



Prime Minister

JOEL OSTEEN'S Houston gigachurch has a congregation of more than 30,000. His television show is the highest-rated religious broadcast in the country. His first book has already sold nearly three million copies. How did the former TV producer become the world's most talked about "pastorpreneur"? He is who he says he is. He has what he says he has. He can do what he says he can do.

By [William Martin](#)
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FOR MOST PREACHERS, MONDAY IS A DAY OF REST. FOR JOEL Osteen, the 42-year-old pastor of Houston's mammoth Lakewood Church and the face of the world's most popular religious television program, Mondays have

become devoted to meeting his public. On this particular Monday in mid-December, his first book, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*, had just hit the top spot on the *New York Times*' "Advice, How-To and Miscellaneous" best-seller list. To show its appreciation, the book's publisher, Warner Faith, had provided Joel with a private jet and liveried town cars to ease the burden of a book-signing trip that included events in Arkansas and Tennessee on the same day.

At the first stop, a Wal-Mart Supercenter in Little Rock, a few hundred adoring admirers were already lined up as Joel and his wife, Victoria, made their way to the store's book section. Some fans applauded them ecstatically or squealed with delight; others handed them flowers or reached out to touch them, tears of joy streaming down their faces. One woman said to her husband, a tinge of disappointment in her voice, "I thought he was taller. He's no bigger than you are." In fact, Joel is not a particularly imposing figure. A trim five nine, he looks and stays in good shape by running, lifting weights, and playing basketball at the YMCA. On television or before any sizable gathering, he wears a conservative dark suit and an attractive but not flashy tie, with thick black hair moussed and curling down his neck past his collar line his only nod to youthful fashion. He is not classically handsome, but his face is instantly appealing, both because of the lively energy in his intense blue eyes and a smile that never seems forced and is seldom missing; he is often referred to as the Smiling Preacher.

As Joel sat down, Lakewood executive director Duncan Dodds announced that the pastor would not have time to listen to testimonies or to personalize his inscriptions. But these restrictions detracted little from the excitement. A large woman laughed and jumped up and down while taking pictures of friends having their books signed. Another woman clutched her autographed book to her breast and said through rapturous tears, "I'm signed. I'm blessed. It's all good!" Many were content simply to let Joel know that they were his greatest admirers, but some used their precious seconds to attempt a more personal connection: "I been keeping up with you since you first started." "You saved my husband's life." "Shake my baby's hand. He needs the anointing." "This is Bailey Ann. She claps when she watches you." One man handed his cell phone to Joel and asked him to say "Hi, Jamie" to his wife. ("She started a new job today and couldn't come.") Joel happily obliged. A young minister who identified himself as Chopper handed the pastor a DVD of his sermons, noting that he often used Joel's. (Among preachers, plagiarism has long been considered more homage than offense.)

A few aisles down, past an area where a young woman from Warner Faith stayed busy opening box after box of Joel's book, Victoria held court with a smaller but no less enthusiastic crowd. A tall blond woman blessed with a beauty queen's features and smile, she wears clothes well. On this day, the vaguely dominatrix look of her high-heeled black boots, black mock turtleneck sweater, and long black leather coat with silver buttons down the front was erased by the warm friendliness she showered on her adorers: "Hi, sweetheart. How are you, darling?" "It's so good to meet you. You look so pretty." "You watch every week? Oh, that's wonderful!" "Bless your heart." "We love you too."

After two hours, during which Joel signed nearly 1,200 books, we hustled back to the airport and headed to Nashville, where a reception was awaiting the Osteens at Warner Faith's suburban Brentwood headquarters. The staff there were duly solicitous, giving Joel a plaque for having reached number one on the best-seller list. Though the young house, a Time-Warner subsidiary, publishes the work of several popular religious authors, Joel is clearly its prize of the moment. I was told that a woman who had represented Doubleday in the bidding for Joel's book had told her successful competitor, "You have just guaranteed the success of Warner Faith."

It's an audacious claim, especially when you consider that just six years ago Joel Osteen was largely unknown—probably even to most members of Lakewood Church, whose beloved founder and guiding spirit was his father, John Osteen. And even among those who did know Joel, it is difficult to find anyone who imagined that the mantle would fall to him when his father died, in 1999. At the time, Joel was a college dropout who ran the church's television ministry and hadn't preached a single sermon. Yet within a few years, he's positioned himself as one of the country's premier "pastorpreneurs," a term often used to describe the leaders behind America's rapidly expanding megachurches. Preaching a consistently upbeat, can-do message that some detractors refer to as "Christianity Lite"—references to biblical passages are few, and he rarely takes a stand on controversial political issues—he's attracted one of the largest and most diverse flocks this side of the Vatican. Under his stewardship, Lakewood has grown from an impressive 6,000 congregants to more than 30,000. His personal-appearance events are packing arenas in major cities around the country, including Madison Square Garden, in New York, where an extra night had to be scheduled to keep up with demand, and the American Airlines Center, in Dallas, where scalped tickets fetched as much as \$100. His television show, *Joel Osteen*, is now broadcast in more than 150 countries. And in mid-July, Lakewood Church moved into the former home of the Houston Rockets, the 16,000-seat Compaq

Center, where he and his staff expect their congregation to swell before long to 50,000. In less than a decade, Joel Osteen has outgrown nearly everything he inherited.

The outstripping of expectations was evident that evening, when, following the reception at Warner Faith, Joel headed for yet another book signing, this time at a Barnes and Noble. The store manager, looking at a line that was already outside the door when we arrived, said, “We knew it would be big but not this big this fast.” Joel and Victoria slowly wound their way through the store, their procession made more auspicious by the dazzling lights of a camera crew covering the event for a local TV station. Twelve hours into his whirlwind tour, Joel still maintained his infectious grin as he addressed his fans with his familiar greeting: “We just love you guys.” The crowd was a bit more upscale than the mostly working-class folk we had seen at Wal-Mart, but the palpable excitement and the proffered comments were much the same: “Love your show. It kept me going.” “I watch you three times a day.” “You are so uplifting. I love to see you smiling.” “The Lord’s with you, boy.”

Joel signed another 750 books, bringing the total for the day to nearly 2,000, all without the slightest sign of fatigue or boredom. The day before, he had preached to 30,000 people packed into 4 ninety-minute high-octane services and had now gone full tilt on one stage or another since daybreak. Minutes after we got into the air, bound for Houston, Joel pulled his tray out before him, laid his head directly on it, without a pillow, and slept soundly until we made the approach for our landing.

THE STORY OF HOW JOEL OSTEEN BECAME THE leader of the fastest-growing ministry in America begins with his father. The son of a cotton farmer in the East Texas town of Paris, John Osteen wasn’t converted until he was eighteen, not long after he had had the feeling that God was tapping him on the shoulder as he left a Fort Worth nightclub (perhaps for being underage). Shortly afterward, he accepted Christ and began preaching in his hometown. After earning degrees from John Brown University and Northern Baptist Seminary, he was ordained as a Southern Baptist minister. He made a brief move to San Diego but soon came back to Texas, where, in 1954, he met and married Dolores “Dodie” Pilgrim, a fitting name for a woman about to set sail into uncharted waters. John served as pastor of Central Baptist Church, in Baytown, and Hibbard Memorial Baptist, in Houston.

Not long after arriving at Hibbard Memorial, in 1958, John experienced and began to recommend to others what Pentecostal and charismatic Christians call the “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” which typically involves speaking in

tongues and openness to other “gifts of the Spirit,” such as the ability to heal, perform exorcisms, and experience visions. Rather than face a showdown with his Baptist brethren, who preferred to keep a tighter rein on the Holy Spirit, John withdrew from their fellowship and, in 1959, founded Lakewood Church in an abandoned feed store in a predominantly black neighborhood on Houston’s northeast side. It was an unimpressive little place, not obviously different from the many churches one sees in such neighborhoods or along highways of Texas and throughout the South, where a small group of believers and a zealous preacher have erected an outpost of faith in the hope of winning their slice of the world for Christ. From the start, however, Lakewood had a great spirit. Nondenominational and inclusive, it welcomed all colors and conditions to what Pastor John referred to as an “oasis of love in a troubled world.”

Though hardly a captivating orator, John was a competent preacher with a lively revivalist style. He spoke on conventional topics—the atonement, the Resurrection, the Holy Spirit—but the theme with which he became most closely identified may be found in this passage from one of his sermons: “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.”

John was one of many Pentecostal pastors proclaiming this controversial worldview, which went under such names as Word of Faith, Name It and Claim It, Positive Confession, or simply Health and Wealth. The essence of the teaching is that when Christians have sufficient faith, they can ask for healing, for prosperity, or for almost any other legitimate good, and God is honor-bound to provide it. That message was a winner at Lakewood. Almost immediately, the church began to expand rapidly, first to a simple but more substantial building hardly larger than the feed store, then to a flat, featureless structure that by 1979 had increased to accommodate more than five thousand worshippers, all sitting on folding chairs. In that time, Lakewood had also become a popular venue for some of the top preachers, teachers, and musicians in Pentecostal and charismatic circles, especially those who shared Pastor John’s Word of Faith convictions.

By the early eighties, the Osteen family was flourishing as well. John and Dodie had six grown children (the oldest, Justin, was John’s by an earlier marriage that had ended in what is referred to by the family as “an unwanted divorce”). They all lived comfortably in what is now Kingwood. Dodie and daughter Lisa were active in the church’s ministry; younger daughters April and Tamara were faithful Christians; son Paul was in medical school; and the

youngest son, Joel, was a freshman at Oral Roberts University, in Oklahoma. By all accounts, Joel was already an upbeat, optimistic encourager; still, he surprised his family in 1982 when he returned home and told them that he wanted to drop out of ORU and help his dad launch a television ministry. John soon agreed, with the understanding that they would never use the program to ask for money.

His son quickly demonstrated a notable talent for TV production and overall marketing. Lakewood's Sunday service, which Joel directed and produced, was soon being aired locally over Houston's CBS affiliate, KHOU-11, and nationally on the Family Channel. It was hard to drive on a Houston freeway without seeing John Osteen's smiling visage shining down from strategically placed billboards. Not everyone knew exactly where Lakewood was, but few Houstonians were unaware that it existed. This point was brought home to me one evening around that time when, riding around with two of my granddaughters, then about six and four years old, a radio commercial began with "We believe in new beginnings," and the girls immediately chimed in with "and we believe in *yooooouuuuu!!!*" (The *Houston Press* would later assert that the jingle ranked as one of the most successful marketing campaigns in the city's history.) Joel's efforts helped Lakewood take another giant step: building a 7,800-seat facility in 1987, one that resembled a civic auditorium more than a sanctuary. This was followed by a large family life building in 1991 and a combination education-office building in 1993, making it easy to mistake Lakewood for a well-kept community college with a great deal of parking.

It seemed nothing could stop Lakewood's growth as long as its pastor stayed healthy, and John had frequently predicted that he would be preaching into his nineties. But while in his mid-seventies, John developed some serious medical problems, including a heart condition that necessitated a pacemaker and high blood pressure that weakened his kidneys to such a degree that he required dialysis. One week, in mid-January 1999, he felt so depleted that he called Joel to ask him to preach for him on Sunday morning.

There was no clear reason to think his son would be an able preacher; personal charisma does not pass automatically from generation to generation. Yet it was no surprise that John had confidence in Joel. When John went on preaching missions to foreign countries, particularly to India, where Lakewood had sent millions of dollars to support missionaries and establish Bible schools, orphanages, and medical clinics, Joel and Victoria, who had married in 1987, went along to handle the filming of the revivals and to provide companionship and care. As they might have put it, Joel and John

knew each other's hearts. But unlike his mother and several of his siblings, Joel had never delivered a single sermon; in fact, he had steadfastly refused to do so on numerous occasions. And even when his father called that night and said, "Joel, you're my first choice," the son once again refused. Then Joel hung up the phone and sat down to eat dinner, confident that Lisa or his mother or some other staff member could easily fill the pulpit for a week or two. A few minutes later, however, Joel changed his mind—something came over him, he says—and called back to tell his dad that he would do it.

The days before that Sunday were not easy. He was convinced that he had made a serious error and was setting himself up for colossal public failure. Knowing he'd be preaching for the first time, in front of some six thousand people, he longed to retreat to his familiar and comfortable position behind the camera. To boost his confidence, he even wore a pair of his father's shoes when he stepped onto the broad stage. He spoke rapidly but winningly, drawing laughs from a sympathetic audience with self-deprecating comments and amusing stories about his family. No one, apparently, enjoyed the sermon more than John, who had been hospitalized but had listened to the service over a telephone. Lisa recalled that when she visited her father after the service, he asked her how she thought Joel had done and she had said, "I thought he was great. You know, Daddy, I think one day he may be standing in front of that camera instead of behind it." Later that same week, on January 23, John Osteen died of a heart attack at age 77. Before the end of the year, Joel officially became Lakewood's new leader.

IN FRONT OF PACKED CROWDS, PASTOR JOEL IS A SUPERB COMMUNICATOR. He pokes fun at himself, makes no effort to moderate a strong Texas twang, and appears to be talking almost extemporaneously. He seems completely unaffected and can be funny without straining to be a comic. His presence and charisma go a long way toward explaining the astounding popularity of the *Joel Osteen* television program, which in most markets is half an hour long and consists almost entirely of his preaching. But crucial to the success of Lakewood is bringing in its Houston constituents, who provide more than 80 percent of the ministry's \$50 million in annual contributions. As with all megachurches—usually defined as Protestant churches with more than 2,000 members; at 30,000, Lakewood is sometimes called a gigachurch—new members are attracted with a vibrant worship experience packed with generous helpings of music and prayer. On a mild Sunday morning in early February, I witnessed a good example of Lakewood's version of a familiar format.

Nearly half an hour before the official beginning of the eight-thirty service, worship leader Cindy Cruse-Ratcliff led a 64-voice choir through several numbers that provided background music as the thousands of congregants found their way to seats with the aid of an extensive corps of ushers, part of the thousand or so volunteers needed each weekend. When the time came, Joel and Victoria stepped onto the stage, and Joel gave his standard greeting: “We welcome you to Lakewood. You guys are looking good. You look like more than conquerors this morning....Let’s take a few minutes to celebrate the good things God has done in our lives.” Victoria, her honey-blond hair cascading over a dramatic black-and-white dress, then offered an enthusiastic endorsement of her husband’s words and promised, “If you are coming in here and you have a heart for God, he will never fail you.”

With this call to worship completed, Cruse-Ratcliff, the choir, and a ten-piece band launched into a slick, rollicking, often throbbing country-rock-gospel outpouring that had the congregation on its feet for more than half an hour, most with arms upraised, some dancing in a manner not learned entirely in church. In one of the aisles, an older black gentleman, nattily dressed in a gray suit, expressed his pleasure at being in the house of the Lord with a restrained but charming quick-step soft-shoe shuffle. Cruse-Ratcliff, meanwhile, wearing high-heeled boots, a white blouse, and a long black jacket that made her short black skirt seem more modest, prowled the stage almost fiercely, now bouncing, now stomping, now leaning forward in an attitude and expression of pained ecstasy. All of this was magnified on five giant screens and dozens of smaller monitors spaced throughout the auditorium and underscored by a saxophone whose smoky sensuality sounded better suited for Saturday night than Sunday morning.

Cruse-Ratcliff and her colleague, African American singer-songwriter Israel Houghton, compose most of the music used at Lakewood. Typical of the thousands of churches that have converted to “praise music,” hymnals have given way to projection screens, and harmony and substantive content have surrendered to unison repetition of simple themes with simple words:

*Lord, we declare, who can compare, who would even dare,
'Cause there is no one like you.*

Or, in a less complex assessment of divine transcendence,

*Who is like the Lord? Nobody!
Who is like the Lord? No, no, no, no, nobody!*

And, in what seems to be Lakewood's all-purpose signature stanza,

*I am a friend of God,
I am a friend of God,
I am a friend of God,
He calls me friend.*

It is not deep, and there's no definitive confirmation that the Almighty actually prefers the praise genre to august anthems, but it is clearly a great deal of fun.

Next, Joel led a prayer for healing, prosperity, new beginnings, and a full measure of joy and peace. He then invited people with any special needs to come to the front of the stage to be prayed for, one-on-one, by a large team of "prayer partners" that includes Joel and Lisa and Dodie, herself a cancer survivor who specializes in praying for people with that disease. This is clearly a moving experience for many, including the partners; after he prayed for a family with two small children, Joel began to weep and returned to his seat for a few moments to gain his composure. (Such incidents, if caught on film, are edited out of the telecast.) After that, Victoria invited parents to bring their children to the front for a special prayer and then announced that it was time to take the offering. She reminded the flock of the need to give a tenth of their income to the church and offered assurance that God would bless them abundantly for doing so, but the whole process, with hundreds of gray plastic buckets whizzing along the rows, took less than two minutes, putting a damper on suspicions that the Osteens are in it for the money. (Remaining true to Joel's father's wishes, this portion of the service is never included in the television broadcast.) Dodie then delivered a brief sermon on how Jesus could rescue us from any trouble if we just had faith to call on him, after which it was time for her son's sermon.

At nearly every service, Joel first greets both the television audience ("It's always a joy to come into your homes. We love each and every one of you, and we know that God has good things in store for you") and the live audience ("You guys are looking good") and then begins by reading a joke: "A man came into the church office..." "A Christian lady on an airplane was reading her Bible..." That morning he began with one about a man trying to discipline a profane parrot. When the laughter subsided, he said, "All right. Hold up your Bibles and say it like you mean it. Ready?" Thousands of Bibles ascended like blackbirds as Joel led the assemblage in its standard affirmation: "This is my Bible. I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do. Today I'll be taught the word of God. I boldly confess: My mind is alert; my heart is receptive; I will never be the same. I am about to receive the

incorruptible, indestructible, ever-living seed of the word of God. I will never be the same—never, never, never. I will never be the same. In Jesus' name. Amen.”

The topic of Joel's sermon was “The Dangers of Procrastination,” and he opened by identifying procrastination as “one of the greatest enemies we will ever face.” He then listed the kinds of things even well-meaning people put off: cleaning the kitchen, straightening up the garage, paying the bills, cutting back on spending (“Listen carefully, Victoria”), losing weight and getting in shape, giving up smoking, practicing good preventive medicine (“Ladies, you know how important it is to have that regular checkup”). He admitted that he suffered the same temptations, which come to us from “the Enemy” (formerly known as Satan), but always felt much better when he did what he knew he should do, which was most of the time now. As in many of his sermons, he urged people to pay attention to their conscience, with gestures that indicated that it was located just below the rib cage.

Joel illustrated his points with simple stories of people he had known or read about, and occasionally he cited a scripture whose words seemed to fit, whether or not the author had that application in mind. As if he had an endorsement deal with Nike, he repeatedly recommended that instead of putting off those things that were nagging at our conscience, we should “just do it!” Despite that note of insistence, his conversational tone invited knowing smiles rather than guilty tears, and his entire manner conveyed encouragement rather than accusation. He wound up by assuring us that if we would stop putting things off and do our part right now, learn to bloom where we are planted, quit looking at what is wrong in our lives and look at what is right, quit letting others steal our joy, quit complaining about what we don't have and start thanking God for what we do have, and stop putting off our happiness and start enjoying life, God would pick up any remaining slack and help us discover the champion in ourselves and, repeating two key Lakewood slogans, be more than conquerors, *victors* and not *victims*. “He will pour out his blessings and favor so you can experience the abundant life that he has in store for you. Amen. How many of you receive it today? I know you do. Amen.”

The service ended with Joel's inviting people to accept the free gift of God's salvation and get on the road to victory. Dozens of people streamed down the aisles, accompanied by sustained applause from those who were not already heading for the exits in an effort to avoid the traffic jam. An hour later I watched the 10:45 service from the television control room. It was virtually identical, right down to the teasing reference to Victoria's penchant for shopping and her surprised reaction—caught both times on the monitors for

the congregation to see but not included in the telecast that aired two weeks later.

NOT EVERYONE WAS INITIALLY ENTHUSIASTIC about Joel's becoming the pastor at Lakewood. To some observers, the choice appeared to be rooted in a determination to keep control of the church within the Osteen family. How could a shy young man with hardly any experience as a preacher be up to the task of shepherding one of the largest flocks in America? Among those said to be disappointed was Gary Simons, who is married to April Osteen and was already prominent in the church as a youth pastor and praise-and-worship leader. Simons subsequently left to establish the High Point Church, in Arlington, modeled along Lakewood lines. Another plausible choice was Jim Graff, who is married to the third Osteen daughter, Tamara, and who was the pastor of a church in Victoria. Joel, however, believes he was more ready than people gave him credit for. "I grew up [in my father's] church," he said, "and I worked with him for seventeen years. That was an education. I kid about being the least likely to take the church, but in one sense, this is all I have ever known. I know how a church works. I just hadn't spoken."

Any residual skepticism about Joel was shattered when attendance at the Sunday morning service began immediately increasing. In fact, Lakewood soon ran out of room, so Joel enlarged the field of his dreams, convinced that "if we hold another service, they will come." When they added a second service in January 2000, attendance doubled. Nine months later, a Saturday night service drew 5,000 more. Not long afterward, a one o'clock service on Sunday filled the building once again, and a Spanish-language Sunday afternoon service, led by Latin Grammy award-winning recording artist and preacher Marcos Witt, drew an additional 3,000 worshipers, bringing the average weekly total to 30,000.

Joel's youth and energy certainly played a part in his sudden popularity, but another key to his success was his early recognition that he needed competent help. Within a month of becoming pastor he hired Duncan Dodds, who had overseen media for Houston's giant Second Baptist Church before establishing a successful marketing and advertising business, to come to Lakewood to help implement his ambitious vision for the church's television outreach. As executive director, Dodds coordinates media buying and handles the contracts with TV networks and individual stations. Media relations is handled by Don Iloff, Victoria's brother, who performs his duties on a volunteer basis, though he is connected to the church in his capacity as president and general manager of Lakewood-controlled KTBV-TV55. Joining Joel and Dodds on the executive team is Lisa's husband, Kevin Comes, who is in charge of administration,

including accounting and other business, and has been consumed in recent months with heading up the transformation of the Compaq Center into a place of worship.

Joel acts as CEO, with responsibility for all major decisions and the overall vision for the church. His main role, however, is to preach. He spends all day Wednesday and Thursday preparing that week's sermon, then two half-days practicing and polishing until he has it down cold. "It takes a lot more work," he acknowledged, "than just getting up there with an outline and preaching to people who know your heart, but this is a responsibility, so I'm very careful. It takes the majority of my time. It's basically what I do."

How, I wondered, can Joel spend three days preparing a sermon, another day delivering it four times, and, in recent months, another full day giving interviews and still have time to fulfill the duties of a pastor of a 30,000-member church? The answer is that he leaves those duties to others. He performs no weddings or funerals, makes no hospital visits, does no pastoral counseling, and turns down outside speaking engagements. Shortly after his father's death, his older brother Paul left a thriving surgical practice in Little Rock and came back home to help Joel, mother Dodie, and sister Lisa run Lakewood's day-to-day operations. Paul and a staff of professionals and volunteers that numbers almost two hundred handle weddings and funerals ("exponentially bigger than you can imagine," said Paul), counseling services, dozens of specialized outreach ministries, discipleship training for new members, a dozen or so "fellowship ministries" (for singles, senior adults, and families who home-school their children), and hundreds of small groups that meet biweekly all over the sixty-mile area from which Lakewood draws its members. He also oversees an extensive Sunday school program, which is expected to involve 10,000 youngsters now that they've moved into the Compaq Center. Paul and Lisa also share the preaching duties at Wednesday night services.

Although the Osteens seemed slightly amused when I characterized Lakewood as a family-owned business, they did not protest. "Yes, the family is in charge," Lisa agreed. "The board is all family members. Joel decides what he feels like the Lord wants him to do, but we work with attorneys. We call other ministries. We get as much counsel as we can. We have a great accountability to the Lord and to the people and we feel that. We hold ourselves to a high standard." None of them saw this arrangement as a cause for concern. "The beauty of our organization," Paul observed, "is that we don't have to pass things by a thousand boards or a bunch of people with different opinions. If we want to add an extra service next week, we can do it. There's a real beauty

about the way we work together. We know our parts. It sounds a lot like the body of Christ.”

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Inevitably, some wonder about the wisdom of having a small family group exercise almost total control, with little outside accountability, over more than \$60 million in annual revenue, a figure almost certain to grow in future years. When I spoke with Joel about the financial scandals that have bedeviled some independent ministries, he revealed that the church did not currently make its budget available to the congregation but that the executive team had been discussing the need to do so. I noted that Billy Graham and other ministries associated with the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability had been able to deflect much criticism—and, in the process, erect a barrier against temptation—by providing an audited financial statement to supporters. As a family ministry, Lakewood cannot belong to the ECFA, nor is it required to submit 990 forms to the IRS listing income and major expenses, including the salaries of its five highest-paid officials. Joel recognized, however, that nothing was stopping the church from doing this on a voluntary basis. Later that week, I learned that on the day following our conversation, he had spoken to Iloff about the need to provide a more complete picture of the church’s finances, “like Billy Graham does.” A few days later, I received audited financial statements for the two previous fiscal years.

“We don’t set our own salaries,” Lisa pointed out. “An outside group approves compensation.” (In addition to contributing a substantial portion of his earnings from the book to the church, Joel has stopped taking his \$200,000 salary.) And Dodie stressed that she had always told the children, “Daddy’s name was always squeaky clean, and we intend to keep it that way.” She seemed to feel this had been sufficient, observing, “They are so respectful of their father and of me. You don’t hear much criticism about Lakewood Church or about the Osteen family.”

Indeed, rather than make an attempt to conceal the family-run nature of Lakewood, the Osteens obviously regard their image as a faithful unit as one of their greatest strengths. From Lakewood’s beginning, Dodie has played a prominent role in the worship services. The tiny (size 2 petite), neatly dressed Osteen matriarch still speaks at every service, frequently noting her pleasure in her brood, and it seems that no service passes without some mention of “Daddy.” Even when they are not on the program, Lisa and Paul are also present, and the giant screens remind everyone that they will be speaking at the Wednesday night service. Pictures and promos for the church feature Joel and Victoria in affectionate poses, and they have recently brought their two

children into a more prominent role. At the Dallas event at the American Airlines Center, six-year-old Alexandra sang “Come Just as You Are” during the invitation. And at this spring’s Easter service, at Minute Maid Park, eleven-year-old Jonathan led the Bible affirmation, then drew warm laughter from the crowd of nearly 40,000 by repeating his father’s familiar line, “You sound great, as usual.” Just as Joel’s sermons often imply that following his own advice has helped him achieve a near-ideal life, so the extensive involvement of his immediate and extended family offers church members another model for their lives.

TO WATCH JOEL AND THE LAKEWOOD team at work and to visit with them offstage is to become aware of dual narratives for explaining the ministry’s meteoric success. At one level is a clear sense that the entire venture has been ordained by God and continues to operate under the direct micromanagement of the Holy Spirit. In trying to account for his popularity, Joel mentioned several possible factors—the head start he got by inheriting an already successful ministry, his youth, his consistently positive message—but finally confessed, “I don’t know what it is. Maybe it’s just God’s favor and blessing.”

Lisa told me about the first Lakewood service after their father’s funeral. “I always sat behind my dad to assist him. So when Joel was sitting there and getting ready to preach—he was so nervous—I was sitting behind him, and I leaned up to say something to him, and in that split second the Lord spoke to me down in my spirit, and he said, ‘Lisa, I am transitioning you to work with your brother, and just as you served your dad, I want you to serve your brother as pastor of this church.’ I knew that was the Lord who had said that to me, and I was just so happy after that.”

Dodie, whose oft-repeated story of surviving metastatic liver cancer serves as a premier warrant for belief in miraculous healing, also finds it easy to accept her son’s success as part of a divine plan. “Not long after John died, Joel said, ‘Mama, I need to talk to you. I think God is calling me to be pastor of this church.’ I said, ‘What?!’ I thought he was the last one. He didn’t want to get up there and pastor, but he felt like it was God’s will.”

A second set of explanations for Lakewood’s success, not perceived as conflicting with the first in any way, is heavy reliance on technology and a great deal of marketing savvy. Although the weekly television show can be seen in almost every home in America, Joel and his associates work constantly to raise the odds that it actually *will* be seen. In addition to repeated showings on religious channels TBN and Daystar, the program currently airs on national

network affiliate stations in 35 major cities, including the top 30 markets, and on 5 secular cable channels (ABC Family, USA, Discovery, PAX, and BET). Iloff noted that some people disapprove of having the program appear on USA and BET—“Don’t you see the stuff they put on those networks?”—but said, “That’s where we need to be: reaching the unreached, telling the untold.” Dodds added, “We love Christian television. We are on TBN and Daystar. But we are committed to reaching those who don’t believe yet. You have got to go with what they are watching. They are not typically tuning into Christian stations. We try to place our program within the habits and patterns of those people. I am convinced that if they will give Joel five minutes, they will be hooked.”

To increase the chances that this will happen, Joel and his media team analyze the Nielsen ratings at the end of each quarter to see how their show is doing and how it might improve. Are they on the strongest station in a market at a time with the highest number of homes watching television? Is a better time slot available? What is the cost per rating point? “We want to know all the same things you would if you were placing your slicer-dicer on the air,” Iloff said. In slightly less-commercial terms, Dodds agreed: “We want to make sure we are spending God’s money wisely.”

The programs themselves are slickly produced, as good or better than any daytime talk show. And even though most people watching never see the joyful-music-and-tear-filled prayer segments of the service, they still get a feel for the church as cameramen roaming the aisles capture the earnest look, the delighted laugh, the agreeing nod, and above all, the remarkable diversity of the crowd. On an average Sunday, the congregation appears to be about evenly divided among whites, blacks, and Hispanics, with a growing number of Asians, who seem to have a better-than-average chance of being shown on television. In addition, all the major services are now webcast live. Lakewood has an extensive **Web site** that provides a wealth of background information about the church, including transcripts of classic John Osteen sermons and some of Joel’s first sermons. The site also offers tapes, CDs, videos, and books for sale—bookstore sales account for more than \$3 million of the church’s annual income—and makes it possible for donors to contribute online. This spring, a webcam, updated hourly during the workday, enabled members to see how the work on the Compaq Center was going.

As an astute observer of both popular culture and other television ministries, Joel realized that people who watched his program would likely have a strong interest in seeing him and other regulars on the program in person. This gave rise to the phenomenally successful tour events, called “An Evening With Joel

Osteen.” At these programs, which Dodds likes to compare to concerts, complete with searchlights scanning the crowd and floor-to-ceiling light columns that move through bright yellow, fuchsia, and purple hues during warm-up segments and musical numbers, the audience not only gets to experience all the ingredients of a typical Lakewood service, including a full choir, but also hears much more explicit references to such pillars of Christian belief as the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus, topics scarcely mentioned on the half-hour program.

Regular viewers have no difficulty finding out when the tour will visit their city. When Joel occasionally quotes a Bible verse during a sermon, a banner at the bottom of the television screen identifies it and displays the crucial part of the text. Much more frequently, that space advertises future tour stops or reminds people that *Your Best Life Now* and its companion text, *Your Best Life Now Journal*, are now on sale.

With all the growth that occurred as a result of its marketing efforts, the only plausible way for Lakewood to expand even further was to find more space. When Joel learned in 2001 that the Houston City Council was going to be leasing out the Compaq Center, he and his associates put together a proposal and hired Dave Walden, who had served former mayor Bob Lanier as a top aide, to lobby the council on their behalf. Their only competitor was Crescent Real Estate Equities, which owned nearby Greenway Plaza and wanted to tear the building down to make way for additions to that complex. A lively struggle ensued. Crescent argued that the space should be put to more varied use and that giving a religious organization exclusive access to a city-owned facility violated the separation of church and state. The Lakewood forces pointed out that the city had rented the Compaq Center and other facilities to religious organizations over the years and promised to spend tens of millions of dollars on improvements. They also bombarded council members with a phenomenal number of calls, letters, and e-mails asking for their support. Ultimately, Lakewood prevailed, agreeing to pay \$12.1 million for thirty years, with a \$22.6 million option for a second thirty years. Even though their new facility will hold more than twice as many people as the old one, the current plan is to drop only the one o'clock Sunday service, with the option to resume it if the remaining three English-speaking services grow too crowded.

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In the meantime, Lakewood's staff is considering other ways of growing beyond Houston by establishing satellite churches that would have a local pastoral and teaching staff, with the worship and preaching service beamed in directly from Houston. “I can't speak for the pastor,” said Dodds, “but I can

see us having Lakewood Philadelphia, Lakewood Atlanta, Lakewood Detroit, and having Joel preach the message every week. I think we could have churches of four thousand to six thousand [in other cities]. I see the potential there from the marketing side. I see the opportunity to expand this ministry and almost franchise it in that way. I think we will get there.”

AS DIFFERENT AS THEY AND THEIR ERAS MAY HAVE BEEN, the great popular preachers with an enduring legacy in American religious history— Charles Finney in the 1830’s, D. L. Moody in the 1870’s, Billy Sunday in the World War I era, Billy Graham in our lifetime—have shared three characteristics: a good organization, a distinctive and appealing personality, and an easily grasped message aimed at a mass audience. Joel’s organization has clearly met the competence test, and even his detractors concede that he is an enormously charismatic young man with no apparent dark side or hidden agenda. Still, detractors aplenty exist, and the criticisms they raise pertain directly to Joel’s message, which is variously characterized as a barely baptized version of the secular doctrine of Positive Thinking or a damnable heresy that legitimizes materialism and endangers the souls of those who embrace it.

Some of the most vitriolic criticism comes from biblical literalists who use their Web sites to attack him as “a devil in disguise...a flashy, smiley, jokey human being” who is “a stench unto God for twisting God’s holy Word” and for preaching “the doctrines of devils and demons.” Specifically, they charge him with being a Word of Faith preacher. Faith healers often espouse this teaching because it provides a convenient explanation for failures; the supplicant lacks the faith to “name it and claim it.” (In the process, it also gives healers an inflated rate of apparent success, as people claim cures they have not yet experienced, lest doubt thwart God’s willingness to heal them.) Word of Faith advocates also urge people to claim material blessings, including new cars, new houses, and financial windfalls. Some, including a few who have preached at Lakewood, go even further. One night in late 1981 I heard television preacher Kenneth Copeland, host of the *Believer’s Voice of Victory* program, tell a Lakewood audience about a farmer whose cotton was withering and dropping to the ground like little brown marbles. When the farmer took his preacher into the field to read some scriptures promising rewards to the righteous, Copeland claimed that they began to hear sounds like popcorn popping, and as they looked about them, they saw the field filling with large, fluffy bolls.

One can understand why some critics place Joel in the Word of Faith camp when he says such things as “You can change your world by simply changing your words” and “When you make declarations of faith, you are charging the

atmosphere, and your own words can help to bring it to pass.” Joel does not disown such statements nor categorically reject the teachings in question, but he softens them considerably. “I never knew it was such a bad thing to be a Word of Faith preacher,” he said, “but I never preach that whatever you say, you can get —‘I want five Cadillacs.’ ‘I’m going to be the president of this company.’ I never believed that kind of stuff.” When I mentioned what Copeland had said about the magical cotton bolls, he said, “I like Brother Copeland, but I don’t believe that. That’s just not me. I encourage people to say what God says about you, to say, ‘I am strong in the power of the Lord. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.’”

Other critics accuse the Osteens of preaching a gospel of prosperity and materialism, a charge with even more evidence to support it. Like his father, Joel often speaks of God’s desire that his children do well financially, and prayers at church services frequently invoke God for jobs and promotions and good homes and good cars. Joel and Victoria live in a large home in tony Tanglewood, as do Lisa and Kevin Comes; Dodie’s townhouse is a stone’s throw from the senior president Bush’s, and Paul lives on a small ranch near Tomball. None of the family members seem inclined to fear that affluence poses much of a danger. During the tour event in Dallas, Lisa made the somewhat surprising statement that “if you look through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, every person who served him faithfully, God blessed financially.” When I asked her about that later, mentioning Jeremiah, who spent time at the bottom of a well and died in captivity, and Stephen, who was martyred, and Paul, who made tents to support his missionary activities, she backed up a bit, noting that she had been thinking mainly about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: “The Bible says they had a lot of things. God is just a blessing God. That’s my point.”

Well aware of the criticism, Joel said, “People will probably laugh, but I don’t feel like I am a prosperity preacher. I do believe, though, that God wants us to prosper. I don’t see how I could get up there and preach that we need one hundred million dollars for the Compaq Center and have a poverty mentality. I just don’t think Christians should feel that they have to stay at the lower rung of the ladder. I also point out that prosperity is not just money. It’s a healthy relationship with your wife, with your kids; it’s a healthy body. We need to get away from the dollar sign on prosperity. In my next book, I’m going to be clearer about that. I believe God wants us to be blessed, but it’s only so that we can be a blessing. I think God blessed me by writing this book and giving me a lot of money, but it’s not so I can go buy thirteen cars or a bunch of other stuff. After the book started selling a couple hundred thousand copies, I called a friend on staff and asked, ‘Do I get paid [more] for that?’ They gave me some

[advance] money. I thought I'd already been paid for it. I didn't know. He said, 'Yeah, you get a royalty.' I said, 'Have you figured that out?!' I had never in a million years thought about doing it for the money, but I thought, 'You know what? That's great. I never dreamed that I could be one of the biggest givers in our church, and now I can. I can underwrite a whole wing of this thing.' I don't see us changing our lifestyle. It's so I can help more people's lives. We are stewards of God's money."

Joel and his associates are less comfortable with the characterization of his message as Christianity Lite, an appealing but less filling version of the real thing. Dodds contends that such criticisms "come from a lack of experience and full knowledge of what we are doing. I always tell people who say that, 'Just come to church.' There is no way you can sit in our services during a time of worship and not know we are lifting up the name of Jesus. I have heard the criticisms. I just don't think they are valid."

Once again, however, the critics can make an argument. Joel readily acknowledges that he is not an exegetical preacher who begins with a passage of scripture and expounds upon its meaning for his congregation. Even in the early days, when Joel preached on such topics as "The Truth of the Resurrection" and "The Great Commission," it was hardly in a standard fashion; at the 1999 Easter service, after a rather conventional sermon, he told a series of amusing stories about his family, even admitting that they had little to do with the drama of resurrection. And eventually, those gave way to sermons with Tony Robbins—style titles such as "Developing Your Potential," "Persistence and Determination," "Your Life Follows Your Thoughts," and "Enlarge Your Vision."

"Daddy would often just teach the Bible," Joel said. "I take a little different approach. I may give a whole sermon and give the scripture at the end—'This is what Jesus meant when he said this, that, and the other.' I know doctrine is good. We need doctrine, but I think the average person is not looking for doctrine. They are looking to ask, 'How do I let go of the past?' 'How do I have a better marriage?' 'What is wrong with me?' If you want to reach the culture, you need to speak in their terms. When Jesus was here on this earth, he did such practical stuff. He taught using simple examples like the parable of the prodigal son; everybody can relate to that. I tell a lot of stories in my sermons. Most of what I preach is about the simple things."

Jesus indeed told stories, but he also issued some scathing condemnation of sinners, particularly the arrogant, the self-righteous, the corrupt, and those who trust in riches. Joel's sermons are notably free of condemnation. "The

Bible says it is the goodness of God that leads us to repentance,” he said. “When I talk about sin, I may call it ‘making bad choices.’ People get so used to being beat over the head. I don’t come from that side. I come from the encouraging side. It seems like it resonates with people that God is for them. I feel like I’m doing what God calls me to do. I don’t have any agenda to say I’m not going to preach about sin. I write my sermons and pray, and this is what comes out of me.”

What about issues of basic social justice, of structures that impede or block personal growth and prosperity, no matter how strongly one believes or how hard one prays? “I don’t know that I have a good answer on that,” he said. “I feel like the church should be a force. I know that I am all for anything we can do to lift people. On a thirty-minute program, you can’t solve the world’s problems.” As for that knottiest of theological issues, the problem of suffering: “I have a file in my mind called an ‘I don’t understand it’ file. There are some things we are not going to understand, and we must say, like Job, ‘Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.’ I think God will give us peace to go through anything. How do you tell somebody why their kid got killed in a car wreck? You just say, ‘I can’t understand it. I can’t explain it to you.’ You can’t dwell on that. You just know that God is in control. It’s a tough issue.”

PERHAPS IN AN EFFORT TO MAINTAIN HIS UPLIFTING MESSAGE, Joel has avoided speaking out on today’s red state, blue state issues, such as abortion and homosexuality. “I feel there are other issues I am called to more than those,” he explained. “I don’t know the answers, even on abortion. Somebody asked me what I think of stem cell research. I had to say I don’t know. I’ve heard people talk about it both ways. I don’t think a homosexual lifestyle is God’s best way, but I’m not going to tell [homosexuals] they can’t come to our church. I’m going to be wide open for them.” In the same spirit, he has resisted recruitment into the ranks of the religious right. Iloff, who worked for a time in the White House during the senior Bush administration, admitted that he was tempted at one time to try to get Joel to be more political. “I guess God dealt with me on that, because I realized, as Joel did from the very beginning, that [politics] could be very polarizing. It could shut the door on his ability to plant the seed of God’s message in people’s hearts.” Politicians are often eager to court his constituency, yet as a general rule, an officeholder who attends Joel’s service will be recognized but not asked to speak. And candidates in a current race will rarely be recognized at all.

What does come out of Joel, no matter what topic he is discussing, is unfailingly upbeat and encouraging. Repeatedly, at book signings, at the Dallas appearance, and at the church itself, his followers told me that this was

part of the appeal: “You can actually take what he teaches you into real life. It’s real useful.” “He gives you such a positive outlook on life. When you listen to him, he gives you renewed hope.” “He addresses the needs in my life.” “He doesn’t make you feel dirty, you know? It’s just so uplifting.” Nonetheless, Joel and his family are sensitive to the charge of theological thinness, so they take comfort in the classic defense used by unconventional but successful evangelists for centuries: It gets results. Virtually every key person I interviewed noted that “We had eighteen thousand people walk the aisles [at Lakewood] last year” to mark a new or renewed relationship with Jesus and that thousands of others from across the country and around the world write or call each week to tell of “giving their lives to the Lord.”

After Joel’s invitation to new visitors at the end of the Sunday service I attended in February, I followed dozens of people to a “salvation room” behind the stage. Once there, Joel congratulated them, urged them to get into a good Bible church if they didn’t intend to keep coming to Lakewood—“This is not the only good church”—and gave each of them a small folder entitled “Your Next Step to a New Beginning,” which set forth a bare outline of Christian beliefs, encouraged them to be baptized in water, and invited them to attend an eight-week New Beginnings class taught on Sunday evenings by Paul. They also received *30 Thoughts for Victorious Living*, a daily devotional guide written by Joel. It wasn’t possible to probe the thoughts of these folks, but expressions on the faces of most indicated that they felt something significant had just happened.

The Osteens define salvation as both a transformation in one’s earthly life and the promise of eternal life in heaven. They believe in hell, but they don’t talk about it much. As Lisa put it: “My dad always said, ‘Preach the Bible like it’s good news. Don’t tell people they’re going to hell. Tell them they don’t have to go.’” Joel often makes the same point: “God is not mad at you; he is not trying to send you down into darkness. God is on your side. He has already forgiven your sins. All you’ve got to do is accept the free gift of God’s salvation.”

Quite appealing, to be sure, but what about Jesus’ observation that “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few”? Doesn’t the gospel according to Joel sound more like the wide gate and the easy way that leads to destruction? Paul knew the scripture. “I think we’ve made it clear,” he said, “that you have to change your life. Joel is giving a lot of people the opportunity to find the narrow way.” Paul contends that, despite the lack of standard theological content, his brother is nonetheless an effective evangelist. “We see the results all the time. I see a guy who is addicted to cocaine, addicted to pornography, on his fourth marriage—it doesn’t happen

instantly, but in a couple of years, he's married, he's stable, he's got a job, he's got a heart for God. Let me tell you, that's pretty big."

Joel says little about the narrow way in his televised sermons or his book, which elaborates on the themes from those sermons. In the past he has conceded that most of his ministry is not evangelistic and has admitted that the principles he extols will work in anybody's life, whether or not that person is a Christian, but he feels confident that by teaching people how to live as God wants them to live, he is training them for Christian discipleship. And in addition to those he brings into the church, Joel feels his television audience gets the necessary message when he offers a fifteen-second "salvation call" at the end of each telecast, asking viewers to repeat a brief prayer—"Lord Jesus, I repent of my sins. I ask you to come into my heart. I make you my Lord and Savior"—and assuring them that if they say those words, they will be born again. "It's not long and it's not complicated," he acknowledged. "It would be great to have three minutes to really explain it, but I do think I put it out there."

Reluctance to shut the gate or shrink the dimensions of the path does not sit well with everyone in Joel's audience. When he appeared on *Larry King Live* in late June, King asked him about the fate of Jews and Muslims, who "don't accept Christ at all." Joel replied, "I'm very careful about saying who would and wouldn't go to heaven. I don't know....I just think that only God will judge a person's heart. I spent a lot of time in India with my father. I don't know all about their religion. But I know they love God....I've seen their sincerity. So I don't know." That humane, large-spirited response—quite similar to comments Billy Graham has made on occasion—apparently brought a flood of critical calls, letters, and e-mails to the Lakewood office, prompting Joel to issue an abject apology on his Web site, asserting that he believes "Jesus Christ is the *only way* to heaven" and that he regretted that he had not "clearly communicate[d] the convictions that I hold so precious." In light of his consistent spirit of "Judge not, that ye be not judged," Joel's repudiation of his apparent instinct in the face of opposition reminded me of another scripture: "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

IN A VIDEO SHOWN AT THE TOUR EVENTS, a man says he believes Joel will replace Billy Graham. Clearly, that does not strike Joel's siblings as fanciful. "Joel's impact is huge," Paul pointed out. "He has a humility about him, a power and presence, an ability to use television, and hundreds of pastors are saying, 'This is changing our lives.' It would not surprise me for Joel to be a dominant force in Christianity for quite a few years." Lisa's assessment was even more positive: "The reason they [compare Joel to

Graham] is because the anointing is on him to bring in thousands, and that's what we saw with Billy Graham, and still see today. That is only the hand of God on a person. You don't choose that. God chooses. I sort of agree with them."

Billy Graham, of course, is not an office in the Christian church that must be filled. Because of the enormous growth and diversification within evangelical Christianity over the past half-century, much of it a result of Graham's vision and thoughtful leadership, it is unlikely that any single figure will ever dominate it again to the extent that Graham has. Yet Joel Osteen is on a remarkable arc, and it's more than fair to speculate that he is nowhere near his peak. That ambitious outlook seems to be embedded in the Osteen genes. Dodie once told me that her husband announced years ago, "Someday, we'll be meeting in the Compaq Center." Lisa remembered that he had the Astrodome in his sights. For his part, as Joel has said, "I am convinced that in twenty years we'll look up and realize that the Compaq Center isn't big enough to hold all the people. Hopefully, someone will want to build another stadium by then and Reliant Stadium will be available."