Phillip Luke Sinitiere


“Joel Osteen is America’s most powerful twenty-first century evangelical minister” (8). Phillip Luke Sinitiere sets out not only to defend this statement, but also to describe Osteen’s sudden ascendance. How is that Osteen, who stands firmly on the shoulders of neo-Pentecostal televangelists, takes their success to another level? According to Sinitiere, Osteen deliberately abandons the “turn or burn” approach and bombastic Christian Right agendas of earlier televangelists and turns instead to a positive, predictable, consistent, and redundant message. Sinitiere argues that Osteen’s steady and encouraging message of _Salvation with a Smile_ provides an alternative voice for many Americans caught up in chaos, confusion, and fear. Osteen also transforms the theatrics of televangelist to the science of tel-e-vangelist through masterful employment of electronic media (websites, blogs, podcasts, live streaming, e-votionals, Facebook, Joel Osteen and Lakewood apps).

In an earlier work, Sinitiere and Shayne Lee co-authored _Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace_ (New York: New York University Press, 2009), an analysis of the collective lives and mega-ministries of Osteen, T.D. Jakes, Brian McLaren, and Paula White. After completing the project, Sinitiere, a Houston native and visiting assistant professor of history at Sam Houston State University, felt constrained to produce a more substantial effort on Osteen.

Sinitiere’s description of Osteen’s Lakewood Church, the nation’s largest at 44,000 weekly attenders, according to five Ps smacks of a good Pentecostal sermon. Sinitiere observes that Lakewood’s visual, auditory, spiritual, and sensual dynamics are extraordinarily memorable and impactful. The _people_, whether parishioners, volunteers, musicians, or pastors, provide an unforgettable experience. The _place_, the former Compaq Center in downtown Houston, has been transformed from a building of sports champions to a $90 million facility for champions of a different kind. The _personality_ of Lakewood Church mirrors the lead pastor’s message of love, compassion, and professionalism. _Pentecost_, for Sinitiere, refers not to traditional Acts-like empowerment, but possibilities for a hope and faith that lead for a new future. Finally, Lakewood adherents receive and adopt the _promise_ of starting over with opportunities for boundless improvement.

Sinitiere works systematically through the origins and development of Lakewood Church. Founded in 1959 by Joel’s father John Osteen, the church tapped into essential elements of the rising prosperity gospel movement. When the
younger Osteen took over, he put his own spin on prosperity theology, labeled by Sinitiere as positive thinking, positive confession, positive providence, and the prosperity of the Christian body (11). In so doing, Joel transformed the message of his father and earlier evangelists to include fitness, health, and psychological wellbeing under the umbrella of divine healing. For the younger Osteen, physical, spiritual, and financial blessing results through the day-to-day disciplining of “the mind, the mouth, and body” (78).

Sinitiere contends further that Lakewood’s charismatic core, consisting primarily of family members, brings their unique stories to the church and enlarges the Osteen trademark. Whether the miraculous healing of Osteen’s mother Dodie, the second chance “scars into stars” success of his sister and divorcée Lisa, the steady story of medical ministries by his brother Paul, or the value of home and family from his vivacious wife Victoria, each one models the mantra of the church. Sinitiere includes only one non-family member in Osteen’s charismatic core leadership team; through his selection of Marcus Witt, the church’s first Spanish speaking pastor, Osteen solidifies Lakewood’s presence in Houston, particularly among Latin American immigrants and Latino/a Pentecostals.

Finally, Sinitiere chronicles Osteen’s uncanny ability to stave off attacks by detractors such as John MacArthur, R. Albert Mohler, Hank Hannegraff, and Michael Horton as well as various Christian rappers and street preachers. Particularly sinister to these theological watchmen is their claim that Osteen proclaims variations of Gnostic self-deification, self-salvation devoid of God’s divine rescue, and quasi pantheism (191, 193). Sinitiere describes Osteen’s response as a piety of resistance, literally a counter-attack of—you guessed it—positive confession and thinking.

Sinitiere acknowledges the influence of Kate Bowler, author of Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), as an important contributor to the topic and one of many readers of his manuscript. In many ways, his work generally follows Bowler’s monumental conclusions and applies them specifically to Osteen and Lakewood Church. He builds on Bowler’s assessment of the rise of the prosperity gospel and extends her thesis with his rigorous history and analysis of early twenty-first century currents (xiv, 17–18, 237n4).

Sinitiere provides a coherent and careful appraisal of Osteen and his ministry. Along the way, he remains remarkably reserved and ambiguous concerning Osteen’s success. For example, when Sinitiere recounts the tense relationship between Osteen and his detractors, he brings little of his own reaction to the foray. To his credit, Sinitiere functions more as a sociologist and ethnographer and thereby strives to narrate the combat between foes. However, I (and