

Introduction

I am in the upscale business complex of Greenway Plaza, near downtown Houston. After parking my car, I follow the signs directing me to Lakewood Church. Emerging from the dimly lit confines of a parking garage, I join hundreds of people surging to the church's entrance. In an energetic multiethnic mix, I walk alongside individuals, some of whom are black, others white, still others Latino/a or Asian. Some are talking with one another, while others are silent. Some walk with heads down as if in prayer. I see men wearing their Sunday best, along with women adorned in stunning white and pink hats; others come in jeans, T-shirts, and shorts. I hear the sharp strike of high heels and the flop of sandals. Some carry Bibles as they purposefully walk toward the church. I see Bibles that appear worn and creased, the result of a sustained engagement. I also observe congregants clutching *Hope for Today Bible*, a resource designed with notes and commentary by Lakewood's pastors Joel and Victoria Osteen. Shortly, at Joel's invitation in the worship service to "lift up your Bibles and say it like you mean it," congregants will thrust their Bibles into the air and make Lakewood's famous "This is my Bible" confession. A mantra started by Joel's father and Lakewood's founder, John Osteen, in the 1980s, the statement highlights the church's evangelical fidelity to the Bible and firm conviction about its spiritual power. I also observe a large group of people rolling into the church, some wheeling themselves while others proceed in electric wheelchairs. The leader of this group also ushers in other disabled persons, some with visual impairments, others with Down's syndrome. Lakewood's doors open for a diverse array of people.¹

As I enter the building with the throngs of men, women, and children who pour in for the service, a volunteer with a nametag greets me with a warm smile and "Welcome, God bless you." I take the bulletin she hands me. I start ascending the stairs into Lakewood Church. Knowing that Lakewood is America's largest megachurch, welcoming

over 40,000 members and other attendees each week, I feel as if I am in an important place. It pulsates with energy. I also notice symbols of the church's history on display. I pause halfway up the steps as I encounter a life-size bronze display of Lakewood's founding couple, John and Dodie Osteen, honoring Lakewood's fiftieth anniversary. The couple meets visitors with smiles and a Bible held in the air. The base of the bronze statue is in the shape of a heart, symbolic of Lakewood's old motto, "Oasis of Love." While John never preached at the Compaq Center, a converted sports arena that became Lakewood's home in 2005, six years after his death, his likeness, along with that of Dodie, greets visitors as they enter the church he founded. At Lakewood, the past intermingles with the present, while the future is a source of perpetual anticipation.

As I continue to walk up the stairs, to my left people enter and exit the well-stocked bookstore. On the television screen that sits in the middle of a display that contains Joel and Victoria's teachings I look over to see and hear Joel encouraging a positive mindset in the midst of difficult circumstances. In the bookstore, I browse the most recent books by contemporary Christian teachers such as Joyce Meyer, John MacArthur, Joseph Prince, and John Piper, and a substantial variety of study Bibles and study aids such as theological encyclopedias and Greek dictionaries. The bookstore contains a children's section and several rows with a variety of Spanish-language resources. I also notice that it sells framed paintings of the Christian artist Thomas Kinkadee as well as spiritually themed items like T-shirts, key chains, or bookmarks that can also be found at Christian chain retail stores such as Family Christian, Lifeway, and Mardel. Just outside of the bookstore, families head quickly to register kids for Lakewood's expansive children's programs. Other people mill about like tourists, many of them visiting Lakewood for the first time, clearly pausing to take it all in. Things are buzzing at Lakewood Church, but also proceed in an orderly fashion. I notice people with official Lakewood nametags, energetic volunteers with clipboards and walkie-talkies who help the massive operation to run smoothly. Not shy, one volunteer inquires if I am interested in trying out for Lakewood's choir. Responding to her facial expression and her excitement to recruit volunteers, I return the smile—and politely decline. "God bless you," the recruiter replies as I continue walking.

INTRODUCTION



Figure I.1. John and Dodie Osteen bronze display, Lakewood Church. The plaque reads, “Pastors John and Dodie Osteen, Founders of Lakewood Church, Mother’s Day 1959, Edd Hayes, sculptor, Gift from Craig Keeland.” Source: Photo by author.

I proceed to the worship center, and with many others, I anticipate my entrance into the 16,000-seat sanctuary. There is a palpable sense of expectation, a feeling already cultivated by Joel’s popular message of self-improvement and salvation on television and published in a handful of *New York Times* bestsellers. Looking up, I see the ceiling arranged with large square white sheeting to produce a cloud effect, simultaneously reflecting blues, reds, greens, and purples from multi-

colored spotlights. I begin to get an inkling of the church's massive size, an architectural expression of Lakewood's signature place in American Christianity. I find a seat, and settle into place on the second level on the far left side of the auditorium. Lights bathe the stage in a glittery display as members of Lakewood's choir, wearing blue robes, find their place in the two choir lofts. The band, arranged on a retractable stage, warms up in front of a massive, bronze globe, an iconic symbol of Lakewood's historic commitment to missionary endeavors. Announcements for religious education classes and church events along with advertisements for resources available in Lakewood's bookstore flash across the three large screens that hang above the stage. I notice individuals in front of the stage and they appear to have security escorts—the Osteen family and other church leaders proceed to their seats. It is nearly time for the service to begin.

The interracial duo of singers Cindy Cruse Ratcliff and Israel Houghton begin the service by leading nearly 16,000 people in musical expressions of adoration toward God and the spiritual meaning of life in Christ. People clap in rhythm with the drums, and sing along as lyrics flash across the large screens. I also notice worshiping bodies sway with the music. The emotional temper of the music produces what appear to be moments of tender introspection; I see people with arms raised and eyes closed, and some with tears streaming. Later, prayer partners meet and pray with those in need. People cry and hug, finding individual spiritual solace among the thousands present in America's largest congregation. The service proceeds with an encouraging testimony from Victoria, a period of prayer and tithing, and a twenty-five-minute message from Joel. An altar call with a simple recitation, asking Jesus to reign as Lord of one's life, starts to draw the morning service to a close. In a final moment of affirmation, Joel asks people to clap if they are better now than when they came in. Employing positive confession, a historic neopentecostal practice of making verbal affirmations of spiritual significance—and much like his father John did at Lakewood—Joel makes several declarations. Each declaration becomes more intense as Osteen's voice rises and he bounces tiptoed as if to push his positive proclamations into every square inch of the auditorium: "I declare . . . God is breathing on your life, he's breathing on your dreams, he's breathing on your finances. . . . God will multiply your talent, multiply your

resources, multiply your strength. . . . If you'll be confident in what God has given you, then I believe and declare you will overcome every obstacle, defeat every enemy, and you will become everything God's created you to be . . . if you believe it, give the Lord a shout of praise!" Joel ends the service in prayer, sending intense petitions upward with his face lifted, eyes tightly closed, hands raised, and his body moving as he speaks. He asks God to make the day's message real in everyday life. "Lord, draw them by your Spirit, let them feel your love as they've never felt it before," he prays. "A new beginning . . . a fresh new start . . . the road to victory . . . comes from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ."

The visual, auditory, physical, spiritual, even sensual dynamics at Lakewood Church are at once memorable, overpowering, and connected deeply to the history of American evangelicalism. This opening vignette provides five ways to consider thematically the historical significance and cultural meaning of Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church in American Christianity.

First, Lakewood is about *people*—the church's founders, its parishioners, members, attendees, volunteers, visitors, musicians, singers, teachers, and pastors. Seeing the concentration of 16,000 people singing, clapping and moving to worship songs or sitting in rapt attention to a sermon—or busily tweeting, texting, or gazing at the surroundings—is an unforgettable experience. Once there, one "feels" Lakewood. Although it began in 1959 with about 200 people, the congregation has been thousands strong since the late 1970s, when Lakewood became a megachurch. Outside of the worship auditorium, Lakewood's people gather for Bible study and spiritual fellowship. They donate their time and efforts to the community, whether handing out sandwiches or shoes to the homeless, or writing notes of encouragement to the depressed and downhearted. Lakewood's people worship by singing, by study, and by community service.

Lakewood is about *place*—the former Compaq Center situated near downtown Houston, a former sports arena transformed into sacred space. Lakewood's current location is a \$90 million facility with an annual budget of similar proportions. Classrooms offer space for collective study, silent reflection, and individual prayer. Offices provide places to plan and strategize for the different ministries Lakewood offers. The latest recording, mixing, and broadcast technology coupled with pur-

poseful sanctuary design ensures a professional production scripted for the maximum impact. A wall of champions displays a short pictorial history of Lakewood's move to the former Compaq Center along with the names of "champion" donors. Yet Lakewood's "place" was not always located in a state-of-the-art facility along a busy freeway surrounded by multimillion-dollar corporations and thriving retail spaces. For forty years of its fifty-year history, Lakewood called home a gritty working-class neighborhood with black and brown enclaves on Houston's northeast side, miles from where political and economic power is concentrated in the city. Small space at a feed store welcomed Lakewood's founding pastor and earliest members in 1959, with incremental architectural additions during the subsequent three decades. In Lakewood's history, place has mattered greatly: its "place" in Houston and its "place" in the Sunbelt are rich with cultural significance.

Lakewood is about *personality*. John Osteen's visionary reach coupled with a fierce willpower not only removed him from the blight of childhood poverty, it resulted in the growth of Lakewood Church and situated John as a leading figure in the neopentecostal movement, a multid denominational charismatic stirring that emerged after World War II. Infused with physical and spiritual energy after he discovered the Holy Spirit's power, during the 1960s and 1970s John built and grew Lakewood Church. Members use the words "love" and "compassion" to describe John's personality. They recall his tireless preaching on Sundays and Wednesdays, the intensity of his exhortations, the tenderness of his encouraging words, and the power of his prayers. And when Lakewood's television ministry began in the early 1980s, his personality instantaneously transcended the walls of the church, now touching not only Lakewood's people but Lakewood's "public," as well. Since 1999, his son Joel Osteen has utilized personality with a recognizable presence as the "smiling preacher"—often alongside his striking and energetic wife, Victoria—counseling positive thinking and positive confession to face life's challenges. His Texas drawl and fit body coupled with a soft-spoken but firm message of encouragement have endeared him to many. But Joel's "personality" also elicits waves of criticism. Elsewhere at Lakewood, the distinct personalities of Joel's sister Lisa and his mother, Dodie, carry John's legacy as they conduct their own services. Joel's brother Paul, a surgeon with a missionary's mindset who also represents

John's legacy, not only fixes bodies but also attempts to mend hearts spiritually through his preaching and teaching. Spanish-language pastor Marcos Witt, an accomplished musician in Latin American circles, when he worked at Lakewood between 2002 and 2012, also constituted a "personality" with his preaching and singing. Likewise, John Gray, the only black pastor on Lakewood's staff, since 2012 has riveted the congregation not only with his preaching, but also with enjoyable stories and jokes, which reflects his previous career as a standup comedian. Performance and personality mix among Lakewood's professional musicians, such as the award-winning Israel Houghton and Cindy Cruse Ratcliff. In the midst of Lakewood's more public personalities, church members and attendees express "personality" as well, constructing religious identities and articulating testimonies about how they believe God sustains and blesses them.

Lakewood is also about *Pentecost*—a term that Christians, particularly Christians of the Pentecostal and charismatic persuasion use in reference to something new: the birth of the Christian movement recorded in the New Testament book of Acts. However, this book employs "Pentecost" as a metaphor to describe Lakewood's origins and conceptually encapsulate the message of second chances that emanates from its pastors to its parishioners. Expressed in different ways by different ministers and members, the message of Lakewood Church centers on the promise of starting over. Both pastors and parishioners contend that the past is the past, and with hope and faith, one can transcend the past in order to remake the future. And while explanations of God's ways do not always satisfy the questions surrounding some of life's unfortunate circumstances, Lakewood promises faith to understand that God's orchestration of history will ultimately turn to one's own advantage spiritually, materially, or both. Lakewood's Pentecost informs the church's history even as it expresses the conceptual architecture of its core message.²

If Lakewood is about Pentecost and the promise of starting over, then it is also about *prosperity*. Lakewood's arrival on the American religious landscape during the genesis of the neopentecostal movement and John's focus on divine healing and positive confession oriented the church toward the prosperity gospel, a message of boundless improvement. More recently, Joel's critics have drawn out opposition to his prosperity message, categorizing him as another manifestation of the

“Health and Wealth Gospel,” a dimension of the prosperity gospel that spiritualizes material attainment. The earliest moments of Lakewood’s history lodged notions of prosperity in the church’s message, particularly related to John’s impoverished origins. But Lakewood’s increasing monetary accumulation throughout the last few decades of the twentieth century made prosperity a financial reality for the church. As a wealthy church in one of the Sunbelt’s most economically vibrant cities, Lakewood’s prosperity gospel also means its history is as much about class as it is about religion. At Lakewood, as in Houston, God’s blessings can be both spiritual and material.

This book argues that Joel Osteen is America’s most powerful twenty-first-century evangelical minister. His story, and that of Lakewood, does not represent the totality of evangelicalism; rather, they collectively illuminate key trends in contemporary American Christianity. First, the constellation of historical and cultural factors that produced Osteen’s privileged position includes his historic and enduring connection to neopentecostalism, his affiliation with the prosperity gospel, and the rise of Lakewood as America’s largest megachurch. Second, Osteen’s pinnacle position in American Christianity is the result of an innovative message delivered through television and across many new media platforms. Osteen’s religious teaching is positive, predictable, redundant, and consistent in a contemporary moment of profound political change. Finally, Osteen’s emergence as America’s leading evangelical minister in the early twenty-first century began at a time of cultural discord, when Democrats and Republicans vociferously debated the role of religion and politics as the presidency of George W. Bush gave way to the Obama era. The fact that Osteen, at the time, was neither specifically aligned with the Christian Right nor connected to the Religious Left meant that his politics of positive thinking presented a unique alternative across America’s religious landscape. Osteen’s functionally conservative political positions on pressing cultural questions such as abortion or marriage equality aligned with Christian Right opinion. But he scrupulously avoided overtly politicizing his teachings, an avoidance that contrasted sharply with the combative rhetoric of religious conservatives and the equally impassioned proclamations of religious progressives. Although Osteen’s sermons and social opinions were not without controversy, his

approach produced a broadly affable message more acceptable to a wide diversity of individuals.

The story of Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church matters today because it is essential to understanding the history of contemporary American Christianity. This is especially true in relationship to neopentecostalism's historic versatility. Osteen and Lakewood's intersection with neopentecostalism documents the movement's vibrancy and adaptability well into the twenty-first century. In addition, Osteen's populist, positive message, delivered via diverse means, testifies to the enduring power of televangelism. Moreover, his ubiquitous, successful presence in the religious media landscape shows that in the twenty-first century popular religious teachers must diversify the modalities through which they present their messages. Osteen's arrival on the national scene paralleled the rise of social media, and his background in religious programming advantageously positioned him to embrace emerging technology; as a result, he has crafted an electronic and digital presence for the prosperity gospel that far exceeds any other minister's or congregation's. In concert with Joel's prominence across social media and the emerging digital universe, the content and tone of his religious broadcasting makes televangelism tolerable, and perhaps even acceptable—despite the long shadow of recent televangelist scandals—otherwise millions of viewers would not tune in every week, nor would his other ventures, such as his *New York Times* bestselling books, net such tremendous success. Also significant is Osteen's soothing Texas drawl and well-known cheery smile, born from his and his church's place in Houston as well as the religiously significant Sunbelt, factors that speak to a transitional moment in the contested history of religion and politics in the United States. Fewer and fewer people wish to stomach the bombastic rhetoric of the Christian Right that was so consequential in the 1980s and 1990s, while large numbers of Americans hold fast to conservative social values. Osteen's power as America's leading Christian minister delivers conservative social values—with an insistence that Lakewood welcomes *all* people—without the vicious language of cultural combat that the Christian Right has perfected and used to significant effect. At the same time, his gestures toward social inclusion, along with Lakewood's consistent outreach efforts both in Houston and around the world, reflect the social consciousness of religious

progressives, even though the individualist-oriented message of positive thinking and positive confession hardly addresses in any robust systemic way social justice or economic equality. Questions of leadership and institutional history—especially with the virtually seamless transition of Lakewood from John’s pastorate to Joel’s church—are equally consequential for grasping the importance of Osteen and Lakewood. In the annals of American religious history, it is not often that a church’s second generation outshines the founder in the way Joel has done with Lakewood Church.

The aim of *Salvation with a Smile* is simple and clear: to explain Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church’s cultural significance in light of American religious history. While this study addresses aspects of Christian theology—neopentecostalism, the prosperity gospel, and New Calvinism—it presents the historical development of theological ideas, not theological analysis itself. While this book is not a biography of Joel Osteen, it deals with biographical aspects of his life, as well as those of other members of the Osteen family. Similarly, this book is not an institutional analysis of Lakewood Church; it delves into selected aspects of the congregation’s institutional life. Organized around eight chapters, this volume explains how Lakewood’s neopentecostal origins resulted in its emergence as America’s largest megachurch. It connects the historical dots between John’s adoption of the prosperity gospel and his son Joel’s creative and purposeful rearticulation of that message as he ushered Lakewood into the twenty-first century. And it spells out how Joel’s technological knowledge coupled with a competent understanding of American culture has translated into a staggeringly popular presence in the contemporary world. At the same time, this book demonstrates that Lakewood is far more than its founder and current pastor. Incorporating the experiences of other individuals in the Osteen family, associate ministers, and church members and attendees, it elucidates the wider history of one of America’s most important religious institutions. Finally, analysis of Joel’s reception among American Christians—after all, constant scrutiny is one price of celebrity—further deciphers Lakewood’s historical significance and cultural meaning across America’s evangelical landscape.³

Chapters 1 and 2 offer a biographical account of John Osteen’s early life in Texas, documenting his Southern Baptist background and transi-

tion into neopentecostalism. They explain how he fostered connections in neopentecostal networks to become a nationally known minister during the 1960s, and connect the strands of John's Sunbelt story to spell out the origins of Lakewood Church. Picking up Lakewood's story in the 1970s, chapter 2 draws on John's books and sermons to explore neopentecostal preacher Kenneth Hagin's influence on his embrace of Word of Faith principles. Turning to the 1980s and 1990s, this chapter tracks the rise of John's televangelism, a vital development in Lakewood's history that paved the way for the church's transition into the twenty-first century after John's death in 1999.

Chapter 3 is the first of two chapters that specifically address Joel's prosperity gospel teachings. It draws out the historical antecedents of Osteen's message to offer part of the answer to the question, how did Joel Osteen become *Joel Osteen*? This chapter sets forth the four parts of Osteen's prosperity gospel as positive thinking, positive confession, positive providence, and finally, the promotion of the Christian body as a site of improvement. It unveils the chief influences that shaped Osteen's ministerial evolution: his father, neopentecostal evangelist Joyce Meyer, and leadership teacher John Maxwell. By establishing the most important neopentecostal and evangelical determinants of Osteen's message, this chapter pinpoints how Joel creatively refashioned a prosperity gospel message that brought him to the pinnacle of American Christianity and helped to make Lakewood Church one of America's most consequential congregations of the twenty-first century.

With the foundational inspiration for Joel's prosperity gospel established, chapter 4 analyzes the content of his teachings. Based on transcripts of his earliest sermons from 1999 along with his more recent orations, his *New York Times* bestselling books, selected interviews, and the *Hope for Today Bible*, this chapter connects Osteen's message to the neopentecostal inheritance of his father, and it discloses how his teaching has drawn heavily from Meyer and Maxwell. Furthermore, it reveals that Joel's unflappable confidence led to the presentation of a message in which God orchestrates history tailored to each individual's specific needs—what I call a providence of positive outcomes. This chapter also explains how Joel translated neopentecostalism's emphasis on divine healing into a wider message that focuses on fitness, health, and psychological well-being, what I call his prosperity gospel of the body. Chap-

ter 4 illuminates striking historical parallels between Norman Vincent Peale's mid-twentieth-century articulation of positive thinking and Joel's astonishingly redundant teaching about self-improvement, further unfolding Osteen's contemporary importance. Finally, chapter 4 shows that while Osteen's prosperity gospel intersects with the broader history of neopentecostalism, his positive message also comes from his cultural roots in Houston.

Coupling the content of Joel's teaching with its display across multiple media platforms, chapter 5 considers his place in the broader history of American televangelism. It fashions Osteen as a new tel-e-vangelist. Bracketing "tel" and "e," this rendering of televangelism highlights the singular importance of Joel's first career as a television producer to his subsequent arrival at the heights of American religious broadcasting as new technology and new media demanded a digital dexterity that Osteen possessed. The discussion of Osteen's tel-e-vangelism recalls the heyday of televised preaching even as it attends to the specific ways Joel harnessed new forms of electronic media (websites, blogs, podcasts, live streaming, e-votionals, Facebook, Joel Osteen and Lakewood apps) while preserving face-to-face encounters.

Establishing that the church is much more than Joel, chapter 6 sheds light on what I term Lakewood's charismatic core, aspects of its collective existence both past and present, as expressed through the congregation's other main preachers. Lakewood's charismatic core is not a hidden center of the church, but distinct manifestations of the church's congregational history and collective identity through the teachings of Dodie and Joel's sister Lisa Osteen Comes, as well as Victoria; Paul Osteen, Joel's brother; and Lakewood's first Spanish-speaking pastor Marcos Witt.

Based on documentary sources, media materials, oral history, and my fieldwork as a participant-observer in Lakewood's religious education classes, chapter 7 focuses on the congregation itself, its members, and attendees. It comments on the congregational resources from which former and current Lakewood members and attendees have fashioned both an individual and a collective religious identity. They have done so by embracing the notion of Pentecost, symbolic for a second chance in life, to attain what narrative psychologist Dan McAdams calls the "redemptive self." While members and attendees connect their redemptive selves specifically to the historic evangelical sense of salvation through

Jesus Christ, this chapter explains that the redemptive self at Lakewood has also referred to the maintenance of a spiritual makeover through activities such as prayer, Bible study, and community outreach.

Chapter 8 profiles Joel Osteen's leading critics to illuminate his place as America's leading Christian pastor. A surging movement within American evangelicalism known as New Calvinism—a group of pastors and theologians committed to intellectualism and Reformed theology—has been most vocal in denouncing the smiling preacher as spiritually weak and biblically illiterate. Detractors such as California pastor John MacArthur, seminary president R. Albert Mohler, and theologian Michael Horton, along with Christian rappers and street preachers, have castigated the Houston pastor. In turn, Osteen has responded to the scoffers by engaging in what I term his piety of resistance, a spiritualized counteroffensive composed of scriptural defenses, positive confession, and positive thinking. The upshot of the conflict between Osteen and his critics shows how evangelicalism's persistent fractures result from battles over how Christians interpret the Bible, part of what historian Molly Worthen calls its "crisis of authority."

A conclusion rehearses the book's main arguments, and points to the historical importance and cultural significance of Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church. Finally, the appendixes provide the texts of two of Joel's earliest sermons from 1999. Annotation offers brief historical and contextual commentary on these remarkable sources, since they all appeared several years before the publication of Osteen's first book in 2004.

A Note on Methodology and Terminology

The discipline of history shapes this book's interpretive framework. It draws heavily on analysis of documentary evidence; it is attentive to context and concerned with change over time. Yet the subjects of this volume—a congregation, its founders, and its members—continue to exist as an active assembly of people. Hence, this book couples archival-based historical study with participant observation in order to make more sense of Lakewood's historical and cultural totality.

Methodologically, the exploration of contemporary history offers unique opportunities and presents considerable challenges. As historians Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano argue in *Doing Recent His-*

tory, reconstructing the recent past depends as much on documentary evidence as it does on newer media such as blogs and web sites. Quicker access to an abundance of primary sources via the Internet, for example, foregrounds the necessity of selectivity and highlights the difficulty of writing historically about living subjects. But with such exciting developments, methodological questions abound. Where does the recent past begin and end? From what vantage points is a subject historical enough? How is analysis of a living subject properly historical? What is sufficient historical distance from a subject in close historical proximity? How much historical distance defines the right amount of hindsight? There are as many answers to these questions as there are historians, but numerous scholars of American religion have intelligently attempted to reconstruct the recent past of contemporary movements and individuals. Studies of neopentecostal faith healers, prosperity gospel televangelists, contemporary evangelical subculture, and Oprah, for example, have collectively grappled with critical scholarly analysis of sensationalized subjects, historical investigation of living persons, and methodological quandaries of access to those subjects. These very questions and concerns surrounded the research and writing of this volume.⁴

Given the sensationalized dimensions of living subjects, researchers often face two additional concerns: historicizing contemporary figures and gaining access to those whose reputations and livelihoods may seem justly suspect. Historians who write about living individuals and movements face the fact that the final chapters are not final; they must keep in mind that the study of the contemporary can fall easily into mere description. The passage of time often fosters fuller perspectives and allows for broader analysis. Nevertheless, historical work on contemporary individuals and movements can yield insightful understanding based on cogent analysis and studied observation. Lakewood's over fifty-year history offers more than enough for historical scrutiny even if the smiling preacher is still smiling. Although repeated requests over a period of several years for interviews with members of the Osteen family proved fruitless, the research for this book surmounted this hurdle with qualitative evidence such as audio and video files of sermons, television broadcasts, and sustained participant observation. Several years of regular participant observation proved particularly fruitful. Relationships and friendships built over the course of months and years yielded

a trove of material that offered plentiful perspectives on Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church.

I profess a personal ambivalence about Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church. While the church is a remarkable religious institution in terms of its size and the deeply multiracial character of its congregation—although at present Lakewood’s leadership remains largely Anglo—a highly individualized spiritual message of self-improvement seems ill equipped to address the persistent, systemic injustices that plague today’s world. At the same time, in my research I discovered that many of Lakewood’s members and attendees actively engage the local Houston community and support, for example, efforts to eradicate human trafficking. With all of this said, I have attempted to maintain a rigorous commitment to remain flexible, patient, but scrutinizing in my historical assessments and cultural analysis of the smiling preacher and his congregation, not unlike anthropologist Susan Friend Harding’s quest to reside at a “psychic intersection” in her study of Jerry Falwell and his fundamentalist world. I endeavored to produce a historically situated analysis of the church’s story, even as I analytically considered through participant observation the current life of an active congregation. In light of such existential and academic intersections, religious studies scholar Manuel A. Vásquez’s *More than Belief* assisted me in assessing Osteen’s message and understanding religious practice at Lakewood. Vásquez elegantly elucidates his materialist approach to studying religion. “[A] non-reductive materialist framework,” he writes, “begins with the acknowledgement that the practitioners’ appeals to the supernatural, god(s), the sacred, or the holy have powerful material consequences for how they build their identities, narratives, practices, and environments.” “It behooves scholars of religion,” he contends, “to take seriously the native actor’s lived world and to explore the biological, social, and historical conditions that make religious experiences possible as well as the effects these experiences have on self, culture, and nature.” Vásquez’s work oriented me to seek to understand the material consequences of Osteen and Lakewood’s spiritual worlds as well as the spiritual dimensions of Osteen and Lakewood’s material realities.⁵

Researching Osteen and his congregation during the course of this project, I have discovered that most people are not neutral when it comes to Joel. In print sources, online, and in interviews I found that Osteen’s

very existence was routinely the subject of effusive, ebullient praise and vicious vitriol. For some of the evangelical faithful, Joel is God’s man for the global age. For others, he is one of the latest flashpoints of theological disputation in contemporary times. For some scholars, Joel is another slick televangelist with a smile in an era with vivid memories of highly publicized televangelist scandals. For others, he is a window into understanding how religion operates in American society. I concluded that it is futile to take sides either with those who insist Joel Osteen is “bad” in a theological sense or with others who claim that Joel Osteen is “good” as a motivational speaker by proffering positive thinking. In telling Osteen and Lakewood’s history, I believe nuanced analysis is more constructive than taking sides in cultural or theological debates. Approaching the topic in a dualistic manner may generate headlines, website hits, Facebook likes, or retweets, but it generally fails to produce clearer understanding of the complex contingencies and changes that have been part of Osteen and Lakewood’s larger story. At the same time, contested opinions about Osteen speak more to his signal importance for those trying to make sense of the contemporary moment in American religion than they do about presenting finalized assessments about America’s most visible evangelical preacher. After all, he is still an active pastor and his living, breathing congregation continues to grow. Put another way, the visibility of Joel Osteen across the vast landscape of American religion—for better *or* for worse—deserves sustained, critical reflection. It is also important to respectfully acknowledge that Osteen and Lakewood matter religiously and spiritually for many people. This means that Osteen and Lakewood matter culturally and politically, too, not least to his most persistent critics. In light of the range of factors noted above, questions of distance and proximity—historical, cultural, and existential—can produce scrutiny, add clarity, and invite conversation. Perhaps this is what ethnographer Robert Orsi meant by pointing to the scholar’s analytical residence at a place of “disciplined attentiveness” in between heaven and earth.⁶

It is helpful at this stage to discuss certain terminological aspects of this book.

First, uses of “evangelicalism” refer to the historical religious movement. For the purpose of readability, this book often uses “evangelicalism” and “Christianity” interchangeably, despite the wide definitional

range of both terms. By referring to evangelicalism as a “movement,” I intend to communicate institutional aspects as well as individual actions. “Movement” also encompasses a very broad range of denominational traditions, political persuasions and religious practices. Implicit in this definitional arrangement is the acknowledgment that evangelicalism, whatever definition assigned to it, is a complex phenomenon. History shows that it is a movement of both elites and nonelites, impacted by changes at both the macro and micro levels. References to the term in this book most specifically engage post–World War II American evangelicalism, which also includes those connected to Pentecostalism, charismatic Christianity, and neopentecostalism.

Highlighting the evangelical movement’s individualist dynamics, historians of American evangelicalism also identify shared characteristics that developed over time and find expression in everyday practice: a focus on an inward, identifiable spiritual change, called a “new birth,” by expressing faith in Jesus Christ; an emphasis on the Bible as authoritative for issues of both faith and practice; acknowledgment of the influence of the Holy Spirit on spiritual enlightenment, sometimes expressed through speaking in tongues; and the imperative to act on faith through evangelistic activity. Historians also point to common questions and concepts about the proper execution of human reason, the most effective place of public engagement, and most acceptable kind of political activity for individuals who adopt a religious orientation rooted in spiritual worlds accessible only by faith. This cluster of experiences, thoughts, and perspectives finds a home in the hearts, minds, emotions, and actions of those individuals discussed in this book, which also renders evangelicals in possession of aesthetic sensibilities rooted in spiritual understanding. Recognizing institutional and individual particulars of evangelicalism, readers will note the historical orientation of how I define evangelicalism as an integral part of American religious culture. This book does not address evangelicalism’s theology systems, or the movement’s technical, doctrinal minutiae that are the province of religious scholars and theologians.⁷

Second, I use “neopentecostal” and “neocharismatic” interchangeably. Following definitional conventions of historians David Edwin Harrell and Kate Bowler, and sociologist Milmon Harrison, these terms refer specifically to the post–World War II charismatic revival in the United

States. Some participants in the movement resisted rigid denominational lines that resulted in the emergence of hundreds of independent ministers and the creation of countless associated evangelistic agencies. Within the neopentecostal movement there emerged a distinct set of teachings called the prosperity gospel, also known as the Word of Faith movement (although the prosperity gospel's historical roots preceded World War II). The prosperity gospel's nomenclature, typically deployed by the movement's critics, also includes references to the "Health and Wealth Gospel" along with "Name It and Claim It." Like Bowler and Harrison, I use Word of Faith to refer specifically to the teaching of Kenneth Hagin as well as to identify ministers Hagin influenced. Finally, I follow religious studies scholar Candy Gunther Brown in my references to "divine healing." Brown explains that this phrase reflects how neopentecostals understand the healing process or healing event. Divine healing highlights the belief that God's divine love is the ultimate trigger for healing, the expressions of faith in God to act, and the neopentecostal conviction about the necessity of "supernatural intervention" in times of spiritual, physical, or psychological need for wholeness.⁸

Following historians Allan Anderson and Russell Spittler, I use "charismatic Christianity," the "charismatic movement," "Pentecostal Christianity," and "Pentecostalism" interchangeably. According to Anderson and Spittler, these terms reflect the conviction that in either individual settings or collective assemblies of worship God is undeniably present through the Holy Spirit, expressed not just through the words and teachings of the minister, but also through events of divine healing or speaking in tongues. Individually, charismatic and Pentecostal Christians experience the Holy Spirit through rapturous moments of intense prayer, visions, healings, or speaking in tongues. Corporately, charismatic and Pentecostal Christians respond to the Holy Spirit in similar ways but also through clapping, shouting, raising hands, applause, singing, dancing, or physical touch ("laying on of hands"). Pentecostal and charismatic Christians also believe that the Holy Spirit prompts improvisational and spontaneous embodied movements or oral expressions. Similar to my definition of evangelicalism, my use of the terms above intends to explain the lived religious experiences or "pietistic habits" of neopentecostals and neocharismatics, not to define or speculate about what they mean theologically.⁹