell.
 2. Revelation 20:10 – The devil is cast into hell.
 3. Revelation 20:14 – Death and Hades are cast into hell.

Osteen goes beyond what the text says and reading into the text, (i.e., letting your own ideas color how you interpret Scripture) is called *eisegesis*, which means "to lead in."

Exegesis, on the other hand, which means "to lead out", is letting Scripture speak for itself without imposing your own ideas on the text.

Osteen and other *Word of Faith* teachers are guilty of *eisegesis*.

We always, always, always want to let Scripture speak for itself.

Conclusion

While there is nothing wrong with speaking positively and not negatively about your life; indeed who likes to hang around people who are constantly saying negative things and dragging everyone around them down?

But this is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. Osteen falls more along the lines and closely associated to motivational speaking and with having a positive mental attitude – which in and of itself is perfectly fine, but not to be confused with a Biblical concept of sharing the gospel and sound Bible teaching to the flock when one has been entrusted to “give the whole counsel of God.” (Acts 20:27)

Ultimately, Osteen’s message isn’t about sin, salvation and grace but about having a *positive self-image, high self-esteem, health and wealth* and the *prosperity gospel* and should be classified in the *self-help* and the *motivational speakers* section in bookstores.

- Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:5 “for we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord.”

If Osteen is unwilling to share the full counsel of God with those he has oversight of, because “that’s not [his] main calling”, he needs to read James 3:1 because he will be held accountable for his teaching.

- James 3:1 says “let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.”

To feed those he has oversight of only spiritual *junk food* that’s not nutritious, doesn’t feed their spiritual souls and ultimately stunts their spiritual growth, plain and simple is false teaching.

- Romans 10:14 says, “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?”
- Romans 10:17 says, “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

Jesus commanded the apostle Peter and by extension all pastors who are overseers of God's flock to "Feed My lambs...Tend My sheep...Feed My sheep" in John 21:15-17.

Jesus never commanded Pastors to "Entertain my lambs...Put on a show for My sheep...Teach self-esteem and creative visualization techniques to My sheep".

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