

A Rhetorical Analysis of Joel Osteen: How America's Most Popular Pastor has Gained Influence  
in a Time of Increasing Privatization.

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of this study was to analyze the rhetoric of religious icon Joel Osteen, deconstructing it to reveal key metaphors, themes and strategies that have contributed to his status as one of the most popular preachers in America. The study explored contemporary American morality as a means of understanding the specific exigences facing Osteen's rhetorical audience. I argue that individuals face a tension between their desires to belong as part of a community, while retaining unrestricted individual expression. This tension is further aggravated by the pressures of globalization, which suggest that individuals can replace their community-formed identities by increasing their reliance on commodities. Osteen's rhetoric was found to soothe these tensions by preaching a message of individualism that promises the eventual deliverance of goods, within a formal community structure. The implications of this study considered whether this message was truly beneficial to the individual or if it was restricting their long-term potential to achieve material and personal success.

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## Chapter I

### Background Information

A man walks energetically onto the stage and a large crowd begins to cheer. He has a youthful appearance, but still looks distinguished in his sharp navy suit. His thick head of hair is complemented by a dazzling smile. The crowd hangs on his every word as he delivers a message heard by millions around the world. Sounds like a celebrity, right? Or a campaigning politician, perhaps? Few would guess that this description is of religious icon Joel Osteen, the pastor of Houston's Lakewood Church. With a Sunday congregation of over 43,000<sup>1</sup> and a television ministry reaching over 7 million viewers each week,<sup>2</sup> Lakewood is America's largest church and Osteen is at the center of it all.

Osteen's father, John Osteen, started Lakewood church 1959 in a "small, run-down, abandoned feed store" in east Houston.<sup>3</sup> Although critics predicted its failure, John Osteen successfully established a thriving congregation and eventually handed his legacy on to his son, Joel. Despite growing up a minister's son, however, Joel Osteen claims he never had aspirations to become a preacher. In 1983, he quit school at Oral Roberts University and started a television ministry for his father at Lakewood Church.<sup>4</sup> Osteen continued his production work until 1999 when his father suddenly died from heart failure.<sup>5</sup> At that point, Osteen says he, "just knew ... (he) was supposed to step up to the plate and pastor the church."<sup>6</sup> He candidly admits his apprehension about performing his first sermon, telling Larry King, "I was nervous. Still get nervous."<sup>7</sup> It would be hard not to feel nervous speaking to the large crowds that gather each

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<sup>1</sup> Bogan, Jesse. "A Conversation With Joel Osteen." *Forbes*, 26 June 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *60 Minutes*, "Joel Osteen Answers his Critics," first broadcast 14 October 2007 by CBS. Reported by Byron Pitts.

<sup>3</sup> Osteen, Joel. *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. New York: Faith Words, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Leland, John. "A Church That Packs Them In, 16,000 at a Time." *The New York Times*. Web. 18 July 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Osteen, Joel. *Your Best Life Now*, 247.

<sup>6</sup> *Larry King Live*, "Interview with Joel Osteen," first broadcast 20 June 2005 by CNN. Reported by Larry King.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

week in the former Compaq basketball arena. The church moved into the 16,000-seat arena after they outgrew Lakewood's original location.<sup>8</sup>

Osteen not only manages a thriving congregation, but he is also a *New York Times* best selling author. His book, *Your Best Life Now* was published in 2004 and sold over four million copies, remaining on *The New York Times* Bestsellers List for over two years.<sup>9</sup> His second book deal is worth an estimated \$13 million. Osteen's self-titled website reports he was "named as one of Barbara Walters' "10 Most Fascinating People of 2006," and he was selected as the "Most Influential Christian in 2006" by the readers of *Church Report Magazine*."<sup>10</sup> His initial apprehension at being in the spotlight clearly subsided, giving way to a rising star.

Despite his success, Osteen claims, "I never did this for the money." He told *Forbes* magazine, "My biggest hobby is hanging out with my family and kids... We just live a pretty simple life."<sup>11</sup> Indeed Osteen's picturesque life gains credibility through the regular appearance of his wife Victoria, who also pastors at Lakewood church. The couple met in 1986 while she was working at her family-run jewelry store. They married less than two years later and quickly entered service in the full-time ministry.<sup>12</sup> Together, the Osteens teach Sunday sermons, co-author a blog, and regularly appear for interviews, often sharing personal stories about their marriage and family. They've managed to create an atmosphere of inviting familiarity, although Osteen admits the church's size makes this difficult.<sup>13</sup>

Osteen credits his vast success to his central message of God's love and goodness. The main thrust of his teaching is described on his personal website: "Our God is a good God who

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> joelosteen.com. "Joel Osteen: An Inspiration to Millions."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bogan, "A Conversation With Joel Osteen".

<sup>12</sup> victoriaosteen.com. "About Victoria ."

<sup>13</sup> Bogan, "A Conversation With Joel Osteen".

desires to bless those who are obedient and faithful to Him through Jesus Christ.”<sup>14</sup> This message is designed to encourage followers “to accept God’s goodness and mercy and to become all that God wants them to be.”<sup>15</sup> His message comes across as part sermon and part pep talk, delivered by the handsome guy-next-door (who just so happens to be on TV). Indeed Osteen’s ability to carry himself with star-like poise while still conveying an approachable, familiar presence makes him a uniquely appealing figure for followers and spectators alike.

Osteen’s success, however, is not without criticism from some leaders in the Christian community who fault his message for its scant use of the scriptures and shallow content. Reverend Michael Horton, a theology professor at Westminster Seminary, claims Osteen “uses the Bible like a fortune cookie”<sup>16</sup> to give listeners visions of future success without any real substance. Osteen directly addressed Horton’s assessment of his message as “a cotton-candy gospel,”<sup>17</sup> claiming that his message is one of hope for people who are hurting and that the gospel can’t get more real than that. Still, one cannot help but notice how Osteen manages to avoid the more controversial subjects within his faith. When directly confronted with issues of salvation and condemnation during an interview with Larry King, the Smiling Preacher refused to definitively answer any of the questions. Instead, he responded with vague platitudes of acceptance, saying things like “I don’t have it in my heart to condemn people,” and “It’s not my job to try to straighten everybody out.”<sup>18</sup> Even when directly asked if a non-believer could still go to heaven, Osteen responded, “I’m very careful about saying who would and wouldn’t go to heaven. I don’t know...”<sup>19</sup> Barbara Walters quoted critics who labeled Osteen’s message as

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<sup>14</sup> joelosteen.com

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Pitts, "Joel Osteen Answers His Critics".

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> King, "Interview With Joel Osteen."

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

“Christianity lite,” describing its content as having “no sin, no suffering, no sacrifice, (and) replacing fire and brimstone with a motivational message.”<sup>20</sup> His critics may have a point, but Osteen’s success in drawing followers during an increasingly secular age cannot be ignored. His words resonate in the hearts of millions who devotedly listen to him each week. Clearly the effectiveness of this message lies far beyond the simple content, or the charisma with which it is delivered.

### **Method and Orientation**

This project attempts to uncover the specific factors contributing to Joel Osteen’s success as a speaker. I am taking the approach of a rhetorical critic, whose focus is on how Osteen’s rhetoric moves and persuades an audience. My analysis is broadly shaped by David Zarefsky’s work, “Knowledge Claims in Rhetorical Criticism,” which classifies rhetorical criticism as “a specific case of argumentation,”<sup>21</sup> with the goal of exercising critical judgment. Zarefsky’s article positions rhetorical criticism as an effective method for analyzing a body of work, even devoid of statistical analysis or quantitative research by claiming that it “emerges as an analogue of the scientific method, applied in circumstances that do not lend themselves to empirical verification.”<sup>22</sup>

Zarefsky qualifies effective rhetorical criticism, however, claiming that it will answer two important questions: “What’s going on here?” and “So what?”<sup>23</sup> The first question is answered by “making clear the underlying dynamics of the rhetorical work-- how it might be seen as influencing people.” The second question, “relates the particular rhetorical work to some

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<sup>20</sup> Walters, Barbara. "The 10 Most Fascinating People of 2006." ABC.

<sup>21</sup> Zarefsky, David. 2008. "Knowledge Claims in Rhetorical Criticism." *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 4: 629-640. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 2, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 630.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 633.

consideration beyond itself,”<sup>24</sup> namely by relating it to a larger historical, social, or economic context. These two questions thus provide a general aim of my research, which broadly asks how Osteen’s rhetoric is influencing his audience, and how it relates to the larger social context in which it is positioned.

In addition to Zarefsky’s work, my method for analyzing Osteen’s rhetoric is informed by Lloyd Bitzer’s article, “The Rhetorical Situation.”<sup>25</sup> His work effectively separates the distinct components of any rhetorical situation, and explains how each part contributes to the overall effectiveness of a message. This construction allows for an in-depth and organized study, while also accounting for broader themes within a body of discourse. Perhaps most significant is Bitzer’s notion that every rhetorical situation contains “an exigence which strongly invites utterance.”<sup>26</sup> Bitzer describes the exigence as a kind of situational imperfection that demands a response, which suggests that environmental and social conditions can be seen as exigences influencing how or why a message is effective. The notion of situational exigences stemming from social preconditions largely informs the second chapter of this thesis. It was Bitzer’s construction that led me to analyzing the larger context of Osteen’s message, and to thinking about what cultural exigences exist that influence how Osteen’s discourse impacts listeners.

While the ideas of both Zarefsky and Bitzer guide my general method, the work of Thomas Benson more specifically provides focus within the discipline of rhetorical criticism. In his article “The Senses of Rhetoric,”<sup>27</sup> Benson delineates between the most common perspectives within the rhetorical tradition. His description of the “social critic” most suitably describes the nature of this thesis. He characterizes the social critic as one who “emphasizes the sense of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Bitzer, Lloyd F. “The Rhetorical Situation.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (n.d.): 1-14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Benson, Thomas W. “The Senses of Rhetoric: A Topical System for Critics.” *Central States Speech Journal* 29 (1978): 237-250.

rhetoric as social influence”<sup>28</sup> and attempts to understand what values the audience is being asked to share with the speaker. In order to understand why a group is influenced, the social critic must “enter imaginatively into the world of the work he is criticizing, to reconstruct the audience to whom the work would appeal, and to fully appreciate, before objecting to, the world of values implied by the work.”<sup>29</sup> I have chosen to take the perspective of the social critic, analyzing Osteen’s rhetoric for its relationship to society as a whole, and to understanding what cultural ideologies influence how an audience interprets his message. As Benson points out, this type of analysis must be preceded by an immersion into the world of the audience. For that reason, I have chosen to focus the next chapter exclusively on reconstructing the broader social context in which Osteen’s specific audience finds itself.

A final note must be made pertaining to the nature of Osteen’s rhetoric itself, which positions this thesis not only as rhetorical criticism, but also as a study of religious rhetoric. While Osteen’s message contains a specific doctrine, I have deliberately refrained from analyzing his rhetoric from a theological perspective. As a social critic, I am not concerned with the merit of his doctrine, but with why that doctrine is effectively persuading listeners. Authors James Darsey and Joshua R. Ritter note, “Religious rhetoric is thoroughly grounded, on the one hand, in the material realities that situate rhetorical endeavors; yet it lays claim, on the other hand, to the supernal.”<sup>30</sup> This points to a tension one faces as a religious rhetoric scholar, which is that there is an inexplicable connection to the divine, but one that is perhaps aided or accessed through rhetorical means. In light of that tension, this project is aimed not to explain the theological intricacies of the connection Osteen’s followers have to God, or to debate the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>30</sup> Darsey, James, and Joshua R. Ritter. "Religious Voices in American Public Discourse." In *Rhetoric and Public Discourse*, 553-586. n.d.

soundness of his doctrine or suggest a different Biblical interpretation; rather it is to understand what rhetorical mechanisms underlie the foundations of his success as a speaker in drawing such a large number of followers.

Few scholarly works exist that attempt to explain Osteen's success. Helje Sodal's piece "Victor, not Victim": Joel Osteen's Rhetoric of Hope,"<sup>31</sup> is the only rhetorical project to date. Her article, while accurately summarizing Osteen's rhetoric and highlighting several notable themes, fails to connect Osteen's message to a larger cultural context. She is remiss in assuming that the cultural narratives informing his readers are not of vital importance to the reception of his message. This study contributes a well-rounded picture of Osteen's audience and connects his message to a broader cultural context. Darsey and Ritter propose sites for future religious rhetoric studies, claiming, "We need more attention to the conditions that seem to bring religious discourse into prominence."<sup>32</sup> This study attempts to uncover the conditions that have brought Osteen's rhetoric into prominence, as well as uncover how his charisma functions to delight, entertain, and persuade listeners. The novelty of this project fills not only a gap in the study of an important religious figure, but also contributes to the body of religious rhetoric as a whole.

### **Sites of Study**

Joel Osteen has managed to capitalize on his success by turning himself into a brand name - complete with an entire line of products and services. His web presence alone features a personal website for himself and Victoria, as well as a co-authored blog. Osteen is also represented on all the major social networking sites (albeit unofficially at times), including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The Lakewood Church's website features a prominent picture

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<sup>31</sup> Sodal, Helje K. "'Victor, not Victim': Joel Osteen's Rhetoric of Hope." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25, no. 1 (2010): 37-

<sup>32</sup> Darsey and Ritter, 571.

of Osteen and directs visitors to the church store where they can purchase Osteen's latest books, as well as transcripts of his sermons, CDs, and even desk calendars. His messages are available for purchase through the church store, but can also be seen on live television, online video streaming, Podcasts, and select YouTube clips. Combining his web presence with weekly television appearances, multiple book deals, and interviews on almost every syndicated network in America and one can see why Osteen has been likened to a kind of religious celebrity.

Osteen has produced a vast number of texts available for rhetorical analysis. Therefore, I have chosen a set of texts that I find most representative of Osteen's style to use in a close analysis of his rhetoric. I have chosen texts from his television, print, and web-based ministries to cover the distinct spheres in which Osteen has a presence. This design will give readers a well-rounded picture of his ministry, as well as fully highlight the repetition of themes and metaphors across the media of Osteen's work.

To represent Osteen's television presence, I have chosen to transcribe one of his sermons that showcase the major themes present in his other work. The sermon is entitled "Seeing Your Set Time Coming"<sup>33</sup> and centers on God's promise to give the faithful believer everything he asks in due time. I've chosen this sermon because it reveals major themes of the prosperity gospel, while also demonstrating Osteen's unique rhetorical contributions.

Osteen's print-based ministry is centered on his first and most successful book, *Your Best Life Now*,<sup>34</sup> making this work essential to my analysis. The book gives readers seven steps to help them live a better life and reach their full potential. The chapter titles give insight into the main message of the book, which advocates for a positive outlook as essential to cultivating happiness and blessings in life. The titles are upbeat directives like "Enlarge your Vision,"

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<sup>33</sup> Osteen, Joel. *Seeing Your Set Time Coming*. Episode no. 452, first broadcast 19 December 2010. Joel Osteen Ministries.

<sup>34</sup> Osteen, Joel. *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. New York: Faith Words, 2004.

“Develop a Healthy Self-Image,” and “Choose to Be Happy,” just to name a few. This text provides a rich understanding of the heart of Osteen’s rhetoric, as well as a wide base for understanding the major tenets of his message. While this book will be my main site of exploration, I will also draw supporting information from his second book, *Become a Better You*,<sup>35</sup> which gives readers seven more keys to living better every day. The steps do not expand much from Osteen’s first book, but include the same reader-friendly messages to be positive, embrace their circumstances, and accept themselves. These two texts comprise the scope of Osteen’s message, and provide a strong representation of his overall style.

I have chosen to supplement my findings by drawing on elements found in the blog co-authored by Osteen and his wife Victoria Osteen. This text is unique in that it includes reader comments, which give insight into the perceived relationship between Osteen and his followers and into how readers understand his rhetoric. By including a site that allows for reader interaction, a richer analysis becomes possible as one delves further into the effect Osteen has on the responses of his audience. Finally, the co-authored blog provides more material for studying the role Victoria Osteen has in her husband’s success and for analyzing the effect their unified partnership has on Osteen’s overall image.

As outlined in the method and orientation section, an effective analysis of Osteen’s message would be remiss without first taking the time to understand the cultural context in which it is delivered. Specifically, Osteen’s message must be understood in the context of the moral society in which we live. In order to understand how his audience might receive particular messages, it is necessary to study the traditions and trends that shape how American culture has developed its moral constitution. Competing discourses exist pertaining to the nature of individualism, each requiring the individual to make specific moral judgments about how to live.

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<sup>35</sup> Osteen, Joel. *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day*. New York: Free Press, 2007.

Understanding the extent of these discourses will enable readers to understand how individuals might receive and interpret messages in order to make value judgments.

In light of this need, I have chosen to focus the second chapter on detailing social and historical trends that have shaped the present moral landscape. The chapter seeks to outline the exigences facing Osteen's audience and serves to setup the context for later analysis. The third chapter is the longest and broadly overviews the rhetorical situation into which Osteen speaks. The focus of chapter three is on the strategies Osteen uses to persuade and convince his followers, with particular attention to the kinds of identifications being generated between speaker and audience. The concluding chapter considers potential implications of Osteen's message and speculates about its ability to create positive and lasting change in the life of an individual.

## **Chapter II: Social and Historical Trends Influencing Modern Conceptions of Morality**

A full appreciation of Osteen's rhetoric is only possible through an understanding of the conditions that have invited his message. Bitzer writes, "A particular discourse comes into existence because of some specific condition or situation which invites utterance."<sup>36</sup> This implies that certain conditions require specific types of responses, and that a successful speaker must understand the context into which he speaks. Additionally, an appropriate message will address the tensions, anxieties and problems experienced by an audience and provide them with strategies to manage or resolve the strains they feel.

Osteen must address the anxieties felt by listeners who are faced with the multiple moral realities characteristic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His audience is situated in a culture that has long-heralded the individual as the prevailing moral authority, with self-gain and freedom of choice being the benchmarks of success. Modern advances in technology and production have elevated consumption and accumulation of goods as a main priority, while simultaneously breaking down the networks of community that once defined American life. Continuing trends draw the individual away from community and into a privatized space, focusing ambitions on achieving success and satisfaction through the consumption of material goods. Osteen must handle the competing ideologies about how an individual ought to pursue wealth, happiness, and success in a culture whose main currents often favor an "anything goes" mentality.

This chapter focuses on the broad social and environmental trends that help shape the worlds of Osteen's audience, which thus gives insight into why his message is so powerful. Without knowing the pressures, anxieties, and tensions felt by his audience, one is unable to understand how Osteen addresses those difficulties. A complete study of the factors contributing to our cultural mindset would be impossible in the scope of this thesis. A sample of ideas from

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<sup>36</sup> Bitzer, 4.

several different authors, however, will give insight into why so many people are responding to Osteen's rhetoric. The ideas of these authors can be broadly categorized into the trends shaping American individualism, ways Americans have responded to those trends, and finally, current problems facing the individual.

### **The Cultural Context Shaping American Individualism**

In the book *Habits of the Heart*, author Robert Bellah and a group of colleagues studied the relationship between individualism and commitment in American life. They found that several traditions, or strands, in American history profoundly shape our current view of moral life. The first strand discussed by Bellah is "the Biblical" tradition established by the Puritans who colonized early America.<sup>37</sup> The Puritans placed great value on Christian community, which they viewed as the bedrock of a successful society. Bellah uses the example of John Winthrop as an exemplar for understanding the mind of the Puritan society as a whole. He quotes Winthrop who said, "We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body."<sup>38</sup> While the Puritans were not above collecting material wealth, their ultimate concern was with cultivating a moral community in which each member exhibited charity towards his neighbor. Puritan ideals held that true liberty was not simply the unbridled pursuit of self-gain, but was achieved only by exercising positive moral freedom, described by Winthrop as doing "that only which is good, just, and honest."<sup>39</sup> Thus their liberty, a central theme in the American cultural identity, was defined in terms of their adherence to Christian principles.

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<sup>37</sup> Bellah, Robert N., Richard L. Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996., 28.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 29.

The second strand discussed by Bellah is the civic republican strand. Christian principles certainly informed the morality of individuals following this tradition, but such principles became a ritualized part of society rather than a framework for determining conduct. For example, public discourse often invoked “the laws of nature and of nature’s God,”<sup>40</sup> while dictating the distinct separation of church and state. Thomas Jefferson, a figurehead of the civic republican strand of thinking, believed that “freedom was not so tightly tied to substantive morality.”<sup>41</sup> Rather, Jefferson believed that freedom would be preserved in the presence of a small government, as well as a highly educated, participatory public. Indeed the thrust of Jefferson’s ideology was in the involvement of citizens. Bellah notes, “The ideal of a self-governing society of relative equals in which all participate is what guided Jefferson all his life.”<sup>42</sup> Jefferson’s vision of society included a public that worked together for greater good. Although he diverged somewhat from Winthrop’s sharp Christian ideals, he continued the tradition of a public that worked together in loyalty to a community. His admonition to “love your neighbor as yourself, and your country more than yourself”<sup>43</sup> still carries a direct Biblical reference as well as an implicit command to devote oneself to the community.

A third strand noted by Bellah is what he calls “utilitarian individualism.”<sup>44</sup> Just as Bellah used Winthrop and Jefferson as exemplars of previous strands, so he uses Benjamin Franklin to explain utilitarian individualism. Franklin, who felt “uncomfortable with the Puritanism of his native Boston”<sup>45</sup> still embraced the Christian tradition to some extent, although Bellah notes his espousal of Christian values may have been “more for their social utility than for their ultimate

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

truth.”<sup>46</sup> At any rate, Franklin’s writings and life-philosophy were influenced by the core values stemming from Christianity. In many cases, however, he repackaged those values into practical maxims that have now become mainstream expressions.

Although Franklin and the Puritans both believed in Christian ideals, Franklin departed from them in his view of community. The cornerstone of the utilitarian view is that America operates on “the chance for the individual to get ahead on his own initiative.”<sup>47</sup> Notably absent are the assertions of both Winthrop and Jefferson who believed that success was contingent on creating a charitable community. To the utilitarian individualist, success is marked by the ability to excel at one’s vocation, amass material wealth, advance in social circles, and otherwise make a name for oneself through individually focused success.

The needs of the community are not completely disregarded, but the path to community-good is altered. Instead of sacrificing individual desires for the good of the whole, some argued that “in a society where each vigorously pursued his own interest, the social good would automatically emerge.”<sup>48</sup> Utilitarian individualism thus radically diverges from earlier Puritan and republican ideas in terms of what constitutes true freedom, how we ought to pursue success, and how the individual ought to relate to his community.

A final tradition observed by Bellah is that of expressive individualism. Expressive individualism developed partly in response to Franklin’s utilitarian individualism. Many felt his view left “too little room for love, human feeling, and a deeper expression of the self.”<sup>49</sup> The new wave of individualist ideology advocated a sense of self-discovery. Bellah focuses on Walt Whitman as an example of this viewpoint, and specifically notes that for Whitman success was

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

not tethered to financial prosperity, but was measured on the individual's ability to amass experiences. Whitman's virtues included being open to others and a having deep inner connection to the self. "A life rich in experience open to all kinds of people, luxuriating in the sensual as well as the intellectual, above all a life of strong feeling, was what (Whitman) perceived as a successful life."<sup>50</sup> Unlike the Puritan-based notion of freedom (which relied on moral values shared by a community), freedom for the expressive individualist "was above all, the freedom to express oneself, against constraints and conventions."<sup>51</sup> Thus this last tradition effectively severed the individual identity from responsibility to any external standard. In this view, each person becomes the arbiter of his own morality, whose highest goal is "to cultivate and express the self and explore its vast social and cosmic identities."<sup>52</sup> The implications of this viewpoint are far-reaching and perhaps most strikingly resemble the mindset of most modern Americans.

As Americans increasingly adopt the ideological principles of expressive individualism, their community involvement has begun to decline. In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam traces the diminishing involvement of American civic engagement (specifically the kind of involvement described in Bellah's civic republican strand). Putnam notes that Americans have a history of participating in civic life, of fostering strong communities, and of establishing organizations loyal to a common cause. During the past few decades, however, our society has seen a steady decline in membership of social and political activity.<sup>53</sup> The result, according to Putnam, is a society in which we "maintain a façade

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Putnam, Robert T. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Touchstone, 2001.

of formal affiliation, but we rarely show up.”<sup>54</sup> Instead of building long-term communities based on common goals, social trends now dictate the rise of special interest groups with no expectations of outstanding commitment. In other words, “More of our social connectedness is one shot, special purpose, and self-oriented.”<sup>55</sup> The result is a generation only thinly connected to the types of formal engagements that used to characterize our society.

Authors Charles Lemert and Anthony Elliott detail reasons for declining involvement in their book, *Deadly Worlds: The Emotional Cost of Globalization*. Their work analyzes the effects of globalization on our notion of individualism, as well as the emotional tolls of living in a world that is rapidly changing. Lemert and Elliot criticize Bellah for failing to account for the economic factors that influence how an individual formulates identity. They assert that Bellah’s analysis is simplistic in the sense that it downplays consumerism as a driving force behind how people define themselves. Instead, the authors assert that Bellah focuses too much on religious and republican traditions as sources of identity. This, they say, leaves Bellah “celebrating an image of individualism from a bygone age.”<sup>56</sup> The authors seek to understand factors shaping the modern individual, rather than focusing on historical traditions shaping the American mindset, and they assert “the condition of globalism actually changes how people think-- about themselves, about others and the wider world.”<sup>57</sup> From this perspective, an analysis of globalization is critically important in understanding the contexts and frameworks through which Americans are interpreting and receiving cultural messages.

Lemert and Elliot describe the culture of globalization as one that perpetuates an economic message of expansion, progress, growth, innovation and cutting-edge developments. As Wendy

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<sup>54</sup> Putnam, 183.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>56</sup> Lemert, Charles, and Anthony Elliot. *Deadly Worlds: The Emotional Costs of Globalization*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2006., 56.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 79.

Brown has observed, globalism has also dictated the rising popularity of neoliberalism, a form of political reasoning that “casts the political and social spheres both as appropriately dominated by market concern and as themselves organized by market rationality.”<sup>58</sup> Lemert and Elliot make the assertion that the neoliberal mindset has transgressed the boundaries of the political sphere and now dominates the ways in which individuals approach their personal lives. They write, “Our language for representing and elaborating our image of self-identity is more and more fixed into a syntax of possession, ownership, control, and market value. What we are suggesting is that people today increasingly suffer from an emotionally pathologizing version of neoliberalism.”<sup>59</sup> This assertion suggests that identity is rooted in the ability to purchase commodities, and freedom of expression is dependent upon obtaining material goods. Thus economics play a vital role in the how the individual understands and defines himself.

### **Responses to Trends Shaping Individualism**

The changing social climate gives rise to a variety of responses as each person attempts to make sense of shifts in cultural ideology and material realities. Several notable responses are worth further study to understand the forces acting upon individuals as they navigate the social climate.

Bellah describes the emergence of one such response, a character he labels the Manager. Individuals possessing a managerial mindset are focused on acquiring wealth by utilizing the resources around them. People with this view believe that wealth is the vehicle for freedom, making it a highly coveted end. Central to the worldview of the Manager are qualities like hard

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<sup>58</sup> Brown, Wendy. "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization." *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006): 690-714.

<sup>59</sup> Lemert and Elliot, *Deadly Worlds*, 36.

work, progress, achievement, and material gain. The Manager is “a self-made man of means,”<sup>60</sup> intent on rising to the top. He operates with the goal to “persuade, inspire, manipulate, cajole, and intimidate those he manages so that his organization measures up to the criteria of effectiveness shaped ultimately by the market.”<sup>61</sup>

Bellah also describes the character of the Therapist. Like the Manager, the Therapist is focused on achieving results. Rather than monetary gain, however, the measure of success according to this view is “the elusive criterion of personal satisfaction.”<sup>62</sup> As a result, the Therapist does not rely on eliciting the best from others or manipulating the environment to produce a product consistent with market demands. Instead, the Therapist looks inward, calling the patient to harness resources he already possesses to build a lifestyle that will satisfy his personal desires. In this view, traditional morality is rendered obsolete in the face of individual pursuits. Instead, the focus is centered on “the autonomous individual, presumed able to choose the roles he will play and the commitments he will make, not based on higher truths but according to the criterion of life-effectiveness as the individual judges it.”<sup>63</sup> The mindsets of both the Manager and the Therapist place the individual as an independent arbiter of morality, capable and responsible for fashioning a lifestyle that will bring personal fulfillment.

Lemert and Elliot confirm much of what Bellah asserts, although they attribute shifts in individual priorities to a global state of economic dislocation. In their view, “the individual self--in extending its imperial sway over the environment--liquidates the solidity and substance of the world into a privatized terrain of needs and desires.”<sup>64</sup> In this assertion, one can see the utilitarian desire for material success as it combines with the expressive individualist’s desire to pursue

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<sup>60</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 44.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Lemert and Elliot, *Deadly Worlds*, 36.

self-exploration, creating a fusion in which the self is explored and defined through material goods. Thus, the individual is focused almost exclusively on his own needs and desires, and looks to purchasable goods as a way of attaining personal satisfaction. The significance of accumulating goods extends beyond mere material possession, as it becomes the vehicle for self-expression and identity.

The result of increased material consumption is a condition Lemert and Elliot label as privatization. “As science and new technologies offer alternative paradigms and possibilities for social life, we have replaced the old contexts of tradition and custom with a focus on our individual selves.”<sup>65</sup> Material goods have replaced the role of community in determining a person’s identity, resulting in a population of people who are increasingly separated from others in pursuit of their own desires. This causes them to retreat further and further into a world of their own construction. Bellah asserts that the language of individualism that dominates our cultural narrative “values independence and self-reliance above all else.”<sup>66</sup> Elliot and Lemert focus on the effects of this fierce self-reliance, which isolates the individual from his neighbors and reinforces the privatized space he has carved out for himself. Consequently, these cultural narratives weaken the bond between the individual and the community, removing the support structures that once helped foster identity and belonging. With less community support, the privatized individual has few resources for managing the anxieties and tensions experienced in a global world—tensions that will be explored more thoroughly in the following section.

### **Problems Facing the Individual**

Traditions that shape the modern individual produce a variety of responses, resulting in a

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>66</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, viii.

set of unique challenges for people attempting to deal with a rapidly changing world. A tension many authors have eluded to is the tension between individual autonomy and community involvement. Bellah cites the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman who came to the United States in the 1800s to observe the lessons being learned by “the first truly modern nation.”<sup>67</sup> Tocqueville studied the moral climate of America and observed the tensions faced by citizens concerning their willingness to engage in community affairs. Bellah summarizes his findings: “For as Tocqueville saw, the American, that new kind of person, was a tentative character type shaped by inherited values on the one hand and the challenges of the expanding frontier on the other.”<sup>68</sup> This tension was observable in the 1800s and persists today, though in different ways.

Our culture is one originally built upon Puritan and civic republican values of community, yet highly influenced by the individualist mindset. Individuals want certain benefits of community--friendship, belonging, security-- but prefer a more liberal definition of freedom than the one offered by Winthrop. Franklin’s notion that an individual can exert control over his own destiny, without any real responsibility to a larger group of people, has wide appeal for an audience looking to break away from the constraints of community. Franklin’s view, however, is criticized on the basis that it leaves “too little room for love, human feeling, and a deeper expression of the self.”<sup>69</sup> Bellah summarizes the work of sociologist Herve Varenne who also noted this trend. About the tensions faced by Americans, he concluded, “The drive toward independence and mastery only makes sense where the individual can also find a context to express the love and happiness that are his deepest feelings and desires.”<sup>70</sup> The current problem

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<sup>67</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 36.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

of Americans thus lies in the ability to construct that specific context in which they can retain a sense of individualism, while remaining part of a community that allows expression of deeper feelings and connectedness.

Along with a tension between community involvement and unrestricted individualist pursuits is a struggle over how to fashion and maintain an identity in a world of prolific choice and economic dislocation. Lemert and Elliot describe the impact of globalization as one that allows many individuals unrestricted freedom and rapidly expanding options to pursue personal happiness; happiness is considered the product of economic freedom that allows the individual flexibility to pursue the material goods of their choice. More choices seem to naturally equate to more happiness, but the work of Barry Schwartz reveals a surprising outcome. Schwartz's book, *The Paradox of Choice*, studies the emotional and psychological effect expanding choices have on individuals. His findings: "Having too many choices produces psychological distress, especially when combined with regret, concern about status, adaptation, social comparison, and perhaps most important, the desire to have the best of everything."<sup>71</sup> He expands this notion by explaining how increasing choices cause people to obsess over the available options, wondering if they might be able to get a better deal elsewhere. Increased choice also breeds paranoia over missed opportunities, creating a tendency to compare oneself with others and feel disappointment or regret over decisions. Schwartz's work centers on the idea that while more choices increase happiness to some extent, they eventually overwhelm and paralyze the consumer and people influenced by consumerist cultural discourses.

Schwartz's work more generally points to a trend of consumption that leaves individuals insecure and dissatisfied. As Bellah notes, the values of independence and self-

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<sup>71</sup> Schwartz, Barry M. *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc, 2004, 221.

reliance “are expected to win the rewards of success in a competitive society, but they are also valued as virtues good in themselves.”<sup>72</sup> Thus we have a moral understanding that individualism is inherently good, and will bring about the success that is a deeply rooted part of our collective American dream. This becomes problematic in our modern culture, however. As Bellah points out, “Individualism has been sustainable over time in the United States only because it has been supported and checked by other, more generous moral understandings.”<sup>73</sup> With the rise of moral plurality, which dictates that each man have the right to choose his own standards, individualism is left without the checks and balances that prevented isolation and severity. Now, the individual is left without community support, due to his own desire for unrestricted moral freedom, leaving him with only purchasable goods as a way of filling the void of identity and belonging.

In this setting, the expectation that “economic success or misfortune is the individual’s responsibility, and his or hers alone”<sup>74</sup> is still present, but is frequently not offset by a security and reassurance of community. Lemert and Elliot note, “The culture of advanced individualism has ushered into existence a world of individual risk taking, experimentation, and self-expression-- which in turn is underpinned by new forms of apprehension, anguish, and anxiety stemming from the perils of globalization.”<sup>75</sup> This leaves individuals alone to achieve success and formulate identity—a feat that is further complicated by the available number of choices and avenues for expression.

The struggle for identity and security produces several outcomes. First, it causes people to intensely examine and question their own power. The net effect of constant change is that people feel out of control. They “seek reassurance of their independence and power in an

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<sup>72</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, viii.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>75</sup> Lemert and Elliot, *Deadly Worlds*, 11.

overwhelmingly indifferent and impersonal world.”<sup>76</sup> Bellah asserts that contemporary culture, “adulates winners while showing contempt for losers, a contempt that can descend with crushing weight on those considered, either by others or by themselves, to be moral or social failures.”<sup>77</sup> This fear, when combined with an increased dependence on commodities, places a huge pressure on the individual to succeed or risk losing their sense of worth and identity. Individuals thus feel great pressure to maintain power, and exert that power to secure financial success (which is then translated as personal security). This emphasis on material acquisition is also observed by Schwartz, who asserts that people obsess over their available choices. He describes this personality type as a maximizer, explaining, “Maximizers need to be assured that every purchase or decision was the best that could be made.”<sup>78</sup> Because the Maximizer wants to make the *best* choice out of a seemingly endless array of possibilities, a painstaking process of comparison results. The Maximizer spends a lot of time examining all the options, comparing them, and constantly looking for better opportunities. Schwartz warns that maximizing contributes to an overall sense of discontent and regret about decisions, resulting in a perpetual quest for perfection that leaves the individual anxious and depressed.<sup>79</sup> The tendency to maximize is symptomatic of a culture dependent on material goods to achieve satisfaction. The anxiety and depression that come from making a bad purchases, points to a deep reliance on commodities as a way of reproducing the security that used to come from relationships.

The rapid pace of changing products, updated technology, and cutting-edge trends has developed an expectation of constant turnover, which contributes to an overall feeling of powerlessness and anxiety. Fear of abandonment is perhaps, the defining strain felt by

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, viii.

<sup>78</sup> Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice*, 77.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 89-94.

individuals. Lemert and Elliot observe, “An ambient fear- of being dumped, of becoming waste, of exclusion has become the emotional backdrop to the theater of globalization.”<sup>80</sup> Though expected, this turnover creates rising anxiety for people constantly competing in an evolving market. Economic realities like cost cutting and outsourcing amplify these fears, leaving people vulnerable and disadvantaged. This dynamic also creates anxiety in human relationships when people wonder if they will be left behind like other outdated “products”. Schwartz mentions a social tendency that greatly contributes to the fear of being left behind. He notes that people often engage in social comparison, and asserts, “If you live in a social world, as we all do, you are always being hit with information about how others are doing.”<sup>81</sup> This knowledge can create an intensely critical and introspective tendency in the individual, resulting in an unhealthy need to keep up for fear of being left behind.

Exacerbating this fear-culture is the tendency of the individual to become increasingly private. As community concerns become more and more absorbed by personal desires, people find themselves with few relationships from which to draw support. Cultural narratives reinforce this tendency by lionizing the image of an all-sufficient individual. This has undoubtedly contributed to a culture dependent on therapy to make sense of and re-gain control over personal circumstances. The rise of expressive individualism encouraged individuals to explore their feelings, but the withdrawal from community has left few places for such expression. Lemert and Elliot note that some have “turned to therapy as a means to limit the emotional impacts of globalization.”<sup>82</sup> Beyond therapy, the individual is left with few resources for managing the anxieties that accompany increasing choice and its subsequent threat to identity. As people grapple with internal struggles and economic realities, they experience rising fears of

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<sup>80</sup> Lemert and Elliot, *Deadly Worlds*, 91.

<sup>81</sup> Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice*, 189.

<sup>82</sup> Lemert and Elliot, *Deadly Worlds*, 93.

abandonment, disadvantage and failure, and have few outlets for negotiating the meaning of such fears.

Competing moral languages have contributed to the current anxieties facing the individual. Cultural discourses have long heralded economic success as the crowning achievement of individualism, yet this message has traditionally been embedded in a context of community loyalty and commitment. With the rise of moral plurality, however, individualism has taken on increased isolation as people withdraw from community and begin to look elsewhere for fulfillment. This has resulted in an increased reliance on commodities to produce personal security. Economic trends have produced environments marked by impersonal and often cutthroat competition. As neoliberal ideals spread from public policy initiatives into ways of relating to the self and others, the arena of human relationships has become dominated by the pursuit of efficiency, control, and economic gain. According to Lemert and Elliot, the resulting emotional effects of globalism have left individuals riddled with anxiety as they attempt to cope with mounting fear and pressure, leaving them with few resources beyond therapy for negotiating the strains they feel.

The modern individual faces decisions about how to best pursue economic success, without sacrificing personal happiness or the expression of self. The tension between community and individualism remains a central problem, which is complicated further by the ushering in of commodities as a solution to identity crises and personal dissatisfaction. Joel Osteen has managed to craft a message that incorporates multiple moral languages in a way that resolves many of the tensions described in this chapter. While it may seem that any positive message could resolve such tensions, Osteen's message sets him apart from other motivational speakers through a deliberate invocation of a higher power. Unlike secular messages, Osteen's message

transfers the anxieties of modernity onto an omnipotent being, effectively removing the individual from culpability in determining his own success (a phenomenon I intend to fully develop in later chapters). While this chapter has set up many of the exigences facing the modern individual, the remaining chapters will focus on Osteen's response to these problems. An in-depth analysis of his rhetoric will highlight the ways in which Osteen draws on the available resources for navigating the dilemmas facing his audience. I will move now into a discussion of the rhetorical situation, which addresses Osteen's methods as a speaker.

### Chapter III: The Rhetorical Situation

Television broadcasts of Joel Osteen generally feature screen-shots of the speaker himself, without much attention to the crowd. Occasionally, however, Osteen's more stirring points elicit shouts and whoops from the audience—reminding home-viewers of the crowded sea of people energetically approving his every word. Shots panning the audience result in a visual overload as row after row of people are shown, amounting to an indistinguishable multitude of waving hands. Close-ups reveal intently focused listeners, often with their eyes closed, hands waving in the air, and tears streaming down their faces. The atmosphere is emotionally electric, igniting a visceral current that pulses through the crowd.

The effect of Joel Osteen's message is seen and felt through the overwhelming displays of emotion in his church, and reaffirmed through the large crowds that consistently assemble to hear him speak. The number of followers Osteen has managed to generate suggests that his message is meeting a need that many people feel. The preceding chapters described the cultural context Osteen speaks into, and this chapter attempts to build on that knowledge by addressing the culture-specific response Osteen's rhetoric has in alleviating and soothing the anxieties of modern life.

My analysis is largely informed by Lloyd Bitzer's article, "The Rhetorical Situation." His work explains the component parts that make up a rhetorical situation, defined as "the context in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse."<sup>83</sup> While Bitzer mentions many factors that influence a rhetorical event, he divides the rhetorical situation into three broad categories: exigence, audience, and constraints. Understanding how these parts work together enables readers to more fully grasp the factors and devices used by a rhetor to influence an audience.

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<sup>83</sup> Bitzer, Lloyd F. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (n.d.), 1.

### *Exigence*

The exigence in a rhetorical situation dictates the character of the response. It is, by definition, “an imperfection marked by urgency,”<sup>84</sup> and can be understood as the problem a rhetor seeks to mediate through discourse. Bitzer adds to this definition by asserting that every situation carries multiple exigences, but delineates between them by claiming that not all exigences are rhetorical. Only imperfection that can be modified through discourse is considered rhetorical in this context. Thus exigences like “death, winter, and some natural disasters”<sup>85</sup> may indeed be problems, but their resolution remains impervious to change by way of discourse, and therefore, cannot be labeled as rhetorical exigences.

Amidst these various exigences, rhetorical and otherwise, Bitzer notes that there exists “at least one controlling exigence which functions as the organizing principle.”<sup>86</sup> This controlling exigence “specifies the audience to be addressed and the change to be effected.”<sup>87</sup> It stands to reason then, that an analysis of Joel Osteen’s rhetoric can best be understood through a careful study of the controlling exigence and its relation to both his audience and the change to which he calls them.

The previous chapter illuminated the effect competing cultural discourses have had on individuals, specifically in relation to the construction of identity and the search for meaning in life. American cultural narratives have elevated individualism as a central virtue, prizing the people who navigate their way to success on the strength of their own initiative. As Bellah notes, these messages were classically underpinned by a strong expectation of community involvement,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

but the decline of public engagement has left individuals with fewer resources for constructing a sense of belonging and identity once provided by community. The emergence of globalism as an economic trend has elevated the value of commodities, making the acquisition of material goods a kind of substitute for the self-definition formerly produced by meaningful relationships. As a result, modernity is marked by materialism that transcends the corporeal sphere and manifests itself in the very essence of selfhood.

The combination of these social and economic influences is a cultural message that at once places demands on an individual to know himself and use that knowledge to produce material success, while also obscuring the traditional methods used to anchor identity (i.e.- consistent affiliation with a group). While community involvement is not entirely obsolete, it is predicated on the understanding that loyalty to a group should never override or inhibit individual self-expression, giving group membership to anything an increasingly transient quality as the individual evolves morally and socially. While ephemeral connections are generally tolerated in the public sphere, there remains a cultural expectation to produce personal success-- defined almost exclusively in fiscal terms with the surging value of commodities.

A modern exigence thus emerges as a kind quest for identity and belonging that will neither sacrifice individual expression, nor inhibit the path to material success. Osteen's challenge lies in fostering a community conducive to free self-expression, while administering the appropriate resources to soothe any anxieties his audience might feel regarding their personal or material realities.

### *Audience*

The second component of a rhetorical situation is the audience to which the rhetoric is

addressed. Bitzer asserts that “a rhetorical audience must be distinguished from a body of mere hearers or readers,”<sup>88</sup> implying that the audience is a specific sector of listeners and not simply the natural consequence of public discourse. Bitzer qualifies the rhetorical audience as one that “consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change.”<sup>89</sup> Thus the rhetorical audience only includes those who are open to being persuaded by a message and have the capacity to carry out the change that the rhetoric calls them to produce.

Osteen’s audience can be broadly separated into two groups: his physical congregation at Houston’s Lakewood church and his larger television audience. No current studies are available that detail the specific demographics of either audience. However, general trends can be observed as a means of understanding the socioeconomic characteristics of religious television audiences, as well as the current economic conditions in Houston. In a study analyzing why people watch religious television, Robert Abelman found the following: “The audience for religious broadcasting has been characterized succinctly as demographically downscale...that is, typically older, poorer, less educated, and more likely to be blue-collar than the average American TV viewer.”<sup>90</sup> These findings characterize Osteen’s audience as more economically vulnerable than the average television viewer, which in turn suggests an audience with predisposed sensitivity to messages promising financial and situational upturn.

The city of Houston reported above average rates of poverty in the US Census Bureau’s 2005-2009 American Community Survey. The survey estimated that 17.3% of Houston families and 20.8% of individuals were living below the poverty line, significantly higher than national

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Abelman, Robert. "Why Do People Watch Religious TV?: A Uses and Gratifications Approach." *Review of Religious Research* 29, no. 2 (1987): 199 -210., 199.

averages of 9.9% and 13.5% respectively. Those living above the poverty line still live on slightly less than the average American; the median income in Houston was reported at \$47, 278, while the national average was \$51, 425.<sup>91</sup> These statistics reveal a population in the midst of an economic struggle-- not only to stay above the poverty line, but also to compete with healthier and more vibrant economies across the nation and the world.

The audience is further constructed through their relationship to Osteen's message. While his discourse is situated in the Christian tradition, it remains a more theologically open message focusing primarily on validating and including members. Osteen's message shies away from discussing the doctrinal particulars that might limit his number of followers, focusing instead on God's character and avoiding issues that have traditionally divided congregations. When asked if he condemned people who believed differently, Osteen responded, "I try not to do that...I'm for everybody. You may not agree with me, but to me it's not my job to try to straighten everybody out. The Gospel is called the good news. My message is a message of hope, that God's for you."<sup>92</sup> By claiming he is "for everybody," Osteen effectively makes his message available not only for Christian believers, but also for anyone who might be searching or questioning. The assertion that he is not trying to "straighten everybody out," implies that his message specifically seeks to inform listeners, rather than coercing them to change. This is followed up with a reminder that he shares "good news," that will encourage and uplift his audience, and that God himself accepts everyone.

Osteen's affirming language seeks to cover over differences by assuring his congregation that God's love is for everyone. This is combined with a deliberate shift away from polarizing issues, making Osteen's brand of Christianity broad enough to fit the needs of most any spiritual

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<sup>91</sup> US Census Bureau . "005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates." <http://factfinder.census.gov/>.

<sup>92</sup> King, Larry. "Interview With Joel Osteen ." CNN.

consumer. The result is a widening of Osteen's rhetorical audience, which includes not only traditional Christian believers, but also anyone who might be searching for meaning or motivation in life.

### *Constraints*

The final component of the rhetorical situation is what Bitzer labels as constraints. Though traditionally thought of only as restrictions, Bitzer classifies constraints as any force that has "the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence."<sup>93</sup> In this sense constraints are comprised of much more than restrictive powers. Indeed, "standard sources of constraint include beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like."<sup>94</sup> Constraints, in a rhetorical sense, are the materials a rhetor draws upon, both within himself and the environment in which he lives, that become pivotal resources for affecting change.

While many constraints are present in Osteen's message, I have chosen to focus on the artistic proofs Osteen draws upon to persuade his audience. Aristotle stated: "Of the *pisteis* provided through speech there are three species; for some are in the character (*ethos*) of the speaker, and some in disposing the listener in some way, and some in the speech (*logos*) itself."<sup>95</sup> This classification provides a general classification for understanding the various strategies employed by Osteen as he influences his audience.

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<sup>93</sup> Bitzer, *The Rhetorical Situation*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> *Aristotle on Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. 2nd ed. Translated by George A. Kennedy. 37-148. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007., 38.

### *Artistic Proofs*

The artistic proofs used by Joel Osteen deserve detailed analysis as a means of understanding his appeal to audience members, as well as providing insight into how the content of his rhetoric is legitimized through the use of his personality and style.

The *ethos* of Joel Osteen, which is based on the audiences' perception of his character, serves as a foundation and platform for the acceptance of his message. Osteen must market himself as a believable source before making any requests of his audience, specifically because his message relies on faith as its foundation. "We believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly (than we do others), on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt," Aristotle suggested.<sup>96</sup> The nature of Osteen's message relies on audience members to make an informed judgment—a decision that rests largely on Osteen's ability to argue convincingly.

Several notable trends emerge when deciphering what exactly gives Osteen such credibility amongst his audience members. The first is his personal circumstance. Osteen promotes the idea that we "receive what we believe" and goes on to assert that God will help faithful believers, "to rise above (their) obstacles, to live in health, abundance, healing, and victory."<sup>97</sup> Osteen's personal life confirms this idea. He is a young, wildly popular, multi-millionaire known for his positive attitude, winning smile, happy marriage, and loving family. He seems to have tapped into his own description of God's blessing. After all, he appears to be living in health, abundance, and victory. In her rhetorical analysis of Osteen, Helje Sodal observes that Osteen "enters the vast auditorium half running, smiling and waving to the congregation like a celebrity

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 73, 76.

in front of his fans. This entrance radiates vitality, authority, and success.”<sup>98</sup> Were this same message of blessing to come from a haggard, impoverished, inconsequential person, it would be received with leery skepticism at best. Indeed, Osteen seems to be testifying through his own life, lending support to his message by performing the outcome he promises to believers. He seems to have it all, and he attributes it to a specific pattern of behavior, making the call to follow him seem much more reasonable.

Contributing to his believability is the prominent presence of Osteen’s own family as an integral part of his ministry. Throughout his sermons and book chapters, Osteen includes personal narratives and examples from his own life. For instance, his first book includes humorous anecdotes about his children, stories about his mother’s struggle with cancer, and even a description of the intimate moments he shared with his dying father. Osteen describes the scene:

As I was about to walk out the door of my parents’ kitchen, Daddy called me back and gave me a great big hug. It wasn’t his usual sort of hug. He hung on to me. He said, “Joel, you’re the best son a father could ever hope to have.” It was a real special moment between us. I felt that we really connected somehow. I felt that I had accomplished my goal of letting my dad know how much I loved him...and that was the last time I ever saw my dad alive.<sup>99</sup>

This account has an immediate softening effect on the image of Osteen, making him appear a sympathetic character. Osteen’s use of the term “Daddy,” conveys a childlike quality, which is decidedly non-threatening. He openly expresses his love for and desire to connect with his dad, and demonstrates uninhibited ease with showing physical affection. Osteen’s free expression of

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<sup>98</sup> Sodal, Helje K. ““Victor, not Victim”: Joel Osteen's Rhetoric of Hope.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25, no. 1 (2010): 37-50., 46.

<sup>99</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 248.

emotion and physical affection as described in this scene are a far cry from the traditional images of the stoic, reserved male. His earnest expression of emotion makes him an accessible and relatable figure, drawing on the sympathies of readers who are witnessing this intimate moment.

On another level, these stories create a kind of familiarity between Osteen and his audience. Readers are invited to share the tender, intimate moments of Osteen's life in what appears to be vulnerable transparency. In reality, the presentation of these moments are directed and controlled by Osteen, but nevertheless they *appear* to be touchingly open accounts. "The point is not only to persuade and advise through these examples. They are also intended to bind Osteen's huge congregation together by including everyone in a common history centered on the Osteen family," Sodal asserted.<sup>100</sup> Cultivating an appearance of transparency allows readers and audience members to feel like they know Joel Osteen. After this connection is established, his message comes across like a conversation with a friend. By inviting readers into his life (albeit selectively), Osteen more easily gains the trust and support of followers.

The presence of Osteen's wife, Victoria, works to credit Osteen in the same way as his personal narratives. The couple presents a unified public image, characterized by free expressions of adoration and support for one another.

Victoria Osteen often appears onstage with her husband as a co-pastor of Lakewood church and is frequently interviewed alongside him as well. Their relationship seems to continue the pattern of connectivity established by Osteen in his family relationships. Similar to Osteen's relationship with his father, his connection with Victoria is widely available for observation. Through their interactions, followers are able to witness the kind of intimate expressions of affection generally limited in the public sphere. For example, in the dedication section of his book, Joel wrote: "To my wife, Victoria, the woman of my dreams and my best friend... You

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 44.

amaze my more everyday. When God gave you to me, He gave me the very best.” He continues, claiming “Your unconditional love and enthusiastic spirit have made me into the man that I am today. I love you.”<sup>101</sup> Victoria too freely expresses her love and admiration for her husband. In a blog article entitled, “Keeping the Connection,” Victoria writes tips for keeping the love in a relationship. She admits, “ When Joel travels without me, I put little notes in his socks just to say “I love you.”<sup>102</sup> She continues by describing how to successfully maintain a happy marriage, giving numerous examples from her own relationship with Joel.

The seeming transparency of their relationship serves as an ultimate witness to the character of Joel Osteen. It lends support to the notion that Osteen’s message is not just for Sundays, but is truly his way of life. Victoria tells Larry King, “What he speaks every week is exactly the way he lives. It’s the way he’s always lived.”<sup>103</sup> Establishing this consistency is important because Osteen’s message hinges on the ability of the believer to develop a lifestyle change. By providing evidence that he himself is living this life, Osteen can more easily ask his followers to do the same. This evidence also legitimizes Osteen’s claim that establishing patterns of positive thought throughout one’s life will bring about God’s favor and victory.

Victoria Osteen’s role is to strengthen and support the *ethos* her husband has created, primarily by extending and amplifying his image as a positive, successful partner. Osteen’s message is one that promises relational and material success for the faithful believer, and his relationship with Victoria exemplifies those promises. Part of her believability stems from her physical appearance—not only her presence beside Osteen, but also through her visual display of success. She’s a tall blonde with flawless hair and makeup, smartly dressed in expensive-looking

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<sup>101</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 2004.

<sup>102</sup> victoriaosteen.com

<sup>103</sup> King, Larry. "Interview With Joel Osteen ." CNN.

suits and fashionable jewelry. Her physical presentation radiates success and prosperity, visually confirming the content of Joel Osteen's message.

Beyond her physical body, Victoria also utilizes a particular style of communicating that lends credibility to her husband. Her messages essentially mimic Joel's, and are delivered in the same upbeat, charismatic style. A pre-taped video segment played during Osteen's televised program features Joel and Victoria sitting together in what looks like a living room. Victoria flashes a smile and echoes her husband's message of support for listeners:

(God) came to give us an abundant life, but it's up to you and I to receive that life every single day and the grace that goes with it. We love you so much and we believe that your best days are still ahead. We've been praying for you and we know that God has a great future and hope for you. So get up every day and expect God to do miracles in your life.<sup>104</sup>

The visual representation of this couple sitting together, communicates a shared belief in the message. That unity is confirmed orally when Victoria reaffirms the main tenets of Joel's message: God loves you, God wants to bless you, and you just have to believe that. She uses the pronoun "we" to express herself, which essentially acts as a cue to listeners that she supports and confirms what her husband says.

The effect of Victoria Osteen's physical and rhetorical presentation serves to strengthen the image of Joel Osteen as a credible figure. She not only confirms Joel Osteen's ideas through the verbal repetition of his main teachings, but also serves as a physical testament to his claims that positive thinking and faith will result in relational success. Their relationship is presented as a natural outcome of the synergy generated through practice of Osteen's message.

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<sup>104</sup> Osteen, Joel. *Seeing Your Set Time Coming*. Episode no. 452, first broadcast 19 December 2010. Joel Osteen Ministries.

While the *ethos* of Joel Osteen sets him up as a credible source, his *pathos* or emotional appeal, works to draw audience members into the message itself. Osteen accomplishes this by developing a distinct atmosphere that is both accessible and inviting. This atmosphere is established by Osteen's language and enhanced through the physical environment of Lakewood church, which combine to instill feelings of friendship and confidence in audience members.

Osteen's speaking style is characterized by a more casual, conversational tone that establishes him as an approachable and friend-like figure. For example, he almost always starts his sermons off with a joke before moving into the main lesson. This establishes a rapport with the audience, who immediately learn that this speaker has a sense of humor. Osteen's use of humor also works to create congeniality between himself and the audience. As Aristotle observed, feelings of friendship are often created with "those who are ready to make or receive a joke; for in both cases they are intent on the same thing as their neighbor, able to be kidded and kidding in good sport."<sup>105</sup> Osteen's opening lines lay a foundation of friendship that not only puts audience members at ease, but also establishes a context for future connection by making him appear approachable and relatable.

After establishing this connection, Osteen moves into the main message. Throughout the delivery, he makes many assurances, like, "I promise we'll make ya' feel right at home," and uses "we" language rather than making personal directives (i.e., "We know that," "As long as we keep believing," "We need to...") This indirect language has the effect of unifying the group, rather than implicating the individual. As a result, audience members are invited to engage with his message without necessarily feeling responsible for its content.

Throughout his lessons, Osteen validates his audience in a way that bolsters their confidence and self-worth, while establishing himself as a trustworthy and credible figure. He

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<sup>105</sup> Aristotle on Rhetoric, 126.

validates each person's differences, saying things like, "You should not let people pressure you or make you feel badly about yourself because you don't fit their image of who you should be...God has given us all different gifts, talents, and personalities on purpose."<sup>106</sup> This message soothes any self-doubt felt by audience members who might be questioning their worth. Aristotle asserted that friendship is developed with people "who praise the presence of good qualities [in others] and especially who praise the qualities that these people fear they do not really have."<sup>107</sup> Osteen seems to cover the spectrum of insecurities a person might feel, reassuring each audience member that they are sufficiently talented and gifted, that they have fine personalities, and that any opinions to the contrary are to be ignored. He invokes divine authority to substantiate his claims, asserting that God has created each person according to his perfect plan. Osteen's role in personally validating each audience member creates a kind of bond between speaker and audience; though Osteen might not know each audience member personally, they can still feel the kind of support and appreciation characteristic of a traditional friendship.

His style and message also combat the pressures of globalization, which insist that each person must prove themselves (primarily through economic gain). His message counters the dominant ideology of globalism by asserting that people need not question their abilities, effectively allaying any anxiety audience members might feel about trying to succeed in a competitive environment.

Osteen can also be seen making deliberate shifts away from the kind of overt religiosity characteristic of other churches—a practice that broadens his appeal to a more diverse range of people and contributes to a sense of belonging felt by audience members. For example, he often paraphrases scripture rather than reading directly from the Bible. If he does use a direct

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<sup>106</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 92.

<sup>107</sup> *Aristotle on Rhetoric*, 126.

quotation, it is shown on the screen projectors so members can follow along. These direct references are almost always followed up with a summary made by Osteen, which puts antiquated Biblical language into a more contemporary style. This downplays the need for a religious text to be present when worshipping God. The focus is on understanding Biblical principles, which are stylized by Osteen to be more modern. By strategically using language that most everyone can understand, and taking care to explain Biblical references in colloquial terms, Osteen is able to create a comfortable atmosphere for members regardless of their social or educational status. This makes religion accessible to everyone, alleviating fears that one might not have the intuition or insight necessary to remain a valuable part of the group. Osteen's method for presenting scripture removes the intellectually intimidating aspect of understanding the Bible, boiling it down to basic techniques and principles that everyone can follow. The emotional effect is one of personal confidence and ease, even for inexperienced or tentative believers.

A deliberate exclusion of any religious symbols inside Lakewood church is perhaps the most striking example of Osteen's move away from traditional church practice. CBS reporter Byron Pitts reported, "Osteen's service is an uninhibited celebration that's part rock concert, part spectacular. There are no crosses, no religious symbols whatsoever." When Pitts questioned Osteen about this, he explained, "I think it helps people be engaged." After seeing the ceiling lights that change colors during songs, Pitts commented that building looked nothing like a church. Victoria Osteen responded by saying, "Hopefully it'll look more and more like churches around the country."<sup>108</sup> This attitude reveals a strategic move away from traditional church symbols like crosses or images of the slain Christ. Instead, their modern conception seems like

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<sup>108</sup> *60 Minutes*, "Joel Osteen Answers his Critics," first broadcast 14 October 2007 by CBS. Reported by Byron Pitts.

an overt appeal to secularism. By removing exclusive religious symbols, Osteen is able to create an environment that more easily lends itself to the various beliefs audience members may have. This establishes Osteen as a relatable figure, contributing to his ability to come across like a friend. Again, Aristotle's observations apply: "[People are friendly to] those who are like themselves and have similar interests."<sup>109</sup> Osteen is able to foster a sense of friendship between himself and the audience, because no one is left out if they don't identify with the typical church experience. Osteen's ability to present himself as an approachable and accepting figure serves to create an emotionally supportive climate, cultivating a feeling of trust between speaker and audience.

The physical structure of Lakewood church adds to the non-traditional feel Osteen has established. The congregation meets in the former Compaq center, which fits almost 17,000 people.<sup>110</sup> The size of the congregation doesn't allow for the kind of tight-knit community commonly found in smaller churches. In some ways, however, this setup is more conducive to successfully managing some of the tensions described in previous chapters. When attempting to navigate the tension between community and individual goals, the anonymity of Lakewood church has a certain appeal. Notably, it provides a setting that allows for involvement in a community that requires little from the individual. Members belong to a kind of loosely formulated community. They have access to all the services offered by the Lakewood staff, and can join smaller, more specialized programs the church offers. The church is large enough, however, that members are not singled out if they choose not to participate, or even skip a few Sundays. The result is a unique balance in which members have access to the belonging and support characteristic of communities, but can control the degree to which they become

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<sup>109</sup> *Aristotle on Rhetoric*, 126.

<sup>110</sup> World News Network. "Lakewood Church." Accessed February 22, 2011.

immersed in the group, thus preserving a sense of autonomy and freedom.

The combination of an accepting message within a modified religious environment creates an overall image of Osteen as an accepting and approachable figure, while developing a sense of confidence in audience members who might hold different beliefs. Aristotle established the function of *pathos* as “awakening emotion...in the audience so as to induce them to make the judgment desired.”<sup>111</sup> Osteen’s ability to develop feelings of acceptance and confidence in his audience creates a bond of trust that makes his message more believable and more persuasive. Instead of listening to the advice of a speaker, audience members feel like they’re listening to advice from a friend—a dynamic that makes Osteen’s message more resonant in the minds and hearts of listeners.

The final artistic proof seen in Osteen’s rhetoric is his *logos*, or appeal to reason. While many forms of reasoning comprise a speaker’s *logos*, the most notable trend concerning Osteen is his use of narrative witnessing and personal accounts. His use of logic is not traditional argument per se, but is informal in nature and relies on audience members to interpret and infer his examples in a particular way.

Osteen’s message centers around the idea that faith and perseverance will lead believers to a life of victory and abundance, and his examples serve to illustrate the power of positive thinking. Some of these examples come from Biblical accounts, but are paraphrased to avoid reading large passages of scripture during the service. In reference to Osteen’s use of narrative witnessing Sodal writes, “Osteen... emphasizes the positive aspects and his interpretations become selective.”<sup>112</sup> She goes on to explain that Biblical stories are edited for content, with a deliberate avoidance of any negative consequences. Instead, the focus is on the relationship

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<sup>111</sup> Aristotle on *Rhetoric*, 111.

<sup>112</sup> Sodal, “Victor Not Victim”, 45.

between faith and reward. In cases where Biblical characters do make mistakes, the focus becomes on how their persistence allowed God to forgive them and give them new beginnings.

Non-biblical examples follow the same pattern, and also emphasize the connection between faith and blessing. In a message titled “Seeing Your Set Time Coming,” Osteen explains the relationship between asking God for something and seeing that request happen. His message can be understood the following way: God has a predetermined time for blessing his followers. While believers don’t know when that time will come to pass, they must wait in faithful expectation without losing heart or doubting that God will indeed give them what they’ve asked for. The only way to deprive yourself of a blessing is to stop believing that God will give it to you. Ultimately faith is the key to receiving what you’ve asked for.<sup>113</sup>

To prove these claims, Osteen ends his sermon with a series of examples. One such example was of a young woman who dreamed of being a television producer. When she graduated college all she could find in the TV industry was a part-time job as a receptionist for a broadcasting company. Eventually this young woman was noticed by the CEO of the company and received a series of promotions that eventually landed her a position as the vice-president. Osteen emphasizes her perseverance, saying, “Friends, it’s easy to abort dreams, but if you will just stay in faith and keep bein’ the best right where you are. Like this young lady, you will come into your due season.”<sup>114</sup>

These examples are straightforward and easy to understand and relate to, adding to the non-threatening atmosphere Osteen attempts to create. Furthermore, the stories “have a happy ending and relate to a great variety of human characters and situations,” which further establishes the perception of Osteen as accepting and approachable. Sodal notes, “Osteen’s examples touch

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<sup>113</sup> Osteen, Joel. *Seeing Your Set Time Coming*. Episode no. 452, first broadcast 19 December 2010. Joel Osteen Ministries.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

on ordinary people's experiences. They are thus well suited for moving people emotionally and to be used as arguments for progress, hope, and relationship building."<sup>115</sup> Little information is given about those used in examples, like their social-economic status or level of education for example. Instead these examples purposefully de-emphasize any factors that might make the participants seem extraordinary. Ordinarity, in this case, is the key to making a successful example out of someone because it makes him or her more relatable to the general congregation.

The logic of these arguments follows an inductive line of reasoning. The life events of one or two people are not seen as happening under exceptional circumstances, but rather the experience of one demonstrates the immutable promise of God to give to others the same kind of experiences. Even Biblical examples are used inductively: "that David, the fornicator and murderer, was given new opportunities by God must also mean that other people who have behaved immorally are given new chances. That Esther could become queen, although she was a young, ordinary girl, means that others may advance socially."<sup>116</sup> This line of reasoning relies on the ability of the audience to make a judgment about their own situation after receiving information about a relatively unrelated set of occurrences. As Heit and Rotello note in a study done on logic, inductive reasoning is "influenced by quick heuristic processes that tap into associative information about context."<sup>117</sup> Osteen's logical appeals are established suggestively by comparing the experiences of similar groups of people.

Many of Osteen's examples function as enthymemes, which the audience is invited to fill in for themselves according to the numerous positive outcomes they hear about each week. Knight and Sweeney cite the following definition (originating in a book by D.N Walton), "An

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<sup>115</sup> Sodal, "Victor Not Victim", 43.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>117</sup> Heit, Evan, and Caren M. Rotello. "Relations Between Inductive Reasoning and Deductive Reasoning." *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 36, no. 3 (2010): 805-812., 805.

enthymeme is ‘an argument in which one or more premises (or a conclusion) is missing, and needs to be filled in, because it has not been explicitly expressed.’”<sup>118</sup> Osteen does offer explicit assurances to his followers by promising them eventual success, but he supplements his more direct claims with parables of success, inviting the audience to identify with the examples he uses. Osteen never promises that audience members will receive the same blessings as another person, and yet his use of narratives encourage people to assume they will end up like featured exemplars. Osteen never claims to use infallible logic, but rather invites his audience to draw a conclusion about themselves based on a set of shared experiences and connections with his examples.

### **Generating Identifications**

The artistic proofs used by Joel Osteen work together to create a body of identifications that seek to overcome the more glaring divisions between this speaker and his audience. The work of Kenneth Burke helped to develop the concept of identification and its relationship with persuasion. In discussing this relationship, Burke asserts that, “Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity.”<sup>119</sup> The divisions between Osteen and his congregation potentially limit the believability of his message. Consider the fact that Osteen is a white male from a relatively prominent Houston family. He was born into financial security as his father had an established ministry by the time Osteen was a young man. He had natural opportunities growing up through his father’s success as a televangelist, and his own ministry has made him a multi-millionaire,

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<sup>118</sup> Knight, Lynn V., and Kieran Sweeney. 2007. "Revealing implicit understanding through enthymemes: a rhetorical method for the analysis of talk." *Medical Education* 41, no. 3: 226-233. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 10, 2011), 227.

<sup>119</sup> Burke, Kenneth. "On Symbols and Society." Joseph R. Gusfield, 179-191. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989., 182.

catapulting him to an elite social class to which most of his congregation will probably never belong. He has achieved a level of fame and success paralleled by few other Christian ministers, let alone average members of his congregation. Despite a history marked by exceptional opportunity, Osteen perpetuates the message that all you need is a little faith and a “can-do” attitude to become successful, strategically avoiding the very real social and economic factors that make financial prosperity almost impossible for some people. Realistically, Osteen is very different from most members of his congregation, and yet for his message to be successful he must downplay those divisions and stress mutuality between himself and his audience. As Burke noted, the vast divisions present make the establishment of identification crucial to the rhetorical success of Joel Osteen. His ability to create identifications lie primarily in his image as a friendly and approachable figure, which is generated through a positive, affirming message and enhanced by his informal style.

Burke’s notion of consubstantiality explains how Osteen strategically overcomes these glaring divisions. Burke explains that when one person joins interests with another, he becomes “substantially one” with that person-- a phenomenon that Burke labels consubstantiality. He continues, positing that consubstantiality “may be necessary to any way of life. ... and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*.”<sup>120</sup> Essentially Burke’s statement explains how a central identification can override the glaring differences between Osteen and his congregation.

Osteen’s informal and familiar style is a second strategy he relies on to compensate for division. Burke notes that, “a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

identifications.”<sup>121</sup> Osteen’s positive demeanor and friend-like familiarity are distinguishing qualities that enable audience members to identify with his message. Osteen’s online blog often draws comments from readers who demonstrate the connection they feel. Osteen’s blog on February 18<sup>th</sup> elicited the following comments: “I always feel like you’re talking to me directly,” and “Thanks Joel and Victoria. I often watch you on TBN and feel as if I know you personally.”<sup>122</sup> One commenter vulnerably admitted, “I really don’t know what I would do without you,” while another simply thanked Osteen for his insight, addressing him as a “friend.”<sup>123</sup> The resounding message communicated by these readers is one that suggests Osteen is a personal friend-- a person they don’t merely see on TV, but a person they *know*. These responses indicate the presence of a relationship that transcends the formal interaction between strangers and moves into a sphere of intimate connection, forming what researchers have labeled as a parasocial relationship. In a study analyzing the effects of parasocial interaction, David C. Giles asserted, “once we have made a person judgement about a media figure...then we will subsequently respond to that figure “as if” it occupies our physical space, thereby becoming incorporated into our social network.”<sup>124</sup> As Giles illuminates, media figures can often become incorporated into the “social network” of an audience member, becoming a figure that feels like and is considered to be a friend.

Burke explains this sense of connection by claiming, “The resources of identification whereby a sense of consubstantiality is symbolically established between beings of unequal status may extend far into the realm of the *idealistic*.”<sup>125</sup> The relationship between Osteen and his

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>122</sup> Osteen, February 22, 2011, comment on Osteen, “You Have the Home Field Advantage,” *Joel Osteen Blog*, February 18, 2011, <http://www.joelosteen.com/HopeForToday/JoelAndVictoriasBlog>.

<sup>123</sup> Comment on Osteen, “You Have the Home Field Advantage.”

<sup>124</sup> Giles, David C. "Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research." *Mediapsychology* 4 (2002): 279-305, 284.

<sup>125</sup> Burke, “On Symbols,” 191.

followers may certainly extend into idealism, which is enhanced through Osteen's use of identification. As Giles noted, "similarity was (found to be) an important factor in the strength of the parasocial relationship, particularly in relation to attitudes, appearance, and background."<sup>126</sup> This suggests that the identifications created by Osteen not only allow his audience to experience a parasocial relationship, but also contribute to its strength and duration. Status inequality is certainly present between Osteen and the majority of his followers, but instead of creating a division, Osteen has successfully overcome it and created a kind of idealized relationship between himself (at least his public persona) and his audience.

Although he may be more prominent, more successful, and in many ways better off than most of his audience members, Osteen has united believers around a common ideology regarding the nature of God (and it doesn't hurt that this ideology promises an eventual status upgrade--making Osteen's success less threatening). Traditional audiences might credit a speaker's success to their talents or the opportunities they have been given. Osteen's message counters this assumption by claiming that success is the product of faith, rather than the product of effort or ability. His claims about success have the effect of making his own status less threatening, while encouraging others that they can succeed in the same way. The culmination of Osteen's artistic proofs (*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*), help foster and maintain a sense of identification and contribute to an overall feeling of connection between audience and speaker. Identification remains the primary mechanism by which the audience connects to Osteen, but other strategies discussed in this section enable those identifications to be made.

### **Osteen's Response to the Cultural Moment**

The following section specifically focuses on rhetorical constraints originating from the

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<sup>126</sup> Giles, "Parasocial." 284.

“cultural moment” described in previous chapters. This will allow the reader to see how Osteen capitalizes on these dynamics, fashioning his message in a way that speaks to pressures and problems facing the American individual. Two distinct trends arose that are worth revisiting. The first is a tension between individualism and community as primarily discussed by Bellah. The second trend concerns the work of Elliot and Lemert, who studied the psychological and emotional effects of globalism as they relate to the individual. I plan now to revisit those problems and explain how Osteen’s rhetoric addresses and attempts to resolve them.

### *Individualism vs. Community*

The tension between individual and community goals emerged as a notable problem for the modern individual as people attempted to balance their own wants while still remaining part of a community. Conflict occurred when individual pursuits violated community goals, leaving individuals facing a choice of either sacrificing their own wants, or abandoning their communities (along with community benefits like support, belonging, and security). Robert Bellah credited this tension to the interplay of four distinct historical traditions that each promoted a certain ideology and addressed morality in a particular way. Over time, followers of these four traditions developed a specific moral language used to prioritize their goals and values. The intersection of these moral languages has left many individuals confused as to how to balance conflicting desires. Recall the comment made by sociologist Herve Varenne who addressed this tension: “The drive toward independence and mastery only makes sense where the individual can also find a context to express the love and happiness that are his deepest feelings and desires.”<sup>127</sup> It was noted in Chapter Two that the current problem of Americans thus lies in creating that specific context described by Varenne, in which they can retain a sense of

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<sup>127</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 39-40.

individualism, while still having access to a community that allows them a deeper expression of feeling.

Osteen's message manages to strike a curiously satisfying balance for individuals facing this problem. He seems to speak multiple moral languages, blending utilitarian individualist ideals with expressive individualism, all in the context of the Christian tradition, which historically promotes the principles of the biblical strand. The only moral language that does not have a strong presence in Osteen's rhetoric is the civic republican strand, which promoted loyalty to the political system and encouraged citizens to practice civic engagement.

The biblical tradition (though a seemingly obvious part of Osteen's rhetoric) extends beyond his mere use of scripture. This tradition held the idea that "success was much more explicitly tied to the creation of a certain kind of ethical community,"<sup>128</sup> a value that can also be seen in Osteen's message. He stresses the idea of being "a person of excellence and integrity,"<sup>129</sup> and directs these values towards the community, promising "nothing pleases God any more than when we take care of one of His children."<sup>130</sup> The enactment of Christian values both in personal and public arenas has a very evident place in Osteen's message, keeping in line with the historical strand of biblically influenced ideals.

As the biblical strand made room for a republican way of thinking, certain values shifted. Although community involvement was still considered virtuous, a greater emphasis was placed on maintaining a "society of relative equals," with a specific focus on political activism.<sup>131</sup> While this moral language is largely absent in Osteen's discourse, certain elements can be seen, specifically in regards to his interaction with those outside the Christian context. Secular scrutiny

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>129</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 230.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>131</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 30.

has often centered on Osteen's claim of tolerance, especially concerning emotive issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, and the fate of non-believers. During an interview with Larry King, Osteen was asked if those outside the Christian faith would go to heaven. He responded by saying, "I can't judge somebody's heart... To me, it's not my business to say, you know, this one is or this one isn't... I'm going to let God be the judge of who goes to heaven and hell."<sup>132</sup>

When asked about same-sex marriage, Osteen seemed to tip-toe around the subject, first claiming he didn't think it was "the way God intended it to be," but quickly following up by promising, "But I'm not going to condemn those people. I tell them all the time our church is open for everybody."<sup>133</sup> By taking care never to harshly condemn or exclude anyone, Osteen maintains a public image of acceptance and open-mindedness-- a distinct value heralded by the republican strand and highly valued in today's social and political climate.

While perhaps echoing sentiments of equality that were found in the civic republican strand, Osteen's deliberate shift away from the distinctly political nature of this strand suggests that this moral language doesn't have a prominent place in his rhetoric. In many ways, Osteen's unwillingness to engage with a political message is consistent with his larger themes of tolerance and acceptance. His ability to draw so many followers relies largely on being able to create an adaptable message that doesn't exclude people based on perceived differences. By not incorporating any politically charged discourse, Osteen leaves his message more widely available to people of all political affiliations.

The utilitarian individualist mindset more radically diverged from both the Biblical and republican strands by de-emphasizing community and positioning individual success as the chief goal. The ensuing moral language was one that prized initiatives allowing "the chance for the

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<sup>132</sup> King, Larry. "Interview With Joel Osteen ." CNN.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

individual to get ahead on his own initiative,<sup>134</sup> and the benchmark of success was almost exclusively considered in terms of material wealth and the acquisition of goods. From this tradition, comes the classical notion of the “American Dream” described as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.”<sup>135</sup> This gave rise to the celebration of Cinderella-stories in which the disadvantaged overcome their circumstances through hard work and raw talent, eventually achieving their due success. The rhetoric of Joel Osteen is replete with these types of narratives, although modified slightly. Instead of attributing success to the tenacity of individuals, Osteen credits the faith that allowed an omnipotent God to reward them for their perseverance. In many ways, the utilitarian mindset still prevails. The individual must get ahead on his own initiative, albeit a faith-initiative more than a strictly behavioral one. The end result is still success, as Osteen promises God will bring about “financial increase”, “supernatural promotion,”<sup>136</sup> and “abundance,”<sup>137</sup> and is committed to “opening doors of opportunity”<sup>138</sup> in the lives of believers. This modification combines aspects of the first two traditions, without sacrificing personal gain for the sake of the community at large.

The singular focus of utilitarian individualists on material success historically unsettled some who felt this mindset lacked the more humanitarian values of love and feeling. This criticism gave rise to expressive individualism, which above all aimed to “cultivate and express the self and explore its vast social and cosmic identities.”<sup>139</sup> Instead of being defined by material wealth, success was determined through an individual’s ability to live “a life of strong

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<sup>134</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 33.

<sup>135</sup> Wright, Luke S. H. "The Death of the American Dream." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 85, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 196-199. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 23, 2011)., 197.

<sup>136</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 24.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>139</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 35.

feeling,”<sup>140</sup> which can be understood as being true to oneself. Osteen’s message combines the utilitarian view of success with an expressive aim at improving oneself. He devotes equal focus to material acquisition as he does to cultivating the self-esteem of his followers. An entire section of his first book is entitled “Develop a Healthy Self-Image,” and aims to help readers accept themselves and reach untapped potential through the use of positive thinking. A second section of the same book is called “Discover the Power of Your Thoughts and Words” and educates readers on self-help topics like “Reprogramming Your Mental Computer” and “Choosing the Right Thoughts.” These chapters include instructions for people who want to elevate their self-esteem. Osteen encourages readers:

It’s vital that you accept yourself and learn to be happy with who God made you to be. If you want to truly enjoy your life, you must be at peace with yourself.

Many people constantly feel badly about themselves. They are overly critical of themselves, living with all sorts of self-imposed guilt and condemnation.<sup>141</sup>

Osteen claims that unhappiness stems from an overly critical self-image, which incorporates the emphasis expressive individualists place on openly exploring and accepting the self. He focuses on cultivating inner peace, freeing oneself from guilt and condemnation, and coming to terms with the true self—all topics reminiscent of the freedom expressive individualists found through introspection. The overall message is that cultivating a positive inner life will lead to true happiness and fulfillment.

Osteen not only encourages his followers to believe in themselves, but also seeks to personally build up members of his congregation. He often says things like, “You are a person of

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>141</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 66.

destiny, a person of purpose. God has something great in your future.”<sup>142</sup> This type of talk allows believers to accept themselves, and perhaps explore parts of their personalities previously covered by shame or insecurity. The end result is freer and more authentic self-expression-- the primary goal for an expressive individualist.

While Osteen speaks each of these moral languages at individual times, his messages often combine multiple languages in one charge. Osteen urges his followers,

You must learn how to cast down those negative thoughts and begin to see yourself as God sees you—as a winner, an overcomer. He sees you as being “well able.” If you want the circumstances to change for the better in your life, you must first see them changing through your “eyes of faith.” You must see yourself as happy, fulfilled, and successful, living an overcoming life.<sup>143</sup>

In one sense, this message focuses on developing a healthy inner life in accordance with the principles of expressive individualism. This includes getting rid of negative thoughts, having a vision for one’s life, and developing a sense of happiness and purpose within. This requires individuals to see themselves as intrinsically worthy of happiness, a vision maintained by self-love and acceptance. While modified to fit a Christian audience, Osteen’s message has a similar focus. He centers on the vision God has for everyone, encouraging widespread participation from his followers. The message is also distinctly utilitarian in that it positions material success as a desired and expected outcome in life. Osteen implores readers to think of themselves as winners, as successful individuals, and as people capable of changing their circumstances. This incorporates aspects of the “American Dream” narrative that typified utilitarian thought, a narrative emphasizing the ability of every person to enrich his life through personal effort. While

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<sup>142</sup> Osteen, *Seeing Your Set Time Coming*.

<sup>143</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 62.

the utilitarian individualist would place responsibility on a person to achieve success, Osteen puts this responsibility on the shoulders of God—thus incorporating the faith-based perspective of the biblical strand. Osteen’s message of individual gain is taught in the context of a more traditional Bible-based framework. The result is that followers retain a sense of the tradition and structure provided by the biblical and republican strands, but don’t have to sacrifice the message of individualism or self-expression popularized by utilitarian and expressive individualists.

The ability of Joel Osteen to combine these moral languages is significant because he seems to resolve many of the problems people encounter when trying to balance the tension between individual desires and community goals. His rhetoric seems to have created that specific context mentioned by Varenne, which allows the expression of deeper feelings without sacrificing individual pursuits, and without limiting self-gain. A message of individualism is preached in a context of community, creating a specific framework whereby the success of each individual is the goal of the group. The presence of God functions in this context not to limit the individual by providing strict rules and limitations, but rather to elevate the individual through material success and personal fulfillment.

The ability of Osteen to create this delicate balance of values is largely enabled by the physical structure of his church. Audience members are surrounded by a community of people who believe in Osteen’s message of individual gain, and can draw support and connection from the emotionally charged environment. A sense of freedom is still retained, however, because of the anonymity provided by such a large group of followers. While audience members may feel they have a friendship with Osteen and a kinship with their fellow believers, it is devoid of the usual obligations and responsibilities that are traditionally afforded by intimate connection. The result is a context in which audience members can feel a form of relational connection, but

escape any responsibilities that might impinge their personal freedom.

### *The Effects of Globalization*

A second tension facing the individual is the emotional and psychological effects of globalization, a central concern for authors Charles Lemert and Anthony Elliot. Their work describes the atmosphere of globalization as one in which cutting-edge improvements, constant innovations, and the relentless pursuit of efficiency has left individuals in a constant state of anxiety as they attempt to keep up with their ever-changing environments. The authors assert that “globalization is a complex mix of forces-- usually messy, often contradictory-- that produce novelties, complexities, and disjunctures in patterns of individualism and forms of identity.”<sup>144</sup> The effect of increasing choice is a state of hardship for individuals who are attempting to understand themselves amidst the rapid-pace of global improvements and loss of traditional contexts for developing identities. Adding to this anxiety is the pressure to compete and succeed: “Pressure to become what one is -- and especially to demonstrate to family, friends, and colleagues that one has truly “made it”-- is perhaps, a central defining feature of contemporary Western living.”<sup>145</sup> The picture of a global world is one wrought with anxieties, fatigue from constant competition, and lingering questions about one’s own identity and future prospects in a world where the moral languages have lost some controlling power.

Osteen’s rhetoric addresses these anxieties and fears in a way that minimizes personal responsibility, while simultaneously increasing a person’s expectation of success. The first way he does this is by positioning spiritual faith as the key to unlocking a favorable outcome. Osteen claims that genuine faith guarantees the fulfillment of requests and prayers, asserting, “The

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<sup>144</sup> Lemert and Elliot, *Deadly Worlds*, 61.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

moment God puts the promise in your heart, the moment the dream took root, at that same moment, God established a set time to bring it to pass.”<sup>146</sup> The pathway to success, in this case, is belief, which causes the supernatural materialization of blessing. Osteen assures his followers that they will receive what they’ve asked of God, adding only one stipulation, “As long as we stay in faith, as long as we keep believing, nothing can stop that set time.”<sup>147</sup> The believer need only continue trusting that God will deliver him into a promised land of blessing and prosperity. This guarantee is powerful in pacifying the ambient fears created by globalization. This essentially eliminates the need to compete, along with the accompanying fear of failure. In Osteen’s scenario, competition has no place because God is the ultimate benefactor and he’s already decided the outcome in favor of the faithful.

The second important tenet of Osteen’s message and its relationship to globalism is the way in which he displaces responsibility, positioning God as one who will ensure and deliver success. The believer simply needs to trust in God’s power and willingness to bring blessings, and then wait for him to do so. Osteen assures his followers, “You don’t have to know when (the blessing is coming), you just have to keep believing, knowing that it’s on his way.”<sup>148</sup> Essentially God does the heavy lifting in this arrangement, which he doesn’t mind doing because he is infinitely loving and magnificently generous. Lemert and Elliot discuss strategies the general population uses to manage the anxieties they feel. They assert that people attempt to limit the emotional effects of globalism “by deploying risk-avoidance merchandise to soothe their anxieties. As a form of emotional defense, therefore, risk-avoidance merchandise feeds into that part of the mind that reassures us and becomes very parenting.”<sup>149</sup> While the secular world looks

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<sup>146</sup> Osteen, *Seeing Your Set Time Coming*.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Lemert and Elliot, *Deadly Worlds*, 37.

to commodities to combat their anxiety, Osteen message can be seen marketing God as the ultimate risk-avoidance strategy. In this situation, the anxiety and pressure of competing are put on God and risk is eliminated because God promises to help the faithful. Osteen remarks, “The barrier (to success) is in your mind. It’s not God’s lack of resources or your lack of talent that prevents you from prospering.”<sup>150</sup> All are equal in this arena, eliminating competition. All people are waiting on the same God, who loves everyone equally, and has full control over a person’s success. In light of that, Osteen’s rhetoric urges followers not to feel the pressure to prove themselves, or to make something of their lives because they don’t feel responsible for the outcome.

The overwhelming pressures of globalism center on the ability of an individual to succeed in an increasingly cutthroat and competitive environment. The underlying assumption of globalism (and the traditional individualist mindset) is that talents, abilities, and effort ultimately determine the outcome of a person’s life. Under these conditions, any failure to produce a successful outcome is directly related to the individual. In other words, failure is personal. By asserting that success is dependent solely on faith, Osteen makes prosperity accessible for everyone. According to him, success no longer depends on a person’s talents, abilities, social status, or economic means. Instead, all people have access to the same resources, which are available freely and abundantly for those who believe in God and in themselves. Instead of feeling the burden of failure for successes that have yet to pass, Osteen tells followers, “Right around the corner, you’re gonna see the situation turn around. You’re gonna get the breaks you’ve been prayin’ about, you’re gonna see your health improve. The most difficult time is always before the victory.”<sup>151</sup> This reframes a lack of success as a simple phase, a precursor to

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<sup>150</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 3.

<sup>151</sup> Osteen, *Seeing Your Set Time Coming*.

impending victory. Believers are encouraged not to feel alarmed by their unpromising situations, but to continue believing that success is surely around the corner—a strategy that keeps the anxieties of globalism at bay and that gives them a way to think about change around them.

## **Conclusion**

Through the framework of Bitzer's rhetorical situation, one can more clearly see how Osteen's rhetoric successfully reaches and persuades audience members. Osteen's ability to connect with his audience establishes him as a credible and believable figure—an ability fostered through the use of artistic proofs and maintained through identification. His message specifically addresses the tensions of individualism by combining moral languages from several historical traditions. The result is an opportunity for individuals to engage with a traditional community while retaining a comfortable amount of anonymity. This allows the individual to receive certain benefits of community without relinquishing personal autonomy or inhibiting self-expression. Additionally, the anxieties of globalization are reduced by Osteen, whose message specifically displaces the responsibility of success onto God—eliminating the need to worry about one's future or compete with others. The result is an assurance of prosperity that is distinctly unrelated to personal merit or effort, reducing the feelings of failure an individual might have.

While this chapter focused on the ways Osteen's rhetoric is functioning on a broad level, the following chapter seeks to undertake a more narrow analysis of his message. I'll move now into a discussion aimed at analyzing the key metaphors contained in Osteen's rhetoric.

## Chapter IV: Key Metaphors

In the previous chapter I approached Osteen's rhetoric on a broader scale, with an emphasis on understanding how it was working as a composite set of personal and situational factors. I move now towards a closer inspection of the rhetoric itself, specifically focusing on the metaphors as a means of explaining the discourse-specific strategies used to effect change.

My method for analyzing Osteen's use of metaphor stems primarily from the work of Robert Ivie, who wrote a guide for analysis in his article, "Metaphor and the Rhetorical Invention of Cold War 'Idealists.'" Ivie asserts that "metaphor is at the base of rhetorical invention," and that "elaborating a primary image into a well formed argument produces a motive or interpretation of reality, with which the intended audience is invited to identify."<sup>152</sup> Ivie adds that metaphors often function "like a filter" on an audiences' perception of reality, "determin(ing) which particles will be selected out."<sup>153</sup> These claims position metaphors as more than tools to creatively illustrate a speaker's point. Rather, powerful metaphors are capable of helping determine how an audience will come to understand themselves and the world around them. Indeed, when used with skill, metaphors are able to completely alter the perspective and worldview of an audience member.

Metaphors are compelling not only for their appeal to individuals, but also for their ability to draw upon broader cultural frames. In his analysis of metaphors, author Jeffrey Segrave wrote, "Metaphor is nuclear rather than atomistic, an intellectual device that links rather than isolates the distinctive features of everyday experiences. It is therefore through rhetorical devices like metaphor that we communicate a common set of symbols... As a result, culture

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<sup>152</sup> Ivie, Robert L. 1987. "Metaphor and the Rhetorical Invention of Cold War Idealists." *Communication Monographs* 54, no. 2: 165. Communication & Mass Media Complete, EBSCOhost(accessed December 2, 2010)., 166.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

becomes encoded in metaphor.”<sup>154</sup> As Segrave eloquently notes, metaphors can become ways of understanding and communicating culture. This implies that a powerful metaphor is one that draws its strength by communicating cultural values and linking them to the individual.

Often metaphors make indirect claims that the audience rarely examines. Ivie writes, “The value of locating underlying metaphors is in revealing their limits or untapped potential as sources of invention, something that is far more difficult to accomplish when a generating term is allowed to operate without being explicitly acknowledged as such.”<sup>155</sup> Without an awareness of what claims are being made, the audience is being acted upon in ways they may not fully realize. Explicitly acknowledging the claims made through metaphors allows for a true analysis of the statements being made. Benson echoes the need for this, claiming, “One of the most useful functions of the rhetorician as a social critic is to analyze the appeals implicit in a work, making the appeals explicit, so that they can be debated on their merits.”<sup>156</sup> Deconstructing the metaphors used by Osteen provides a way not only to understand the implicit appeals he makes to an audience, but also serves as a launching point for critically viewing his claims. Without first studying the metaphors themselves, however, an informed critique of his message cannot be made. This chapter seeks to set up an effective base for analyzing the implications of Osteen’s rhetoric by analyzing key metaphors, the implicit appeals contained in them, and the way they might operate on the minds of audience members.

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<sup>154</sup> Segrave, Jeffrey O. 2000. "The Sports Metaphor in American Cultural Discourse." *Culture, Sport, Society* 3, no. 1: 48. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 25, 2011)., 48.

<sup>155</sup> Ivie, “Metaphor and the Rhetorical Invention”, 167.

<sup>156</sup> Benson, “The Senses of Rhetoric”, 242.

### *Victor/ Victim Metaphor*

The defining metaphor in Joel Osteen's rhetoric is the contrast between the Victor and the Victim, which emerge as personae the audience is likely to take on. Supporting terms are used by Osteen to support this central metaphor, but as Kathleen Jamieson notes in her article "The Metaphoric Cluster," "What is significant about the rhetoric of [a speaker] is not the reoccurrence of a single metaphor but rather the appearance of clusters of related metaphors which reveal the rhetor's projected relationship with his audience and corroborate otherwise inconclusive rhetorical cues."<sup>157</sup> It is my intention to study this central metaphor in relation to other key terms used by Osteen as a way of deconstructing his claims and their subsequent impact on audience members.

The character of the Victim embodies everything Osteen encourages his followers not to be. The definition of a victim, as provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "One who suffers some injury, hardship, or loss, is badly treated or taken advantage of."<sup>158</sup> Osteen diverges somewhat from this classical definition by using the term victim to describe a mentality of defeat. His usage implies a responsibility on the part of the victim to change their circumstances, rather than seeing themselves as helpless. Osteen writes,

You can't have a victim mentality and expect to live in victory. You can't live in a perpetual pity party and then wonder why situations aren't improving in your life...you can't go around thinking thoughts of defeat and failure and expect God to fill you with joy, power, and victory. You can't go around thinking thoughts of poverty and lack and expect God to fill you with abundance.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Jamieson, Kathleen H. "The Metaphoric Cluster in the Rhetoric of Pope Paul VI and Edmund G. Brown, Jr." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 51-72., 52.

<sup>158</sup> "Victim, n." OED Online. November 2010. Oxford University Press

<sup>159</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 32.

Osteen asserts that a victim mentality will prevent a person from experiencing victory, improvement, and power in their life. He focuses primarily on the thought-life of an individual, connecting thoughts of defeat, failure, poverty and lack with the inability to materialize success. Osteen's description highlights an important relationship between attitude and the materialization of blessings. The victim mentality manifests itself in the material world as a lack of success or progress. Thus, the inner qualities of a victim are evidenced through his life by a lack of tangible success. Mediocrity becomes a defining feature of the victim, who is neither willing nor capable of rising above his self-imposed limits.

The central metaphor of the victim is accompanied by clusters of associated terms, which craft a more defined sense of what it means to live as a victim. The supporting terms used to describe the victim can be generally categorized into emotional, spiritual, or material outcomes. Osteen provides a long list of emotional outcomes that come from living like a victim, with specific focus on the thought-life of an individual. He asserts, "We will feel exactly the way we think. You will never be happy unless you first think happy thoughts."<sup>160</sup> The main emotional outcome of a victim is living an unhappy life, which is described using terms like "depressed", "negative", "defeated", "discouraged", "worried", and "afraid." These feelings primarily stem from negativity, which begins in the mind.

The emotional mindset of a victim generally prevents them from receiving the spiritual blessings of God. Osteen asserts, "You must be determined and put forth some effort if you're going to keep your mind set on the good things of God and experience his best."<sup>161</sup> Thus the negative energy of a victim prevents them from accessing the spiritual wealth God offers. Spiritual outcomes experienced by the victim generally include overall weakness and lack of

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 105.

faith. However, Osteen is careful to avoid dwelling on the spiritual outcomes that could potentially discourage his followers. He excludes outcomes that might incur God's discipline, judgment, or wrath—focusing instead on the emotional and material realities that are prevented by the victim's negativity. The overall concern in this message is the quality of life experienced by the victor, with little emphasis on God's feelings (beyond describing his love and mercy).

The combination of emotional negativity and spiritual weakness contribute to the material outcome of the victim, which is marked by poverty and lack. This lack is attributed to the kind of negative synergy created by the victim mentality, whose thought-life keeps them in a cycle of underperformance. Osteen explicitly connects the emotional/ spiritual life of a person with their material reality. Speaking of the victim, Osteen claims, "Because of their vacillating faith, they never really get to the place God wants them to be. They never experience the victories He has in store for them... Set your mind for success, victory, and progress... and He'll help you live that life of victory that He has in store for you."<sup>162</sup> This implies that the victim never experiences material success, but is trapped in a cycle of mediocrity and lack due to their faithless, negative mindsets.

In this picture, God emerges as a willing agent to success, but one who is limited by the victim's own defeatist mentality. Osteen asserts that many people,

Suffer from low self-esteem; they feel insignificant and unworthy to receive God's attention, much less his blessings. This sort of poor self-image keeps them from exercising their God-given gifts and authority, and it robs them from experiencing the abundant lives their heavenly Father wants them to have. Most

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 120.

often, the lack of joy and meaning in their lives is a direct result of how those individuals see themselves.<sup>163</sup>

Again, Osteen focuses on the thoughts an individual has, specifically in regards to self-image and self-esteem. Feelings of insignificance, unworthiness, ‘poor self-image,’ and ‘low self-esteem’ are cited as the root causes behind a person’s inability to improve their life. Osteen classifies God as the source of blessings, describing him as a most willing and generous benefactor. He assures his followers that God wants to pay attention to them, and wants them to have abundant lives full of joy and meaning. Osteen maintains, however, that the nonoccurrence of blessing can be attributed to a limited vision for one’s life. The victim’s own self-image keeps them from experiencing the blessings that God ultimately wants them to have, and keeps them in a place of mediocrity. The key to overcoming lack and tapping into the readily available blessings of God lies in developing a more positive mindset, which Osteen labels as a Victor mentality.

The persona of the Victor emerges in response to the Victim, and developing a victor mentality is lifted up as the key to attaining success and satisfaction in life. Osteen describes the Victor as a person who sees himself, “as more than a conqueror, well able to succeed, strong in the Lord, the head not the tail, the victor not the victim.”<sup>164</sup> Again, Osteen’s focus is on the thoughts and perceptions audience members have about themselves. Osteen asserts that the Victor sees himself winning and conquering, which positions a person’s life as a kind of battleground in which they are fighting for success and happiness. The victor is strong—both mentally in his attitude towards himself, spiritually through a fortifying relationship with God, and physically in his ability to produce tangible success in life. The victor sees himself as “the head not the tail,” implying that he senses an intrinsic value within that makes him a deserving

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 76.

recipient of the bounty God longs to give. And finally, the victor is “not the victim.” While this assertion may seem to go without saying, it is here that Osteen explicitly positions the victor as the antithesis of the victim-- a character marked by perceived deficiency and a measurable lack of success. This sets up the victor as a person who has developed a winning mindset that has translated into material and relational success.

Developing the right attitude is key to unlocking the winning momentum of the victor. Osteen asserts, “How we see ourselves will make or break us.”<sup>165</sup> The victor’s ability to see himself as “the head not the tail,” as the rightful heir to fortune, and as deserving of blessing, is what enables God to bestow him with success. Contrary to the negative emotional outcomes experienced by victims, the victors exert a positive emotional energy that translates into other favorable emotional experiences. Osteen often describes the emotional climate of the victor as one filled with happiness, fulfillment, positive thoughts, and personal confidence.

Osteen’s verbal affirmations can be seen as attempts to ignite this kind of positive self-image. He tells his followers, “You were born to win; you were born for greatness; you were created to be a champion in life,” “God didn’t make you to be average,” “(You are) a winner, an overcomer,”<sup>166</sup> “You are a person of destiny, a person of purpose. God has something great in your future.”<sup>167</sup> The implications of these statements are that a victor is capable of handling life’s challenges and thoroughly competent in his ability to navigate successfully through life. The victor is established as a person who believes in God’s ability and willingness to transform them into a “champion” and a “winner.” This belief allows the victor to experience other positive spiritual benefits, most commonly listed by Osteen as increased strength, joy, peace and hope—which all stem from an attitude of faithful expectancy.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 35, 62.

<sup>167</sup> Osteen, “Seeing Your Set Time Coming”.

By asserting that believers were “born to win” and “born for greatness,” Osteen establishes the victor mindset as the vehicle for achieving one’s destiny. This elevates the victor mentality beyond a simple tool for boosting one’s self-esteem, and makes it a central to producing and expressing one’s identity. Thus the transformation into the victor takes on a mystical element whereby a person can unlock their true purpose and experience a more pure form of self-expression.

The benefit of being a victor extends beyond identity and into the enhanced material reality he experiences. Tangible blessing is evident in the life of the victor, and indeed serves as a confirmation that thinking positively will yield a material reward. In connection to the material success experienced by the victor, Osteen often uses words like promotion, increase, abundance, and supernatural blessing. His description of blessing moves beyond abstract promises, however, and into specific fortuitous events: “In your future, you’re gonna come into a set time of promotion, a set time of supernatural opportunities, a set time where you meet the right people. A set time where your health is restored, a set time where you accomplish your goals, a set time where you fulfill every God-given dream.”<sup>168</sup> These assertions link the thought-process of the victor with a tangible material reality marked by promotion, opportunity, influential connections, health, progress, and fulfillment.

Osteen’s use of the victor metaphor carefully blends aspects from Bellah’s moral languages in a way that allows individuals to maximize their expressive and material potential. Becoming a victor is described as the process of achieving one’s destiny, whereby a person becomes the person God intended them to be. This message is consistent with the expressive individualists’ desire to explore their identities. Becoming a victor provides a way for individuals to explore their true natures, to understand themselves better, and to fulfill an ultimate purpose

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<sup>168</sup> Osteen, “Seeing Your Set Time Coming”.

centered on connecting to something deep within. Uninhibited self-expression, stemming from truly knowing oneself, is heralded as the path to happiness and contentment.

While Osteen's message of victory focuses on self-expression, it doesn't exclude the importance of material acquisition consistent with utilitarian individualist ideals. Osteen's followers are given explicit descriptions of the blessings available for them. Osteen modifies the utilitarian perspective somewhat, displacing the responsibility to materialize success from the individual and onto God. Though the path to success is slightly altered, the result is still material goods, promotion, status upgrades, and a sense of satisfaction that comes from achievement. Osteen blends the languages of expressive and utilitarian individualism so that by exploring the self and becoming a person of destiny, one achieves personal satisfaction that eventually results in material blessing. The delivery of this message in a church setting, and to a community of believers, associatively links it to the biblical strand that emphasized Christian ideals and community involvement. The result is a delicate combination of values that allows believers to retain a sense of tradition and community, while freely pursuing personal and material satisfaction.

### *God as the Ultimate Victor*

God is not absent in the metaphor of the victor, but emerges as a kind of ultimate victor who is willing to share his blessings with those of a like mind. The relationship between God and the victor is one that symbiotically creates a cycle of blessing wherein the victor believes God will bless him, and that faith allows God to give blessing to the victor.

God functions as a kind of cosmic cheerleader in this scenario, encouraging followers to see themselves as winners. Osteen writes, "You may feel unqualified, insecure, or overwhelmed

by life; you may feel weak, fearful, and insignificant, but God sees you as a victor!”<sup>169</sup> The positive attitude of the victor is not only inspired by God, but is a prerequisite for attaining his blessings. Osteen’s depiction of God as a willing agent of success undoubtedly instills confidence in his audience members who might wonder if they qualify for such blessings. He acknowledges that his followers may have made mistakes, but encourages them.

God wants us to have healthy, positive self-images, to see ourselves as priceless treasures. He wants us to feel good about ourselves. God knows we’re not perfect, that we all have faults and weaknesses; that we all make mistakes. But the good news is, God loves us anyway. He created us in His image, and He is continually shaping us, conforming us to His character, helping us to become even more like the person He is.<sup>170</sup>

These claims establish God as a willing partner in the creation of success, and a being who wants people to feel good about themselves. This has the effect of allaying any fears the audience might have about God that could potentially limit Osteen’s message. By reemphasizing God’s loving, generous nature, Osteen’s picture of God as a Victor becomes more believable for audience members who are invited to identify with God. Furthermore, Osteen establishes God as a force that is actively grooming believers to be more like him and to share in the abundance that he possesses. His claim that God made people in his image, and is helping them “become even more like the person He is” establishes the idea that to become a victor is to become more like God, and fulfill a divinely ordered purpose. Osteen’s description of God presents him as having the same kind of friendliness that Osteen himself shows towards the audience, creating a kind of shared *ethos* and generating the same emotional responses of confidence and camaraderie. By

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<sup>169</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 59.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

establishing these similarities, audience members can more easily identify with the image of God as a victor.

While Osteen establishes a certain image of God with which audience members are invited to identify, he encourages followers to complete their transformation into a victor through an internal confirmation of belief. He tells them, “God has made you, and He has programmed you for victory. But until you get your thinking in line with your owner’s manual, God’s Word, you will never operate to your full potential.”<sup>171</sup> Osteen suggests that a person’s complete transition between victor and victim relies on their ability to convince themselves from within. Burke describes this process as rhetoric that is addressed to the self. He claims, “Persuasion implies an audience. A man can be his own audience, insofar as he, even in his secret thoughts, cultivates certain ideas or images for the effects he hopes they may have upon him.”<sup>172</sup> Through Burke’s assertion, one can understand the internal rhetorical process that occurs as audience members begin to use the imagery and ideas presented by Osteen with the hope that it will effectively turn them into victors. Burke not only suggests that a person can become his or her own audience, but claims that the rhetorical process is not truly complete until that happens. He writes, “Education (“indoctrination”) exerts such pressure upon him from without; he completes the process from within. If he does not somehow act to tell himself (as his own audience) what the various brands of rhetorician have told him, his persuasion is not complete.”<sup>173</sup> Osteen’s rhetoric establishes a kind of education by explaining what the victor is and how it relates to a larger image of God as a victor. However, his assertion that audience members must convince themselves from within sets up their ability to complete the persuasive process.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>172</sup> Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1950, 38.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 39.

Faith is a key component in the relationship between God and the victor. Osteen emphasizes faith as an attitude of expectancy, derived from belief that God is willing and able to bless. This expectant attitude is the mark of true faith, and is also necessary to receiving all God has promised. Osteen outlines the role of faith in the relationship between God and the Victor:

You don't have to see how God is going to solve your problems. You don't have to see how He's going to bring it to pass. That's His responsibility; that's not your job. Your job is to be a believer. Your job is to live with faith and expectancy.

Just turn that situation over to God and trust him to take care of it.<sup>174</sup>

The place of faith can be pared down to a belief in the ability of God to bless, and an expectation that he will bless because he is good. In the life of a Victor, one's expectations are in proportion to how one sees God, so that bigger expectations are the natural product of a belief in God's abundance. God's desire to bless is the same for both Victim and Victor, except his power is not limited in the life of the Victor. The faith and expectant attitude of the Victor enable God to pour out his blessing and abundance, which is evidenced by material success. The mindset of the Victor enables him to develop a great vision for his life, which is accompanied by the necessary faith and persistence to actuate such a vision.

### **The Victor as a Part of Larger Cultural Ideals**

As previously noted, metaphors operate within a specific cultural context and are made powerful by communicating shared values through their usage. The metaphor of the Victor provides vivid imagery in itself, but is given enhanced meaning through its relationship to the values that are often associated with sports and competition as they relate to American life.

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<sup>174</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 81.

Sports culture has emerged as a way of communicating shared values through the use of sports metaphors. As Segrave notes,

The sports metaphor has so thoroughly colonized our cultural discourse that the guiding logics and ethical dimensions of sport are now routinely employed in the form of language as frames for not only commenting upon and understanding a vast complexity of issues but for interpellating us as cultural beings who are a part of the complexity.<sup>175</sup>

This extends the function of metaphor to being part of the language that creates an understanding of what culture is and how people relate to it. The victor metaphor can be seen as a frame for understanding more complex issues of identity, self-worth, and purpose. Transformation into the victor is made meaningful by invoking the “guiding logics and ethical dimensions of sport,” which promote the “construct of team-work and the concomitant values of loyalty, co-ordination, and unity.”<sup>176</sup> The idea of the victor is imbued with larger cultural values associated with sports, and receives added moral complexity through an association with those values. By becoming victors, Osteen’s followers are subscribing to a set of social values that elevate the meaning beyond personal morality and into an exhibition of values that are consistent with larger cultural ideals.

The identity of the victor is given significance through a cultural emphasis on competition as a distinct part of American life. Osteen’s use of the term victor, however, modifies the concept in ways that make it more universally appealing, especially as it relates to gender. As Pope asserts, “Prominent white men with national connections shaped sporting

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<sup>175</sup> Segrave, “The Sports Metaphor”, 58.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

culture in masculine terms, consistent with the larger national identity.”<sup>177</sup> The image of the victor is inherently masculine as it implies competition, battle, and in some ways brutality when facing a particularly challenging opponent. Osteen can be seen strategically moving away from these gender-loaded terms, which takes on added significance due to his public stature. Osteen holds a unique position in the tradition of sports culture and is in some ways consistent with the voices that have historically defined it (he’s a prominent white male, with national connections). He diverges from tradition, however, by blunting some of the traditional masculine force of the metaphor.

Osteen’s speaking style contributes to his ability to shift sporting culture away from dominant masculine images. Opponents of Osteen have capitalized on his somewhat feminine tendencies, commenting on his style to generate their criticisms. One website described him as an “effeminate, obviously whipped evangelist,”<sup>178</sup> while another vehement blogger labeled him a “blinking southern belle.”<sup>179</sup> Osteen’s interview with Larry King prompted one commenter to ask, “Where did all the ‘Manly Preacher Men’ go? I don’t mean to offend anyone who attends church, but he just struck me a little odd.”<sup>180</sup>

While perhaps brutal in their assessment, critics have picked up on a general trend in Osteen’s speaking which is characteristically feminine in its delivery. Osteen’s medium build, soft voice, and gentle demeanor combine to present an image devoid of the classic masculine bravado associated with sports culture. His more feminine style is enhanced through the content of his message, which focuses on love, relationship building, and the expression of emotion.

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<sup>177</sup> Pope, “Negotiating”, 331.

<sup>178</sup> Landover Baptist Church . "Victoria Osteen Tells All to a Landover Lady."  
<http://www.landoverbaptist.org/news0106/osteen.html>.

<sup>179</sup> Institute Blog, The. <http://bradley.chattablogs.com/archives/2006/08/effeminate-preaching.html>

<sup>180</sup> October 17, 2007 (3:43 p.m.), comment on “Joel Osteen on Larry King,” *Baylorfans.com*,  
<http://www.baylorfans.com/forums/showthread.php?t=134631&page=1>.

When advising his readers about parenting, Osteen asserts, “Your children need to hear you say words such as, ‘I love you. I believe in you. I think you’re great. There’s nobody else like you. You are one of a kind.’”<sup>181</sup> Similarly, when talking about marriage Osteen writes, “Many women today are depressed and feel emotionally abused because their husbands do not bless them with their words... Every single day, a husband should tell his wife, ‘I love you.’”<sup>182</sup> Osteen’s assertions reveal characteristics more commonly seen in the feminine sphere: he intuitively senses the needs of others, is devoted to family, and is comfortable with intimate expressions of emotion. These qualities create an impression of Osteen that seems domestic, warm, and approachable. By exuding these more feminine qualities, Osteen’s use of the masculine trope ‘Victor,’ is tempered in a way that makes room for feminine expression.

Another way Osteen makes the ‘Victor’ more gender-neutral is by eliminating competition as a requisite part of victory. Instead, competition is replaced by an attitude of expectancy and an acceptance of self that enables God to decide the victory in favor of the faithful. Osteen asserts,

I’m not in a contest; I’m not comparing myself with anyone else. As far as I’m concerned, I’m number one! I know I’m doing the best I can do... Granted, you will face enormous pressure to do what everybody else is doing, to try to please everybody and meet all their expectations...(but) if you’ll just be happy with who God made you to be and make a decision that you’re going to be the best you can be, God will pour out His favor in your life, and you’ll live that life of victory He has in store for you.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 137.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-98.

Osteen's claims eliminate competition by promising a favorable outcome, which is predestined by God rather than being dependent on a person's skill or effort. Classic notions of competition dictate that the victory is decided in favor of the strong and the cunning, aided by fierce aggression that drives the competitor to outwork and outsmart their opponent in order to secure victory. This environment is not typically inclusive of traditional forms of femininity, which place the female in a more submissive, domestic sphere.

Osteen's picture of the 'victor' eliminates a male-oriented practice commonly associated with victory. Instead of competing, the believer can rise above financial destitution, material lack, and spiritual poverty by believing in the immutable power of God. Osteen emphasizes both the ability and the willingness of God to forcefully elevate his followers into a place of exceeding abundance. Notably, this promise is universally accessible. The only necessary resource is faith, which exists as an internal state available to everyone.

Eliminating competition has the additional effect of limiting anxieties brought on by globalism. The competitive environment ushered in by modernity has created a high-pressure expectation to succeed, which is determined by the individual's skills and abilities. Globalism dictates that the status of a 'Victor' is only conferred on the most capable, and those who have achieved material success in life. The glory, honor, and sense of worth are bestowed on a victor after they have proven themselves. Osteen reverses this logic by asserting that, "God longs to make something great out of your life. He'll take a nobody and shape that person into a somebody...but you must start thinking of yourself as the champion God made you to be."<sup>184</sup> Osteen encourages his followers to consider themselves champions *before* they've actually accomplished anything, establishing it as the first step towards materializing victory. This allows the believer to experience the positive benefits of success (worthiness, importance, glory) even if

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<sup>184</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 110.

they haven't physically experienced the outcome. Images of people toiling and striving after success are characteristically absent in Osteen's rhetoric, which promises the positive effects of success to anyone with faith in God. This limits the negative effects of globalization by staving off anxiety and the fear of failure. Instead, followers are encouraged to act as if they've already accomplished their goals, with the expectation that God will materialize the blessing in due time.

## **Conclusion**

The metaphor of the victor emerges as a spiritual persona that is given added significance through cultural messages glorifying the competitor. Osteen's rhetoric strategically modifies what it means to be a victor, replacing competition with an attitude of faith and expectancy. This translates into an assurance of success, and successfully prevents the pressures of globalism from pervading Osteen's carefully constructed reality. Osteen's message is one that affirms the individual's self-worth and encourages listeners to pursue their true destinies, with the promise that it will bring about uncharted happiness and material gain.

While the victim/ victor metaphor is given significance through its relationship with larger cultural ideals, the metaphor also works in itself to create a specific interpretation of reality. The filtering effect of metaphors is often achieved through use of implicit claims that the audience may not consciously recognize, as Ivie asserted. Osteen's use of the victim/ victor metaphor has suggested a reality in which positive thinking and faithful expectancy unlock a person's spiritual and material goals. The central victim/ victor metaphor is given added significance through association with clusters of accompanying terms, which Jamieson positions as an important function of metaphors.

Osteen's claims imply that God is universally willing to bless people according to their desires, and mentions little about God's discretion or hesitance when answering prayers. In this scenario, attaining emotional, spiritual, and material success has little to do with talent or work ethic, and instead relies solely on faith in the generous character of God and a willingness to continue believing even when circumstances are grim.

This chapter sought to uncover the implicit claims made by Osteen as a way of understanding how his rhetoric was functioning. As was noted by Benson at the beginning of this chapter, however, the larger purpose of mining out the implicit claims and making them explicit is "so that they can be debated on their merits."<sup>185</sup> The concluding chapter seeks to understand the broader implications of Osteen's message for both Christian and secular audiences, and attempts to engage the debate Benson describes in order to truly understand the value of Osteen's rhetoric.

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<sup>185</sup> Benson, "The Senses of Rhetoric," 242.

## Chapter V: Implications and Conclusion

In beginning this study, I found Osteen's success to be both perplexing and intriguing. On the one hand, I felt skeptical about a message that seemed too good to be true, and yet I couldn't deny Osteen's ability to successfully persuade millions of people. Though suspicious at first, I started to think more positively and feel generally uplifted as I listened to Osteen speak. Looking back on my experience, one day in particular stands out: I was tired, emotional, and overwhelmed by the relatively mundane concerns of daily life. My mind was racing with frustration and I couldn't seem to concentrate, anxious tears threatened to rise to the surface at any moment. I sat down and braced myself for study, determined to finish at least one section of Osteen's book before I went to sleep. As I began to read, however, his words touched and calmed me. I felt the analytic part of my brain making room for a more emotive response as I shifted from a reviewer to a receiver. As I continued to read, my thoughts became clearer and I felt a weight beginning to lift off my chest. My brow unwrinkled as I let go of the anger and stress I had accumulated throughout the day. As I made a conscious effort to let go of my worries and fears, concerns about the future seemed less threatening and I felt a regained sense of control. I finished the section and lay down to sleep, drifting off with a sense of hope—a lingering feeling that tomorrow would be a better day.

My personal experience with Osteen's rhetoric led to a kind of appreciation for his work, and though approached with a critical eye, is permeated by respectful recognition of his ability to communicate encouragement and hope for the hurting. My experience enforced a belief that his rhetoric is powerful in many ways, and served as the catalyst to considering Zarefsky's question, "What is going on here?" which he asserts that rhetorical criticism can answer by "making clear

the underlying dynamics of the rhetorical work—how it might be seen as influencing people.”<sup>186</sup> Zarefsky’s question broadly influenced this thesis as I attempted to understand why Osteen has successfully influenced millions of people. My analysis was shaped further by Benson’s notion of the social critic, whose aim is in understanding how cultural values and ideologies influence an audiences’ perception of a message.

The sociological observations of Bellah and Lemert & Elliot shaped my study of culture specifically in regards to the moral pressures facing American individuals. A study of their respective works revealed that individuals experience a tension between wanting to maintain autonomous self-expression, without giving up the sense of support, belonging, and identity that traditionally come from community. Bellah claimed that modernity has ushered in an increased desire for moral freedom, leading people away from the moral understandings that generally accompany community life. Lemert and Elliot asserted that without groups to fashion identity, individuals were found to rely more and more on commodities to replace the security and sense of self that traditionally derived from relationships. The authors also claimed that the modern world is marked by intense pressures to succeed and fueled by increasingly steep competition. The message of globalism was found to be one that values talent and drive, positioning these qualities as vital resources for gaining the opportunities and experiences that lead to material prosperity.

The ideas of Bellah and Lemert & Elliot helped define the social and moral landscape in which Osteen’s audience finds itself. The dynamics described in their works illuminated some of what Bitzer would label as exigences facing the audience. Bitzer’s idea of the rhetorical situation enabled me to explicate the various components of Osteen’s rhetoric that contribute to his persuasive abilities. The rhetorical situation provided a kind of framework for analysis, which

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<sup>186</sup> Zarefsky, “Knowledge Claims,” 633.

was supplemented by Burke's theory of identification. Application of Burke's ideas revealed that Osteen has the ability to connect with his audience and to create powerful identifications that result in feelings of friendship and belonging. While these theories provided a general overview of Osteen's rhetoric and provided some insight into how his rhetoric was functioning on a macro-level, additional study demonstrated the complexities of his actual message, specifically in regards to the victim/ victor metaphor.

The study of metaphor in Osteen's rhetoric contributed to my larger cultural study by demonstrating how his use of metaphor drew upon established cultural values, while also creating a specific interpretation of reality. My method and orientation when approaching this study was greatly influenced by the ideas of Ivie, Jamieson, and Segrave who explained methods for analyzing metaphors in connection to their larger rhetorical significance.

The victor/ victim metaphor essentially captures the heart of Osteen's theology, which asserts that success is dependent on faith in God and positive thinking, rather than on talent or effort. In connection to larger cultural exigences established in previous chapters, this metaphor serves to deflect pressures and anxieties brought on by globalization and other anxiety-generating phenomena. Osteen's use of metaphor effectively creates a view of reality that downplays competition as a necessary part of life, and affirms the ability of each individual to succeed by having faith in God's benevolence.

The study of metaphors highlighted the implicit claims made by Osteen's rhetoric with the intention of analyzing the implications those claims might have for audience members. In many respects, this process seeks to answer the second of Zarefsky's questions, which naturally follows the "What is going on here?" and asks, "So what?"<sup>187</sup> Essentially this implies that an understanding of Osteen's ability to influence must naturally lead to speculation about why his

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

influence matters. I'll conclude now by attempting to address that question and point to some notable implications of Osteen's message.

Matters of spirituality often take on an interpretive dimension allowing for a continuum of beliefs to develop within distinct traditions of faith. The limitations of Osteen's theology dwell not in his interpretation of scripture, but in an intentional avoidance of subject matters that are clearly present in the Bible. When pressed during an interview about the seemingly one-dimensional nature of his message, which lack the more hermeneutic aspects of preaching, Osteen responded, "There's a lot better people qualified to say, 'Here's a book that's going to explain the scriptures to you.' I don't think that's my gifting."<sup>188</sup> Perhaps a detailed explication of scriptures falls outside Osteen's natural speaking abilities, but nevertheless, his message strategically avoids the themes in scripture that address heavier topics like sin, punishment, and the reality of hell. The Bible is in many ways a book that addresses the battle between good and evil, positioning man as an agential being who must, as the Apostle Paul described it, "struggle... against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."<sup>189</sup> It seems that the members of Osteen's audience, who rely on him to equip them spiritually, are being deprived of the necessary information they need in order to deal with more intense crises of faith. While Osteen focuses on larger themes of redemption and grace found in the Bible, he fails to adequately address the darker conditions of the heart that explain why people need mercy in the first place. One cannot help but wonder if Osteen's message prevents people from being able to identify or deal with the weaknesses of character that might be contributing to their material or relational disappointments. If so, it stands to reason that

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<sup>188</sup> *60 Minutes*, "Joel Osteen Answers his Critics," first broadcast 14 October 2007 by CBS. Reported by Byron Pitts.

<sup>189</sup> Ephesians 6.12 (New International Version 2011).

Osteen's exclusive focus on encouragement, while anesthetizing feelings of guilt or shame, is actually reinforcing bad habits that contribute to cycles of destructive behavior.

Osteen's message has negative implications not only for the spiritual lives of followers, but for their personal lives as well. Osteen's positive message seems to be a great equalizer among people, minimizing the importance of their individual abilities and asserting that success is waiting for everyone. Speaking about his congregation Osteen asserted, "I'm there to encourage them. I see myself more as a coach, as a motivator to help them experience the life God has for us."<sup>190</sup> Osteen seems to view his positive message as the agent by which people can access and experience the blessings of God. It seems, however, that his exclusive focus on encouragement suspends the necessary realities needed to propel people towards true growth, leading one to wonder if his message that success is for everyone might actually be the very message reinforcing mediocrity. By eliminating competition and softening the effects of failure, Osteen is delaying the truths that could help his audience achieve tangible success.

The focus on competition has often been limited to the increased pressure and anxiety that come from having to compete, and yet competition can often serve as a catalyst to higher levels of achievement. In an article discussing the positive aspects of competition, authors David Light Shields and Brenda Light Bredemeier define competition as "an opportunity to quest for excellence and find enjoyment in the strenuous pursuit of worthy goals... (during which) each party is pushed to its limits by the challenge coming from the best efforts of opponents."<sup>191</sup> While this description has a slightly quixotic bend, it does highlight how competition can cause a person to achieve at higher levels. Often times the process of competition is accompanied by singular focus, increased effort, and intense discipline that develops a person's underlying talent.

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<sup>190</sup> *Larry King Live*, "Interview with Joel Osteen," first broadcast 20 June 2005 by CNN. Reported by Larry King.

<sup>191</sup> Shields, David Light, and Brenda Light Bredemeier. 2010. "Competition Was Kohn Right?" *Phi Delta Kappan* 91, no. 5: 62-67. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 5, 2011).

It is important to note that these authors do not exclusively focus on winning as the outcome of competition. In fact, they assert, “While competitors seek victory, it is not victory for itself that matters most... The mutual challenge is a stimulus to maximum effort that, when rooted in the values of true competition, leads to an exhilarating upward spiral towards excellence.”<sup>192</sup> This distinction is important because it establishes the positive effects of competition separate from a winning outcome, legitimizing the process itself and not just the ability to secure success.

Individuals who exert themselves in competition reap rewards as their skills are honed and crafted through the process. The result is a level of output beyond what the individual was first capable of, a benefit that rewards the competitor even if victory is not attained.

Osteen eliminates competition as a requisite part of success, assuring believers that God will bless them in due time. He assuages any insecurities his followers might have, promising, “God is not limited by your family tree. He is not limited by your education, your social standing, economic status, or your race. No, the only that limits God is your lack of faith.”<sup>193</sup>

While this message may relieve anxiety in the short-run, it may also inadvertently discourage people from trying to better themselves. If Osteen’s followers believe that personal qualifications have no bearing on future successes, what incentive do they have to work harder or earn a degree? By eliminating competition and, in many ways, personal responsibility, Osteen may reinforce many of the trends that have likely contributed to the economic situation of his followers. As Shields and Bredemeier noted, “Problems arise not when people become too competitive, but when they are not competitive enough. We need to encourage them to become *more* competitive, more focused on excellence and the enjoyment that comes from pursuing it

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 109.

with vigor.”<sup>194</sup> Osteen’s message is potentially keeping people from pursuing the resources that could help them succeed, and keeping them trapped in a cycle of mediocrity.

Eliminating competition also negates the relevance of failure, setting it up as a precursor to impending success. Osteen’s tells his audience:

Maybe there’s some dreams you’ve tried and failed in the past... (but) many of you are much closer than you think. Right around the corner, you’re gonna see the situation turn around. You’re gonna get the breaks you’ve been prayin’ about, you’re gonna see your health improve. The most difficult time is always before the victory.<sup>195</sup>

This message downplays failure as a longstanding indication of talent or ability, positioning it instead as a phase before inevitable victory. Normally failure leads to an honest assessment of talent as one considers why the failure occurred in the first place. The process of assessing failure is often painful—it might mean admitting personal inadequacies that could lead to the loss of confidence, or loss of a dream. However, an honest look at failure also has the potential to greatly improve the quality of a person’s life by causing them to reevaluate their efforts or choose a new path more suited to their talents. In an address to his congregation, Eugene W. Brice, Senior Minister of Country Club Christian Church, was quoted as saying, “Failure is a teacher, the best one we’ll ever have.”<sup>196</sup> His words underscore the importance of failing as a necessary means of learning. His sentiment was echoed by several businessmen in *Fortune* magazine who weighed in on the place of failure in business enterprises. In their view, “Failure is a motivator,” “Failure is necessary for innovation,” and “Every failure is an opportunity to

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<sup>194</sup> Shields and Bredemeier, “Competition”, 65.

<sup>195</sup> Osteen, “Seeing Your Set Time Coming.”

<sup>196</sup> Brice, Eugene W. 1983. "Good News About Failure." *Vital Speeches of the Day* 49, no. 8: 236. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 6, 2011), 237.

figure out what went wrong and apply those lessons.”<sup>197</sup> Interminably postponing the feeling of failure is more damaging in the long run than simply allowing people to experience the temporary sting of defeat-- a wound that could eventually lead to the pursuit of more achievable goals and long-lasting happiness. By changing the meaning of failure and making it less personal, Osteen is depriving his congregation of the chance to learn the lessons that come from losing.

Few scholarly studies exist that attempt to understand the success of Joel Osteen, and none has extensively critiqued his rhetoric as a response to larger cultural messages and contexts. Osteen is arguably the most successful preacher in America, making his message of particular interest to scholars attempting to understand the current moral climate. While this study begins to explain Osteen’s rhetorical success, more research is needed to truly unpack the various cultural and spiritual dimensions at work in his message. My cultural analysis primarily focused on the moral languages influencing individuality and the effects of globalization, but did not account for attitudes about spirituality that might be influenced by larger cultural discourses of tolerance, moral plurality, and evolving gender roles, among others. In addition, this study could have benefited from more relevant ethnographic observations, rather than speculation from a distance. To date, no demographic information exists pertaining to Osteen’s congregation, which could give more substantial insight into the kinds of people that are attracted to his message.

The long-term benefits stemming from this kind of feel-good message are still largely unknown, which opens the door for future research that might connect this kind of religious discourse to measurable outcomes in the lives of followers. In some ways, this kind of rhetoric has the distinct ability to soothe feelings of anxiety and fear, as I personally experienced. The

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<sup>197</sup> Yang, Jia Lynn. 2008. "My latest product launch was a failure. How do I move on?." *Fortune* 158, no. 1: 28. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 4, 2011).

pressures of modernity often descend with disheartening force on people who might not have the resources to successfully cope, suggesting that this kind of message is meeting a recognizable need. Future research focusing on the long-term benefits of positive, self-help messages might identify whether this approach truly enhances an individual's success.

A central question remains about the nature of Osteen's message and its ability to truly benefit followers. While perhaps alleviating the tensions of the moment, his message seems to lack an essential quality that engages the hurts and hardships of life in a way that not only postpones their effects, but also equips followers to embrace the pain that so often defines the human experience. The risk in all this, is that Osteen's congregation will play out the description Brice gives of people who refuse failure as a teacher: "Safely living tight little lives, they never offered themselves for any great new truth, and they lived and died with nothing more than kitchen failures and back yard defeats."<sup>198</sup> It seems that in an ironic twist, Osteen's message may very well be turning his people from victors to victims.

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<sup>198</sup> Brice, "Good News", 237.

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