

**PRESENTS OF GOD: THE MARKETING OF THE AMERICAN PROSPERITY
GOSPEL**

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences

in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2014

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
KENNETH P. DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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University of Pittsburgh, 2014

Prosperity Theology is a fast-growing Protestant movement rooted in Pentecostalism, which teaches that faithfulness to God ensures health and wealth in this lifetime. This study analyzes how it is marketed at Oasis Church in Hollywood, California, Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, and Victory Family Church in Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania. The dissertation examines how these churches market Prosperity Theology online and offline to determine the themes and emphases of their messages, whether the content changes based on the audience, if the audience is affecting the presentation of the message, and, if so, in what ways. Included in this investigation is rhetorical analysis of the sermons, websites, and Twitter posts of the pastors to determine themes that emerge in their presentations. Secondly, this study analyzes the make-up of the audience and how it responds to the practical preaching of the Prosperity pastors. Examining the audiences provides insight into the growth and popularity of the movement, and reveals how the audience can and does influence the message that is presented to them. This study demonstrates how these three churches address fewer traditional Pentecostal elements like glossolalia and spontaneous healing, to focus instead on relationships, personal betterment, and therapeutic messages of inspiration. Furthermore, I have found that the pastors' messages are influenced by who is perceived to be in the audience, and, as a result, they offer theological content based upon whether the audience is comprised of insiders or outsiders. Finally, I found that audience members respond favorably to the practical preaching and message of God's interest and interventions in their daily lives. The new focus among prosperity churches upon material improvement and therapeutic uplift has implications regarding the congregations' shared-identity and ability of the leaders to mobilize the audience based upon a common worldview.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	XI
1.0 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 THE CHURCHES	8
1.2 THE RESEARCH.....	11
1.3 PROSPERITY GOSPEL BACKGROUND	12
1.4 DEFINING PROSPERITY GOSPEL	26
2.0 FOLLOW ME: ONLINE MARKETING OF PROSPERITY THEOLOGY	33
2.1 TWITTER	36
2.1.1 Twitter Analysis Methodology	39
2.1.2 Twitter Background.....	41
2.1.3 Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church Tweets.....	44
2.1.4 Twitter Conclusions	75
2.2 WEBSITES.....	77
2.2.1 Website Giving: Digital Tithes and Offerings	78
2.2.2 Website Branding.....	82
2.3 ONLINE VIDEOS	86
2.4 DIGITAL MARKETING CONCLUSIONS	91

3.0	PREACHING TO THE CHOIR: MARKETING WITHIN PROSPERITY	
	CHURCHES.....	99
3.1	CHURCH ATMOSPHERE	101
3.1.1	Church Style and Architecture.....	106
3.1.2	Audio Visual Technology	108
3.1.3	Resources	109
3.1.4	Renovations and Relocations	111
3.1.5	Demographics.....	113
3.2	WORSHIP	115
3.3	SERMONS.....	118
3.3.1	Philip Wagner’s Sermons.....	120
3.3.2	Joel Osteen’s Sermons	124
3.3.3	John Nuzzo’s Sermons.....	131
3.4	PASTORS	137
3.4.1	Joel Osteen.....	138
3.4.2	John Nuzzo	143
3.4.3	Philip Wagner.....	145
3.5	CHURCH EVENTS.....	147
3.6	IN-HOUSE MARKETING CONCLUSIONS.....	151
4.0	AUDIENCE	157
4.1	OASIS CHURCH AUDIENCE	162
4.2	VICTORY FAMILY CHURCH AUDIENCE	172
4.3	LAKESWOOD CHURCH AUDIENCE.....	181

4.4	AUDIENCE CONCLUSIONS.....	190
5.0	CONCLUSIONS	198
	APPENDIX A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH SAMPLE.....	206
	APPENDIX B: WEBSITE AND SOCIAL NETWORKING: MEASUREMENT AND SCALE ITEMS	209
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	211

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Joel Osteen Tweet, Accessed April 4, 2014, www.twitter.com/joeosteen	40
Figure 2: John Nuzzo Informational Tweet, Accessed October 18, 2013, www.twitter.com/johnnuzzo	44
Figure 3: Oasis Church Inspirational Tweet, Accessed January 4, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla	44
Figure 4: Joel Osteen Inspirational Tweet, Accessed August 7, 2013, www.twitter.com/JoelOsteen	46
Figure 5: Joel Osteen Tweet, Accessed June 4, 2013, www.twitter.com/JoelOsteen	48
Figure 6: Lakewood Youth Group Tweet, Accessed June 4, 2013, www.twitter.com/canvasyouth	50
Figure 7: Joel Osteen Tweet, Accessed on July 29, 2013, www.twitter.com/JoelOsteen	51
Figure 8: Lakewood Church Easter Tweet, Accessed on August 8, 2013, www.lakewoodchurch	54
Figure 9: Joel Osteen Easter Tweet, Accessed August 8, 2013, www.twitter.com/joelosteen	55
Figure 10: Lakewood Church Tweet, Accessed on August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/lakewoodch	56
Figure 11: Lakewood Church, Accessed on August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/LakewoodCh ...	57

Figure 12: Victory Family Church Tweet, Accessed on August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/lifeatvictory	59
Figure 13: Victory Family Church Tweet, Accessed August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/lifeatvictory	60
Figure 14: Victory Family Church Tweet, Accessed August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/lifeatvictory	61
Figure 15: John Nuzzo Tweet, Accessed August 13, 2013, www.twitter.com/johnnuzzo	62
Figure 16: John Nuzzo Tweet, Accessed on August 13, 2013, www.twitter.com/johnnuzzo	63
Figure 17: John Nuzzo Tweet, Accessed August 12, 2013, www.twitter.com/johnnuzzo	64
Figure 18: Oasis Testimony Retweet, Accessed August 12, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla	66
Figure 19: Oasis Church Tweet, Accessed August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla	67
Figure 20: Oasis Church Testimony Retweet, Accessed October 18, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla	68
Figure 21: Oasis Church Retweet, Accessed on October 18, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla	69
Figure 22: Oasis Church Tweet, Accessed on October 18, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla	70
Figure 23: Victory Family Church Seminar Tweet, Accessed August 6, 2013, www.twitter.com/lifeatvictory	71
Figure 24: Oasis Church Seminar Tweet, Accessed August 6, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla .	71
Figure 25: Financial Peace University Description, Accessed on June 28, 2013, www.daveramsay.com/fpu/home/	72
Figure 26: Victory Family Church 90-day Tithe Pledge, Accessed July 11, 2013, www.lifeatvictory.com/give	79

Figure 27: Lakewood Giving Philosophy, Accessed on July 24, 2013, http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/Give.aspx	81
Figure 28: Tweet to Joel Osteen, Accessed March 3, 2013, www.twitter.com/howardgordon .	186
Figure 29: Joel Osteen Tweet, Accessed September 13, 2013, www.twitter.com/joelosteen	187

PREFACE

This project benefitted from a great many people. First, I must acknowledge the support of my family. My husband Adam offered unfailing support throughout this journey and inspired me to keep going through his words and his own example. My mother, a believer in the Prosperity Gospel, was often helpful unconsciously as she revealed elements of the tradition through her own faithfulness that I might otherwise have missed. She also supported me in hundreds of ways through her persistent cheerleading even though the graduate school process baffles her.

I must acknowledge the incredible support of my dissertation committee. My graduate advisor, Paula Kane, acted as my mentor and sounding board, and exhibited a gift for encouragement during my moments of frustration. Paula's ability to laugh in the midst of difficulties is something I hope to honor throughout my career with equal gusto. Adam Shear showed incredible patience as he acted both as my committee member and graduate advisor, and I will be forever grateful for his gentle spirit and unparalleled wit through the process. Rachel Kranson kindly provided detailed notes and advice on my various drafts that helped mold my project and also prepared me for life after graduate school. Ronald Zboray gave me valuable assistance and outside perspective that my project surely needed.

A collection of talented scholars helped me through the process. Many thanks to Kate Bowler for providing me with a copy of her incredible manuscript and assisting me with scholarship that assisted me in my research. Her kindness and generosity and her exceptional

scholarship inspired me throughout this process. Gerardo Marti provided valuable assistance along the way. Clark Chilson showed me the value of ethnographic research and the ways in-depth analysis can provide great insight. Rebecca Denova helped me more than she will ever know through her enthusiasm for the field and her ability to make difficult subjects both fun and approachable.

Finally, I owe a debt of appreciation to Lakewood, Oasis, and Victory Family Church and the many people from each who sacrificially gave me their time, insight, and energy. I was struck by their enthusiasm and faith, and impressed by their open hearts. Listening to sermons and reading tweets of Prosperity Gospel pastors and congregants is an uplifting way to make a living, and I was repeatedly reminded throughout the process just how blessed I am to study this remarkable and fascinating Christian tradition.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

It had been ten years since I last attended the church of my youth. Looking around, while much was the same, I took note of the many changes that had taken place in my long absence. The sign on the wall outside that used to say Rolling Hills Assembly of God now read simply Rolling Hills Church.¹ The stained glass windows were gone, the stage was equipped with new modern audio-visual technology, and the pastor was wearing an untucked golf shirt instead of a suit and tie. The building was completely remodeled and was able to fit twice as many people as it did in the 1980s and 90s when I attended. The sermon on the day I returned was about how to become more successful personally and professionally. It dealt with everyday concerns instead of the topics I was used to hearing about such as salvation, the Holy Spirit, or the importance of reading “the Word.” The most noticeable difference at this Pentecostal church, though, was there were no longer people openly speaking in tongues, being “slain in the spirit,” or having “hands laid” on them for healing.

Growing up at Rolling Hills Assembly of God, I would sit in the second row of the sanctuary pews every Sunday morning. Each week there would be an opportunity for healing where the deacons and pastors would pray with and lay hands on people who wished to be healed. During this portion of the service, many people were “slain in the spirit,” when they

¹ Name of this church was changed for the purposes of this paper as it is not one of the churches examined in this project.

would fall to the ground seemingly out of control of their own bodies, struck by the power of the Holy Spirit. There were brown cloths folded neatly under the first row of pews that were used to ensure modesty by covering the laps of women in skirts who had fallen to the floor. There would also inevitably be someone who would speak in tongues during the musical worship portion of the service. The music would stop and we all listened as the person spoke loudly and unintelligibly in a foreign tongue. We were told this was the Holy Spirit speaking through the person, and when they finished we would wait in silence until someone else revealed the English translation of the divine proclamation. Most of the time, someone would translate, but occasionally no one would come forward. The absence of a translator meant that the person who had spoken in tongues had done so in error and that the Lord was not guiding in their actions. This was rare, but scandalous, as it indicated the speaker acted without divine guidance and would therefore later be privately reprimanded by the pastor.

While to most people, this series of events within a church service would seem odd if not completely bizarre, it was normal to me. I realized this did not go on at every church, but the Assemblies of God is a Pentecostal denomination that embraces the gifts of the Holy Spirit including glossolalia and divine healing. When I returned to this same, but different, church that no longer included these elements in the service, I assumed they had divorced themselves from the Assemblies of God denomination—especially because Assembly of God was no longer in the church's name. When I spoke with one of the pastors, however, he assured me they were still affiliated with the Assemblies of God, but took on the bland moniker because it was “easier to say.” Curiously, though, a Seeker Church Pastor survey showed that 56% of seeker churches do

not list a denomination on the church's main sign.² Such an intentional decision seems to indicate a strategic marketing effort to appeal to a broader audience. Furthermore, the absence of people speaking in tongues and organized healing efforts during the services indicated an intentional effort to redirect their focus and present a different style of Christianity. Indeed, this Pentecostal church was behaving almost exactly like an evangelical church, devoid of acts of the Holy Spirit, and embracing more modern worship, technology, and look.

The Rolling Hills Church's pastor assured me that all the changes were stylistic not substantive, but the absence of the more traditional elements of Pentecostalism made me wonder if that was accurate. Scholars consider churches like this one neo-Pentecostal and they are known for being, "modern, media literate, and expansionist."³ They are also said to put "less emphasis on baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, and more in the power of the Holy Spirit for healing, prophetic utterances, vibrant worship in music, and prosperity for believers."⁴ While neo-Pentecostalism maintains Pentecostalism's core beliefs, it looks and behaves like an evangelical church in both its look and theological emphases. The pastor at Rolling Hills Church acknowledged that these changes were implemented in an effort to attract more congregants. He said they were attempting to compete, not with other churches, but with the Sunday paper and Starbucks; things that people would do on a Sunday if they did not go to church. In response to the coffee shop competition, Rolling Hills Church added a new café area adjacent to the foyer, and more "entertaining" elements within the service that are not overtly

² Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 139; Seeker Churches can be of any denomination, but are designed to make those who are previously "unchurched" or from a different background comfortable. They usually have contemporary music and a more casual atmosphere.

³ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 118.

⁴ Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 34.

Pentecostal or even necessarily based in Christianity such as entertaining videos and artistic performances.

In addition to the stylistic changes implemented and the more practical approach to preaching, Rolling Hills Church began to emphasize the ways God wants to bless those who follow him. Their sermons started to include Prosperity Theology, which is a tradition within Christianity that promises believers health and wealth in this lifetime to those who are faithful. The decision by my old church to make stylistic changes at the same time they began emphasizing earthly blessings and “practical, everyday” lessons in their sermons instead of more traditional Christian themes indicates a broader shift in tone. The practical sermon content and ministries embraced by Rolling Hills Church are an important part of Prosperity Gospel churches, and is becoming one of the most common traits within non-denominational, evangelical, and Pentecostal churches. While Rolling Hills Church does not advertise itself as a Prosperity church specifically, its message and emphases are consistent with the tradition, and the pastors acknowledge their belief that God is willing, able, and eager to bless his followers with health and wealth in this life. The church’s commitment to this doctrine coupled with the decision to showcase its own earthly success through things like renovations and sophisticated technology makes it a part of this fast-growing movement. Even the decision to move towards Prosperity Theology without officially declaring affiliation is consistent with the movement, as the Prosperity Gospel’s negative connotations, such as greed and superficiality, cause them to be leery of the designation.

Returning to the church of my youth and seeing its dramatic theological and stylistic changes sparked my curiosity about what these attempts to modernize and become culturally relevant mean for the presentation of the Prosperity Gospel. Rolling Hills Church claims the

changes it has implemented are merely superficial; namely, an attempt to make the packaging keep up with modern sensibilities, but the content presented has shifted towards a more inspirational, practical, and prosperity-based approach revealing the changes to be more substantive than the church is acknowledging. This realization inspired the research found in this study.

I began contemplating and investigating how the Prosperity Gospel is presented and whether the traditional Pentecostal themes of self-sacrifice, unconditional love, and eternal reward/damnation are being replaced with general inspirational ideas of hope, success, and wellness. Prosperity Gospel's "this-worldly" focus, with its emphasis on earthly success can overshadow more "other-worldly" concerns like the Holy Spirit and even salvation. I wanted to learn how the Prosperity Gospel is marketed online and offline to determine whether theological components are being deemphasized and replaced with general inspirational content. For the purposes of this study, "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large."⁵ While churches do not have "customers" in the traditional sense, congregants are attracted and maintained in much the same way, and a number of scholars have argued that congregants are consumers of the "product" of religious fulfillment ideally provided there.⁶ In this study, marketing is not limited to advertising, but instead includes all interactions that facilitate the branding and image of the church and its pastors, including sermons, events, and social media output by the churches and its senior pastor.

⁵ American Marketing Association, Accessed on September 16, 2013, <http://www.marketingpower.com/AboutAMA/Pages/DefinitionofMarketing.aspx>.

⁶ Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (New York: Routledge, 2007), xi; Mark Shibley, "Contemporary Evangelicals: Born-Again and World Affirming," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558 Americans and Religions in the Twenty-First Century (July 1998) 72; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 140.

My dissertation examines the marketing efforts of the American Prosperity Theology movement, which is part of the neo-Pentecostal tradition within American Protestantism.⁷ One in five Americans identifies as Pentecostal, many of them embrace the prosperity message, and in a Pew study, 43 percent of Christian respondents agreed that the “faithful receive health and wealth.”⁸ Of the 260 well-attended churches in America, fifty of them can be classified as Prosperity churches.⁹ This evangelical movement has evolved over the last fifty years, and most recently it is characterized by therapeutic messages, positive speech, and personal empowerment, and is best known for such “celebrity” preachers as Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and T.D. Jakes.

My research will examine how the Prosperity Gospel is marketed online and offline among three churches to determine the themes and emphases of their messages, whether the content changes based upon the perceived audience, and if/how the audience is affecting the presentation of the message. I focus on three questions as I organized my research: 1) How is the American Prosperity Gospel presented by these three churches? 2) How do the audiences respond to the message? 3) What do these elements imply for the future of the movement and its theology? My data indicates a doctrinal tempering among Prosperity churches, particularly in more public settings such as television broadcasts and social media that offers audiences a general message of inspiration and focuses on earthly concerns, while simultaneously limiting references to the Bible, salvation, and the Holy Spirit.

To examine the marketing of Prosperity Theology, I consider how its leaders, advertising, and audience help determine the tradition’s identity. While this movement’s lack of denominational affiliation contributes to variations in its message and presentation, there are

⁷ Prosperity Theology is also called the Prosperity Gospel, Word of Faith movement, the Health and Wealth Gospel, and the Name it and Claim it Gospel.

⁸ Bowler, *Blessed*, 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

themes that can shed light on how Prosperity Theology fits into the American religious landscape and explore why this tradition is experiencing growth across race and class lines.

One of the ways the Prosperity message is transmitted is through sermons, which frame its message to insiders. My research analyzes the content of the sermons to identify themes in the message in an effort to understand which concepts are emphasized and ultimately determine to what extent the audience dictates the content presented. While the Prosperity Gospel was traditionally a healing-focused tradition within Pentecostalism, it now downplays its spirit-driven elements (e.g., tongues speaking), while emphasizing the materialism and positive thinking instead.

Comparing leaders' online messages with their sermons and other live appearances could illuminate whether and how they adjust the content of their messages to meet demands of particular audiences. My research explores whether having a larger percentage of outsiders, such as what is found on Twitter, contributes to a more secularized version of Christian theology within that forum. An analysis of theological shifts among these neo-Pentecostal churches sheds light on some of the factors that might contribute to the growth or decline of particular Christian traditions. A religious tradition that is presenting inconsistent theology among various formats could be problematic should audiences notice and object to the variations. Furthermore, a decline in shared-identity could undermine this group's stronghold as a conservative voting bloc and/or collective cultural voice.

1.1 THE CHURCHES

My research is based on three churches from different parts of the country that reflect different elements of evangelical life in America and are home to a variety of ethnicities and classes. Two of the churches have already been the subjects of scholarly investigation, which my work builds upon. While three churches cannot represent a movement, tradition, denomination, or religion, they can show patterns in marketing strategies that illuminate how the Prosperity Gospel is presented. In the fast-growing Prosperity movement, the marketing helps reveal what is attracting people and how the theology is developing. The churches in this study provide insight into the ways Prosperity Theology is marketed and how their audience is responding both online and offline. My research includes the following churches: Victory Family Church in Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania; Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas; and Oasis Church in Hollywood, California.

Victory Family Church has approximately 2000 members and 1500 regular attenders making it just shy of the somewhat arbitrary “megachurch” title.¹⁰ It is located in Cranberry Township in the exurbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and recently opened a newly renovated facility.¹¹ Victory is led by founding pastor, John Nuzzo, who is in his fifties, married to Michelle, and a father of three. He grew up in an Italian Catholic home, and converted to evangelical or “born-again” Christianity when he was a teenager. He worked as a missionary in Africa and as a travelling preacher for 8 years before founding Victory Family Church. The

¹⁰ The term megachurch has been widely accepted to mean a church that has 2000 regular attendees. The number of “regular” attenders is imprecise because it is difficult for larger churches to be certain of their average weekly attendance.

¹¹ An exurb is defined as, “A district outside a city, especially a prosperous area beyond the suburbs.” (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/exurb); Victory Family Church is located over 25 miles outside of the city of Pittsburgh and is in a wealthy, expanding community.

church is Pentecostal and non-denominational. When it was founded, it was an intimate group of devotees who met in a small movie theatre. Over the twenty years since then, Victory swelled to its current size and is stationed in a multi-million dollar building filled with modern amenities and advanced audio-visual technology.

Lakewood Church of Houston, Texas is home to America's "most popular" pastor, Joel Osteen, and the largest congregation in the country with an average of over 45,000 people attending weekly services.¹² Like Victory, Lakewood is non-denominational, and is evangelical and charismatic in foundational beliefs.¹³ Lakewood is known for its racial and ethnic diversity and makes an effort to accommodate their many Spanish-speaking congregants by hosting two Spanish services in addition to their four English services every Sunday. Lakewood was founded in 1959 by John Osteen and led by him until his death in 1999, at which point Lakewood was taken over by John's son, Joel. Despite Joel's reservations about taking over as Lakewood's senior pastor, the church has grown exponentially since his promotion. Lakewood was a large church and televised its services during John Osteen's period as senior pastor, but after Joel took over leadership, church attendance increased tremendously, and its television reach grew to over 100 countries reaching 7 million viewers each week.¹⁴ It is under Joel's leadership that the church became an international symbol of evangelicalism, Prosperity Theology, megachurches, and, for some, of American religion.

Joel Osteen is also in his fifties, married to Victoria, who also contributes to the weekly services, and has two children. In addition to being senior pastor at Lakewood Church, Osteen is

¹² "60 Minutes," broadcast 10/14/2007, Accessed on February 25, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGisLq9DA6U; Oral History with Jason Madding, Marketing Director, Lakewood Church.

¹³ Jessica Ramirez, "No Politics from this Pulpit," *Newsweek* (New York, January 24, 2008).

¹⁴ Ibid.

author of numerous journals, devotionals, and inspirational books. Additionally, Osteen and his wife travel the country with their “A Night of Hope” tour. He can also frequently be seen in television interviews with the likes of Barbara Walters, Oprah Winfrey, Piers Morgan and other national television journalists.

Oasis Church is located in the heart of Hollywood, California, and is home to 3,000 members. The church was founded in 1984 by Philip and Holly Wagner, and was based in the home of an unnamed Oscar winner. The church later moved to the historic Destiny Theater on Wilshire Boulevard, and more recently upgraded to a new, larger facility nearby. Oasis is a non-denominational, neo-Pentecostal church, and Philip and Holly are both its senior pastors (although he preaches more frequently). Its location in Hollywood inspired their most famous feature: a star in the pavement outside of their building modeled in the tradition of the famed “Hollywood Walk of Fame” stars. The Oasis Church star, however features the name “Jesus Christ: The Son of God” instead of an entertainer’s name. Wagner says the star is intended to establish a “walk of *faith*,” but also speaks to their roots in the entertainment capital.¹⁵ Oasis was the subject of scholarly investigation in Gerardo Marti’s 2008 book, *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church*, which uses ethnography to explore the church and its congregation. His work laid the path for my research, and helped inform my understanding of Oasis as a Prosperity church.

In choosing the churches to investigate, I included multi-cultural congregations that represent three different parts of the country. While three churches cannot provide a complete picture of the Prosperity movement, these congregations provide racial, class, and regional diversity. All three are non-denominational with evangelical and charismatic/Pentecostal roots,

¹⁵ Gerardo Marti, *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 21.

and fall under the umbrella of Prosperity Theology, though their support manifests in different ways and to different degrees. It is within this context that each of the three churches is considered.

1.2 THE RESEARCH

This study relies on ethnographic analysis including observation and oral histories as well as rhetorical analysis on the sermons and online content to examine the marketing strategies of the three churches. The goal was to determine how the churches are attracting new members and maintaining current ones through sermons, events, infrastructure, services, websites, and social media. The research period was October 2011 – June 2013, during which I listened to sermons and public interviews by the senior pastors, and attended at least one month of services at each church. For the sermons preached while I was not in attendance, I was able to watch them online and/or listen to them through their podcast feeds available on iTunes. I conducted oral histories with ten to twenty members of each church, and interacted with dozens more during my onsite visits. I analyzed the online content published by the churches and their senior pastors including websites, videos, and their feeds on social networking site, Twitter. While all three churches claim continued growth, they do not reveal the turnover rate of congregants. Through some luck I was able to find members of each church who had once attended and have since left, and talked with them about what made them leave, but for the most part, it is left to inference and conjecture as to a church's turnover rate and why members decide to leave.

Pastors (when possible), marketing directors, staff, and congregants of each church provided their oral histories including information about their religious upbringing, experiences

at the church, and other related information. These oral histories were provided via phone, in person, and over email.¹⁶ The names of the congregants were changed in this dissertation to protect their privacy, but the actual names of the pastors, marketing directors, and other staff members were used due to their official affiliation with the church and their role in the marketing of the churches.

Among the considerations of this study is how the churches, through the pastors and marketing teams, are targeting new members, and how they approach the process of attracting people. The growth of a church, or lack thereof, is one way to determine if the marketing is effective. In addition, the efficacy of the marketing will be gauged by whether the church and its members are congruent in their beliefs and worldview. This study also considers whether the theology is consistent through the various means of marketing. If the message varies, I explore in what ways it does so, and how the medium affects the message.

1.3 PROSPERITY GOSPEL BACKGROUND

The academic study of religion can offer deep and intimate insight into personal and public expressions of faith. The intimate nature that makes religion so compelling, however, can also make its study imprecise, and scholars struggle to define exactly who fits into certain categories and designations. Prosperity Gospel, in particular, lacks denominational parameters that make definition and delineation difficult. This complicated foundation makes understanding the relationship between Pentecostalism and evangelicalism important as well as their interplay with

¹⁶ For a sample of the oral history release letter can be found in Appendix A.

Prosperity Theology. Evangelicalism is among the broader categories within American religion, and there is some fluidity both among scholars and adherents in terms of who falls under this umbrella.

While evangelicals are often discussed in mainstream secular media and have become known for their strong shared identity and worldview, they do not fit within established denominational parameters and are often found outside of denominationalism altogether. This study understands evangelicals as Protestant Christians that maintain three core elements: an emphasis on the Bible, a conversion (or born-again) experience wherein they accept Jesus as their personal savior, and are committed to sharing their faith to convert others.¹⁷ This study also speaks to James Davison Hunter's definition, which notes the evangelical emphasis on personal piety and religious commitment.¹⁸ Like Randall Balmer, I use the term "evangelical" as a broad umbrella term that includes, "fundamentalists, evangelicals, Pentecostals, and charismatics."¹⁹

Difficulties defining and categorizing these Christians arise in part because members of each of these groups might be baffled, or worse offended, at the idea of being included within a group or among other groups. Balmer claims, "Such is the unwieldy nature of evangelicalism."²⁰ Pentecostals share the basic foundation of evangelicalism, but also incorporate the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues, and see their practice as the mark of a true Christian. They believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit demonstrated by the Early Church as described in the New Testament book of Acts are still meant to be included in

¹⁷ Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the American Subculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), xiv; Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston, *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Mark Shibley, "Contemporary Evangelicals: Born-Again and World-Affirming," *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558 Americans and Religions in the Twenty-First Century (July 1998).

¹⁸ James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 65-69.

¹⁹ Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, xvi.

²⁰ Ibid.

Christian practice. One of these gifts is that of divine healing obtained through faith. This element of Pentecostalism was one of the foundational elements of Prosperity Theology. While it can be difficult to delineate among the various evangelical groups, placing Prosperity Theology within this theological context demonstrates its deep roots in American religious culture.

While Prosperity Theology “stems from multiple historical and theological streams,” most scholars agree that its roots are in the nineteenth-century New Thought movement and its focus on the unity between divinity and humanity, the world conceptualized through thoughts, and the power of those thoughts to create.²¹ New Thought was the philosophy of Phineas P. Quimby, whose patient was Christian Science founder, Mary Baker Eddy.²² Eddy’s Christian Science was based upon the idea that the mind, body, and spirit are all connected, and disease begins in the mind, and can be overcome through right thinking.²³

This metaphysical movement was perpetuated by the written word, and among those who carried on the tradition was preacher and writer E.W. Kenyon. Although he denied any connection to the New Thought movement, there is a strong similarity in their philosophies. In his writings he added an element of faith to the notion of positive thinking. It was Norman Vincent Peale, however, who brought these beliefs to a more mainstream audience with his publication, *The Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952.

²¹ Bowler, *Blessed*, 250.

²² Bowler, *Blessed*, 14. Bowler’s book provides a thorough exploration of the roots and beliefs of Prosperity Theology in its many iterations.

²³ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?: Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 52.

Prosperity Gospel's current form, however, developed in the 1950s amidst postwar optimism and healing revivals within the Pentecostal tradition.²⁴ Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin were among the first leaders, and their testimonies of miraculous healings and their savvy use of the media facilitated the spread of their message. Hagin (1917-2003) claims to have experienced miraculous healing from a deformed heart and blood disease in his childhood, and found inspiration in the work of Kenyon.²⁵ Indeed Hagin acknowledges the influence of Kenyon on his life and Christian message, and used it to create a religious empire. By using his own healing testimony and his *Word of Faith* magazine with millions of subscribers, he was able to establish a devoted following, and in so doing, began the modern-day Prosperity Theology movement in the United States.²⁶

Prosperity Theology is understood as having three main tenets: divine healing, material prosperity, and positive confession.²⁷ Positive confession is a practice wherein Prosperity proponents verbally claim the blessings they desire as a means of manifesting them into their lives. Faith is critical to the success of the confession, so any doubt about its future manifestation will prevent the blessing.²⁸ Different leaders emphasize each of these tenets to different degrees, with some, such as televangelist and faith healer, Benny Hinn, focusing on divine (and spontaneous) healing, while others, such as Prosperity evangelist, Kenneth Copeland, focus primarily on material prosperity. Some, like the Copeland ministry, claim amassing wealth is a means through which one can and should bless others, rather than a way to gain personal

²⁴ Ibid., 55.

²⁵ Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 68.

²⁶ Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29.

²⁷ Bruce Barron, *The Health and Wealth Gospel* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1987), 9-13.

²⁸ Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It*, 69.

benefits, however they are inconsistent on this point as many Prosperity preachers (including the Copelands) live lavish lifestyles outside of their ministry roles.

The Health and Wealth Gospel is predicated on an interpretation of the biblical account of the Abrahamic covenant found in the biblical book of Genesis. Kenneth Copeland calls it the “Blood Covenant,” which is described as an extension of God’s blessings promised to Abraham and all believers through the redemption of Jesus’ crucifixion and subsequent resurrection.²⁹ Prosperity Gospel proponents draw upon several verses from the Old and New Testaments to justify the Prosperity tradition including 3 John 1: 2, “I pray that in all respects, you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.”³⁰ The use of “prosper” is not present in every translation and has been criticized by many who claim this was merely a salutation of well wishes not a justification for amassing wealth.³¹

Pentecostals have been criticized for being so “‘heavenly minded’ that they are no ‘earthly good.’”³² Their spiritual focus was one of their defining, or at least stereotypical, characteristics. The shift toward an earthly focus, however, demonstrates how Prosperity Gospel proponents, have given Pentecostalism a facelift. Critics including the “red letter Christians” such as Jim Wallis, the National Baptists, and even fellow megachurch celebrity pastor, Rick Warren, say the Prosperity Theology strain of Pentecostalism is too focused on materialism and its leaders are ostentatious.³³ Furthermore, its attention to material wealth is also offensive to those who see its beliefs as antithetical to the message of Jesus.

²⁹ Kenneth Copeland, *Covenant of Blood* (Fort Worth, Texas: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1987).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Barron, *The Health and Wealth Gospel*, 91.

³² Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamuri, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 21.

³³ David van Bema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You to Be Rich?,” *Time Magazine*, September 10, 2006.

Scholars have focused on the historical roots and development of the Prosperity Gospel as stemming from a mix of Pentecostalism and New Thought, an early “cluster of thinkers and metaphysical ideas that emerged in the 1880s as the era’s most powerful vehicle of mind power.”³⁴ Scholars also focused on Prosperity Gospel’s televangelists and ultimately their sexual and financial scandals of the 1980’s with many believing the negative press could be the end of Prosperity Theology and/or televangelism.³⁵

The stories of disgraced televangelists were of such importance to the Prosperity Theology movement that the study of it can be divided into before and after the scandals.³⁶ The incidents made national news and cast a shadow on televangelists, evangelicals, and Prosperity Theology. The fallout resulted in a shift in the way the message was presented rather than the demise of the theology altogether.³⁷ In the midst of the rise and redirection of televangelism (or perhaps because of it), evangelicalism became more world-affirming, and its “ability to adapt to the surrounding culture has been essential to its recent growth...”³⁸ This move towards a more world-affirming approach by evangelicals is central to my investigation of the marketing of Prosperity Gospel and its theology. While the evangelical business approach does not necessarily affect the theology, questions remain about the degree to which the “adaptation to contemporary culture is eroding religious authenticity.”³⁹ While Jeffrey K. Hadden’s argument

³⁴ Bowler, *Blessed*, 13-14.

³⁵ Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann, *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1981); Razelle Frankl, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1987); Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³⁶ Bowler, *Blessed*, 107.

³⁷ Jeffrey K. Hadden, “The Rise and Fall of American Televangelism,” *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527 Religion in The Nineties (May, 1993) 113-130.

³⁸ Mark A. Shibley, “Contemporary Evangelicals: Born-Again and World-Affirming,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558, Americans and Religions in the Twenty-First Century (July, 1998) 69.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

that, “contemporary evangelicals are not somehow less born-again,” might be true, I argue that their theological emphases have shifted toward a more broadly palatable message.⁴⁰

Beyond this world-affirming approach, evangelicals have ushered in a new period of innovation in the midst of a post-denominational landscape where lines are blurred among Pentecostals, charismatics, evangelicals, and non-denominational Christians. These murky boundaries are most clear in evangelical schools that cater to the educational and spiritual needs of Christians from a variety of evangelical backgrounds. As such, they have adopted a set of core beliefs that highlights the sameness among them instead of the differences.⁴¹ This push towards commonality among a variety of “brands” of Christians creates the sense of a more generic Christianity, which might attribute to evangelicalism’s broader appeal (and growth). Such a development would warrant greater investigation into the “strictness thesis” that posits that traditions with greater rigidity and expectations of loyalty thrive.⁴²

This common branding has been facilitated in part by evangelicals’ embrace of business practices and media promotion to market their churches, organizations, and tradition. This approach is not new; evangelists have used business-savvy marketing for decades in an effort to broaden their reach. Interestingly, some consider Mary Baker Eddy to be the “most innovative promoter of religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”⁴³ Her ingenuity was rooted in a decision to market her religious text in secular venues, which is an important aspect of the current evangelical marketing strategy.⁴⁴ This marketing technique demonstrates the way religious leaders can use secular venues to sell their products and even their message. All three

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Melinda Bollar Wagner, “Conservative Christianity: The Demise of Denominationalism in Christian Schools,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36 no. 1 (March, 1997).

⁴² Mark Shibley, “Evangelicals: Born-Again and World-Affirming,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558, *Americans and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (July 1998) 67-87.

⁴³ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 37.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

churches in this study use secular means (e.g., pop culture references, interviews on secular television, secular entertainment) to frame their message and/or entertain their audiences. Eddy's example demonstrates how the positive-thinking message can be marketed outside of the confines of religious environments. Indeed, evangelicals have always embraced American culture and, "Were not afraid to sensationalize...present images of luxury...to entertain, or to cater to the viewers' self-interest, and consumerism."⁴⁵

Foursquare Church founder, Aimee Semple McPherson, was also an innovator of religious marketing in the 1920s and 1930s. McPherson partnered with local politicians, businessmen, and movie execs to gain power, and adopted their marketing strategies including simple messages, catchy openings, and repetition to attract her following.⁴⁶ She managed to combine the appeal of "old-time religion" with American culture and included elements of patriotism and militarism in her messages.⁴⁷ Elements of McPherson's legacy can be seen among the three churches in this study. The churches all embrace marketing and show-business techniques to keep crowds entertained and interested. They use contemporary and non-religious movie and song references to illustrate religious themes and they work with community leaders to host events that are only tangentially religious in nature. Additionally, the leaders, like McPherson, keep the messages simple and the themes repetitious. Victory Family Church, in particular, embraces the patriotism employed by McPherson in conjunction with their theological message.

Traveling evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, also employed innovative marketing techniques to promote his massive revivals across the country. Moody subscribed to an 11th commandment,

⁴⁵ Peter G. Horsfield, *Religious Television: The American Experience* (London: Longman Press, 1984), 19.

⁴⁶ Edith Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister* (New York: William B. Erdman, 1993).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 237.

“Let there be advertising,” to promote his events.⁴⁸ His savvy use of “pre-event planning, preparation, prayer, and publicity” to create public interest made him a celebrity evangelist long before Billy Graham, Joel Osteen, and other modern incarnations.⁴⁹ Moody's content is similar to current Prosperity Gospel preachers in his calls to “expect a blessing of unusual magnitude” because he believed it created excitement at the events.⁵⁰ As a lifelong salesman, much of Moody's success is attributed to his persuasiveness, both with the media and with his audiences. Like the pastors in this study, Moody saw his audience members as customers and talked to them as such by making religion the commodity.⁵¹

Nineteenth-century evangelist Henry Ward Beecher masterfully connected with his audience through the use of “feeling” and he advised other evangelists to “worry less about doctrine and more about their training in voice, gesture, and posture.”⁵² His commitment to presentation can be seen among the three churches in this study, and shows how doctrine can take a backseat to the performance. Also like the churches in this study, Beecher believed “luxury and extravagance were not only respectable, but also the proper tendencies of a pious man.”⁵³ Additionally, his marketing techniques were as aggressive as those seen by contemporary evangelists. He “made his middle-class audience luxuriate in their emotions” and he constructed an elaborate communications network that made him a national name.⁵⁴

The use of business and entertainment techniques to attract an audience does not end with evangelists. Christianity has become marketable outside of the church as well. Christian music is

⁴⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁹ Bruce J. Evenson, *God's Man For the Gilded Age: D.L. Moody and the Rise of Modern Mass Evangelism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 25.

⁵¹ Ibid., 144.

⁵² R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 207.

⁵³ Ibid., 208.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 207.

big business, and while some Christian leaders note ambivalence about “selling Jesus,” Dan Harrell, an industry leader, is unequivocal saying they are selling Jesus because ““that is our product.””⁵⁵ Within the framework of Christian music, there is a sense that the message, “has not been ‘diminished,’ but has changed.”⁵⁶ With Jesus as the “product,” the line between a well-marketed and entertaining church and one that tones down the religious message to attract more people is a fine one.

Evangelical leaders insist changes in presentation are not substantive, and the Christian message has remained the same, but it is within this framework that this study is situated. Mara Einstein predicted in *Brands of Faith* that the increase in marketing and promotion among a variety of competing forces would make religious groups more likely to create a desirable “product,” but also to “change the product to suit the market.”⁵⁷ She claims the desire for large audiences, “Changed religion from what people need to what people want,” especially among “prosperity and self-fulfillment” movements.⁵⁸ Indeed, Mark Taylor argues in *After God*, that “Western secularity is a *religious* phenomenon,” (italics his), and the way secularization theory has been rejected by religious scholars is due in part to a narrow interpretation that does not account for the way Western religion now operates.⁵⁹

In addition to the stylized changes within services that were introduced as evangelists worked to appeal to large audiences, they used media to present their message and promote their organizations.⁶⁰ Evangelicals have a long history of print, radio, and television usage beyond the

⁵⁵ Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 24.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁷ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, xi.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵⁹ Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xiii.

⁶⁰ Quentin J. Shultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003).

newsworthy tales of televangelists' bad behavior. Perhaps most noteworthy, however, is the decision by many evangelical leaders to make their publications resemble their secular counterparts.⁶¹ One example is the "Bible-zine" for girls called, *Revolve*, which includes advice for young women on everything from beauty to dating. The content in *Revolve* changes with each printing as feedback is received from readers. For example, editors changed a section of commentary when readers took offense to some of the dating advice.⁶² This market-based formatting demonstrates one way evangelical audiences influence the content presented to them. Furthermore, because the marketing strategy of "culturally relevant" Bibles is to provide familiar, comforting images to accompany the text, such as smiling women, *Revolve* "deemphasizes many of the core attributes of Jesus' ministry."⁶³ Providing comforting and familiar content shifts the emphasis of the message to appeal more broadly to the audience.

While evangelicals were embracing business and media as a means of growth, the media began embracing spiritual themes and the same positive, feel-good message the Prosperity Gospel leaders were using. Oprah Winfrey and others in the media ignored the "great divide between what is properly religious and what is not," and the businesses embraced a "spiritual corporate culture."⁶⁴ For her part, Winfrey frequently featured religious leaders side-by-side with motivational speakers on her show and promoted books like *The Secret* with its visualization techniques and prosperity-focused message. Businesses began teaching their employees how to thrive through positivity techniques. These blurred lines between the sacred and profane mirror what is happening in many Prosperity churches, and demonstrate a move

⁶¹ Charles L. Cohen and Paul S. Boyer, eds., *Religion and the Culture of Print in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 331.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 344.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁶⁴ Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided*.

toward bland spirituality, the commodification of religion, and tempered theology. Additionally, this broad spirituality is widely appealing and without strong denominational markers, making it highly marketable.

R. Laurence Moore claims the appearance of a shift toward secularism is actually a result of religion's increasing commodification.⁶⁵ As churches and religious organizations create products, television shows, and books to generate revenue, the preferences of the audience become more important. He argues, this is only superficial, however, and not evidence of secularization. Shayne Lee, however, finds it "ironic that Pentecostalism, the branch in Christendom that once harbored the most ardent secular sentiment, transformed into a movement with the strongest embrace of technology, secularism, capitalism, and popular culture."⁶⁶ Most scholars including Robert Bellah, Peter Berger, and Rodney Stark dismissed secularization theory as inapplicable to religion in the United States.⁶⁷ My research explores how adapting the theory might explain the success of neo-Pentecostalism. The growth of Pentecostalism and evangelicalism in the U.S. and abroad caught the attention of many who saw it as clear evidence that secularization theory was not valid.⁶⁸ These conclusions were reached using adherence and attendance as criteria for American religiosity. While some scholars like James Davison Hunter and Shayne Lee saw the evangelical embrace of popular culture as a factor in its success, they

⁶⁵ Moore, *Selling God*.

⁶⁶ Lee, *T.D. Jakes*, 176.

⁶⁷ Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Peter Berger, ed., *Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Co, 1999); Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion*, 60:3 (1999), 249-250.

⁶⁸ Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1995); Paul Freestone, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Latin America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*; David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (New York: Ashgate. 2005); David Martin, *The Future of Christianity: Reflections on Violence and Democracy, Religion, and Secularization* (New York: Ashgate, 2011).

did not characterize its success to a secularization of the message. By eliminating considerations of secularization theory altogether scholars aren't accounting for doctrinal shifts toward a more secular message that might be facilitating the rapid growth of neo-Pentecostalism.

One of the concerns of this paper is how/if the Prosperity Gospel message is shifting and whether theological themes are being tempered and replaced with inspirational ones. If the word "secular" is defined strictly as non-religious or unrelated to the spiritual world, then its application among these churches would be inaccurate given their foundation in Christianity. However, the churches' use of secular music, movies, and pop culture references and their emphasis on inspirational themes in place of religious ones within their messages denotes a shift toward content that is less spiritual in nature. The self-help and earthly focus in the pastors' messages is far from their heaven-focused, Pentecostal roots. Because of the ways secularization language is typically applied, perhaps a more appropriate term for the shift among these churches would be a de-Christianizing of their message. Regardless, considerations about the ways a modified understanding of secularization theory could account for these changes might be warranted.

Despite the growth evangelicals have experienced due to their savvy use of print, radio, and television they have also experienced a fair amount of backlash from the media. The Prosperity Gospel has been criticized in the media for the role it potentially played in the economic downturn since 2008, particularly that of the housing market. Hanna Rosin documented how many people bought homes they could not technically afford due to their faith (or positive confession) that they would be able to pay for them through God's blessings.⁶⁹ The foreclosure rates correlated with areas where Prosperity Theology is practiced in greater

⁶⁹ Hanna Rosin, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash?," *The Atlantic*, Accessed April 9, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/12/did-christianity-cause-the-crash/307764/>.

numbers. Rosin acknowledges that this correlation does not equal causation, but it certainly raises questions about the implications of the economic impact of a faith that promotes consumerism and materialism as symbols of faith. The method for deciding what to purchase based upon theology has implications for many Americans who are spending money as an act of faith. With their pastors telling them that God provides for their material needs as long as they have faith, many are making purchases they cannot technically afford, which could have big consequences financially.

Despite criticisms and past scandals, Prosperity Theology continues to draw followers and fill megachurches, and is being exported to countries around the world whose people are attracted to its promise of health and wealth to the faithful.⁷⁰ The theology has become an important part of the American culture particularly since many of the leaders have become celebrities and their sermons are often televised. As more people are exposed to the Prosperity message, the movement should expect continued growth.⁷¹ Its growth is important as the nature of the message also has implications for American consumption, treatment of the poor, voting patterns, and the economy. Because Prosperity Theology is geared towards earthly blessings, at the very least, its doctrine influences how people make day-to-day decisions and purchases.⁷²

⁷⁰ Coleman, *Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*; Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*.

⁷¹ Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 18.

⁷² Hanna Rosin, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash?"

1.4 DEFINING PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Scholars traditionally define prosperity Gospel as the belief that Christian faithfulness manifests earthly blessings such as health and wealth in this life. Despite a seemingly simple and straightforward idea, it can be difficult to get followers and sometimes even scholars to agree on the more nuanced implications of this theology. Because it knows no denominational boundaries, it is difficult to determine who fits into the category and the word “prosperity” in the designation makes it clumsy. Kate Bowler’s “Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel” explains how this complicated tradition’s “diverse expressions of Christian faith-fuelled abundance can be understood as a movement, for they stemmed from a cohesive set of shared understandings.”⁷³

Despite its definitional difficulties, Prosperity Gospel’s growth and “celebrity” pastors including Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and Kenneth Copeland make it well known even among non-Christians, and important within American culture. It has no denominational ties, membership rates, or official organization. Some who attend Prosperity churches have never even heard of the designation even while maintaining its tenets, while others are uncomfortable with the designation’s implications. Many churches do not acknowledge affiliation with the movement despite the fact that their sermons, publications, and worship content reinforce the idea that faithfulness brings blessings in this life.

The very public scandals of Prosperity televangelists in the late eighties made many people wary of the implications of the Health and Wealth Gospel. Additionally, its natural

⁷³ Kate Bowler, “Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel,” (PhD Diss. Duke University, 2012), 4. (This version includes sections that are not included in the Oxford University Press publication.)

association with money, and the implications therein, causes some churches distance themselves from the label even if they embrace the theology. Furthermore, the word “prosperity” is not specific and for some connotes solely a monetary success, while for others it is understood as a broader more abstract abundance. While these issues cause challenges in precision, they provide greater necessity for scholarship. Its growth also has been spread among different denominations, making it difficult to quantify and track.

The Prosperity Gospel’s non-denominational nature also makes the demographics of the audience difficult to determine. Traditionally Pentecostals have been seen as undereducated and having lower socio-economic status, however their demographics are shifting.⁷⁴ More “economically powerful and socially ambitious” members now characterize what was once called redneck religion.⁷⁵ We do know the face of Pentecostalism has changed over time as more people are embracing what scholars call “neo-Pentecostalism” with its emphasis on practical preaching and modern style. “Not only are neo-Pentecostals overall better off economically than their religious ancestors, they avoid denominational affiliations, incorporate rather than exclude professional classes, show greater accommodation to material prosperity, and practice energetic and technologically sophisticated worship.”⁷⁶ A tradition that once focused on the imminent return of Christ and the eternal blessings his followers would receive now is focused on popular culture, technology, and earthly betterment.⁷⁷ Neo-Pentecostalism does much to explain the shift in style among churches rooted in Pentecostalism and provides context for the popularity of the Health and Wealth gospel. Indeed, it is through the neo-Pentecostal lens

⁷⁴ Donald E. Miller, Kimon H. Sargeant, and Richard Flory, eds., *Spirit and Power: The Growth and Global Impact of Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.

⁷⁵ Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 2.

⁷⁶ Marti, *Hollywood Faith*, 6.

⁷⁷ Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press), 176.

that this study explores Prosperity Theology in an effort to determine if the neo-Pentecostal shift is superficial or theologically substantive.

When speaking with my narrators, I attempted to demystify the Prosperity definition by describing the tradition as adhering to the belief that, “God wants to bless his followers during their lifetimes and will do so if they are faithful to him.” I also often explained that any negative connotations they fear to be associated with the Prosperity label, such as greed, are not necessarily implied. Each person accepted this understanding, and agreed that they and their churches are believers of this doctrine. When we would elaborate on the idea of Prosperity Theology, they would often qualify the term by saying that they do not believe it is as easy as asking for whatever you want and expecting to get it.⁷⁸ For each individual person, the line of “how much” they expected to receive and what they had to do to get it was different and often vague.

Finding a church that acknowledges its affiliation with Prosperity Theology can require some detective work. In my attempt to find a church in the Pittsburgh area I reached out to a local non-denominational church and asked the senior pastor if he considered his church to be a Prosperity Gospel church. He wrote back with a curt response, and said, “While I know the tradition that you’re referring to, we are NOT affiliated with Prosperity Theology, and I do not know why you would even ask.” Even though from a scholarly point of view, the designation is as innocuous as “evangelical” or “charismatic,” to him, and presumably many others, the phrase is loaded with negative implications. Since the understanding of the terminology is not universally agreed upon, it can be challenging to find a church that not only accepts the designation, but also is comfortable with a researcher poking around in its business.

⁷⁸ Oral History with Kristen Tarsuik, June 2012, Oasis Church Marketing Director

All three of my research churches have a different relationship with the Prosperity Gospel label, and even among individual members, the level of acceptance varies. The churches' willingness to accept the label falls across a spectrum with Victory Family Church being most comfortable, Lakewood in the middle, and Oasis being the least comfortable. Their varying degrees of ease with the designation speak to the differences in how people see the movement, its connotations, and their place within it.

Victory Family Church is unabashed in its approval and endorsement of Prosperity Theology. It does not associate the designation with anything negative, and has no reservations about its commitment to it. It uses the Bible to back up the belief that God wants to bless his followers. It sees poverty, suffering, and illness as less than God's best, and something that people can overcome through faith. Lakewood Church shares this belief, and encourages their members to reach toward betterment and believe that God offers blessings for those who follow him. Osteen, however, shies away from a focus on the financial aspects when pressed in interviews. He claims that while the blessings do manifest in this life, the financial prosperity is not the focus nor should it be the motivation for faithfulness. Oasis Church is the least comfortable with the label and many staff members, congregants, and pastors that provided oral histories insisted that they were not a Prosperity church. Its rejection of the categorization was particularly surprising given Gerardo Marti's ethnographic work with them and his decision to classify them as such in his book, *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church*.

Oasis' refutation of the Prosperity Gospel classification added a challenge to the ethnographic study; however, it provides insight into how Prosperity Theology is perceived. During my conversations with Oasis staff and congregants I realized their dismissal of the label

was a desire to not be associated with the more unsavory aspects of the Prosperity Gospel or what many called the “name-it-claim-it” philosophy. Oasis members balked at the idea that you can simply name your desires (particularly lavish or unnecessary items) and expect them to appear. They claimed to focus instead on generosity with the understanding that giving triggers God’s desire and ability to bless you. Their reservations with the Prosperity label are rooted in its association with greed, selfishness, and a sense of entitlement. For them, the Prosperity Gospel, while it offers material blessings, should focus on having a generous spirit, a desire for excellence, and faithfulness to God. Marti found that Oasis “cultivates a distinctive moral community that empowers highly ambitious fame-and profit-seeking members...who are negotiating between secular success and religious devotion.”⁷⁹

The three different relationships these churches have with the Prosperity Gospel designation, demonstrate why the movement must not be narrowly interpreted, and the variations therein be specified. Often whether someone believes he/she falls under the umbrella of Prosperity Theology has to do with semantics. In the end, all three of the churches I examined have similar approaches to Christianity including the idea that faithfulness will reap earthly rewards, and God’s blessings are not limited to the afterlife. All three churches also believe God is waiting and wanting to bless you and it is up to you to trigger that through faithfulness. The range of willingness to accept the Prosperity designation among the three churches speaks to the negative connotations of the tradition and the followers’ awareness of them. The clumsiness of defining this tradition is due in part to its complicated reputation, which makes it difficult to determine its trajectory.

⁷⁹ Marti, *Hollywood Faith*, 9.

For my purposes, I chose to adhere to the scholarly definition of Prosperity Theology, but I do so with the understanding that some churches that I would classify as such might not see themselves in this way. By including them within this tradition, I aim not to undermine their own perceptions or designations, but to use a broad stroke in terms of classifications. The narrower understanding of Prosperity Theology seems to derive from a stereotype (born, possibly, from the scandals and more notorious Prosperity pastors and churches) rather than rooted in a theological understanding of the movement. All three of my churches fall under the scholarly definition of Prosperity Theology, and will thus be referred to in this way. I note the oral histories and observations in which church members or pastors wanted distance from the label as a means of showing the relationship churches have with the designation.

In my consideration of the marketing of Prosperity Gospel, one consideration is whether or not the theology is maintaining the foundational principles of Pentecostalism, and how the churches' goal of growing its congregations affects the presentation of the message. Some scholars and critics have accused evangelicals of watering down the message. One journalist said, "I think the whole megachurch phenomenon is premised upon the idea that we can't do anything with people unless we get them to church first, so the priority is to get them in there. But to get them in there you downplay the Christian symbolism..."⁸⁰

My study is organized into three sections. The first chapter explores the online marketing of Prosperity Theology. It examines how the churches are utilizing online space as a way to brand their message. I analyze their website content, posted videos, and Twitter feeds. In doing so, I aim to determine how the Prosperity message is being presented online and ultimately if this message differs from the message presented in other spaces such as in church services. Due to

⁸⁰ Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn From American's Largest Churches*, (San Francisco: Wiley Publishing, 2007), 91.

the interactive nature online, I examine the dialogue between the leaders and their congregants to better understand the online relationship between them.

The second section explores the in-house marketing of Prosperity Theology at the three churches through things like sermons, worship, and events. While the attraction phase of the marketing plan is accomplished, the church wants to maintain and grow membership rates, and continues their marketing within the church. I analyze how the pastors present the Prosperity Gospel message and what elements are emphasized within the Pentecostal message (if any). The goal of this investigation is to determine if this private atmosphere encourages a more traditional presentation of the message.

Finally, the third section examines who makes up the audiences of the three churches and what attracted them to the message. I received oral histories from many members and regular attenders of each congregation with the goal of determining how they came to attend the church, why they stay, and what elements of the church experience were appealing to them. The oral histories, interactions, and observations of these church communities provided insight into how the Prosperity audience is receiving the message and whether it is congruent with the mission and marketing goals of the churches.

The three sections together show how the Prosperity Gospel is being marketed by Lakewood, Oasis, and Victory Family Church, and whether their marketing efforts have any impact on the theological content. This study is designed to promote better understanding one of the fastest growing religious traditions in the country, and to examine how the message is being presented by its leaders and received by its followers.

2.0 FOLLOW ME: ONLINE MARKETING OF PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

Evangelicals have long utilized print, radio, and television to reach their followers and attract new ones, and now digital media provides even more opportunities to establish, develop, and maintain connections. The “newness” of digital and social media has not allowed for as much scholarly attention as other forms of media receive, but its ability to reach people all over the world quickly, affordably, and effectively makes it an important marketing tool. Online social networks such as Facebook and Twitter allow a dialogue between religious leaders and their followers that does not exist in other forms of media. Even in-house experiences (i.e., church services) usually do not allow for congregants to engage their pastors actively in such an open and conversational way, leaving pastors without clear feedback on the audience’s preferences. Internet users, however, can respond immediately to content, which allows leaders and organizations to gauge audience response and potentially adjust their message to please their followers. Furthermore, digital media’s user demographics skew younger than other media, making it more appealing for potential growth rates and longevity among churches.

This chapter analyzes the use of digital media by Oasis, Lakewood, and Victory Family Church to determine whether digital media’s interactive and global nature has an impact on how the Prosperity message is presented. This chapter analyzes how the churches use their websites, online videos, and Twitter accounts to establish their message. I argue that their digital marketing downplays traditional Pentecostal elements and emphasizes general themes of victory, hope, and

blessings instead in an effort to broaden their appeal. The ability of digital media users to share content facilitates its exponential or “viral” spread, which encourages Prosperity leaders to maintain a broad-reaching digital presence in an effort to reach more people.

Most religious traditions have embraced digital media at least to the extent that organizations and churches have websites and/or social networking pages. An online presence is certainly not limited to evangelical Christianity, and websites and forums span from broad religious content to very specific sects. There are several websites, for example, that address Islamic tradition, practice, and belief. One popular Muslim website, www.islamicity.com, has an “Ask the Imam” section for anyone with questions about proper ritual protocol or how to effectively practice Islam within the ever-changing framework of modernity. Likewise, Pope Benedict XVI made a grand entrance into the world of social networking when he established a Twitter account with the “handle” @pontifex and began regularly tweeting from an iPad. It is clear that digital media provides new opportunities for religious traditions to connect with followers and promote their message. Despite this embrace of digital media by a variety of religious traditions, Prosperity Gospel’s theologically-based support of material culture combined with evangelicalism’s embrace of media, audience-consciousness, and use of business practices, makes it particularly well suited for the effective use of digital media.⁸¹

While Pentecostalism has at times been ambivalent about utilizing secular means to promote its message, Grant Wacker described their ability to combine the “primitive and pragmatic.”⁸² In other words, while Pentecostals are focused on other-worldly issues, they are willing to work within the social and cultural expectations of the age. And the specific

⁸¹ Edith Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith: The Assemblies of God, Pentecostalism, and American Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

⁸² Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009).

theological components of neo-Pentecostalism and Prosperity Gospel allow even more interaction with “the world” as they downplay more controversial elements of their tradition, such as speaking in tongues, in favor of more appealing elements such as earthly success. Additionally, by definition, Prosperity Theology embraces consumerism and capitalism, and as a result, its leaders are enthusiastic in their use of business strategies and media.⁸³

Digital media allows religious leaders to receive immediate feedback from their audience. This feedback can come in the form of comments, messages, and mentions from their online followers or, in the case of Twitter, it can be a “retweet,” where the user reposts the leader’s original message signifying the user’s implicit approval and support. Through this process of retweets, there is also potential for the message’s exponential, or “viral,” spread through the “Twitterverse” as followers share the content with their friends and so on, making it appealing in its ability to quickly spread the message. This system of retweets allows leaders and their organizations to quantify which messages are the most popular. Such valuable insight into the preferences and opinions of the Prosperity audience can be a powerful marketing tool. Furthermore, the feedback is more precise than television or radio ratings, which do not show specifically whether the audience is responding positively to the message being presented. Should leaders wish to, they can adjust their message based on the feedback regarding the audience’s preferences, and thereby facilitate the maintenance and growth of their audience (both online and offline).

Approaching this analysis, it is important to note that the online audience is necessarily different from the offline one. Internet users are younger, more educated, and more affluent than

⁸³ Bowler, *Blessed*, 103.

the population at large.⁸⁴ Knowing the online audience is only an indirect reflection of Prosperity church attenders helps guide the examination. Furthermore, the online audience could potentially be influencing the trajectory of the movement through its feedback, so being made up of many people who are only tangentially related to the theological aspects of the movement is noteworthy. Because online followers of the religious leaders include more outsiders, we can theorize that their feedback would skew towards the secular or less theologically based elements of Prosperity Gospel. Because we know that, by definition, evangelical leaders want to grow their ministries and the movement in general, it is within their interest to appeal to the widest possible audience. In order to do this online, presumably they must cast a wide net.

2.1 TWITTER

Social media provides an inexpensive means to reach large numbers of people, and savvy use of this technology provides businesses, organizations, and gives individuals an opportunity to brand themselves, increase visibility, and demonstrate success. The proclamations of accomplishments provided through social media fit well with Prosperity Theology's commitment to the concept that faithfulness reaps earthly rewards. The ability of churches and pastors to demonstrate Prosperity Theology's efficacy through these proclamations to large groups of people in real-time, makes social media the perfect marketing tool for this movement. The synergy created between the Prosperity Gospel's understanding of earthly rewards combined with social media's immediate and viral nature, creates a valuable tool for the movement's growth. Furthermore,

⁸⁴ Pew Forum. Accessed September 10, 2013, [http://pewinternet.org/Trend-Data-\(Adults\)/Whos-Online.aspx](http://pewinternet.org/Trend-Data-(Adults)/Whos-Online.aspx).

Prosperity Theology's focus on material success is reinforced by the leader's sophisticated use of technology and its implicit endorsement of consumerism. The leaders' proclamations of earthly abundance such as best-selling books, successful events, and new church buildings offer followers evidence of the Prosperity Gospel's validity.

While there are many social networks that churches and pastors can use to interact with followers, gain visibility, and share information, Twitter is the most helpful for my research purposes. Its straightforward design allows data to be obtained and quantified in a way that more fluid social networks such as Facebook cannot. Because Twitter limits users to 140 characters in posts, called "tweets," users are more likely to be deliberate and precise in the words they use. This makes rhetorical analysis more valuable as well as more streamlined. Furthermore, Twitter allows users to retweet something someone else posts, and the number of retweets helps to determine how popular a sentiment is. This is particularly helpful with Joel Osteen, who has thousands of followers. Through this large sample, the number of retweets each of his posts receives can show audience preference on content and also, over time, can help show whether leaders increase the content that is more popular in response to audience preference. Examining the popularity of particular content and whether it affects the leaders' future posts would be best done over an extended research period, but this preliminary investigation can help uncover trends that could have an impact on the trajectory of the Prosperity Gospel.

To determine how Prosperity leaders are using Twitter to market, promote, and brand, I analyzed the tweets of the three Prosperity leaders and churches over nine months and coded them for various themes. In addition to the leaders' tweets, I coded tweets directed *to* the churches/leaders from their Twitter "followers." In doing so, I was able to examine the relationship between the leaders with their followers, analyze audience feedback, and ascertain

which of the leaders' posts are most popular. Unlike television, radio, or even in church, the active dialogue between leaders and followers allows us to look more closely at how the audience interacts with the leaders. While congregants can, in theory, offer feedback at church, the anonymity and distance provided online makes the act of commenting less intimidating, which encourages a heartier conversation. The online feedback provides a rich picture of how the messages of the churches are being received, interpreted, and spread online.

One challenge related to analysis of Twitter content is that because anyone can choose to follow the leaders on Twitter, a person's decision to do so should not necessarily be interpreted as an endorsement. Twitter users follow people (especially celebrities) for a variety of reasons including general curiosity and even hostility so the number of followers a pastor like Joel Osteen has is in part a reflection of simply being very well known. There are undoubtedly a large number of followers who see him as a secular motivational figure. Despite the challenge of including a "celebrity" pastor in the study, Osteen's presence is important being one of the most influential religious figures in America today. Ultimately, for all of the leaders, the Twitter audience is made up of people outside of the "typical" evangelical circle who might have been introduced to the leader through a talk show, book, or friend. The digital audience, therefore, is broader and is not necessarily made up primarily of insiders like a church congregation or even a radio broadcast. It is important to consider the nature of the digital audience when analyzing the relationship between the leaders and their online followers. Despite the more complicated nature of the audience, the vast majority of those who follow a person on Twitter do so because they support and enjoy the message that person or organization presents.

2.1.1 Twitter Analysis Methodology

To determine the constitution of the Prosperity churches and leaders' Twitter content, I employed a rhetorical analysis program that allowed me to categorize and code their tweets.⁸⁵ Despite social media being relatively new, researchers, companies, and organizations often employ programs to analyze content to better understand who is using it, how they are approaching it, and who makes up the audience. For the Tweet coding process, seven codes were designated that represent themes expected to appear frequently in the data in addition to a miscellaneous category: 1. Health, 2. Charity, 3. Inspiration, 4. Salvation, 5. Wealth, 6. Promotion, and 7. Holy Spirit. The decision on which codes to choose was intentional and based on the understanding of evangelical rhetoric. The themes chosen were based upon my experiences studying and observing evangelicals and religion in general. While the argument could be made that certain themes such as inspiration are broader than others such as Holy Spirit, effort was made to include general and specific words within each category to ensure an accurate distribution of themes.

When coding, more than one theme can be chosen to represent each tweet. Most tweets, however, tend to fall into only one category. Below is a tweet from Joel Osteen that was coded as “inspiration.” It was coded under inspiration because of his use of the word “victory,” which was one of the words that falls into the “inspiration” category.

⁸⁵ There are numerous programs available to analyze digital content, but I chose DiscoverText because the University of Pittsburgh has a licensing agreement with them, thus making me eligible for services that would otherwise be cost prohibitive. They allow their users to analyze data from a variety of social media forums.

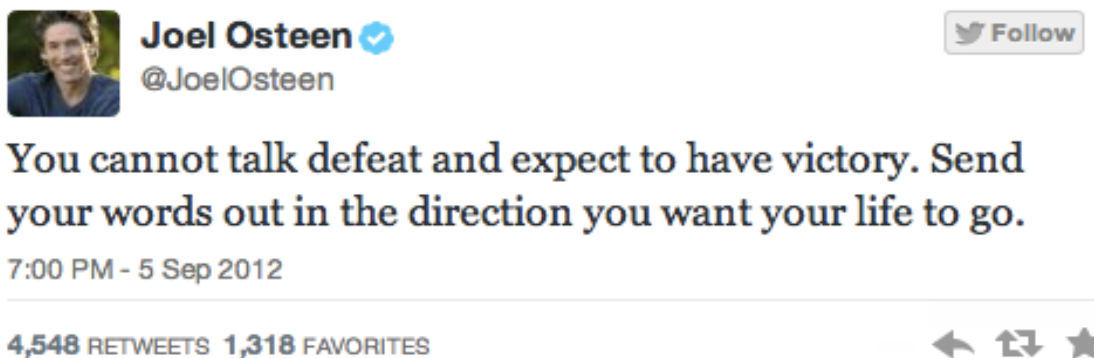


Figure 1 Joel Osteen Tweet, Accessed April 4, 2014, www.twitter.com/joeosteen

This tweet was posted on September 5, 2012 and was retweeted 4,548 times (as of October 16, 2013). For the sake of the coding, only the words used within the tweet determine its categorization, but what is also noticeable from a purely observational standpoint is what it does *not* mention. In this case, Osteen does not mention God, Christianity, religion, faith, or any other words that indicate he is a religious leader. His use of “victory,” however, makes this an inspirational tweet for the categorization of this study.

Under each theme, there are a series of words that, when tweeted, designate the tweet into that category. The “health” code is meant for tweets that encourage or reference general health, wellness, and healing. “Charity” is for any tweet that encourages or references giving to or helping others. Any tweet that is generally positive without an overt or specific Christian message is considered “inspirational” (this includes tweets that refer to God, but not specific Christian elements). The “salvation” code is for any tweet that focuses on life after death and the Christian belief that Jesus is the world’s savior. “Wealth” is designated for tweets about money or professional success. For any tweet promoting the leader’s church, appearances, or products, the “promotion” code is given. The “Holy Spirit” code is for all tweets that reference the more traditional Pentecostal element of glossolalia or the Holy Spirit in general. “Other” was for any

tweet that did not neatly fit into one of these categories. Often, “other” tweets were tweets from the leader addressing a specific follower with a general message or an answer to a question.

The coding of each tweet was based upon a predetermined list of words that had been categorized and verified for intercoder reliability at 87.76%.⁸⁶ The completed coding provides theme quantification by determining the frequency with which topics were mentioned. In doing so, I was able to see the constitution of the leader’s tweets as a whole and how they framed their message as well as the response from their audience.

2.1.2 Twitter Background

For all of the ink that is spilled lamenting and lauding these leaders for being solely focused on money, their messages on Twitter focus more on general inspiration and emphasize their “brands” through the promotion of their events, interviews, and products. This self-promotion is particularly important among Prosperity Gospel leaders as they use proclamations of their success to reinforce their message that faith results in this-worldly rewards. In other words, their perceived success causes inertia as it validates the Prosperity Gospel’s core philosophy that God wants to bless you. My analysis shows how these three churches and their leaders use Twitter as a way to proclaim and perpetuate their success, creating a perception that God’s favor is upon them, and ideally attracting more people to their message. Twitter is ideal for branding, marketing, and communicating and these pastors are using it for promotion in the same way any

⁸⁶ For detailed information regarding the coding of these terms, see Appendix B. Intercoder reliability refers to the rate of consensus among the coders regarding, in this case, the category of each term.

business would. Furthermore, my research demonstrates how they focus on general inspirational content rather than theological doctrine, making their message appealing to a broader audience.

It is important to consider that the leaders are speaking to a crowd that includes people who are not subscribers to the Prosperity Gospel, and how the presence of “outsiders” among their followers contributes to the leaders altering the message both online and off, in order to broaden its appeal. It is impossible to determine exactly what percentage of a leader’s followers is supportive of his message, but the responses from the followers help to determine the general audience reaction. While the breadth and anonymity of the Twitter audience makes analysis more complex, it has the potential to help us understand the developments theologically within the Prosperity movement specifically and evangelicalism more broadly.

One component of social media, particularly among celebrities and other well-known users, is that their accounts are often managed and maintained by someone other than the person him/herself. For example, celebrities often have their personal assistants manage their Twitter account so the public has the perception that the celebrity is accessible and communicative, when the celebrity actually has little to do with the posts. In the case of a church or organization, a communications or promotions director might manage the account. For our purposes, this is of particular concern for Joel Osteen, whose schedule is packed with appearances, interviews, and meetings outside of his normal church duties. As a result, it seems likely that he has a more hands-off approach of the content presented in his name on Twitter especially in comparison to the other two pastors in this study. Lakewood’s marketing director, Jason Madding, however, said that while their Communications Director was in charge of the Twitter and Facebook accounts, Joel is “very hands on” and has ultimate determination of the content.⁸⁷ He assured me

⁸⁷ Oral History via phone with Jason Madding, Promotions Director, Lakewood Church, July 2, 2013.

that everything posted on Osteen's page represented the pastor's point of view, faith, and beliefs. While this is of less concern for Wagner and Nuzzo, both of their churches also have staff handling the marketing and promotion, which includes the management of social media. In the end, all three churches claim the Twitter feed represents the thoughts, beliefs, and doctrine of the pastors regardless of who is managing the day-to-day aspects of its use.

The mandated brevity of tweets also makes Twitter an excellent resource to determine themes within the content of its users. By limiting each tweet to 140 characters, users are necessarily more intentional with their content. While Facebook and other digital outlets allow unlimited content length, Twitter requires users to maintain short clips of information. Jason Madding acknowledged this with regards to Osteen's Twitter, lamenting the lack of nuance and detail afforded in each tweet. Madding noted, however, that the church has had great success reaching people through the forum, and emphasized how its global and immediate nature provided a valuable resource to their ministry and its ability to grow.⁸⁸ While the leaders often focus on the same themes over and over, they do not repeat tweets. They always have original content even if it's simply rewording a particular notion repeatedly. In the end, despite its limitations, Twitter allows users to reach a broad and diverse audience that can help the users spread their message at a very limited cost.

All three churches and the pastors maintain Twitter accounts where they tweet informational and inspirational content. Below are examples from Pastor John Nuzzo that is purely informational (linked to his Facebook page) regarding church renovations and a tweet from Oasis Church that is inspirational in its focus on a "blessed life".

⁸⁸ Ibid.

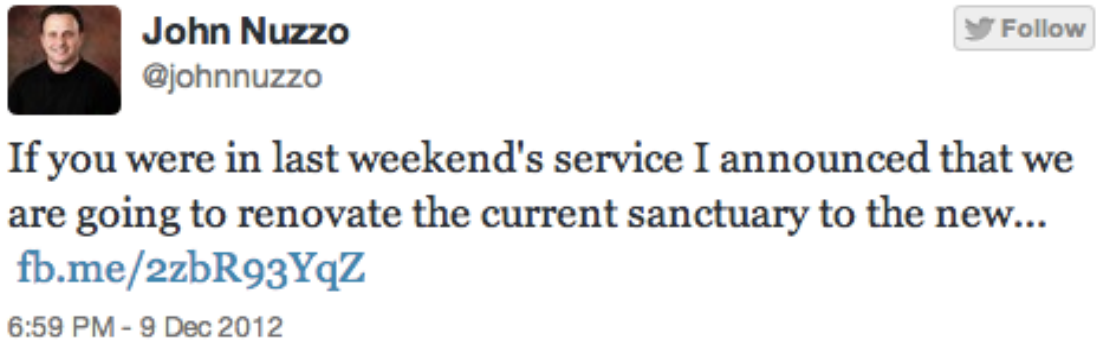


Figure 2: John Nuzzo Informational Tweet, Accessed October 18, 2013, www.twitter.com/johnnuzzo



Figure 3: Oasis Church Inspirational Tweet, Accessed January 4, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla

2.1.3 Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church Tweets

As perhaps the most public prosperity leader in America, Osteen represents the “celebrity preacher” phenomenon that has made household names of many evangelical religious leaders. He has over 1.5 million Twitter followers and tweets several messages per day in addition to many responses to specific followers (that are then deleted, so are not visible on his page, but come through the text analysis program used in this research) from his @joelosteen Twitter handle. In addition to Osteen’s individual Twitter account, Lakewood Church also has an account featuring content dealing with Lakewood Church events, ministries, and sermons. The church has over 45,000 followers and while the themes of the content are similar to that on

Osteen's page, there is more material addressing Lakewood Church in particular and its many events and ministries.

At the top of every Twitter page, users have space to briefly describe themselves and anything they would like their followers to know. Osteen's Twitter page says he offers, "Daily inspiration to help you live your life of victory and abundance that God intended for you."⁸⁹ Everyone can add a blurb such as this to his/her Twitter page. Osteen's blurb explicitly states that he is offering daily inspiration for victory and abundance, revealing that his stated intention is inspiration, not salvation. He references a general "God," but emphasizes inspiration, victory, and abundance. The idea that God intends for every one of his followers to live in "abundance" is a key point among Prosperity Gospel followers. This concept will come up repeatedly in sermons, tweets, and other literature among all three churches. This simple concept holds, beneath the surface, numerous implications about how one receives this abundance (presumably through faith and devotion), what it means if you have not received this blessing (perhaps that you lack faith), and that the leader can help provide some instruction and/or motivation for you to live in a way that facilitates the blessings to come into your life.

The importance of a social media presence is clear to Osteen who said, "When you study Jesus, you find that He spent His life where the people were...millions of them worldwide are [gathering] in a virtual way. For hundreds of millions of people today, their marketplace is online, their social gatherings are happening on Facebook and Twitter, and church is often (and perhaps unfortunately) a TV or Web streaming experience..."⁹⁰ Osteen's interest is in reaching

⁸⁹ Accessed August 7, 2013, www.Twitter.com/JoelOsteen.

⁹⁰ "Joel Osteen: Gospel Communicator, *Ministry Today*, Accessed December 19, 2013, <http://ministrytodaymag.com/index.php/features/20065-gospel-communicator>.

the largest number of people possible and realizes the opportunity that digital technology and social media provide his ministry.

Osteen is aware of his influence through social media as he speaks openly about the *New York Times* ranking him as one of the most important accounts on Twitter. He says the key to his message is “being consistent. For instance, on Twitter, I don’t tweet about having coffee with friends or what I had for breakfast. People follow me for three things: hope, joy, and inspiration. So I stick to that. I want anyone who sees me on TV, reads my books, or follows me on social media to receive the message that there is hope in whatever circumstances they’re in at the moment.”⁹¹ His statement reveals his awareness of what his audience wants, his willingness to provide that, and that his focus is on inspirational content rather than spiritual content.

Indeed, during my research period 68% of Osteen’s tweets were inspirational messages that include little or no Christian content. He tweeted the following very popular tweet on March 25, 2012:



Figure 4: Joel Osteen Inspirational Tweet, Accessed August 7, 2013, www.twitter.com/JoelOsteen

⁹¹ Ibid.

This tweet received over 3,000 retweets and 1,000 “favorites” (meaning over 1000 people clicked “favorite” implying they liked his message), making it one of his more popular posts. The motivational language found in this tweet could easily be found within the pages of secular motivational speaker, Tony Robbins’, self-help book or within an episode of television psychologist, “Dr. Phil.” The only difference between such a tweet and its more secular counterparts is a vague foundation in Christian beliefs that is usually subtext rather than mentioned in the message itself.

The blurred line between the secular and religious realms is not strictly in Prosperity leaders’ Twitter feeds. Super Soul Sundays on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), where pastors are interchanged with self-help gurus and motivational speakers, are an example of a secular space adopting elements of religiosity to satisfy the spiritual yearnings of its audience. Some familiar with this push in secular media for more (vaguely) religious programming (e.g., “Breaking Amish” and “Preacher’s Daughters”) might think it is simply a permeation of religion into every area of popular culture. My analysis of these three churches, however, demonstrates how the Prosperity message on Twitter is decidedly lacking in theological content. While Osteen is an uplifting pastor, the content of his tweets resembles that of a Christian life coach. The emphasis is on the secular rather than the sacred. The Christian message is often incidental or completely absent from his Twitter message.

The theological content that Osteen uses is often tangential to his larger point. For example, when Osteen talks about a religious concept such as faith or prayer, it is often within the context of getting ahead in this life such as:



Figure 5: Joel Osteen Tweet, Accessed June 4, 2013, www.twitter.com/JoelOsteen

In this case, he doesn't use the word "pray" and instead uses "ask." He doesn't actually say whether you're asking God for these things in prayer, nor whether this principle is even grounded in Scripture. In fact, his tweets almost never include a biblical reference, and they only reference God not Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Much of his message is meant to inspire people to strive for more, or "uplift" them as his marketing director says. Osteen's philosophy dictates that aiming merely to make ends meet is foolhardy, for if you really wanted more, all you have to do is ask God. Osteen frequently makes similar proclamations in television interviews saying that these inspirational ideas are connected to his theology. When asked why he focuses on this "uplifting" theme within his message, he says he wants to make the Scriptures, "practical for today...everyday life issues."⁹² This practical approach to preaching is not limited to Twitter. Indeed, Osteen's sermons use a similar approach; however, the limitations of Twitter mean that fewer details, Bible verses, and insider language will be used.

References to God are not absent from Osteen's Twitter feed, but often when he mentions God, it is in the context of what God "wants" for you or what he will do in your life. Osteen

⁹² Joel Osteen interview on Piers Morgan Live, January 26, 2011, accessed on June 19, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-buCDzsTcz0>.

tweeted, “When you do what you can do, God will show up and do what you cannot do. That’s his favor shining down on your life.” His decision to avoid Scripture references with his tweets (perhaps because a citation would take up valuable character space) leaves the follower to assume that Osteen somehow knows that God will “show up” because of his “favor” on your life. And the follower is asked to trust that Osteen’s proclamations are biblically based. In addition to general themes, the leaders, including Osteen, will use language that is particular to evangelical and/or Prosperity movements. For example, “victory,” “blessings,” “abundance,” and “favor” are Prosperity buzzwords that are seen frequently in Osteen’s tweets. They refer to the understanding that your faithfulness puts you into God’s good graces, opening up the gates for “blessings” to rain on you. It is a subtle nod to the evangelical subculture without alienating non-believers.

His inspirational tweets often reference, and sometimes speak for, God. For example, Osteen tweeted, “You may feel like your dream is gone, but start dreaming again. God has not given up on your dream and neither should you.”⁹³ In this tweet, Osteen offers his followers motivation to not give up on their dream, but also speaks for God by assuring them that God still believes in the dream. While Osteen is using media to promote his message as his predecessors such as Aimee Semple McPherson and D.L. Moody did, unlike them, he downplays theology and instead emphasizes general inspiration. When compared with McPherson, Moody, and a more recent example like Jimmy Swaggart, Osteen offers a diluted version of the Christian message. This is particularly true on Twitter where users are forced to narrow their message down to only the most important part.

⁹³ Accessed August 7, 2013, www.Twitter.com/joelosteen.

In addition to theological and inspirational content, Prosperity leaders frequently use Twitter to promote events, appearances, and products. This is especially true for celebrity preachers who often have books, events, interviews, and products to promote in addition to their in-house events and sermons. Osteen's promotional tweets are for upcoming book signings, tour dates, and television interviews. Because evangelicals have enthusiastically embraced business strategies in running their churches over the last 30 years, their promotion of events and products on Twitter is not remarkable from a historical perspective.⁹⁴ It is common for people in general to use Twitter as a way to promote their products, appearances, and business. What is notable in Prosperity promotion on Twitter, however, is their decision to post about events that have already occurred and accomplishments the church has achieved such as well-attended church services and impressive book sales. In doing so the church demonstrates its success, and, ultimately, the efficacy of Prosperity Theology. For example, Lakewood retweeted a tweet from its youth group Twitter page, @lakewoodyouth, describing the "incredible" night the group had the previous day. It also predicts "hundreds of Youth and Young adults" will be working in Houston as a result of their incredible turnout.

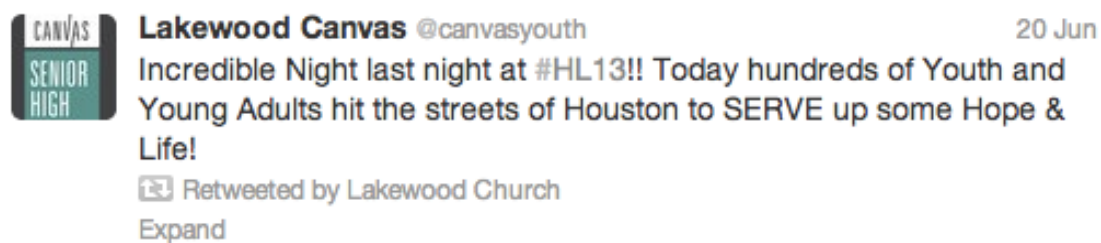


Figure 6: Lakewood Youth Group Tweet, Accessed June 4, 2013, www.twitter.com/canvasyouth

⁹⁴ Bowler, *Blessed*, 103.

This approach to self-promotion is consistent with the Prosperity message. Successful events (as defined by high turnout and/or energetic crowds) or impressive product sales can be seen as evidence of God’s blessings in return for the church’s faithfulness, and are therefore deserving of mention for those with the goal of proselytizing the message. By revealing these successes to their followers, Oasis is demonstrating the efficacy of Prosperity Theology, but perhaps more importantly, God’s “favor” on the church and/or pastor in particular. It is a clever and subtle marketing approach that employs enthusiasm and gratitude as a means of promoting past and future events.

In addition to the promotion of past events, Osteen uses Twitter to promote his books and products. In these promotional tweets, he tends to incorporate his philosophy as a means of legitimizing the product. For example, Osteen promoted his latest self-help book, *Every Day a Friday: How to Be Happier 7 Days a Week* from September 2011 until early 2012. During my research period, some of his tweets referenced this book (or its associated signings and appearances) such as:



Figure 7: Joel Osteen Tweet, Accessed on July 29, 2013, www.twitter.com/JoelOsteen

This tweet includes two central components of Osteen’s Twitter agenda: inspiration and promotion, and while it has nothing to do with Christianity, it serves the goal of encouraging his followers, increasing his own success, and thereby validating the Prosperity message.

Additionally, this tweet indicates that buying Osteen's book will assist you in programming your mind towards happiness. Within Osteen's promotional tweets we can see the Prosperity message being propagated and cyclically reinforced by the success of events, publications, and church growth. This book was on the *New York Times*' best-seller list for weeks.

While @joelosteen's followers tweeted with his handle over 64,000 times during the research period, the vast majority of these were retweets of Osteen's initial message and therefore offered little insight on his followers' preferences aside from their implicit endorsement of the original tweet's content. While some of the comments directed to @joelosteen were negative and sometimes hostile (presumably from people who do not subscribe to Osteen's brand of Christianity), the overwhelming majority of tweets were supportive and offered testimonies of the people being inspired and encouraged by Osteen's message.

Due to the anonymous and vast nature of digital media, it is impossible to know the demographic make-up of an online audience (particularly an audience the size of Osteen's). We can, however, learn something about their interests from the patterns within the content of their tweets and retweets mentioning or directed at Osteen. About 75% of the Twitter content directed to Osteen fell in the categories of health, wealth, and/or inspiration. In contrast, only 9% of the tweets to Osteen discuss salvation, charity, or the Holy Spirit. Charity, in particular, ranked last among the themes. Such a strong preference for self-focused concerns (e.g., prayer for a promotion, prayer for healing, hope for better days ahead) in contrast to spiritual and outward-focused concerns (e.g., wanting to go to heaven, wanting the "Spirit" to move in their life, salvation for others) is remarkable in its shift away from traditional Pentecostalism. The lack of tweets pertaining to salvation and charity are also in contrast to more traditional Christianity. Osteen's audience emphasized the same themes, and responded with fervor to his tweets offering

hope, victory, and blessings for them. This alignment of foci indicates Osteen's ability to meet the demands of his followers. Because the online audience is much broader, and is not necessarily neo-Pentecostal or even Christian, it raises questions as to whether its make-up might encourage a non-theological focus online.

Despite having a huge in-house congregation, Osteen's tweets are not directed at his local church members or followers specifically. His promotional tweets focus on his products, national interviews, and speaking tour rather than his church's events. Despite the divide, there is a great deal of overlap thematically between @joelosteen and @lakewoodch. However closely related they are, within Joel Osteen Ministries they are treated as two separate entities with different people managing the two accounts. According to Jason Madding this is simply because Joel Osteen Ministries is a much broader organization that includes Osteen's books, products, and tour, while Lakewood Church is specific to the ministries within the church itself.⁹⁵ The separation Joel Osteen places between the church and his "ministries" (or business) is common among more well-known pastors who delineate between the "for-profit" and "not-for-profit" portions of their work.⁹⁶ While Lakewood Church is non-profit as all churches are required to be, Joel Osteen Ministries with its many ventures, publications, and tours, makes millions of dollars of profit every year.

Compared to the @joelosteen feed, the Lakewood Church Twitter feed is obviously going to have more announcements related exclusively to church events and groups. Beyond that difference, it would be reasonable to assume the content would be very similar. Indeed the themes are similar with an emphasis on Prosperity Theology such as blessings, victory, and hope. Upon further inspection, however, it is clear that the Lakewood Church Twitter feed is far

⁹⁵ Oral History of Jason Madding via phone, July 2, 2013.

⁹⁶ Bowler, *Blessed*, 103.

more theological message including more Bible verses, references to Jesus, faith, the crucifixion, and healing. These references are not found on Joel Osteen's page, and indicate an attempt to keep his page more comfortable for non-Christians. The Lakewood page only has about 85,000 followers (still a huge number, but considering their size is not surprising), and clearly is attracting primarily local members. The marketing approach of this page is directed at insiders, and people who are comfortable with the more Bible-based rhetoric found more typically in evangelical churches.

Lakewood Church and Joel Osteen posted the following tweets on Easter Sunday. Both refer to Jesus Christ, which is rare for Joel Osteen, but each takes a different approach to their message.



Figure 8: Lakewood Church Easter Tweet, Accessed on August 8, 2013, www.lakewoodchurch



Figure 9: Joel Osteen Easter Tweet, Accessed August 8, 2013, www.twitter.com/joelosteen

While Lakewood’s tweet takes the approach of referencing God’s love and implying the resurrection by referencing how the nails couldn’t hold him, Osteen uses the resurrection to assure his followers that the same power lives in each one of us. Through these two tweets, posted on the same day, we can see two decidedly different tones. One tweet’s focus is directed towards God and the other’s focus is directed at the follower. Joel Osteen is attempting to inspire his followers and tell them they can stand tall knowing that the power that allowed Jesus to be raised from the dead lives in you. His church’s tweet is simply celebrating the resurrection for its own sake.

The difference between these two posts might appear inconsequential, but if there is a pattern of different emphases based solely upon the perceived audience, then the development of the Prosperity Gospel could be compromised as followers lack a shared-identity and worldview. In looking at Lakewood Church’s posts as a collective, there is indeed a pattern of greater theological depth and less inspiration/self-help in comparison to Joel Osteen’s feed (even though he is often tagged in the church’s tweets, such as the one pictured above).

In addition to the statistics being used to identify themes among the churches and leaders’ tweets, other elements were equally helpful and in the analysis of their marketing. When looking

at Lakewood and Joel Osteen's tweets, Lakewood uses Bible verses and rhetoric while Osteen almost never does. A tweet like the one below is not uncommon for Lakewood Church to post:



Figure 10: Lakewood Church Tweet, Accessed on August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/lakewoodch

While this is still a “promotional” tweet given it is urging for people to attend church on the upcoming weekend, Lakewood approaches their marketing through a direct biblical quote. Even when a biblical quote is used, it can be broadly interpreted. The “I” in this quote, for example, might be referring to the reader, Lakewood, or God, but is left for the reader to interpret on his/her own. Osteen, who frequently uses Twitter to promote his events, does not use Bible verses, but instead uses his life coach approach to urge attendance. Likewise, Lakewood uses strong biblical rhetoric in their tweets that would be familiar to Christians, but not necessarily to outsiders. The following tweet refers to “yokes,” which is a word found in Scripture that would be familiar to those who regularly read the Bible, but would seem out of place to “seekers” or outsiders.



Figure 11: Lakewood Church, Accessed on August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/LakewoodCh

Even though most people would probably know what the word “yokes” means, it is not something that would appear in Osteen’s tweets. The language in this tweet is that of an insider and more similar to what you would hear inside the church walls on a Sunday. The same victorious theme as you would find in Osteen’s tweets is there, but it is framed in a far more liturgical way. This is evidence that while the themes between the two accounts overlap, Osteen’s ministry is marketing to different audience; in one case keeping the tone inspirational and in the other more theological.

Because the underlying message of hope and victory on Lakewood and Osteen’s Twitter feeds is the same, some might argue the differences are purely superficial rather than substantive. I argue that the variance in emphasis between the two accounts demonstrates how the Prosperity Gospel can be molded to accommodate different audiences. The relevance of this vacillation is in its potential to limit shared-identity, unity, and efficacy among the movement’s members with regards to cultural and political power. This is of particular note given the evangelical voting bloc that has had significant influence over the last thirty years. While evangelicals remain a large voting bloc with high turnout rates, some wonder whether it is truly a monolithic group.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Accessed February 25, 2014, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/evangelicals/vote.

It would be worth examining to what extent the more “inspirational” and/or less theological content in evangelical churches is having on voter preferences/cohesion.

Despite the tremendous following amassed by big names in Prosperity Theology such as Joel Osteen, Twitter is not exclusively for “celebrity” pastors or megachurches, with many evangelical churches using the site to post relevant church news, promote events, and connect with members. While smaller churches and lesser known leaders do not reach as many people as an international figure like Osteen, Philip Wagner’s and John Nuzzo’s churches use the technology to provide church information, promote services and events, and present their message to their regular attenders and interested outsiders.

Victory Family Church of Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania has almost 400 Twitter followers and nearly all of the church’s tweets are linked to its website. By linking to the website, Victory is, in a way, circumventing the 140 character limitations of Twitter. In so doing, the church’s followers can choose to click on the link which allows them to see more content that, unlike traditional tweets, allows greater depth and detail. The church primarily uses Twitter to promote upcoming sermons and events through their account, and like Osteen, the church also features inspirational quotes such as, “Do not let your dreams slip away!” and “Discover, pursue, and achieve [your dreams],” (see tweet below). This inspirational content uses many of the same Prosperity themes and buzzwords found on the Osteen and Lakewood feeds.



Figure 12: Victory Family Church Tweet, Accessed on August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/lfeatvictory

While Victory Family Church and John Nuzzo have only a fraction of the followers that Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church do, their posts reveal how a more typically sized evangelical church uses social media to present its message. In order for their message of prosperity to be convincing, it is imperative that the church be perceived as successful. Personal success is a fundamental principle of the prosperity message and evidence of the followers' and churches' faithfulness to God. To help achieve success, Victory is using social media as a tool to promote their events and church services and ultimately grow their congregation. At times, their calls for followers to join the services imply that by attending you will have material increase in your life. For example, @LifeatVictory tweeted, "I Have Decided' concludes this weekend. Come and get everything God has for you! See you in church."⁹⁸ "I Have Decided," was a four-part sermon series that was presented in August and September 2012. During the "I Have Decided" series, Nuzzo preached the message of Christianity including elements of the Prosperity Gospel. This tweet promoting the sermons series indicates that by coming to church to hear the message you can "get everything God has for you," presumably by finding out about their understanding of salvation, but also how to tap God's blessing through faithfulness. This is consistent with Victory's belief that prosperity should be found in every area of your life (not just financially),

⁹⁸ @LifeatVictory tweeted on September 12, 2012. This tweet is no longer available when searching through Twitter archives, but is in my data archives.

and that through your faithfulness to God, his blessing will rain down on you. Within this context of this sermon series we can see how Victory Family Church equates deciding to “follow Jesus” (as the lyrics to the song “I Have Decided,” go) can result in receiving “everything God has for you.” Receiving his blessings is based on your choices according to this sermon series.

Victory Family Church’s tweets are primarily promotional and provide little in the way of Christian content. The majority of the church’s tweets fell only into the promotion or “other” categories because its focus on Twitter is generally not related to theology or inspirational themes. Sometimes within the tweets promoting a particular event or sermon series Victory will include a reference to blessings, hope, or victory. Below is a tweet promoting a particular sermon asking followers if they are “blessed,” and ultimately inviting them to listen to a recent sermon they posted on their website.



Figure 13: Victory Family Church Tweet, Accessed August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/lifeatvictory

Possibly due to the church’s promotional focus, Victory Family Church does not receive many retweets or replies from its followers, making the dialogue aspect more limited than that of Lakewood. The church ran a contest in December where people submitted pictures of themselves with a Victory Christmas ornament which encouraged more conversation between the church and its followers, but for the most part users are disengaged at least in terms of a communicating

with the church on Twitter. As a result, it is difficult to determine what, if any, of the tweets are popular among users. The church prioritizes the promotion of its sermons and events on Twitter.

Because almost all of Victory Family Church's tweets are linked to their website, my analysis of their website provides more insight into their branding, however there is a small portion of material preceding each link on Twitter that is found exclusively there. It is within these blurbs that Victory has the opportunity to include more Prosperity-focused rhetoric. Typically the content remains informational, but occasionally the church will add a line like, "God is faithful!" or the following:

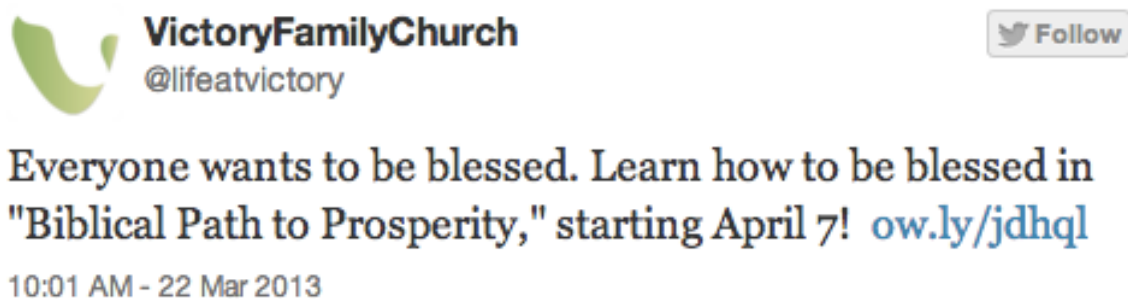


Figure 14: Victory Family Church Tweet, Accessed August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/lifeatvictory

As with almost all of their tweets, the tweet above ends with a link that takes the user to the Victory website, which provides more information about the event. In the portion before the link, however, the church provides an overtly Prosperity-themed tweet and simultaneously promotes their upcoming sermon series. This small post provides much insight on Victory's support for Prosperity Theology and their commitment to teaching it to their congregation and promoting it on Twitter. The tweet announces their upcoming sermon where attenders can learn the biblical way to be prosperous, and claims, "everyone wants to be blessed." Despite the

pastors and members stating the church's understanding of prosperity is not primarily financial, this tweet comes across as decidedly materially focused.

Like the other two churches, Victory Family Church proclaims their successes. The church boasts when it has particularly high attendance, receives publicity in the newspaper, and hosts energetic services. The church tweets when events go particularly well. This form of promotion is curious because it serves no other purpose than to demonstrate success. Because the event has already occurred, promoting it only serves as evidence for the efficacy of their faith. Below are two tweets John Nuzzo posted after two successful events.



Figure 15: John Nuzzo Tweet, Accessed August 13, 2013, www.twitter.com/johnnuzzo



John Nuzzo
@johnnuzzo



Well over 6,000 people came to Eggravaganza this year.
Over 900 people lifted their hands to receive Christ into...
fb.me/WesPI6MO

2:10 PM - 30 Mar 2013

1 RETWEET 2 FAVORITES



Figure 16: John Nuzzo Tweet, Accessed on August 13, 2013, www.twitter.com/johnnuzzo

This approach to promotion is particularly suitable to the Prosperity Gospel approach as it shows how God is blessing the church. According to Prosperity Theology, God's blessings are evidence of the church's faithfulness so the successful events show that Victory Family Church is faithful and holy. The proclamations of success among these three churches do not typically relate to charity, missions, or other social justice accomplishments. The church tends to measure their success in earthly measures such as attendance rates, publicity, and donations received for things like building renovations. Less frequently, the church will tweet about people who were baptized or "saved" at an event such as the tweet above about their annual Eggstravaganza event. Below is a tweet about a donation the church received for its building renovation.



Figure 17: John Nuzzo Tweet, Accessed August 12, 2013, www.twitter.com/johnnuzzo

Despite the differences found between Joel Osteen's tweets in comparison to his church's tweets, I did not find the same distinction between John Nuzzo and Victory Family Church. The two entities tweet similar if not identical posts with occasional personal entries posted on John Nuzzo's feed about his children or wife. This is most likely due to Nuzzo being a local pastor with the church being his only ministry in comparison to Osteen, whose church is but one of the venues in which he appears. The approach of Victory, however, has many similarities to that of Osteen and Lakewood Church.

In contrast to Lakewood Church and Victory Family Church, Oasis Church in Los Angeles does not like to categorize itself as a "Prosperity" church despite being documented in Gerardo Marti's *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church* as such. Marti notes that his interviews with churchgoers and pastors conspicuously included references to prosperity leaders, yet when pressed the Oasis Church pastors and members distanced themselves from churches whose message was, "all hype and no substance."⁹⁹ In my conversations too, leaders consistently said they would not classify their church as prosperity-

⁹⁹ Marti, *Hollywood Faith*, 124.

based. Their resistance to this label reveals the negative connotations often associated with Prosperity Theology and a potential obstacle when researching it as a result. Unlike other categorizations such as Christian, Protestant, and evangelical, Prosperity Theology proves more difficult to assign as some churches and leaders recognize that a focus on money can be perceived as superficial and outside of the boundaries of orthodox Christianity, yet their infrastructure, sermons, and marketing can send the message that success is a natural blessing of faithfulness. This lack of “shared self-identifying label” can make understanding the Prosperity movement nuanced and confused.¹⁰⁰

Their distaste for the label also says something about how the churches market themselves. Whether or not they identify as a Prosperity church is just as important as whether scholars would classify them as such. Oasis takes their marketing very seriously and each element of their marketing campaign is intentional. Marketing Director, Kristen Tarsiuk, says that even the decision of what cardstock is used for promotional materials falls in her lap and she considers their marketing goals when choosing the paper, the font, and every other detail.¹⁰¹ Knowing that, their decision to distance themselves from the Prosperity label demonstrates at minimum a sense that the category does not fit their mission. When discussing the Prosperity Gospel, my narrators often equated it with greed, selfishness, and church corruption. The church emphasizes on Twitter, their website, and in person to identity as generous, selfless, and ethical. Given their perception of the Prosperity Gospel and their marketing goals, it is not surprising that the church distances itself from it.

One program set up by Oasis was a Christmas Wish Offering, which encouraged church members to donate money to help make Christmas wishes of others come true. Philip Wagner

¹⁰⁰ Bowler, *Blessed*, 249.

¹⁰¹ Oral History of Kristen Tarsiuk, August 2, 2012.

tweeted that he expected to see “radical compassion and generosity” from his church to help others.¹⁰² In the tweet below, a church member says it was a “Christmas miracle” that she got money that she can give to the program.



Figure 18: Oasis Testimony Retweet, Accessed August 12, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla

Sentiments like that expressed in the above tweet were not unusual among Oasis’s followers. Interestingly, references to money, giving, tithing, and financial blessings were more common among Oasis followers/congregants than Oasis Church. While it is impossible to determine the motive for why Oasis members were more inclined to talk about financial blessings and giving, it does indicate a belief by those who attend Oasis that God is involved in finances and income.

Despite the reservations of Oasis’s pastors and congregants that I spoke with regarding the Prosperity Theology label, they unanimously agreed that God wants to bless his followers. Many of my narrators were comfortable with the Prosperity designation only when it was qualified by saying that “getting stuff” should not be the focus of the tradition or Christianity more generally, and pointed to Oasis’s emphasis on giving as a fundamental component to their

¹⁰² Accessed on October 18, 2013, www.twitter.com/PhillipWagnerLA.

mission. In other words, according to them, blessings (in whatever form) are merely a byproduct of your faithfulness, and “giving to get” should not be the motivation for generosity. Despite some ambivalence about their association with Prosperity Theology their sermons and Bible study often refer to an expectation and/or desire for God to bless them financially. This tweet directs followers to read Corinthians and pray for financial blessings.



Figure 19: Oasis Church Tweet, Accessed August 9, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla

While this tweet and its directive for followers to pray for the “financial blessing and provision for people at Oasis,” shows their alignment with the Prosperity message, their prayer focus changes each week and during my research period included such themes as generosity, unity, and salvation. The above tweet simply demonstrates that the church believes God can and will bless their followers and this can be accomplished, at least in part, through prayer.

It is clear that the Oasis members I spoke with agree with the church’s beliefs that God wants to provide for his followers, prayer can affect earthly outcomes, and faithfulness naturally results in blessings. Each of them provided examples of how God has provided for them and answered prayer. This tone is also evident on Twitter with many followers tweeting to Oasis to proclaim financial victories, healings, and other earthly blessings. Additionally, they believe

their gifts to the church spur financial gifts from God. This mentality can be seen in the tweet below of an Oasis church follower who believes that her generous monetary gifts to the church are responsible for her subsequent \$700 windfall.



Figure 20: Oasis Church Testimony Retweet, Accessed October 18, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla

Not only does this Twitter user lay out the exact formula described by Prosperity Theology's core philosophy, but also the tweet was retweeted by Oasis Church. The retweet demonstrates support for the belief that giving to God reaps gifts for the giver. Within tweets users can use what is called a "hashtag," which is a pound sign followed by a word or phrase. These help Twitter users find categories of things by searching for a specific hashtag as a filter. In this tweet, @nance_pants uses the hashtag, "#MiracleWeekend," which refers to a special event weekend at Oasis where members were asked to step out in faith and give to the church with the expectation of miracles. She also uses #H4tH, which stands for "Heart for the House," which is Oasis's donation drive to raise money for their new building.

Similarly, the following tweet shows how an Oasis church member enjoys giving and is grateful that he uses a text version of a heart to say that he loves to "oversee Gods [sic] money" in this way.



MatFretschel

@MatFretschel



I <3 being able 2 oversee Gods money N my life by tithing
2 the local Church (@OasisLA) giving 2 #H4TH & helping
w/ a Xmas wish! #ilikegiving

12:17 PM - 13 Dec 2012

↻ Retweeted by Oasis Church

Figure 21: Oasis Church Retweet, Accessed on October 18, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla

Despite being the least comfortable with the Prosperity designation, Oasis members were the most likely among the three churches to tweet about finances and giving. In their tweets, they often reference specific concepts within Prosperity Theology such as the notion that God would bless them or has blessed them due to their faithful giving.

Like Victory, Oasis Church's Twitter account is primarily used for promoting events and sermons and thanking the church's many volunteers for their service. Oasis often encourages the reading of particular Bible passages, promote upcoming sermons, and encourage people to "attend" live streaming church services. The church also reports on particularly successful events, by proclaiming the great turnout, the excitement of the event, or the powerful worship experience. For example, below is a tweet where Oasis announced that every seat of their youth room was filled for a particular service and included a picture of the room (not shown here) to prove it.



Oasis Church
@OasisLA



Every single seat is full at @OasisLA Youth High School
Mustache Bash! Our youth need a new bldg too!
#VisionSunday pic.twitter.com/ZydEcsDQ

11:38 PM - 25 Jan 2013

Figure 22: Oasis Church Tweet, Accessed on October 18, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla

This tweet proclaims the success of the church's youth program and also the need for a bigger facility. The decision to announce the state of a current or past event is a distinctly Prosperity-based approach to marketing. Announcing successes demonstrates the legitimacy of Prosperity Theology indirectly. Businesses and organizations often use Twitter to promote future events, but Prosperity Gospel churches announce events that have already occurred. Ultimately, this well-attended service or other successful events are seen as blessings and are evidence of the church's faithfulness, which provides theological legitimacy.

Notably, Oasis Church and Victory Family Church both offer financial seminars for a "Godly" approach to investing, earning, and spending. The church is also both affiliated with financial adviser Dave Ramsey's "Financial Peace University" seminar series, which claims to be a "Bible-based curriculum that teaches people how to handle money God's way." Dave Ramsey is a *New York Times* Best-Selling author, radio host, television personality, and motivational speaker. His radio broadcast, *The Dave Ramsey Show*, is heard on over 500 radio stations. Ramsey claims his financial advice is not based on the Bible, but he does identify as a Christian. Despite having great success speaking for churches and Christian organizations across the country, he has critics within the Christian community who disagree with his investment

advice. They object to his support of investing in companies that make money off of abortion, gambling, and pornography, for example.¹⁰³ Both churches use their Twitter feed to promote this seminar series:



Figure 23: Victory Family Church Seminar Tweet, Accessed August 6, 2013, www.twitter.com/lifeatvictory

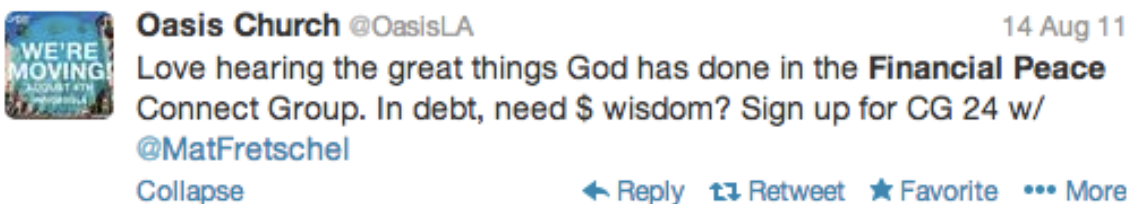


Figure 24: Oasis Church Seminar Tweet, Accessed August 6, 2013, www.twitter.com/oasisla

Dave Ramsey's books and radio show have had wide mainstream success, and he claims he walks a fine line between his personal theological beliefs and his secular promotion of his brand.¹⁰⁴ The Financial Peace University (FPU) seminar is specifically marketed towards Christians, while his other products and appearances do not. FPU encourages charitable giving, but focuses primarily on getting out of debt and building wealth. The promotional material for FPU uses language familiar to the Prosperity Gospel community by encouraging hope, positivity,

¹⁰³ Rob Moll, "Dave Ramsay Goes Beyond Credit Card Shredding," accessed on March 3, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/august/dave-ramsey-money-church.html?start=2>.

¹⁰⁴ Rob Moll, "Dave Ramsay Goes Beyond Credit Card Shredding," accessed on March 3, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/august/dave-ramsey-money-church.html?start=2>.

and optimism. Clearly, this affiliation is consistent with the Prosperity Gospel message of earthly wealth as a reward for faithfulness (or specifically, good stewardship and charitable giving). Below is an explanation from Dave Ramsey's website about what Financial Peace University is.

What is **FINANCIAL PEACE UNIVERSITY?**

We all need a plan for our money. *Financial Peace University* (FPU) is that plan! It teaches God's ways of handling money. Through video teaching, class discussions and interactive small group activities, FPU presents biblical, practical steps to get from where you are to where you've dreamed you could be. This plan will show you how to get rid of debt, manage your money, spend and save wisely, and much more!

Figure 25: Financial Peace University Description, Accessed on June 28, 2013,
www.daveramsay.com/fpu/home/

Unlike Ramsay's investment advice more generally, FPU claims to use biblical principles as a guide for proper money management. Dave Ramsay's seminar frames giving as a virtue, not just for its own sake, but also for its certain return to the giver. Such an approach to money is consistent with the Prosperity Gospel's support of financial success, practical advice for daily living, and blessings in this life. This affiliation is heavily promoted on the Twitter feeds of both churches, perhaps because they believe their Twitter users are drawn to this practical application

of theology. The decision to promote this affiliation on Twitter could be evidence that the church believes its digital audience is more amenable to practical advice rather than spiritual advice.

Neither church advertises Dave Ramsay specifically as a Christian financial adviser, but their endorsement of him demonstrates their support for his approach to finances. The churches promote his seminar series as means of learning how to manage one's money according to God's plan and with the expectation that this approach will build wealth for the faithful. Despite Ramsay's mainstream success and mostly secular promotion of his brand, the churches seem satisfied with his personal commitment to Christianity.

Like Victory Family Church, Oasis Church was also fundraising for a new building with a financial drive called "Heart for the House." The church recently revealed that its fundraising efforts to raise over \$2.5 million went beyond their goals. This fundraising effort was heavily promoted on their website and Twitter and they asked their followers to "give sacrificially" as an expression of faithfulness and commitment to God. When gifts to the church are seen as both part of a church member's faithfulness and also a spiritual investment that will reap earthly rewards, the act of giving gets added incentive.

Victory Family Church primarily uses their Twitter for promotional purposes where it heavily emphasizes seminars, events, and small groups (e.g., Bible studies). Curiously, most of Victory's courses, seminars, and events are separated by gender. The church has women's groups and men's groups, and the groups that are coed are generally designed for marriage counseling or divorce counseling. One tweet claimed, "All women want to be romanced," join this women's group and see how much "God wants to romance you." The church also promoted an event for men called, "Rise, Eat, and Shoot," which was a shooting range get-together for

men. Most importantly, however, is their consistent promotion of their sermons, which tend to be designed in series of three and four. While the content of the sermons is covered separately in this dissertation, their titles figure prominent in the tweets of Victory Church. Titles like, “The Blessed Life,” “Faith Is...,” and “Dream On,” are all sermon series that were featured during the research period and are focus on themes such as blessings, destiny, and faithfulness, and they are all framed in the inspirational style of Prosperity churches.

While James Davison Hunter saw a softening among evangelicals on gender-related issues, the culture at Victory Family Church does not reflect this shift.¹⁰⁵ The church’s decision to focus on men and women separately is consistent with their gender-specific worldview where men are the leaders and providers and women are the nurturers. By having ministries designed specifically for one or the other, Victory reinforces this aspect of their worldview.

In addition to analyzing the content of the churches’ Twitter feeds, I found what was absent to be equally telling. The near absence of content pertaining to salvation, charity, and Pentecostal themes like the Holy Spirit was as striking as the frequency of inspirational and promotional material. While many would consider salvation to be the bedrock of the Christian message, it is being overshadowed by more general self-help concepts-the likes of which could be found on the Twitter page of secular motivational speaker and author, Tony Robbins. While each church has a different approach, all three avoided controversial topics in favor of more generally likeable ones.

¹⁰⁵ Hunter, *Evangelicalism*.

2.1.4 Twitter Conclusions

There is much to be gleaned from studying the use of Twitter by these three churches. Digital media is a natural fit for Prosperity Theology because it cyclically reinforces the prosperity message. Churches and leaders are able to promote themselves by proclaiming their legitimacy through past success, which encourages future success, and so on. Twitter establishes and strengthens Prosperity leaders' authority by providing a vehicle for them to tout their successes, causing their audience to grow, and thus continue the cycle of gaining more success. Osteen, Nuzzo, and Wagner, to varying degrees, tweet inspirational messages that affirm their authority, demonstrate their success, and appeal to their audiences. While non-prosperity leaders are making promises that relate to the afterlife, prosperity leaders demonstrate their theology's validity through success in this life. Their earthly success establishes their theological authority. As such, through Twitter, the leaders can perpetually reinforce their message while simultaneously meeting the needs of their followers. Additionally, unlike most businesses, organizations, and individuals, who primarily promote upcoming events, prosperity leaders also tweeted about successful past events. The promotion of past events allows prosperity leaders to demonstrate that their faithfulness is reaping rewards, which strengthens the message's legitimacy. The Prosperity leaders' proclamations about their successes demonstrate their understanding of the value their own success has towards the credibility of their message.

Twitter users who follow these churches and pastors retweet inspirational themes at higher rates than any other topic, which could precipitate a shift in the theology towards a more secular message of positive-thinking. The followers of Prosperity leaders on Twitter are particularly drawn to messages of positivity, and regardless of the frequency with which the leader posts them, followers retweet them disproportionately to other themes. Because

Prosperity Theology requires adherents to speak out about their lives in faith and to verbally acknowledge ways their faith has been and shall be rewarded, positive-thinking and inspirational tweets are structured in a way that is familiar for the Prosperity audience. Additionally, the Internet's inherent relationship to consumerism presumably makes the material focus of the prosperity gospel congruent with the tastes of many online users. Based upon the evangelical innovator model of Lee and Sinitiere, the leaders' focus on inspiration could be evidence of a shift in the message.¹⁰⁶ If social networking maintains its stronghold on Internet communication, Prosperity Theology could continue to grow in part due to its ability to market in this way.

The perpetuation and development of the evangelical brand is being facilitated by the tweets of Prosperity leaders who are able to use the medium to continuously reinforce the worldview of this subculture. The evangelical branding has been accomplished through books, movies, and other forms of media, and is now also thriving within the dialogue of social media. Twitter provides a constant stream of information, and prosperity leaders are able to structure their tweets to mold the image of their organizations, churches, and prosperity theology in general. Each of these three Prosperity leaders I examined has a slightly different approach to presenting their message, yet their audience seems unified in their preference for inspirational themes. The audience has embraced the self-help messages of positive-thinking, encouragement, and inspiration within the framework of Christianity. More traditional Christian themes of salvation, charity, and repentance are simply not being emphasized. While this shift might not be representative of evangelicalism writ large, its components are compatible to developing the brand in their ability to be easily marketed within American culture.

¹⁰⁶ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*.

Like most social networks, Twitter is a growing means for individuals, organizations, and companies to convey their message and create a dialogue with the online public. Its limitations are somewhat offset by the immediate, quantifiable, public response. It is this interactivity that sets digital media apart from other forms of media. Twitter users have the opportunity to speak directly to the people that they follow. While there is no guarantee that the person they are talking to will respond or even see their tweet, Twitter creates a sense of dialogue that makes audiences feel greater intimacy between them and people they would otherwise not have contact with (e.g., celebrities, religious leaders, athletes). This faux intimacy fits well with the Prosperity leaders' presentation of the message. They are known to call their viewers "friend" and to talk about their audience's lives as if they are familiar with them personally. Many of the leaders' tweets use this language, and because their audience can answer back, the illusion of a dialogue can enhance the already intimate Prosperity message.

2.2 WEBSITES

In addition to their use of Twitter, the three churches all use their websites to attract new members, inform current members, and provide resources for the community. All three websites provide podcasts of sermons, a digital means to donate, and information regarding events and resources. The websites' content changes somewhat week-to-week with themes often corresponding to church goals (e.g., fundraising for new building) and events, but they all maintain consistent formats. As is typical for businesses and organizations, the websites are run by a particular person, but the content is approved by the senior pastor and corresponds with the sermons, Twitter content, and printed marketing materials.

2.2.1 Website Giving: Digital Tithes and Offerings

The new applications afforded by technology allow churches to modernize their means of collecting money from members and guests. Lakewood, Victory, and Oasis all have online giving pages that allow people to electronically tithe and donate. The electronic collection plates of these three churches are not necessarily evidence of the churches' enthusiasm for Prosperity Theology. They do, however, illustrate the commitment evangelicals, as a whole, show for technological advancements. Evangelical churches have embraced many technological advances including online media, live streaming of sermons, and downloadable reading material. As such, online giving is a natural extension of that commitment, and supports the churches' ability to provide electronic content, which requires sophisticated staff to facilitate. Oftentimes, however, the electronic giving page is accompanied with biblical context that reveals their support for Prosperity Theology. This is true for all three churches as their donation page includes biblical context for giving as well as assurance that faithful giving will provide blessings for the giver. It is this context that helps show how tithing is framed for Prosperity churches, and in all three of my cases, tithing is seen as both a Christian duty dictated by the Bible, and a way to increase your earthly blessings. This perspective is consistent with the Prosperity Gospel and provides incentive for followers to give generously to their churches.

Victory Family Church's technologically sophisticated website (www.lifeatvictory.com) features a homepage with a scrolling banner containing upcoming events, sermon series, and church news. The sermons series usually feature a promo video that introduces the content and

encourages people to attend services. Their navigation buttons include: Who We Are, Ministries, Contact, Get Connected, Sermon Media, and Give with subheadings under some of them. It is not surprising that “Give” is one of the main navigation options on Victory’s website, as this principle is strongly emphasized by the church. On the Give page, users can electronically donate money, watch testimonials by people who have reaped financial rewards due to faithful tithing, and read scriptures explaining the importance, virtue, and benefits of giving to the church. The giving page does not discuss or advocate the giving to charities outside of the church. It states instead, that by giving to Victory, you will be benefitting thousands of people throughout the world through their missions and outreach programs. The tithing promoted on this part of the website is in addition to the sacrificial giving requested during special fundraising efforts such as their building renovation fundraising campaign, “How Will They Hear.” Generous giving to your home church is considered by them to be a fundamental Christian value, and to be done with the expectation of God’s financial blessing in return.

During my research period, Victory Family Church initiated a 90-day Tithe Pledge that was promoted in church services and online. The 90-day tithe pledge is a call for members to commit to tithe for ninety days to “test” God’s promise that generous giving to him will result in abundant blessings for the giver and their family.¹⁰⁷

Join our 90-day tithe challenge to test God according to His Word.

*"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. **Test me in this,**" says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and **pour out so much blessing** that there will not be room enough to store it." - Malachi 3:10*

Figure 26: Victory Family Church 90-day Tithe Pledge, Accessed July 11, 2013, www.lifeatvictory.com/give

¹⁰⁷ Accessed July 11, 2013, www.lifeatvictory.com/give.

The Oasis website has a similar donation page to Victory, which includes a description of their giving philosophy including biblical references to validate them. Notably, the website quotes Malachi 3:10-12, which are the same verses that Victory Family Church quoted to accompany their 90-day tithing challenge. Below is some of their philosophy:

At Oasis we believe in living a generous life. The Bible tells us to give our tithes and offerings generously and with a willing heart. Malachi 3:10-12 says: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. 2 Corinthians 9:7 tells us: "Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." To donate online please click the link below and you will be directed to our donation form where you can select the type of donation you'd like to give. If it is your 1st time giving on our new site, you will need to create a new login and password.¹⁰⁸

In addition to this text is a video where senior pastor, Philip Wagner, talks about the church's belief in giving. He makes sure to tell people that whether they give to Oasis or not, they are welcome to attend. He also says that he wants people to know that they can trust Oasis with their finances, and noted that he realizes many people "have cynicism and suspicion" about donating to "non-profit organizations."¹⁰⁹ He assured the viewer that each year an independent company verifies that their financial behavior is in line with the governmental regulations on "non-profit organizations." He urged the viewers not to feel cynical, but to honor God with their income so they can live a "blessed life."¹¹⁰ He also stressed that each person's donation makes a difference in building "water wells," and helping "widows and orphans."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Accessed on July 24, 2013, <http://www.oasisla.org/life--oasis/give/>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Lakewood Church has a similar video on their “Give” page that features Lisa Osteen Comes urging followers to give to the church. She says it, “Opens the door to financial blessings in our life,” if we give our tithes to the Lord.¹¹² She goes on to say that if we do not tithe, Malachi 3:8-12 tells us we are actually “robbing God, and no one wants to be guilty of that.”¹¹³ In addition to this video is an explanation about the “Lifestyle of Giving,” that Lisa mentions in the video. The page quotes Luke 6:38, “Give and it will be given to you...For the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”¹¹⁴ The following screen-grab from the page goes on to explain their position on giving:

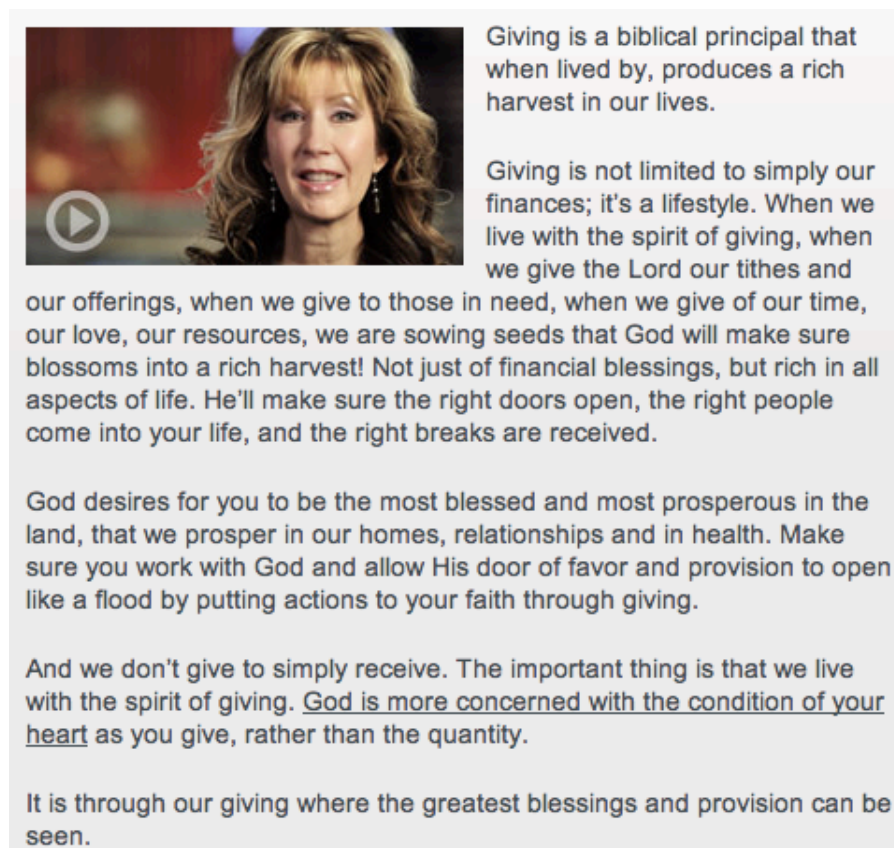


Figure 27: Lakewood Giving Philosophy, Accessed on July 24, 2013, <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/Give.aspx>.

¹¹² Accessed on July 24, 2013, <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/Give.aspx>.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Joel and Victoria Osteen also recorded a video for the church's "Give" page where they emphasize that if you give to God, you will be rewarded financially. According to them, this guarantee does not provide merely enough money to meet your needs, but provides an abundance of money so you can in turn "bless others."¹¹⁵ Joel says that God has seen every penny that you have given and that it is "credited to your account." Victoria tells the viewer to remind God that you have sown that seed because he promises to give more seed to the sower, and he will "turn his favor in your direction" because you're faithful to him.¹¹⁶

Interestingly, Joel Osteen has been intentional in his decision not to ask for money during his televised broadcasts. His Marketing Director, Jason Madding, highlighted this point during his oral history saying Osteen made a decision not to ask viewers for donations because he is aware of the negative connotations people have about televangelists. Madding said Osteen does not want to reinforce these negative stereotypes. This decision apparently does not extend to their website, which is in other ways designed not just for regular attenders, but also for the public in general. It is unclear why Osteen is comfortable encouraging donations online given his policy for televised solicitations.

2.2.2 Website Branding

Websites offer businesses, organizations, and individuals the opportunity to paint a picture of who they are (or at least how they want to be seen) to visitors to the site. Websites provide a means to "brand" themselves through videos, information, links, and forums. It is not unusual

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

for a church to have a website to showcase their ministries, current events, and sermon series. Victory, Oasis, and Lakewood's sophisticated, vibrant websites provide information to members and encourage people to attend their services and events. The websites also can tell us a lot about how the churches want to be seen by their members and those who they are trying to attract. Every part of their websites is carefully designed, and through the final product we can analyze how each church and their pastors wish to be perceived.

In the "Who We Are," section of the Victory website, Pastor John Nuzzo talks in a video about what the church has to offer. He says that every member of the family from infants to senior citizens can feel "God's power," acceptance, and love at the church. On this page it also states their mission and the Christian tenets that the church supports. The church believes the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God, God has three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and that Jesus died and rose again as an act of atonement for sins. The church also believes in healing, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the importance of water baptism, and the return of Jesus to earth is imminent.¹¹⁷ The church does not state any affiliation with a denomination or branch of Christianity, and does not explicitly note a connection to Pentecostalism, neo-Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, or non-denominationalism. It simply says they have a "casual, modest, atmosphere," and are "full of loving people."¹¹⁸ While the website mentions that senior citizens are welcome, the ministries at Victory are skewed towards younger people. There are children and youth ministries for every age, marriage counseling, and men and women's groups.

¹¹⁷ Accessed July 25, 2013, <http://lifeatvictory.com/whoweare/>.

¹¹⁸ Accessed July 25, 2013, <http://lifeatvictory.com/whattoexpect/>.

All three websites include a page dedicated to assist those who wish to “accept Jesus” as their Savior.¹¹⁹ On each of the websites, there is a video of the respective pastor inviting the viewer to accept salvation through Jesus by saying a prayer asking God into their lives. On the Oasis website people who have said the prayer for the first time are also asked to email an Oasis staff member so they can be provided with guidance and direction. The Lakewood salvation page, found under the “Pathway” navigation tab, includes information about salvation and says, “Jesus came that we might have a more abundant life. He came to carry our weaknesses, our sickness, our pain, so that we can walk in the total freedom, peace, power, and purpose.”¹²⁰ This statement goes beyond the more typical “other-worldly” promise of eternal life that is often the focus of Christian salvation. Lakewood is showing how one can gain immediate benefits from a Christian commitment through healing, freedom, peace, power, and purpose. Of the three churches, Lakewood was the only one to include a Prosperity principle within the salvation resource tab.

Lakewood Church has a “What We Believe” page that includes a list similar to that of Victory. The list includes: The Bible, The Trinity, Salvation, Water Baptism, Communion, and Growing Relationship. Conspicuously missing is any mention regarding the gifts of the Holy Spirit or Pentecost more generally. Under “Growing Relationship” it says, “We believe every believer should be in a growing relationship with Jesus by obeying God’s Word, yielding to the Holy Spirit, and by being conformed to the image of Christ.”¹²¹ It does not specify what it means specifically to “yield to the Holy Spirit,” but this is the only reference, however subtle, to the church’s Pentecostal roots.

¹¹⁹ Accessed on July 25, 2013, <http://www.oasisla.org/next-steps/become-a-follower-of-christ/> and <http://lifeatvictory.com/knowGod/>.

¹²⁰ Accessed on July 26, 2013, <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/pages/pathway/jesus.aspx>.

¹²¹ Accessed on July 25, 2013, <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/new-here/What-We-Believe.aspx>.

The Lakewood website is designed differently than the other two churches due in part to its massive size and the church's awareness that people from all over the world are visiting the site regularly for information on its celebrity pastor, his tour dates, books, and television schedule. Unlike most churches whose websites serve primarily as informational hubs for existing members, Lakewood must include information for people who plan on visiting the church from out of town and many who have no experience with churches more generally. Osteen's mass appeal is reflected in the content on its website, which focuses equally on local members and ministries as it does on television broadcasts, social media, and non-local supporters.

Lakewood also has a "Resources" page where users can purchase any one of Osteen's books. The titles of the books, such as, *Living in the Abundance of God*, *The Lord Gives*, and *Everyday Favor*, all focus on receiving God's blessings rather than salvation or charity.¹²² Even the Bible the church sells is called the Hope for Today Bible, with "notes and encouragement from Joel and Victoria Osteen."¹²³ While all three churches include elements of the Prosperity message, for Lakewood's website, the message repeated more frequently and more explicitly. On nearly every page of the Lakewood website, the Prosperity Gospel is referenced and emphasized.

There are many similarities among the three websites with a great deal of overlap in approach, style, and content. Each of the three churches provides a means for online giving and each uses Scriptural references and video technology to reach their followers. The Bible verses provide a meaningful foundation for followers by offering validity to the pastors' claims that God wants you to give. Furthermore, the video allows the pastors to speak personally to the user

¹²² Accessed on July 25, 2013, <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/Store-Features.aspx>.

¹²³ Accessed on July 26, 2013, <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/Store-Features.aspx>.

and simulate a Sunday sermon experience. All three also make claims that the giver will be blessed financially, providing incentive for generous giving. All three websites are vibrant, modern, and frequently updated. They all work to maintain up-to-date calendars and promote upcoming events. The websites tend to feature what the church offers in terms of ministries rather than theology and doctrine. None of the websites indicate a specific denominational or theological affiliation. Judging from their website content, the three churches are emphasizing the Prosperity Gospel tenets of giving to the church, receiving blessings, and experiencing victory in this life, and deemphasizing less broadly appealing elements like the gifts of the Holy Spirit, charitable giving, and traditional Christian doctrine. Perhaps the most striking element of all three websites is their commitment to modern technology. The churches offer podcasts, smartphone apps, live video streaming, and information updated in real time. This sophisticated use of technology serves to make their message appealing to their target demographic of young, educated, financially secure Christians. It also contributes to their image as a hip, updated, version of their parents' Christianity.

2.3 ONLINE VIDEOS

Like Twitter, online videos are a great way for organizations, individuals, and businesses to gain attention and exposure. There are many outlets for churches to post video content with the most popular websites being Twitter and Vimeo. Additionally, all three churches in my study include numerous informational videos on their websites. While much of the content that is found in church videos is recorded during church services and events, the churches are aware during production that many non-members and/or non-Christians could see these performances. The

marketing directors acknowledge that as a result, the content in these videos tends to lean more toward pop culture, humor, and entertainment rather than theology. With all three churches we will find videos online that emphasize general Prosperity themes of hope and victory or even remaining completely secular.

Victory Family Church has a Vimeo.com page where it posted over 300 videos. The majority of the videos feature the sermons, but the page also includes video testimonies from many of their congregants who converted to “born-again” Christianity from Catholicism or another Protestant faith. For the most part, the videos posted are meant to inspire faith, encourage attendance, and promote Prosperity Theology.

Other videos feature performances from services such as a “Mommy Rhapsody,” which was performed on Mother’s Day and features several women singing Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” with words about the challenges of motherhood. This performance has been presented at a number of churches, and while this was performed live at Victory Family Church, the lyrics were not written by Victory members. A few things are notable about this piece. First, the song they are covering is secular, but also from a band known for being anything but Christian as this church would describe it. Furthermore, the moms begin the song by acting out “motherly” duties such as ironing, folding, and cleaning. The song is meant to be silly and simply pay homage to moms that are in the audience. On holidays, the audience includes more outsiders, and, as such, the decision to parody a rock song on this day is not surprising. The performance’s depiction of stereotypical mothering is not surprising either given the church’s strong gendered focus with regards to small groups and events. Many of Victory’s groups and events are segregated by sex, making this video consistent with the idea that mothers do the housework.

The Victory Family Church video page seems to be designed for members who missed church and would like to view the sermon as well as to provide links for people to attach to their tweets in order to promote the church. For the most part, insiders are the targeted demographic, particularly existing members of the church, but some of the videos are posted with the goal of members sharing them and inviting friends to church.

Joel Osteen chooses to have his video channel on the Internet's most popular video website, YouTube. It is here that you can find videos posted under the Joel Osteen Ministries logo (rather than the Lakewood Church logo) under the headings: Inspiration, Testimonies, and Missions. There are 36 videos under the Inspiration category, 10 in Testimonies, and 1 in Missions. If you search Joel Osteen on YouTube there are over 488,000 videos, however these 47 are the only ones posted by his ministry. There is one video in the Inspiration section titled "Joel Osteen--What Kind of Gospel Does He Preach?" In this nearly 3 minute video he describes God as a "today" God, not a "some day" God. He says we are to expect our dreams to come true today. He says we are not defined by our past, but through the trials we face we must have a "victor" mentality rather than a victim mentality where you will come out, "stronger, happier, healthier...."¹²⁴ Almost every video in the Inspiration section is about what God will do for you or wants for you. One video is called, "God Thinks You're an Extraordinary Person." The videos are not about what is required of Christians other than a belief that God wants to bless you and to "dance before God in praise."¹²⁵ The video in the Missions section of the Joel Osteen channel is a promotional video for Osteen's "A Historic Night of Hope" tour (this video

¹²⁴ "Joel Osteen: What Kind of Gospel Does he Preach?," Accessed on August 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=creB8kZXifc&list=PL64D8FD6EEC6BE803&index=5>.

¹²⁵ "God Thinks You're an Extraordinary Person," Accessed on August 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL64D8FD6EEC6BE803>.

features his appearance at Los Angeles' Dodger Stadium).¹²⁶ The first half of the video features people talking about how excited they to see and be inspired by Osteen. Curiously, Philip Wagner of Oasis Church appears in this video. Despite Wagner's claims that Oasis is not a Prosperity church, he does affiliate on this occasion with Joel Osteen's appearance in Wagner's home city. He says, "Any time we can get 40,000 people together to hear the Gospel, was just a time that we really wanted to get behind and pray."¹²⁷ Even in this video, Wagner does not emphasize traditional Prosperity themes, but instead focuses on the Gospel and prayer. Wagner seems to support Prosperity themes and pastors as long as the focus is on growing the Kingdom (of God) and improving your life in every way.

Oasis Church's YouTube channel reflects this difference in tone as well. It has numerous videos dedicated to marriage, social justice, and their mission work in Africa. The content is primarily about relationships and getting involved in the church. There are several videos about giving to the building fund, tithing, and volunteering at the church. The YouTube channel has a lot of content that can be found on its website, and, like their website, they direct the content towards insiders. There are several videos, however, developed for their "GodChicks" group, which is led by Philip's wife and co-pastor, Holly. The videos are seminar style videos in which she talks about relationships, marriage, and how to be a godly woman. The videos have a conversational style, and are designed for women "and the men who love them."¹²⁸ The videos as a whole are generally for existing church members, and can be found on their website, but there is one video designed specifically for outsiders called simply, "Try Oasis Church." This 30-second video describes the church as the perfect place to meet people, "especially if you're

¹²⁶ "Joel Osteen: A Historic Night of Hope," Accessed on August 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G54Oh4CfwRs&feature=c4-overview-vl&list=PL5F3FEDA1CF866E3B>.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ "GodChicks 2011," Accessed on August 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/user/Oasisla/videos>.

not from LA,” and has a diversity of races and ages.¹²⁹ It says, “There’s no place like it in LA,” and it ends with the phrase, “Try Church.”¹³⁰

The videos posted by each organization may or may not be deliberately chosen to represent or brand them, however, their public placement reveals at least what the ministry thinks is important enough to produce and post. For Joel Osteen, the emphasis is unquestionably on inspiration. Oasis is focused on their church’s groups such as GodChicks and re-posting videos that are shown in the services. The focus on relationships might indicate a sense that that is what its audience wants. While the church boasts a diverse crowd, their marketing is skewed towards young couples. The GodChicks program is heavily marketed on the video channel and on their Twitter feed, and two of my narrators said they were brought to the church through women they were dating. The church’s focus on women and relationships could be effective tool to attract young people with growing families. Victory Family Church’s video channel includes unedited sermons, but also promotional videos and entertaining pieces. This approach demonstrates an interest in appealing to current and prospective members. The church does not link the material on their video page to any Tweets, so the marketing approach is not connected with that of its Twitter feed. While a valuable and almost necessary marketing approach to any technologically minded organization, the video pages of these churches do not appear to be the marketing focus. The videos posted directly to each of their websites are more heavily promoted, and take a greater role in their branding.

Like Twitter, online videos are a great way for organizations, individuals, and businesses to gain attention and exposure. There are many outlets for churches to post video content with the most popular websites being Twitter and Vimeo. Additionally, all three churches in my

¹²⁹ “Try Oasis Church,” Accessed on August 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snGDOZ1i92Q>.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

study include numerous informational videos on their websites. While much of the content that is found in church videos is recorded during church services and events, the churches are aware during production that many non-members and/or non-Christians could see these performances. The marketing directors acknowledge that as a result, the content in these videos tends to lean more toward pop culture, humor, and entertainment rather than theology. With all three churches we will find videos online that emphasize general Prosperity themes of hope and victory or even remaining completely secular.

2.4 DIGITAL MARKETING CONCLUSIONS

Even though digital media is a new format for religious marketing, Oasis, Victory, and Lakewood Church's online presence offers great insight into how these Prosperity Gospel churches wish to be seen publicly. Digital media is critical to the marketing of evangelical churches and religious organizations in general, and also for the maintenance and development of the churches' audiences. In addition to its unique interactive nature, digital media also blurs the lines between the sacred and profane as well as public and private life. In *Mediating Religion: Studies in Media, Religion, and Culture*, Heidi Campbell describes how online religion is not replacing offline religion, but instead acts as a supplement and provides relationships that some members say they lack at church.¹³¹ Its complicated nature makes digital media a particularly hearty resource for understanding the relationship between the churches, leaders, and audiences.

¹³¹ Heidi Campbell, "Approaches in Religious Research in Computer-Mediated Communication," in *Mediating Religion: Studies in Media, Religion and Culture*, eds. Jolyon P. Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003).

The three churches in this study have embraced digital media as a way to continue branding their church and connect with their congregants. What they say and do not say online helps form the public's perception of their theology, style, and mission. The churches and the leaders that represent them are intentional in their posts and tweets, making them valuable tools to determine what is important to them and how they wish to be seen. What they choose to emphasize and deemphasize can affect the shared-worldview of their followers and evangelicalism on a larger scale should their approach be adopted more broadly. The Prosperity Gospel's presence online could affect its trajectory and the online dialogue could play a role in the path that is taken.

The content posted on the three churches' websites and Twitter feeds is chosen as a means to tell the public who they are and convince them to attending (or continue attending). While the limitations inherent to digital media, such as difficulty conveying tone as well as the restrictions on content length (e.g., Twitter's 140-character maximum) can be challenging for the churches and the researcher, the format is also rich with potential to determine the "branding" process within Prosperity Theology. Their websites, online videos, and Twitter feeds provide a sense for how each church is projecting itself into the digital world.

The interactive and global nature of digital media encourages these marketing-savvy Prosperity churches to present a more general message of blessings, victory, and hope in this public forum with the goal of broad appeal. This is particularly true in social media such as Twitter because many who are unfamiliar with Prosperity Theology, Pentecostalism, and even Christianity are present. More traditional elements of Christianity such as salvation and charitable giving are downplayed while Pentecostal components were virtually non-existent. The content presented by these churches on Twitter is decidedly not theological. It is largely

promotional or inspirational rather than spiritual. This approach reflects the move of evangelicals towards business strategies to promote their “brands.”

Not only does this research provide insight on how religious leaders are promoting their ministries online, but also through Twitter we can see how their audience is responding to their messages. Through the interactivity we can see the relationship between leaders and followers that is not as clear through television or even in person. By establishing the themes among the leader’s tweets and the reactions they incite from their followers, we can begin to see which themes resonate with the online audience.

The three churches successfully use digital media to brand themselves as vibrant, interactive, and modern Christians. This approach is consistent with Mara Einstein’s thesis on evangelical branding in her book, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*, where she demonstrates how evangelical organizations and leaders have developed and maintained a “brand” that has facilitated their rapid growth over the past thirty years.¹³² While Prosperity Theology often falls under the umbrella of neo-Pentecostalism, it “behaves” and appears like traditional evangelicalism. In previous generations evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, while similar in some ways, did not mesh well because of the distinction in beliefs about the role of the Holy Spirit particularly with regards to speaking in tongues and other charismatic components. Because neo-Pentecostals have downplayed the more controversial elements of the message (e.g., the “gifts of the Holy Spirit) in favor of more general inspirational messages of hope and faith, the divide between the once distinct traditions has been lessened. As such, Prosperity Theology utilizes the evangelical style of branding to promote its message of earthly abundance. In the case of their websites, the three churches have embraced the flashy,

¹³² Einstein, *Brands of Faith*.

technological advances and the focus on this-worldly issues in place of the more traditional Christian components that has become popular among evangelicals. The promotion of the religious brand is also well suited to the 140-character “tweets” of Prosperity leaders on Twitter.

The interactive nature of Twitter also suits the dynamic relationship evangelical leaders seek to have with their followers. Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere’s *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* describes the importance of this relationship, and the ways the leaders have sought to develop this dynamic. They argue that evangelical leaders are “innovators” and savvy marketers, who adjust their message to suit the ever-changing preferences of their audience to connect with them and maintain and grow membership.¹³³ In order to understand the preferences of their audience they must have a way to gauge what their followers’ preferences are. The interactive nature of digital media, particularly within social networks, provides the feedback necessary for the leaders to adjust their message.

Religious leaders “adapt pragmatically to an increasingly pluralistic spiritual sphere or ‘religious marketplace,’” online by employing “strategic arbitration” of the content they present.¹³⁴ This discretion helps them establish authority and maintain control of their online image. Additionally, the differences in content posted on the churches’ websites in comparison to what they post on Twitter demonstrates awareness that different audiences want different information and themes. As such, the leaders post content based upon their perception of who is in the audience. The dialogical nature of digital media demonstrates how evangelical leaders adjust their message as described in the arguments of Lee and Sinitiere. On Twitter, Prosperity leaders are presenting general inspirational and informational messages in place of a theological

¹³³ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 3.

¹³⁴ Pauline Hope Cheong, “Authority,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 81.

one, while on their website they include information on salvation, their specific biblical beliefs, and outreach programs. While there is some overlap in material on their websites and Twitter feeds, the emphases are different. There is far more focus on theology and donations for the churches on their website, while their Twitter feeds, on the other hand, emphasize inspiration and blessings for the followers. Changing the style or tone to accommodate different audiences is a savvy marketing approach, but omitting, diluting, and/or changing the core of the message might affect the Christian theology and has the potential to affect how audiences are receiving the message and the Prosperity Gospel.

All three of my research churches acknowledged stylistic changes to accommodate audience preferences and appeal to a younger crowd, such as modernizing worship style, but each claimed the adjustments were aesthetic, not substantive. “The core message doesn’t change,” said Pastor John Spencer of Victory Family Church. He said the church refuses to compromise its message to grow the church. With Twitter, however, certain theological elements are not just deemphasized, but are almost completely omitted and replaced with inspirational and motivational messages or general biblical references. This decision to change the content presented based on the audience could spur a more general theological tempering should the online users begin to dictate how the message is taught offline.

In addition to the inspirational content, the churches promoted their sermons and events online. They also proclaimed past successes, which were usually defined by high event attendance, money raised, and good crowd energy. They tended not base their success on charitable giving, souls saved, or healings. This measure of success is particularly compatible with social media, which bases success on the number of followers one has. If success is based on the number of people attending their church or following them on Twitter rather than on the

number of souls saved or mouths fed, then it is in the leaders' interest to provide a more generally accepted message. Furthermore, because the online audience is made up of believers and non-believers, the influence of this group has the potential to shift the message towards more universally accepted themes, such as inspiration, in place of salvation and charity.

The Twitter feeds of the three churches and their leaders give a great deal of attention to themes that are not explicitly Christian. Their messages tend to avoid concepts such as salvation, repentance, and sin, and the content of their online communication mimics that of secular self-help gurus. This dilution demonstrates a shift in the theology presented through media in comparison to earlier incarnations (e.g., Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker), and warrants greater investigation. While this more secular presentation might be used primarily online, it demonstrates some movement away from strong Bible-based theology. Because secularization theory in the American context has been largely panned among scholars, the push by Prosperity Gospel leaders towards a more secular focus suggests we should reconsider the theory's relevance. While its application in the American context would need complicating and qualifying, secularization theory could prove an effective means of understanding how the relationship between American culture and religion is evolving in the post-modern era. If, instead of things like attendance rates, we used theological content to measure religiosity, the findings of a shift toward secularism might prove to be true.

Looking forward, digital media, and social media in particular, is rich with possibilities for exploring the relationship of religious leaders and their audiences. The interactive nature of the online world provides immediate feedback on audience response. Over time, one could determine trends of whether (and how) prosperity leaders adjust their messages in response to the preferences of their audiences, and how different audiences result in different messages. A lack

of consistency in the Prosperity message could be contributing to a dilution of its theological underpinnings, confusion about what Prosperity Theology even is, and a lack of shared-identity among followers.

A longitudinal study of religious marketing through social networking could help determine how this and other evangelical traditions are developing and changing over time. Because evangelical audience preferences help leaders determine the theological message presented, the interactive nature of social media is conducive to understanding whether leaders are altering the substance of the message in order to meet audience demands. Such an analysis is highly favorable to learning more about the trajectory of the movement. Unlike other forms of media, the dialogue present between the leaders and their audience online provides scholars with a unique ability to study audience response, and whether that response dictates what content is presented over time.

Seeing how these three churches present their message in different forums is insightful, but a more extensive survey including a broad range of Christian leaders could offer comparisons of how Twitter is used among various groups and how their audiences respond, which could demonstrate how theology affects social network usage and vice versa. While social media is particularly suitable to Prosperity Theology, the online world is ever growing and changing, and many traditions are finding it necessary to keep up with the technological demands of the next generation. Examining how other traditions respond to audience preferences could provide scholars insight into the complicated relationship between audience and leader and who is influencing whom. In the end, my research provides a glimpse into how Prosperity leaders and their ministries navigate the challenges and advantages of digital media. My hope is that this snapshot of the Prosperity Gospel's digital media presence will precipitate further investigation

into the marketing of religious traditions online and determine the impact of the audience response.

3.0 PREACHING TO THE CHOIR: MARKETING WITHIN PROSPERITY CHURCHES

Despite all the ways pastors and churches are now able to communicate with people, the church service is still the foundation for presenting their message. It is at the center of all that they do, even in the case of celebrity pastors like Joel Osteen. While pastors can potentially reach more people through audio, visual, and digital media than they can in person, it is difficult to know who makes up those audiences. Because pastors have a better understanding of who is in the church audience demographically and theologically, they can provide content designed to meet their demands. This chapter examines the sermons, literature, and events of Lakewood, Oasis, and Victory Family Churches, and proposes three conclusions. First, that the material presented within the churches is more doctrinally dense than that posted online. Second, traditional Pentecostal concepts are presented more frequently in church than online; however, they are applied practically and the pastors and congregants do not perform the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Third, the perceived makeup of the audience affects the tone and rhetoric used by the leaders. In other words, the more secular the audience is perceived to be, the less theological content is used.

Knowing that the crowd is made up mostly of church members, regular attenders, and theological allies provides an unspoken theological understanding between the pastor and the audience. While the audience still might have varied theological commitments, they are

implicitly supportive of the beliefs of the church and its pastor. Some might not consider the in-house presentation including sermons, worship, and even architecture to fall under the umbrella of “marketing.” However, just as any business wishes to maintain the customers it has attracted, so too does a church wish to create official members and maintain regular attenders. As such, every aspect of the service is carefully choreographed in order to present a very specific message to those in the audience. It is within this context that this chapter will examine the marketing of the Prosperity Gospel at Lakewood, Oasis, and Victory Family Church.

At a church service or event, the initial phase of marketing--the bait, so to speak--is over. The leaders know the majority of their audience is familiar with Christian rhetoric, Bible references, and evangelical subculture. The goal, then, is to maintain their loyalty and encourage them to invite friends and family to join as well. As a result, the leaders’ presentation is based on a marketing approach of audience maintenance rather than attraction and therefore includes more theological themes than are presented in other venues. In order to accomplish congregation maintenance and growth, all three churches are committed to creating a user-friendly church that is familiar, modern, and non-threatening.

The commitment to marketing and growth is particularly strong among Prosperity Gospel churches, whose success is evidence of their faithfulness according to their own religious beliefs. By definition, Prosperity churches see growth as important in spreading their message, but also as a manifestation of their faithfulness. All three churches acknowledged the difficulty in measuring success when dealing with spirituality, but each of them proclaim their continued growth, successful fundraisers, and building upgrades as evidence that they are meeting the needs of their congregants and growing the Kingdom of God.

Because so many elements make up the church service including worship, prayer, sermons, and socializing, my ethnographic research will cover all of these components to varying degrees. I pay special attention to the sermons, specifically those presented by the senior pastors, as they offer the most explicit evidence for the theological content that is emphasized.¹³⁵ I examine the rhetorical approach of the pastors through my experiences in their services, and through my conversations with them. The overall style of the church will be discussed, which includes architecture, technology, and other elements of the church complex. This chapter also examines the way the church markets in-house events, and considers how they are reaching the community. In sum, I will examine how Lakewood, Oasis, and Victory Family Churches are presenting the Prosperity Gospel message in person, and how this presentation fits into the trajectory and marketing of the movement overall.

3.1 CHURCH ATMOSPHERE

So much of one's perception of a church comes from things beyond the sermon itself. Every aspect of a church experience, including interactions with staff, the style of the music, and the color of the pews, is intentional. The three churches work on every detail of the congregant's experience in the hope that every attendee has a positive and comfortable experience. Ideally, they would like the experience to be such that you return and tell your friends to come. Pastors often attend seminars and conferences on how to grow their church and how to manage their flocks. These three pastors all work with other pastors to create a unified worldview and vision

¹³⁵ At times, other pastors preach sermons either when the senior pastor is away or, in the case of Oasis, they rotate responsibilities amongst pastors. Philip Wagner splits his preaching schedule almost equally with his wife, Holly. Although Joel Osteen travels throughout the year, he rarely misses Sunday services at Lakewood Church.

for the evangelical movement despite being unaffiliated denominationally. What they create in these churches is a modern, upbeat, and casual environment designed to appeal to the current generation of young adults and new families.

As I pulled into the parking garage on Hollywood Boulevard on a summer Sunday morning, two happy, young women directed me where to go. They were wearing matching mint green Oasis Church t-shirts, and were eager to help me navigate the unfamiliar facilities. When I walked into the church I was surprised by how small it was. In comparison to many of the evangelical churches I have been to this was on the more intimate side. I arrived an hour early and watched the on-stage team rehearse. The staff is so familiar with each other that I stood out as a newcomer, and as such, people passing by would often stop at my row and introduce themselves. The sanctuary was empty except for a few worship team members, but most people who saw me were quick to approach me, welcome me, and make me feel at home. The group on stage and in the sound booth did a dry run of the entire service to work out any technical or logistical difficulties. After they finished, the sanctuary doors were opened and congregants were allowed to enter.

The sanctuary is an old theatre with an elevated stage, sloped seating, and even ropes blocking off seats designated for certain guests. The ropes are put in place so that people are seated in order of arrival from front to back. Volunteer ushers lined the aisles wearing headsets and the same mint green t-shirts as the friendly parking helpers. They walked congregants down the aisle and passed them off to the next person like a real-life relay. They talked to each other using hand gestures to show the number of people in each incoming party, and they treated the whole process with precision and enthusiasm. While the facility is not particularly large, there are volunteers everywhere, mostly women, of a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The sanctuary

filled up quickly and ropes were moved back to allow for the influx of people. The congregants greeted each other with handshakes, high fives, and hugs. As the service began there were still people trickling in, but the worship team began with a fast-paced song.

When I met with the marketing director, Kristen Tarsiuk, she described how Oasis is committed to excellence in every area, but especially in worship. She says that because their audience is made up of artists, producers, and musicians, who live in Hollywood they expect a high production value. Oasis aims to meet this expectation and therefore places a high premium on state-of-the-art technology, professional singers and musicians, and worship leaders who can create an excitement for an audience with high standards. Their worship team does not disappoint and of the three churches I observed, Oasis has the liveliest and most demonstrative audience. The congregation is extremely enthusiastic in its worship through singing, dancing, and lifting of hands in praise. They clap and sway and their emotions seem to match the performance unfolding before them.

The worship continued for about 30 minutes and was followed by announcements, video presentations, and a reminder that the church is still in need of funds for the purchase of their new building. The fundraising campaign for the new building is called, “Heart for the House,” and during the services the church ran video testimonies from people who “heard from God” telling them that they were supposed to give sacrificially for this project. One married couple in particular said they both believed God put the desire to give to the church “on their hearts” even though they did not know where the money would come from to contribute. They decided to give in faith believing God would provide. They said that after they made this commitment they had the good fortune of receiving a car for free. They believe their act of faith and generosity to God begat their financial windfall. Their testimony was played via pre-recorded video for the

church and demonstrates a theological commitment to Prosperity Theology. Their story was meant to inspire others to have a “heart for the house” and to give as the Lord leads them to do so as an act of faith that God will provide and reward accordingly.

During my visits, Philip and Holly Wagner preached frequently as did many guest speakers (I happened to visit during the summer months, which is when the Wagners take a month-long vacation). Philip’s appearance is youthful and his preaching approach is conversational, energetic, and comical. He often wore jeans and casual shoes, and always wore stylish, black glasses that make him appear younger than a man with two adult children. He is mellower than his wife, Holly, who is known for her theatrical style, but both of them provide a warm, comfortable sermon setting where the congregants will often chime in with quips or responses to questions posed by the speakers.

The lobby area at Oasis is surprisingly small, especially in comparison to that of Lakewood and even Victory. There is an area where people can buy books, and there are tables with literature and people to help. Oasis is particular about how it markets the bookstore. When I asked about some of the books and products it sells, staff member Nicole Reyes said she was hesitant to call it a bookstore because of negative connotations such commercialization might inspire, but instead, she refers to it merely as a resource center where congregants can find Christian materials. While this is merely semantics, it is fair to say the church is aware of potential bad branding, and prefer to be clear about their intentions regarding the “business” elements of running a church.

In contrast to Oasis, Lakewood is as vast a space as you would imagine a former sports arena to be. The staff goes to great lengths to make the experience of the large church feel more intimate, and people are encouraged to ask questions to volunteers and staff members. Signs are

set out to help visitors and regular attenders know where to go. The buzz at Oasis seems like a library in comparison to the crowd that descends upon the Lakewood property for their services. The church is bustling and there are so many people going in so many directions it is difficult to imagine how many people are required to facilitate the success of each service. Because some of their services are televised internationally, there is a distinct order put in place to ensure smooth production. Nothing is left to chance. The enormous effort to create each Lakewood service is apparent, and also clearly paying off.

While Lakewood Church is committed to “everyday” applicability in the messages, it has not adopted some of the casual elements so many evangelical churches have embraced. Despite Lakewood’s commitment to “everyday” preaching and themes applicable to daily life, Joel Osteen always wears a suit, which is in contrast to many current evangelical pastors including Wagner and Nuzzo, and most notably, Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in California, whose famous Hawaiian style shirts have become his trademark. Everyone on the Lakewood worship team and most of the audience is also dressed in their Sunday best (so to speak).

It is not uncommon for evangelical pastors to be wearing khakis, jeans, and untucked golf shirts. This shift to a more casual look has taken place over the last twenty-five years. Osteen, however, has remained committed to the more formal attire his father, John Osteen, wore as pastor of Lakewood, and is not uncommon within Southern Pentecostal and evangelical churches. One reason this new casual style is notable is its contrast to the Prosperity Theology pastors of the 1980s who were known for their ostentatious presentations and clothing. It was unheard of at that time for the pastors to wear anything but a suit. Their bold fashion choices went the way of their bold preaching approach. Both have since been largely exchanged for a more approachable, everyday style. This transition indicates how audience preference can

inspire change in the pastors. The clothing of the audience followed the larger culture's move towards less formal attire, and the style of the audience made its way onto the church stages.¹³⁶

Walking into Victory Family Church, it is clear that the church has put a great deal of thought into every aspect of the experience including the building and its contents. I approached the children's information desk where four staff members (or volunteers) greeted me. Dropping off my son was a multi-step process as they had me fill out forms and asked me questions about him (e.g., allergy information). Every parent dropping off their child for the first time receives a DVD and information packet about their safety procedures and what they teach the children regarding Christianity. The church has safety precautions in place to ensure no child can be picked up by anyone other than his/her guardian(s). The rooms for the children are brightly colored, elaborately decorated, and filled with age-appropriate toys and games. The church has gone to great lengths to provide a children's program that allows the parents to feel safe and the children to be excited for the service. Victory is appealing to families with its elaborate children's program that includes the annual Eggstravaganza Easter community event.

3.1.1 Church Style and Architecture

Like the preachers and their toned-down, casual look, the exterior of Prosperity churches usually lacks the grandeur of traditional churches with their stained-glass windows and elaborate architecture. Lakewood, Victory, and Oasis Church are no exceptions, and all have styles that are decidedly bland in terms of Christian paraphernalia. During an interview with Joel and Victoria Osteen for CBS's "60 Minutes," the reporter noted that Lakewood Church does not

¹³⁶ Mark Shibley, "Contemporary Evangelicals: Born-Again and World Affirming," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558 Americans and Religions in the Twenty-First Century (July 1998).

have a single cross, and “no religious symbols whatsoever.”¹³⁷ There is no cross-adorned pulpit or Christian iconography. When asked by “60 Minutes” reporter, Byron Pitts, why their church “doesn’t look more like a church,” Victoria Osteen responded by saying, “I think it is going to look more and more like churches across the country.” Her response indicated that, at least in her estimation, the look of an auditorium devoid of Christian symbols is a trend that is growing nationwide. She implied that this style is an intentional shift rather than a function of being housed in a former arena. The reporter asked what Osteen called the lectern in the front of the stage, asking, “What do you call this? A pulpit?” Joel said, “I called it a podium.” Even the more traditional word “pulpit” was either too old-fashioned, too religious, or just not the right fit for Osteen’s standards. Randall Balmer and Barbara Ehrenreich attribute this shift toward a more bland sanctuary as a strategic move to avoid intimidating or frightening visitors who might associate crosses etc... with harsh religion.¹³⁸

Similarly, Oasis and Victory Family Church have embraced the more modern look and their main worship areas resemble auditoriums rather than traditional sanctuaries. Neither church denies this shift away from the old-fashioned look, but they are quick to say it is merely superficial and not emblematic of a shift in theology. They see this renovation as more of a facelift to keep up with younger congregants rather a representation of a substantive shift. The strip mall style exterior and movie theatre interior may be far cry from the more traditional steeple and stained glass, but this trend is a common site in cities, suburbs, and even rural areas across the country.

¹³⁷ “60 Minutes,” Broadcast October 14, 2007, Accessed on March 25, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGisLq9DA6U>.

¹³⁸ Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts Faith and Threaten America*, (New York: Basic Books, 2007); Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided*, 138.

3.1.2 Audio Visual Technology

What the churches lack in architectural artistry, however, they often make up for in production value including state-of-the-art sound systems, visual equipment, and light displays. Prosperity churches tend to place priority on experience during the service over architectural beauty, and this is exhibited in their building styles, and church service atmosphere. Instead of a crucifix or cathedral ceilings, the most ostentatious element of each of these churches' facilities was their audio/visual equipment. The systems used in all three churches are extremely expensive and complex. They are used for worship purposes, presenting pre-produced videos, and recording services. In the case of Osteen, the system provides the means for the church to broadcast to over 7 million people every week in over 100 countries.

When Victory Family Church hosted its grand opening service in its newly renovated building, one of the first things it did was thank the company that provided the new sound/video system. Nuzzo told the congregation that the church received the system, at least in part, as a donation from a local company, and he said how pleased the church was to have this technology. The production value in all of the videos made by all three of the churches is top of the line, and includes graphics, music, and editing that requires a knowledgeable staff. High production value was mentioned by many of my narrators among the congregations as something that is important to them. They said the videos produced by the churches were impressive and helped make church feel "more modern and in touch with current trends."¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Oral history with Megan from Oasis Church, June 2012.

3.1.3 Resources

In addition to the design and style of the buildings, the resources available to congregants have come a long way since the nurseries and foyers found in most churches. In these and many evangelical churches now you will find cafés, bookstores, and gymnasiums, in addition to the traditional foyer. The cafés are a new development in some churches that allow attendees to mingle, eat, and drink in the lobby area of the church. The marketing directors at each of the three churches described how their aim is to fill the church and attract new members. They all claim they are not competing with other churches, but rather with the Sunday paper and Starbucks (e.g., things non-churchgoers will often do on a Sunday morning). Because the neighborhood coffeehouses are the perceived “competition,” many churches have simply brought the coffee to their congregations in the form of elaborate cafés. As a result, coffee areas are becoming a part of the “normal” evangelical church experience. In addition to luring in congregants, the cafes encourage people to stay longer, get involved, and have the church as a part of their lives. All of these things help establish lasting, familial relationships with the church members.

Bookstores are also common sights in evangelical churches. All three of my research churches have a bookstore where consumers can purchase Christian literature, Bibles, and other Christian-themed products. When talking to the Nicole Reyes, Director of Ministries at Oasis Church, she balked when I used the term “products” to describe the items offered for purchase at the bookstore. She said, “We do not call them products because they are not meant to make a profit. They are valuable tools...to reach people with a cohesive message.”¹⁴⁰ Reyes is clearly

¹⁴⁰ Oral History with Nicole Reyes, March 25, 2013.

aware of the concern some people have regarding the relationship between the church and consumerism, greed, and business practices. This concern undoubtedly grew in the wake of the televangelists' scandals that rocked the Prosperity movement in the 1980s. While bookstores within churches are becoming commonplace, Reyes wanted to be clear the goal was not to increase revenue, but to provide a service to congregants.

Victory Family Church also has a bookstore on site that is about the size of a small store at any mall. It is filled with books and other products and resources that support their Christian worldview. One of my narrators from Victory volunteers at the store and said she loves it because it provides her with “supplemental feeding” of Christian content. She said the sermons at Victory are wonderful, but are geared more towards new Christians so it is important for older Christians to get more material to supplement the weekly sermons. She said, “Pastor Nuzzo knows many people in the church need more material to meet their spiritual needs, and the bookstore is a great resource for that need.”¹⁴¹

While most churches are not getting rich off their bookstores, Lakewood's store is quite successful due to its size and its shelves being filled Osteen's best-selling books. Financial records indicate the Lakewood Church bookstore generated \$3.4 million in revenue in 2005.¹⁴² Such success indicates a hunger from audiences for Osteen's inspirational message outside of his sermons, even when his books are often simply his sermons repurposed in book form. It seems clear, however, that whatever their purpose, cafés and bookstores provide reinforcement of the evangelical subculture and the “cohesive message” Reyes mentioned, which facilitates the unified worldview that has made evangelicals a powerful force culturally and politically in

¹⁴¹ Oral History with Pat from Victory Family Church, September 9, 2012.

¹⁴² John C. Roper, “Big Budget Supports Lakewood's Higher Calling,” Accessed on August 13, 2013, <http://www.chron.com/business/article/Big-budget-supports-Lakewood-s-higher-calling-1920840.php>.

America. Most churches have fundraisers to assist with Toms, mission trips, and building upkeep, but these organized efforts for increasing revenue reflect a more business-minded approach to growing and maintaining the congregation and its infrastructure.

Curiously, while Lakewood Church's sanctuary lacks crosses and other Christian symbolism, its bookstore offers countless products with religious imagery including crosses, Bible verses, and other Christian references for sale. It is perhaps in this dichotomy that we can see clearly the commodification of this tradition. The sanctuary is designed to be inoffensive and welcoming to all, and reflects this in its look. The bookstore, however, is meant to make money, and Christian paraphernalia is big business. Members and guests buy books, house wares, and gifts with Christian messages, which translates into revenue for the church.

3.1.4 Renovations and Relocations

At the end of my research period, Victory Family Church finished its \$8 million renovation and had a grand opening service on June 9, 2013. This building project took over four years to complete and was a frequent theme in the pastor's sermons as he asked congregants to give sacrificially to the fund. The day of the grand opening began with a video presentation on their new state-of-the-art audio/visual system. The church announced that this structure was more than "just a building," but was evidence of God's faithfulness and favor. God had provided the funds to complete the project because he was rewarding the church for their dedication, faithfulness, and good work. The renovation super-sized the sanctuary allowing room for 1800 people. It also introduced stadium seating, sofas and lounge chairs throughout the foyer, and elaborate rooms for the ministries at every stage of childhood.

During the Grand Opening service, Senior Pastor, John Nuzzo, said he wanted the congregation to know this is a “come-as-you-are” church. People can wear whatever they want. He said, “I want this to be like an emergency room; nobody cares about what they look like when they are having an emergency.” Despite this unpretentious policy, for the most part, the crowd was well-dressed, and if the crowd really was coming “as they are,” then they are middle-to-upper class. The irony of the church’s “come as you are” policy, however, is that Nuzzo had just finished describing how the staff had made “tens of thousands” of decisions about every detail of how the church would be remodeled including the tile, carpet, bathrooms, and stage. Every single detail was coordinated and came together through the work of a team of people over the last four years. Apparently, it doesn’t matter what the congregants look like, but it matters what the church itself looks like.

Since my research completed Oasis Church finished its fundraising efforts and purchased the new facility, and is now located in its new home in “the first Christian Church built on Wilshire Boulevard in 1926,” which is an historic landmark.¹⁴³ Given when it was built, it is not surprising that the new Oasis location features some of the more traditional, ornate elements that many evangelical churches are abandoning. They have only recently moved in, and will be interesting to see how the church approaches the interior aesthetic in light of the exterior’s more traditional look.

The 2005 relocation of Lakewood Church to its current location in the former Compaq Center in Houston, Texas was a milestone for American religion and national news for the largest church in America. Lakewood invested \$95 million dollars in renovations before the

¹⁴³ “Oasis History,” Accessed on August 13, 2013, <http://oasisla.org/about/oasis-history/>.

relocation to the 16,000-seat arena.¹⁴⁴ Marketing Director, Jason Madding, described how since their move they have continued to grow so much that it keeps adding additional services to accommodate the throngs of people who attend services each week.

Each of these relocations and renovations is evidence of the church's success, but also, implicitly, their position in God's grace and favor. According to the Prosperity Gospel philosophy, the churches growth is evidence of God's blessings, and by extension, their faithfulness. Each of these churches believes that growth is a result of its spiritual health. Such success serves as a marketing boon for these churches. Their success is evidence that Prosperity Theology is true and God's blessings that the churches' faithfulness brought them blessings.

3.1.5 Demographics

What was noticeably absent from the grand opening celebration at Victory Family Church was the presence of older people and people of color. Victory is located in a township north of Pittsburgh whose population is 94.4% white (1.2% black, 2.4% Asian) with a median age of 38.¹⁴⁵ The area's homogenous makeup is reflected in the church's congregation. Almost all of the church's services and programs are designed for young married couples with families, and the pastors I spoke to said the programs are simply designed to appeal to their members, not to strategically exclude older people. Ultimately, Sunday segregation is not uncommon, and Victory's primarily white demographic makeup is a reflection of how many churches look

¹⁴⁴ Craig Hvalaty, "Eight Years Ago Today: Lakewood Church Moves Into Compaq Center," Accessed August 13, 2013, <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/8-years-ago-today-Lakewood-Church-moves-into-4668263.php>.

¹⁴⁵ Accessed on June 13, 2013, <http://www.cranberrytownship.org/index.aspx?NID=1622>.

throughout the country with many scholars referring to the “Black Church” seen commonly in many traditions, including Prosperity Gospel churches.

Oasis Church prides itself on its multi-cultural congregation. When I spoke with the Marketing Director at Oasis, she was quick to point out that the majority of people at Oasis are non-white and described the church as “welcoming to everyone,” but was quick to qualify that they are not a welcoming and affirming church (which is a phrase often used to connote an acceptance of a homosexual lifestyle within churches). Unlike most neo-Pentecostal churches, Oasis is attracting millennials.¹⁴⁶ This is striking due to the fears of many churches among the religious right that they are unable to attract or keep younger members. Marti believes this is due in part to Oasis’s commitment to charitable work by “going beyond consideration of the self to the consideration of good on behalf of others regardless of personal consequences.”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, he uses Durkheim to describe Oasis as a moral community that “celebrates and encourages ambition while channeling that ambition into disciplined action that is empowered by the sacred community and simultaneously supports the sacred community.”¹⁴⁸ In a tradition that correlates growth with church health, Oasis’s ability to attract millennials deserves greater attention in its distinction from other non-denominational, evangelical, and neo-Pentecostal churches seeking to maintain and grow their membership numbers.

Similarly, Lakewood has a diverse membership with a high population of Latino and black members. Osteen has said in many interviews that he is proud of Lakewood’s efforts to accommodate the needs of every ethnic and racial group. Much of what we know of Lakewood’s congregation is observational and anecdotal as hard numbers are not publicized, but

¹⁴⁶ Marti, *Hollywood Faith*, 6.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 17.

their focus on families and young couples is evident in their ministries, worship, and cultural references.

3.2 WORSHIP

One of the most important ways churches set the tone for the service each week is through the lyrics, pace, and style of the music. This portion of the service is called “worship” within evangelical communities and does not include the announcements or sermon. As the first section of each service, the worship creates the ambiance, establishes theological parameters, and defines the image of the service. As the single longest element of each service, worship is critical to branding and marketing of the church, even though the pastor himself is often either in the audience or absent altogether during this time. The length of worship varies, but for Lakewood, Oasis, and Victory it usually runs 30-45 minutes. The pastors are sometimes in the congregation looking on, or in the case of Osteen, off-stage and away from the eyes of the congregation. Based on the style and volume of the worship in all three churches, this is not your grandma’s tradition. Music at all three churches is loud, emotional, and electric. While there is a mix of slower and faster paced songs, they are bolstered by electric guitars, lights, ten to twenty singers, sometimes a choir, and a large drum kit.

The audience’s enthusiasm varies among and within all three churches with Oasis and Lakewood having numerous audience members actively participating through dance, clapping, hands raised, and swaying. Victory Family Church has the same style of worship being presented, and if you were to only watch their worship via video you would see a high energy, heavily produced, and vibrant worship team leading each week. The first few rows of

congregants continue this trend and are highly engaged in the worship experience with many people lifting their hands and moving to the music. Examining the Victory congregation as a whole, however, shows a more reserved group than the worship band projects. Most people are singing along, but there is not a lot of physical engagement in terms of dancing, raising hands, or swaying to the music. Located in Cranberry Township in the exurbs of Pittsburgh, this very conservative location might be influencing how the audience is responding to the worship leadership. Regardless, the worship team at Victory is attempting to create a vibrant, energetic, worship experience for their church audience.

In the oral histories, each church's pastor expressed a commitment to a high standard of quality from their worship team, and Oasis in particular emphasized a commitment to excellence, in part due to their location in the entertainment capital of the world. The church's singers and musicians are often professional, and as a result, create an incredible worship experience for the audience. The congregants respond in kind to the high caliber experience and are actively involved in singing, dancing, waving hands, and swaying. The worship team includes soloists, featured singers, and a variety of instruments. Oasis prides itself on providing a stellar experience for the audience. The word "experience" comes up a lot in evangelical speak, and refers to a desire on the part of the leaders to have the church service be more than just ritual or tradition. They believe each person in the audience should have an "experience" that inspires them and helps them feel closer to God. The rhetoric relies heavily on feelings rather than thoughts.

Like Oasis, the caliber of singers at Lakewood Church is professional grade, and the worship leader, Israel Houghton, has won several Grammys for his gospel albums. Houghton has been with Lakewood for over a decade and is a staple member of the church's staff. In an

October 2012 interview, Houghton defended Osteen by dismissing concerns by some that Osteen was just a “positive-thinking” motivator.¹⁴⁹ He went on to say that he would “rather offend Christian leaders who think Osteen doesn’t preach enough about sin than the many non-Christians who are attracted to Osteen’s message of God’s love for them.”¹⁵⁰ Clearly, Osteen is on the same page as his worship leader, and together they are creating an incredible independent force. Lakewood’s worship team and leader, Houghton, have received numerous awards and sell CDs of their work to great acclaim. Clearly, the church is creating a positive worship “experience” for the congregants as well as the millions of people watching beyond the church walls via television and the Internet.

The lengthy worship segment is typical for evangelical/non-denominational churches, where worship is a critical component of the service and takes up approximately as much time or more as the sermon. At Lakewood and Oasis, tithes and offerings are collected after/during worship while Victory conducts its collection at the end of the service. The Lakewood money collection is not included in the edited version of the television broadcast, and the worship portion in general is either pared down significantly or omitted altogether. The songs at all three churches are scheduled and designed around the service with faster and slower songs placed within the service where appropriate, and with slower songs playing in the background when pastors speak. Usually the songs begin fast-paced, and get slower as the service progresses. The entire worship portion of the service is scheduled and designed as a means of creating emotional responses and setting the tone of the service for the audience.

¹⁴⁹ “Lakewood Worship Leader Defends Joel Osteen,” Accessed August 24, 2013, <http://www.newsnet5.com/dpp/lifestyle/religion/lakewood-church-worship-leader-defends-joel-osteen>.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

There is some overlap in the songs that are played among the three churches with many of the songs coming from the famed Hillsong Music collection. Hillsong is a music company featuring music written and performed at Hillsong Church, an evangelical, megachurch in Australia that has become one of the largest providers of Christian worship music globally. Hillsong music can be heard across the country at countless churches and there is an annual Hillsong conference where pastors and other members of ministry meet to get ideas for effective worship, hear new music, and compare notes to improve the worship experience at their respective churches.

Among all three churches, much of the musical content focuses on general praise to a good God who wants to bless you and protect you. The lyrics support the churches' general mission and goals. The songs tend to be about praising God, being faithful to him, and having him bless you. In a nutshell, this is the philosophy, to varying degrees, of each of these churches. The worship, then, is an effective way for the churches to reinforce their message and prepare the congregants for the content of the upcoming sermon. In many ways, the worship acts as the “opening act” for the main event: the sermon.

3.3 SERMONS

One of the most important ways churches “market” themselves is through their weekly sermons. The content of sermons helps “brand” the church by emphasizing its core tenets, values, and foci. The pastor’s presentation of his/her religious beliefs encourages the congregation to replicate them. The sermon goes beyond doctrine, however, and also sets the tone and style for the church. Whether the pastor is playful, serious, energetic, or angry has a lot to do with the

branding of the church by contributing to its overall energy. This study analyzes the content of the sermons of the three churches to determine the themes that are emphasized and the tone of the pastors.

I chose an ethnographic approach to my sermon analysis for two reasons. First, the three churches (and churches in general) do not offer transcripts of their services, and the time it would take to transcribe them would be prohibitive. Second, and more importantly, this approach provides a depth of analysis that cannot be gleaned from quantitative research. In contrast to Twitter, sermons are more content rich, nuanced, and emotional, and are therefore best examined through an ethnographic lens.

I attended two months of services at Lakewood and Oasis churches and watched four months worth of sermons through their online videos, some through live streaming and others through videos posted to their websites. Oasis and Victory also post podcast versions of their sermons, which are available on iTunes. I attended Victory Family Church for six months because its proximity to my residence allowed me more time to attend in person. Although convenience allowed me to spend more time on-site at Victory Family Church, in sum, I listened to, watched online, and/or observed six months of services for each of the three churches.

I identified themes presented within the services to determine how the Prosperity Gospel message is marketed within church walls (but is also available to watch online). In contrast to the exclusively online content, the sermons use a tone and themes designed for insiders. The pastors realize their congregants are familiar with the basic Christian message, evangelical worldview, and Pentecostal/charismatic tradition, and therefore speak to them more theologically to reinforce rather than teach the message. Like online, they emphasized practical preaching and downplayed Pentecostal themes. Many acknowledge that large churches, “try to convey the

Christian message in ways that connote that the faith is relevant to contemporary life,” but while church leaders claim their focus is still on Scripture and a strong biblical foundation, my research indicates these elements are not emphasized.¹⁵¹ Even when they would discuss the Holy Spirit, it was done so with a practical approach and the pastors and congregants did not display the gifts of the Holy Spirit during services. Finally, the perceived audience affects the content presented as more popular services like Easter and Christmas Eve included more inspirational content and Osteen’s televised services are more theologically light than the in-house presentations

3.3.1 Philip Wagner’s Sermons

Every time I visited Oasis Church I was greeted with enthusiasm and made to feel welcome by the pastors, staff, and volunteers. Philip Wagner and his wife Holly are engaging and warm, and their approach to ministry is intentionally casual with an emphasis on a practical application of the Bible. In her oral history Holly expressed a desire for the church members to be “entrenched in the Word” by having their followers reading the Bible regularly. “I do not care if it is a family heirloom Bible or a downloaded Bible on their smartphone, I just want them reading the Word.”¹⁵² She also said, however, that she wants the sermons to sound like everyday conversations rather than more traditional sermons where specific catchwords and phrases used frequently among those within the evangelical community. “Sometimes we catch ourselves using words and we have to ask, ‘Is that a word that only Christians use?’ because we do not want to be excluding anyone or just using words that are trendy in the Church.”¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, 16.

¹⁵² Oral history with Holly Wagner, April 24, 2013.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

Holly and Philip both include personal stories in their sermons, and frequently discuss their own struggles and failings. The Wagners' discussions regarding their imperfections helps them achieve their goal of accessibility and applicability. "We want our audience to relate to us. We do not want to be separate from them or have them think we do not make mistakes."¹⁵⁴ In addition to the pastors' practical approach, they have also downplayed the more traditional elements of Pentecostal roots. While Oasis' sermons mention the Holy Spirit regularly, they almost never mention speaking in tongues, and the pastors and congregation do not openly practice glossolalia. During my research period, Philip Wagner preached a sermon series on the Holy Spirit, and explained how the third member of the trinity should be involved in the congregants' lives. Wagner encourages his audience members to engage the Holy Spirit in their lives, but he avoids discussions of speaking in tongues specifically, even during this series. He equates the Holy Spirit with a general concept of having God fill up your life in every area rather than as synonymous with ecstatic spiritual expressions.

Even within the Holy Spirit series, Wagner applied the concept of the Holy Spirit practically. He said the Holy Spirit's presence should encourage each of us to "believe big about your life and about God," and "expect the unimaginable and for God's best in your life."¹⁵⁵ Wagner describes the Azusa Street revivals featuring charismatic expressions at the turn of the twentieth century that occurred in their own city of Los Angeles. He talked about it as a revival where many people came to Christ, but does not emphasize the speaking in tongues specifically. He said the leaders at the time of Azusa Street believed that 100 years later there would be another "outpouring" of the Holy Spirit. Wagner says he wants to be a part of that, and asks God to fill him with his Spirit. He invites the audience members to turn from their sinful ways,

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Philip Wagner sermon, "Acts of the Holy Spirit," May 19, 2013.

accept Jesus into their hearts, and accept the gift of the Holy Spirit. While Wagner acknowledges that Jesus' followers spoke in tongues, Wagner does not say he has this gift nor does he encourage his audience to receive glossolalia. He asks the audience to receive the "gift of the Holy Spirit," but he describes it only as "miraculous" and conflates conversion with receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit without any additional Pentecostal acts necessarily.

Wagner also claims healing is possible through the Holy Spirit. The services I attended did not include healings, but in their oral histories they all said they believed healing was possible through prayer. For all three of the churches, healing tends to be spoken about as something that can happen slowly over time through faithful prayer rather than a spontaneous act. This is a distinct shift from traditional Pentecostalism, which emphasizes miraculous, spontaneous healing. Additionally, Pentecostal churches often include healing as a feature within every service. This is not the case at any of the churches in this study, and healing was only included periodically at Lakewood at a separate service.

Wagner's sermons on the Holy Spirit were based on a Pentecostal foundation, but were framed within the current practical and optimistic approach to Christianity and avoided discussion on the more controversial elements of the tradition. The description of the Holy Spirit sermon series on iTunes says Pastor Wagner preaches about the "power of the Holy Spirit in our lives." Even this description emphasizes the practical application of this spiritual entity. He does not shy away from the idea of the miraculous, but deemphasizes speaking in tongues, and does not explicitly encourage his congregants to be filled with the Holy Spirit in this way.

Notably, the descriptions of the Oasis sermons found in iTunes speak to the approach the church takes with sermons. The descriptions always say the pastor is going to "teach" the sermon or "speak" on a particular topic rather than "preach." The descriptions also frequently

say that the pastor is going to show how to “apply” that week’s topic to the listener’s life. The series of sermons from March 2013 features different speakers teaching the church “practical ways to apply the truth of the Bible to our lives.” Even the Easter sermon on Christ’s resurrection, perhaps the most spiritual or heavenly-based story in the Bible, claims to show how we can “experience resurrection in different areas of our lives.” The Oasis sermon descriptions also use evangelical buzzwords like “purpose” and encourage people to “live out their dreams.” Oasis is framing their sermons as practical, applicable, and approachable. The church describes the content as a means for the listener to improve their life on earth. Their approach is consistent with Prosperity Theology, and demonstrates how the church differs from more traditional Pentecostal preaching.

Among the pastors in this study, the Wagners are the most accessible in terms of preaching style, and they often engage the audience, invite people to speak to them during the sermon, reveal the dynamic of their marriage, and make self-deprecating jokes. While all three churches’ pastors are likable and down-to-earth, the Wagners engage the audience in a much more intimate way than Joel Osteen and John Nuzzo. The approach Nuzzo and Osteen take is one that implies that they are the experts and we can be inspired and learn from their expertise. They both frequently preach by speaking for God, saying things like, “God wants you” to do a certain thing or feel a certain way. They often say, “God wants to bless you,” and make other proclamations about God’s will, intentions, and role in your life. While this approach is different than Oasis, Lakewood and Victory both share Oasis’ commitment to a practical approach to biblical principles.

Wagner’s sermons and Oasis’ ministries frequently revolve around the development and nurturing of personal relationships. Marriage, friendships, and other relationships are discussed

in sermons and in the church's seminars and prayer foci. There are discussions about relationships within almost every sermon and he occasionally even discusses sex. Regardless of the weekly sermon's theme, Wagner applies it to the idea of relationships in our life. While applying biblical principles to our life is not a new idea, Oasis is intentionally emphasizing the improvement of our earthly life and finding ways to use Christian concepts to improve our lives. By focusing on life improvement and deemphasizing sins, "fire-and-brimstone" rhetoric, and spiritual components of the more traditional Pentecostal message, Oasis is able to reach a broader audience.

3.3.2 Joel Osteen's Sermons

Despite, or perhaps because of, its incredible size, every element of the Lakewood Church services is carefully orchestrated. From the moment congregants arrive there are people ready to assist with seating, directions, and questions. Many of the people assisting are volunteers who serve the church in this way. Guests are ushered to their seats where they are surrounded by thousands of other people in an arena designed for sporting events and concerts. There is a specific design and flow from the moment the service begins including the worship portion of the service. The music has particular highs and lows in terms of pace that generally do not deviate week to week. At the beginning of every service, Osteen asks congregants to remain in the audience for the entire service unless the person has a flight or an emergency, so the church can "maintain order in the House of the Lord." This commitment to order is evident in every detail of the service. While the music and the preaching clearly aim to elicit emotion, the direction of the service does not provide any leeway for emotionally inspired improvisation or

perhaps the moving of the Spirit. There are six services on Sunday (two of which are a Spanish language services), and Lakewood's Marketing Director, Jason Madding, says the "main" service does not allow for spontaneity or the inclusion of "acts of the Spirit" that you would normally see in a Pentecostal service.¹⁵⁶ He does not say why, but says one would more likely see these types of expressions at the church's small group meetings. Small groups are common within larger churches to create intimacy among members and regular attenders that is more difficult to accommodate in the regular services.

It is at the "main" Lakewood church service that Madding referred to in which the television broadcast is recorded. An edited version of this service is broadcast each week to over 100 countries and is available for viewing on joelosteen.com.¹⁵⁷ This broadcast is a shorter version than the live service, which can be seen in its full form at lakewoodchurch.com. Madding says the television broadcasts are edited for time, and eliminate the worship, money collection, and prayer portions, but he says, "Joel's sermons are left almost untouched." As a result, the broadcast is almost exclusively just Osteen's sermon without any of the context from the live experience. Additionally, the mini sermons offered each week by Joel's wife Victoria Osteen are not included in the television broadcast. The elements included in the broadcasts are less theological than the parts that are omitted. It is impossible to know whether this is strategic or if, coincidentally, Joel Osteen's sermons tend to be the least theological element of services. When asked about the more "uplifting" approach Osteen takes, Madding says, "That's just Joel," implying the approach is not strategic, but simply Osteen's personal sermon style.

Regardless of intention, the television broadcasts are more agreeable to the general viewing public than the in-house events. The television content is focused primarily on

¹⁵⁶ Oral History via phone with Jason Madding, July 2, 2013.

¹⁵⁷ Accessed February 28, 2014, <http://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/About.aspx>

anecdotes and inspirational advice. Osteen never asks viewers for money, and Madding says this is by design in an attempt to avoid the negative connotations that can come with the word “televangelist” and “Prosperity Gospel.” In his interview with “60 Minutes,” Osteen says, “We did not want anything to distract people while they were watching to turn off the message because we know how people are skeptical of TV ministers....”¹⁵⁸

While editing is a necessary component of broadcast time constraints, excluding Victoria Osteen’s sermons, worship, and some of the prayers deemphasizes the more traditional Christian elements and emphasizes the inspirational themes. Including only Osteen’s sermon in the television broadcast with its broader message of hope and motivation, while including more traditional elements in the live event is consistent with my overall findings that the makeup of the audience influences the content presented. The presentation is more traditional if the pastor believes the audience is made up of insiders (e.g., members, Christians) while the content is less theological when the audience is thought to include more seekers or non-Christians.

Among the portions edited from the television broadcast are Victoria Osteen’s mini-sermons, much of the worship, and an early prayer from Joel Osteen. Victoria’s sermons include more biblical references, specific Scriptures, and discussion about the Holy Spirit and other traditional Pentecostal themes than Joel’s sermons. Evangelists’ wives such as Tammy Faye Bakker and Gloria Copeland have often been included in the ministry, but Victoria’s weekly sermons represent an evangelical move towards a “couples” approach to preaching. This is seen most notably at Oasis where Holly Wagner is almost equally present at the pulpit as her husband throughout the year. The shift speaks to the practical preaching approach as the couples often speak to marital and familial issues. It is unclear whether the motivation to omit Victoria’s

¹⁵⁸ “60 Minutes” interview with Joel Osteen, Accessed February 27, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGisLq9DA6U>

sermon from the broadcasts as purely practical or whether there was a specific marketing decision to omit her portion based upon content.

Victoria's sermons are surprisingly animated given her quieter demeanor during appearances in television interviews with Joel. During these public appearances she behaves like a "traditional" wife of a public figure who looks beautiful, smiles a lot, and doesn't say much. In front of her home church audience, however, Victoria is boisterous, funny, and passionate. She frequently quotes scripture and is much more likely to mention the Holy Spirit and "other-worldly" concepts than her husband is. Her mini-sermons are among the more emotional elements of their weekly service and frequently illicit proclamations of "amen" and clapping from the audience. She is much more likely to mention salvation, the Holy Spirit, and quote Scripture than Joel. The content of her sermons makes them more palatable to an audience of insiders, and less fitting for an international television audience made up largely of casual onlookers, non-Christians, and what evangelicals refer to as, "seekers."¹⁵⁹

Osteen's easy rhetorical style, stage presence, and command of the material are striking. He memorizes his 30-minute sermons, rarely checks his notes, and maintains a steady cadence. Part of his command of the material undoubtedly stems from his repetitive phrasing and consistent themes from week-to-week. Jason Madding says Osteen is intentionally "consistent" with his message. This consistency is so strong, however, that it can be difficult to differentiate among the sermons. The themes present in most sermons include the concept that God is a good God, you can have "victory" in your life, God wants to bless you, and your best days are ahead

¹⁵⁹ Evangelicals often refer to people looking for a new church or religion as "seekers," They may or may not have been exposed to Christianity or religion previously. They speak of seekers as though they are shopping for a church or religion and churches attempt to market to them by making the church experience less intimidating.

of you. While he changes anecdotes, details, and biblical references, his message does not change. No matter what biblical context he chooses for his sermon, the take-away points are the same. Barbara Ehrenreich notes the similarity between Osteen's repetitive content to that of Norman Vincent Peale. "'The chapters of the books could easily be transposed from the beginning to the middle...The paragraphs could be shuffled and rearranged in any order.'"¹⁶⁰ This is also true in Osteen's interviews. He says that his goal is to "lift people up," and have them leave the church each week believing that they can live a blessed and abundant life. Such a positive message is clearly striking a chord, as his congregation consistently fills up the former Compaq Center. If people notice the repetition in his message, they do not seem to mind. His church is the largest in the country, the television audience is ever growing, and his books continue to be on the *New York Times* Best Seller list.

Osteen oozes charisma, optimism, and enthusiasm. He is often criticized for being wishy-washy and lacking theological guts. He believes the inspirational approach he takes toward Christianity is the best way to show God's love and reach people, and it is clearly hitting a nerve. Osteen has the audience hold up their Bibles before each sermon and chant in unison that, "This is my Bible; I am what it says I am, I have what it says I have, and I can do what it says I can do...." Despite this proclamation, his sermons often lack a specific theological foundation including mostly general references and brief mentions of the biblical context. Marketing Director Jason Madding says that Osteen has to be "very careful" in the words he chooses for his sermons because of how many eyes are upon him. Madding claims Osteen deliberately avoids themes and words that are controversial. Madding said he once attended a Lakewood service in which the sermon was about sin, but Osteen never actually uttered the word

¹⁶⁰ Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided*, 126.

sin. Madding spoke of this as a way of lauding Osteen's ability to preach more palatably about difficult topics. Madding says Joel has a special gift for telling people the truth about how to live without passing judgment or making them feel like they're being "bashed over the head with it." By avoiding the word "sin" in the sermon, Osteen can maintain a connection with his audience that he believes makes them feel validated instead of judged or criticized. Osteen confirms this approach when discussing his style in interviews. During my time at Lakewood and listening to the sermons online, he did not discuss sin, hell, judgment, or punishment. He instead looked only at the more optimistic elements of Christianity.

Not only does Osteen avoid certain terminology that might be considered judgmental, he sometimes presents sermons that lack a strong theological foundation. In his April 21, 2013 sermon, Osteen urged people to "take control of their happiness." Saying, "It is good to be kind, loving, generous, but you are not responsible for other people's happiness. You are responsible for keeping yourself happy."¹⁶¹ While Osteen might see more traditional Christian virtues as positive, he claims we must put our own happiness above all else. Many would argue this is the basis for Osteen's entire philosophy, yet it has little to do with traditional Christianity. In fact, many would find the idea of self-gratification above all else to be antithetical to the message of Jesus. Osteen did not provide a biblical reference for this principle, but the audience seemed impressed offering frequent bouts of clapping and verbal affirmations throughout his sermon.

Osteen's repetitive message is also present in his best-selling books. This is, in part, because much of his book content is recycled sermon material. The overlap among his sermons, books, and interviews creates a sense that Osteen is reading from a script from which he does not deviate. His careful presentation keeps him largely out of the snares of saying something he

¹⁶¹ Accessed on July 25, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snyurE-zVuY>.

might regret or get him into trouble. He is strident in his decision to remain focused on very specific talking points and even when pushed in interviews to grapple with gay rights or other hot-button issues, he expertly dodges the controversial territory. When pushed, Osteen claims he is not avoiding questions, but rather says he is humble enough to say he doesn't have all the answers.¹⁶² He claims that the themes that he focuses on are those that he believes are the true essence of the Bible, Jesus' life, and Christianity in general. Jason Madding describes Osteen's foci as simply him following his gifts and presenting the Bible in a way that he is comfortable with.

Known as the "smiling preacher," Osteen possesses a gift for connecting with people while still maintaining a squeaky clean image. Unlike the Wagners, Osteen does not rely on sharing familial struggles or personal temptations or weaknesses within his sermons. When he shares personal stories, they are always humorous or light-hearted anecdotes or testimony of how faith brought his blessings. Frequently in interviews Osteen is referred to as having a "perfect" public image and his stage presence reinforces this. He is always perfectly coifed and, while he tells anecdotal stories to lighten the mood, he avoids stories of personal struggles. Ironically, part of his perfect image comes from a stubborn humility. He refuses to acknowledge any hand in his own success and when asked to explain the church's size, his book sales, or even his youthful appearance, he often begins his answer with, "You know, I do not know...." while hanging his head in embarrassment. Osteen's image is rooted in his message of positivity and less so on his personal life or his own Christian journey. He is focused on his message, and does not deviate from it.

¹⁶² Piers Morgan Interview, Airdate January 26, 2011, Accessed on July 25, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snyurE-zVuY>.

3.3.3 John Nuzzo's Sermons

Victory Family Church's website includes a chart of sermon topics and a number beside each topic that shows how many times that topic has been covered there. The list includes 35 topics that have been the subject of one or more sermons. The themes include some Prosperity buzzwords like "purpose," and also many practical topics, "how to live," "relationships," "children," and "finances." The list does not include "giving," "missions," "salvation" (although "grace" and "redemption" are listed), or "life after death." The topics seem somewhat arbitrary, but represent the main concepts covered in sermons at Victory. Rather than focusing on spirituality, the list is skewed toward practical content.

The sermon topic list includes the term "Holy Spirit" and has this as the sermon topic six times, however, the topic, "being led by the Spirit," was preached 41 times. "Being led by the spirit," is a way that Pentecostals might describe the way they make decisions through prayer. This ratio of coverage between the two topics indicates that even when traditional Pentecostal themes are being covered, they are done so with a more practical approach. Like Oasis Church, during my research period, Victory included sermons on traditional Pentecostal themes like the Holy Spirit. Even during this series, titled, "The Other Baptism," Nuzzo acknowledged how "baptism in the Holy Spirit," (i.e., speaking in tongues) can be seen by many as a strange, freakish, or even sinister concept. The discussions on the topic often acknowledge how most people find the practice odd at best.

During "The Other Baptism" sermon series, Nuzzo talked about how modern evangelicals often say that glossolalia is for the "undereducated" and unsophisticated people.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ John Nuzzo, sermon "The Other Baptism Part 2," February 3, 2013.

He scoffed at this notion and assured them that baptism in the Holy Spirit is for all of God's followers. He started singing a popular Christian children's song saying, "It is in the B-I-B-L-E," and then he adlibbed a verse making fun of people who claim to believe in the Bible, but make exceptions for "speaking in tongues because it makes [them] nervous."¹⁶⁴ He called these people "cafeteria Christians," because they pick out only the verses or concepts they are comfortable with.¹⁶⁵ For many years, Pentecostals believed when they spoke in tongues that it was meant to be an existing foreign dialect, but most now say it is a "prayer language," rather than an actual language spoke on Earth.¹⁶⁶ During this sermon, however, Nuzzo told stories of people he knows who spoke in tongues or observed someone speaking in tongues, when the tongues was an actual earthly language. He did not, however, claim that he speaks in tongues and indeed none of the pastors or congregants displayed the gift during the services that I attended.

A different pastor at the church preached a sermon during my research period called "How to Be Charismatic Without Being Crazy," which is clearly alluding to the perception that many people have that Pentecostals are weird or "crazy." The inclusion of these sermons indicates two things: Victory is committed to their charismatic roots and is also keenly aware of the negative connotations this tradition has in the public eye. Their sermons indicate a desire to remain a part of the Pentecostal tradition, but demonstrate how people can do so without appearing odd.

Despite the inclusion of the charismatic-themed sermons, Nuzzo primarily focused on applying biblical stories and characters to modern concerns. In a six-week sermon series called, "Extraordinarily Normal," Nuzzo discussed biblical characters who he said were just normal

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Miller, et al., *Spirit and Power*, 6.

people who did extraordinary things. One of the weeks featured Mary, the mother of Jesus. Nuzzo often includes stories of growing up in his Italian home, and frequently jokes about his upbringing. His background inspired him to include a parody video of “Italian Mary,” where Nuzzo dressed up as an older Italian woman and did a comical take on Jesus having a “normal” mom. Nuzzo wore a cheap wig, grandma-style “muumuu,” stockings rolled down so you could see them at his knees, and bright pink lipstick. The sketch was humorous, but Nuzzo tweeted his concern about the content saying he would not post it outside of the sermon because it could be considered offensive if it was taken out of context. Regardless of whether this video is offensive to some, it shows how the sermons are designed to appeal to modern sensibilities and be entertaining. Nuzzo’s acknowledgement that his irreverent take on Mary could be offensive to some demonstrates his awareness of branding, presentation, and the importance of audience response. Even though Nuzzo was aware of the provocative nature of the sketch, he decided the benefits of being entertaining and comical were worth any potential risk. Nuzzo’s acknowledgement that the “Italian Mary” video could be offensive to some is evidence that the audience’s reception is important to him.

Nuzzo often preaches on Prosperity Theology and how to practice and apply it to one’s life. Within this theme, Nuzzo presented a sermon series called, “The Blessed Life,” in which he described how his audience could live a prosperous and victorious life. In this series, Nuzzo describes his beliefs about money, blessings, and poverty. During this series he said poverty is a curse. He claimed God wants to bless all of his children, and it is up to you, as God’s follower, to ensure you receive the blessings. Essentially, Nuzzo is saying if you are poor it is not because of God, but because you did not give God what he wants/deserves. Nuzzo said Victory is a

“Prosperity” church because he is not here, “to preach you into a curse.”¹⁶⁷ He supplied several verses during his sermon that described the blessings and wealth that will befall those who follow God. In addition to his sermon, he showed videos of church members who tithed even when they did not have much money or when they had lost their jobs, and a financial windfall or professional success came their way. These testimonies help provide legitimacy to his religious philosophy.

This comedic approach to their theology extends also to the presentation of their worldview. When Chick-Fil-A’s President, Dan Cathy, affirmed the company’s anti-gay stance in the name of biblical family values, Victory presented a video of comedian Tim Hawkins singing a song about his love for the restaurant to the tune of the Beatles’ “Yesterday.”¹⁶⁸ The audience laughed uproariously and the pastor presenting it pointed out how “crazy” it is that a company would be punished for being “pro-family.”¹⁶⁹ He noted television shows like “The New Normal” and “Modern Family” that have “clear messages” that go against biblical values. The pastor (who is not identified in the audio clip) said the church was not “anti-anybody,” but wanted to remind everyone it was a Presidential election year and the congregation needed to learn how to navigate their faith within the modern culture.

A focus on the “traditional” family has been a strong mobilizing and unifying force among American evangelicals, and helps provide a shared-identity among conservative Christians. The pro-family/anti-gay-rights posturing is a powerful element within the evangelical worldview. Along with their anti-abortion position, this platform provides them with a common cultural worldview that has facilitated great political influence over the past thirty

¹⁶⁷ John Nuzzo, “The Blessed Life sermon series, Part 1, February 10, 2013.

¹⁶⁸ Accessed February 28, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5EztTZYbyU>

¹⁶⁹ Victory Family Church service, August 5, 2012.

years, to varying degrees. Their tax-exempt status means they must be careful to avoid candidate or party endorsement, but by focusing on “moral” issues or “values,” Victory is able to make their views clear without violating the law.

While these videos are common opening act to the sermons, they are not the headliner. The sermons present more serious content and are rooted, at least to some degree, in Scripture. Prosperity Theology plays prominently in Nuzzo’s sermons. He makes no apologies for his belief in it, and treats the subject matter as biblically based. He sees the Prosperity Gospel as simply “The Gospel” in that all Christians should believe that their “Father” wants to bless them.

His preaching style, while conversational, is bold and unapologetic. The topics focus on you, the believer, and how God wants to work in your life. He does not preach about giving (to charity, for example) aside from encouraging the audience to tithe and donate to the church. In a sermon called, “Receiving by Faith,” Nuzzo made it clear that if someone does not receive God’s blessings they did not have enough faith. He claimed when people see someone receive something bad, even if you think they have been faithful, you just do not know.¹⁷⁰ In other words, God always follows through on his side, so if blessings aren’t coming it is because of a failing on the believer’s side. “You have got to go after what belongs to you in faith,” he tells his audience. “We must have a posture of aggression,” regarding prayer, according to Nuzzo. He says despite this, many believers just “leave it God’s hands,” but it is up to you to get what you want by walking in faith.¹⁷¹

This core Prosperity Gospel understanding of God’s blessings in return for faithfulness is often criticized for the implicit message that if one is poor, sick, or in despair it is because you have not maintained enough faith. This component of the Prosperity Gospel is often downplayed

¹⁷⁰ John Nuzzo, “Receiving by Faith,” sermon December 12, 2012.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

or avoided completely during sermons. Naturally, believing the less fortunate have failed God is considered by some to be provocative theology. At Lakewood and Oasis, this element of the Prosperity Gospel is not discussed. Even though both churches feature video testimonies of people who have received blessings through faith, they do not explicitly say why it is that other people fell ill or lost their jobs. Victory is the only one of the three churches that examines why it is that some people do not receive God's blessings.

The difference among the churches with regards to how or if they present this aspect of the tradition is a reflection of the spectrum in the presentation of the Prosperity Gospel. Some Prosperity Churches are unapologetic and explicit in their commitment to the tradition, while others accept its tenets, but are more vague or implicit in its application and presentation. The range of this presentation is also part of the reason why churches like Oasis distance themselves from the theology. It aims to promote the giving and uplifting side of the message and avoid the concepts that point fingers at "sinners" and condemn those who are sick or poor.

While Osteen, Nuzzo, and Wagner have different approaches to Scripture and rhetorical styles, they are all committed to providing practical, everyday advice on how the congregants can live their best lives on earth. They vary in their use of biblical references and more traditional Pentecostal themes, but for each of them, the bottom line is for people to leave feeling inspired, uplifted, and ready to live a victorious life. The pastors use the sermons as a way of outlining their beliefs, but also to "brand" the church within certain parameters. Sermons are perhaps the most important component of in-house marketing, and for each of these churches the senior pastor drives the direction of the marketing through sermons. Each week all three of these men make statements that place their respective church within theological boundaries, and guide the congregants in a particular direction. Every person attending can choose to come back or

not, and many will make this choice based upon whether they are on the same theological page as the pastor. While causation is difficult to determine, pastors are aware of who is in their audience and their sermons must meet the needs of the audience in order for their success to continue.

3.4 PASTORS

In addition to the importance of the message, the messengers (i.e., pastors) are a critical part of the marketing of the church. Because of the evangelical embrace of television to broadcast its message, pastors have gained national fame as a common presence in people's living rooms. In the 1980's, Prosperity-focused televangelists gained attention and fortune through the broadcasts of services and Christian talk/variety shows. Televangelists such as Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart became well known for their flamboyant preaching style, flashy suits, and lavish spending. Their outward (and very public) success was evidence of God's favor on their life and of the theology's authenticity. After the financial and sexual scandals of various televangelists, the ostentation and flamboyance of Prosperity leaders was largely replaced with a simpler and more accessible approach. These famed pastors became associated with the movement and, in many ways, became the face of the Prosperity movement in America. As ambassadors of Prosperity Theology, these pastors were presenting themselves within the framework of the Prosperity Gospel milieu and evangelical "brand," and when their religious empires became embroiled in financial and sexual scandals, the country took notice. Their image as bold Christian leaders was now tarnished as they were seen as crooks and phonies who used religion to steal money from faithful followers.

The Prosperity Gospel took a hit as these audacious televangelists became synonymous with the movement. While many scholars predicted the end of Prosperity Theology as a result of the public scandals, what happened was a reinvention of the Prosperity Gospel. In the quiet after the scandals from the early to late nineties, evangelical churches began employing business and marketing techniques to brand themselves and appeal to a wider market. And it worked. Non-denominational churches began to grow across the country as people became disillusioned with organizational limitations and negative connotations associated with formal affiliations.¹⁷² Simultaneously, John Osteen fell ill and passed away, leaving his large Charismatic church to be led by his son, Joel. What came next was one of the most expansive church growths in American history.¹⁷³

3.4.1 Joel Osteen

The story of Joel Osteen's ascension to leading the largest church in United States history is oft told. Before he took the reins of his father's church, Joel's presence in the Christian community was almost non-existent. Preferring the behind-the-scenes television production aspect of Lakewood Church, Joel avoided the stage that his father occupied. John Osteen was a well-known Houston preacher, from 1959 until his death in 1999. He televised his services and had a gift for public speaking. From small beginnings, John grew his church to 6,000 members by the time of his death.¹⁷⁴ John attended seminary and earned a Doctorate of Divinity from Oral

¹⁷² Stephen Ellingson, *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 7.

¹⁷³ Taylor, *After God*, 294.

¹⁷⁴ Accessed, August 22, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=2086670>

Roberts University. In contrast to his father's clear passion for the ministry, Joel was a shy young man with no desire to follow in his father's steps and no college degree. Upon his father's death, however, Joel claims he felt God call him to take over.

When Joel replaced his deceased father, he did so without attempting to replicate his father's more traditional style. Despite John's great success, Joel says he has a different personality than his father and decided he wanted to use his gift to "motivate people...to come up higher."¹⁷⁵ Since taking over Lakewood Church, it has consistently grown to its size now of approximately 45,000 regular attenders. Despite maintaining his father's Pentecostal foundation, Joel's services do not include open displays of traditional Pentecostalism such as speaking in tongues or being "slain in the Spirit." Whether this is due to Joel's personal preference or a reflection of the shift among Pentecostals more generally towards "practical" preaching, Lakewood's decision to exclude more traditional Pentecostal elements is in line with the national trend. Osteen includes a call to salvation at the end of each service, but the content of his sermons is not focused on conversion to Christianity, salvation through Jesus, or the Holy Spirit.

Osteen's rhetorical style is accessible, casual, and upbeat. He rarely shows emotion outside of his cheerful disposition, and has certain rhetorical phrases he includes in every service, which give his sermons consistency. Each sermon looks and sounds like the others and it is difficult to differentiate among them. He counts this as one of the most important elements of his marketing approach. Osteen claims consistency is imperative to his success, as he believes his audience wants to hear his message of "hope, joy, and inspiration," no matter how they access his material.¹⁷⁶ The format of the service and the content of the sermon do not vary. Even the

¹⁷⁵ Accessed December 19, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGisLq9DA6U>

¹⁷⁶ Accessed December 19, 2013, <http://ministrytodaymag.com/index.php/features/20065-gospel-communicator>.

speed of his speaking has a consistent cadence both within each sermon and from week to week. The weekly services are organized in such way that even the length of time spent in worship and the sermon remain consistent. The sermons, of course, are always technically somewhat different from each other, but include the same themes over and over. Occasionally, he will forget where he is in his sermon and he will make a joke about it and quickly reference his notes to get back on track, but there is never adlibbing or segments left to a looser directive. Osteen claims this consistency is how he works best and provides a sense of security for the audience.¹⁷⁷

The growth of Lakewood under Joel Osteen's leadership has been remarkable, and as the pastor of the largest church in America, he is often invited to meet with politicians and celebrities. He has appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and has since become a guest on various shows on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), including Super Soul Sunday on "Oprah's Lifeclass" where Osteen sat with Winfrey in what she calls, "The World's Biggest Classroom" and taught a seminar on "dreaming big."¹⁷⁸ Oprah refers to Osteen's church services as "Sunday celebrations," and while God is frequently mentioned during the "Oprah's Lifeclass," broadcast, he is spoken of as a general force that can inspire and propel you to do great things with your life. A video preceding one of his sermons on YouTube has a narrator saying that, "God will not allow a situation to come without giving us the grace to make it through victoriously."¹⁷⁹ One of Osteen's main lessons is that every life has trials, but your "best days are in your future," and God has given you the ability to overcome.¹⁸⁰ This promise is a core element to Osteen's philosophy, but perhaps the most controversial. Even when asked how

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Super Soul Sundays on OWN is a block of programming on Sundays dedicated to spiritual, motivational, and inspirational content; "Oprah's Lifeclass." Originally aired April 7, 2013.

¹⁷⁹ Accessed July 26, 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d25FwvmpH2E>.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

he can be sure that good things are inevitably ahead for the faithful, Osteen claims it is not “magic,” but what we say or put out verbally into the universe comes back to us.¹⁸¹

This power of positive thinking is not new development in American thought. The New Thought Movement and its influence on Christian thinkers in the early twentieth century evolved into what is now a mainstream Christian movement. What has emerged over time, however, is a minimization of the less broadly appealing components including spontaneous healing in favor a focus on the “positive confession” aspects, wherein believers proclaim what they desire and believe their faithfulness will result in those blessings coming to pass. This part of the Prosperity Gospel is why many people pejoratively call it the “name-it-and-claim-it” gospel. In comparing it to more traditional Pentecostalism, Prosperity Gospel largely replaces the spiritual focus with an earthly one.

Preaching the more earthly elements of the Prosperity message and making it applicable to everyday life is a clear change from the more spiritual-themed sermons of previous Prosperity preachers. Despite Joel Osteen’s decision to still wear a suit and tie (which seems to be more common among pastors in the South), his preaching is far removed from the emotionally charged, damnation-focused style that was common among pre-scandal Prosperity preachers. Osteen frequently jokes about how people comment on his seemingly permanent grin. He opens every single sermon with a light-hearted anecdote (always preceded with the sentence, “I like to start with something funny.”). Whether Osteen is conducting a sermon, a television interview, or mingling after church with visitors, his disposition remains unchanged. His range of emotion is so stable that it was remarkable when during one sermon he began to weep. He pulled himself together and apologized, and said he cries when he feels the anointing of the Lord. This was one

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

of the only moments where Osteen's approach resembled that of his predecessors. He also wept during his "60 Minutes" interview when he was describing how blessed he feels when people say he has touched their lives. He then said, "I told you I was a crybaby."¹⁸² In general, however, Osteen is known for his positive perspective and optimistic attitude, which he aims to impart on his audience. He sees positivity as a critical component to his Christian faith.

Despite his likeable personality and positive outlook, one doesn't become the pastor of the largest church in the country without a few detractors. Osteen's critics point out his many public interviews as evidence that he is a theological lightweight. During one interview on national television show, "Larry King Live," Osteen seemed to dodge the question of whether people besides Christians would be able to go to heaven. After much criticism, Osteen released an apology on his website (that is no longer available), which said:

Dear Friend, Many of you have called, written or e-mailed regarding my recent appearance on Larry King Live. I appreciate your comments and value your words of correction and encouragement. It was never my desire or intention to leave any doubt as to what I believe and Whom I serve. I believe with all my heart that it is only through Christ that we have hope in eternal life. I regret and sincerely apologize that I was unclear on the very thing in which I have dedicated my life. Jesus declared in John 14; *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.* I believe that Jesus Christ alone is the only way to salvation. However, it wasn't until I had the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview that I realize I had not clearly stated that having a personal relationship with Jesus is the only way to heaven. It is about the individual's choice to follow Him. God has given me a platform to present the Gospel to a very diverse audience. In my desire not to alienate the people that Jesus came to save, I did not clearly communicate the convictions that I hold so precious. I will use this as a learning experience and believe that God will ultimately use it for my good and His glory. I am comforted by the fact that He sees my heart and knows my intentions. I am so thankful that I have friends, like you, who are willing to share their concerns with me. Thank you again to those who have written. I hope that you accept my deepest apology and see it in your heart to extend to me grace and forgiveness. As always, I covet your prayers and

¹⁸² Accessed December 19, 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGisLq9DA6U>.

I am believing for God's best in your life, Joel Osteen, Pastor, Lakewood Church¹⁸³

Osteen's letter demonstrates his concern for his audience's response, and while in the interview he had a "desire not to alienate the people that Jesus came to save," in the end, he offended many in the traditions' core audience. The Larry King interview and subsequent apology help demonstrate how aware Osteen is of his audience, and the effort that he makes to appeal broadly. Often, this approach works for Osteen who tends to stay on point with his "uplifting message," but occasionally in interviews he is pressured to take a strong stance on a controversial issue (e.g., gay marriage). It is within these settings that Osteen is forced to answer questions that will inevitably offend some people. His letter of apology speaks to the pressure he is under in these interviews to satisfy a wide range of people and the compromise he made when he was attempting to avoid alienating the television audience.

3.4.2 John Nuzzo

John Nuzzo founded Victory Family Church 18 years ago, and he remains the senior pastor today. According to the church's website, his wife Michelle also has the title of Senior Pastor, but she rarely preaches and tends to take on a more traditional pastor's wife role.¹⁸⁴ Nuzzo says he started his church with a commitment to Prosperity Theology and a vision for the "next generation."¹⁸⁵ His commitment includes a focus on healing, financial success, and living a "life

¹⁸³ While this is not available on Joel Osteen's website any more, it has been saved on another website, accessed August 1, 2013, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/religion/1434686/posts>.

¹⁸⁴ This decision to give the pastor's wife a title (and presumably add her to the payroll) is a newer trend within many evangelical churches, and has been implemented in each of the three churches in my study.

¹⁸⁵ Accessed September 9, 2013, <http://lifeatvictory.com/whoweare/>

of victory.” The church’s name is a direct reference to this passion. He talks about the healing of his son with autism as evidence of God’s promise to heal his followers. He believes in “walking by faith,” but says, “You have to be careful that what you call a walk of faith doesn’t become a burden to you,” but should be a burden that Jesus bears for you. Nuzzo preaches the tenets of the Prosperity Gospel frequently at his church. He also preaches about more traditional Pentecostal themes like the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He says he runs the church based upon how God leads him, and even though there are a team of staff members and pastors, Nuzzo is the final authority when it comes to the direction of the church and all marketing decisions.¹⁸⁶ In his bio on the website, Nuzzo says his favorite book is *21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* by John Maxwell.¹⁸⁷ He is clearly passionate about his role as leader and ways to more effectively and efficiently run his church.

Nuzzo uses his Italian heritage and an affinity for Pittsburgh sports to connect with his congregation, and he appears at ease in front of his congregation each week. He often refers to his personal life including his wife, kids, and childhood as a means to relate to his audience. Like so many evangelical pastors, Nuzzo has embraced a casual style insofar as he preaches in jeans and un-tucked shirts regularly and he wears Steelers football jerseys on football game days. He says he wants to be “approachable,” and for his sermons to be “practical” and applicable to the daily life of his congregation.¹⁸⁸

Nuzzo’s associate pastor, John Spencer, acknowledges the shift towards casual church services, worship, and atmosphere, but claims it is not a substantive shift, merely stylistic.¹⁸⁹ The decision of many evangelical churches to more modern look, less formal attire, and pre-

¹⁸⁶ Oral History with John Spencer, November 9, 2012.

¹⁸⁷ Accessed on August 20, 2013, <http://lifeatvictory.com/leadership/>

¹⁸⁸ Oral History with John Spencer, November 9, 2012.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

produced video presentations during the services is a reflection of the overall “business casual” approach the churches have embraced more generally.¹⁹⁰ The pastors claim it is not indicative of a watered-down theology or a shift in message. Spencer was adamant that the message is non-negotiable and no matter what superficial elements of the message may have been modernized or become casual, the sermons still contain the same message as when the church was founded.¹⁹¹

3.4.3 Philip Wagner

Like John Nuzzo, Oasis Church pastor Philip Wagner acts nothing like the previous generation of Prosperity pastors, and he looks and dresses much younger than his sixty years might predict. He began his church in 1984 inside the Beverly Hills home of an unnamed Oscar-winner with only ten people. The church has always prided itself as multicultural and maintains this demographic makeup today. The congregation grew slowly but consistently, and they now have 3,000 people who attend regularly and are housed currently in the Oasis Theatre on Wilshire Boulevard. From the beginning, Phillip’s wife, Holly, was involved in the church’s ministries, and still frequently presents sermons. She said that it wasn’t a strategic decision for her to be one of the pastors; referencing, perhaps, many churches in recent years that have made pastors’ wives a more visible part of the official ministry. Phillip is passionate about foreign missions and includes video presentations and speakers who discuss the need for clean water in Africa and other international needs. His focus with regards to prosperity is in its potential for allowing the recipient to give generously. He and Holly believe faithful giving naturally results in God’s blessing, but personal financial gain should not be the incentive to give.

¹⁹⁰ Bowler, *Blessed*, 103.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

In addition to his work as senior pastor, Philip Wagner founded a clean water organization called Generosity Water, which offers clean water solutions to the global water crisis. The organization has built over 400 wells in 18 different countries. It has brought “clean water and hope to 250,000 people.”¹⁹² His blog discusses his commitment to “social justice,” which is typically associated with equality and human rights, and is not commonly supported in more conservative evangelical churches. Wagner’s commitment to service and charitable giving was documented in *Hollywood Faith*. Wagner’s commitment to social justice places him on the more liberal side of the Prosperity Theology spectrum.

Wagner also has a blog that he promotes on his Twitter page, where he writes about more personal things that are on his mind regarding ministry, current events, and family life than would be found on the church website. In one post called, “What’s the Problem with Joel Osteen?” Wagner addressed his decision to promote and attend Joel Osteen’s Los Angeles tour event. Wagner can even be seen in a promotional video for the event.¹⁹³ The blog was a lengthy discussion on the criticisms he received from people when they found out Wagner would be supporting Osteen’s LA visit. In the promotional video and in the blog post, Wagner said he supports Osteen because he is bringing the Gospel to thousands of people and the blog went on to say that Osteen is a “genuine” and “loving” man who wants to bring people to Christ.¹⁹⁴ Wagner said he is disappointed with Christian leaders who question Osteen’s authenticity and when people criticize Osteen for preaching that “feel-good gospel,” Wagner asks rhetorically if we’re supposed to be preaching the “negative gospel.”¹⁹⁵ Most of Wagner’s blog posts are for

¹⁹² Accessed August 22, 2013, <http://www.philipwagner.com/about/>

¹⁹³ Accessed March 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfmPfAL7-Vc>

¹⁹⁴ Philip Wagner’s Blog, Accessed August 22, 2013, <http://www.philipwagner.com/article/whats-the-problem-with-joel-osteen/>

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

practical application of the Bible. He talks about a range of topics including relationships, dating, marriage, and even whether tattoos are acceptable biblically. Additionally, there are many videos of Wagner interviewing people about their testimonies of salvation and redemption. The blog provides Wagner with a way to connect with his audience in a more personal way than from the pulpit. Philip and Holly Wagner both claim to be committed to remaining on the same level as their audience and creating an environment of connectedness. Unlike Prosperity preachers of the past who exhibit a more ostentatious and bold demeanor on stage, the Wagners and many others now project a much more down-to-earth style.

All three pastors have different foci, styles, and histories, but they are united in the belief that God wants all of his followers to be prosperous on earth. Osteen, Nuzzo, and Wagner have all arrived at their station in life through different means. They share their stories in different ways, but each has embraced the idea that blessings are not reserved for the afterlife, but will be manifest in this life for those who follow God and give faithfully to his Kingdom. Each pastor has made a conscious decision to approach Scripture and Christianity through a practical lens. They aim to make their congregants feel welcome, comfortable, and happy, and do not focus on judgment, sin, or condemnation. Their sermons take what they consider to be Christian principles and make them attractive to a wide audience.

3.5 CHURCH EVENTS

As members of the community, churches will often get involved in local happenings, hold fundraisers, and even host their own public event on church property. These events can take many shapes such as holiday, fundraiser, or leisure, but ultimately serve as a marketing tool. The

events get the church's name in the local news, attract newcomers, and raise money. They are a way for the church to brand themselves through the style, tone, and context of the event.

Victory Christian Church hosts an annual Easter event called Eggstravaganza that is open to the public and is the church's most popular event of the year. This event takes months of preparation, hundreds of volunteers, and is free of charge, so costs the church a lot of money. When I rode up the winding road to the building, which was still under renovation, the number of cars and volunteers directing the traffic was remarkable. Outside the church were three police cars with flashing lights directing traffic. Entering the building I was greeted by a middle-aged man who welcomed my one-year-old son and me and told us to, "Have fun!" Inside the building were hundreds of people and dozens of areas with corresponding signs and decorations. The event was for Easter, but the tone was decidedly non-religious. There was a temporary tattoo station, a Disney Princess area, animal balloons, and an outdoor area with an inflatable jumping pen. The main event at the Eggstravaganza is the egg hunt, which is divided by age group and involves hundreds of volunteers helping kids find candy and Easter eggs on the lawn area. There was not one mention of Jesus, the resurrection, or the Easter story in general in the areas that I visited.

Nuzzo tweeted and mentioned in the weekly service that Eggstravaganza was a huge success with thousands of people in attendance and hundreds of people coming to Jesus, but during my time at the event it seemed wholly unholy. Amidst the throngs of people, performances, and costumed superheroes, I did not see any evidence that this was taking place at a traditional church. I did not see a cross or any other Christian symbol on the property. The event is clearly designed to attract all members of the community and surrounding areas. Eggstravaganza is not meant to be solely for members and attendees of Victory Family Church,

and is marketed as such. The non-religious focus (even in the name) is evidence of their attempt at appealing to people across religious lines. Rather than having a completely religious-themed event, Victory designed an Easter event that does not exclude community members of other faiths or churches. Whether this approach is a bait-and-switch-style marketing maneuver is unclear. Their intentions to appeal to a large audience, however, are unmistakable.

Victory Family Church's marketing reflects a desire to attract new people into the church, even if that means focusing on the more secular aspects of the Christian holiday of Easter. To them, the goal is to fill the pews, which is also evident in their push to have members invite friends and family to events. In the marketing push leading up to Eggstravaganza and also leading up to the newly renovated building's grand opening, Nuzzo and other leaders encouraged members to invite friends and family. He assured the audience that the events would be fun for everyone and that the goal was to make everyone regardless of age, race, class, or creed feel welcomed. From their point of view, the way to measure the success of the event is quantified through the number of people coming to the church and accepting Jesus as their Savior. They attempt to increase these numbers by making the events and services as familiar, casual, and entertaining as possible.

While Lakewood and Oasis both sponsor events as well, their focus tends to be on charitable ministries like feeding the homeless, helping at-risk youth, and evangelizing rather than more entertainment-themed events like Eggstravaganza. For example, Lakewood hosts an annual book drive, where the congregants renovate a school in a high-risk area and provide the school with books to educate the students. Similarly it holds an event called, "Baskets of Love," where the church provides baskets filled with gifts and essentials for local moms in need for Mother's Day. These events are not necessarily designed to attract new members (although that

could be an outcome), but instead are meant as outreach for members of the community who need assistance. Lakewood also has dozens of ministries within the church that reach out to the people already in the congregation who need help with childcare, job skills, and even tax preparation for free.

Of the three churches, Oasis provides the most assistance to those completely outside of their church. Rather than hosting community events or even focusing on services for their existing members, the church tends to ask members to serve the at-risk members of their community. For example, Oasis partners with the Los Angeles Police Department to help at-risk youth. They also have a program called Treasures that provides assistance for women in the sex trade who wish to leave, but need resources in order to do so. These programs might attract new members to Oasis, but are clearly designed as service projects for existing members and to help the community.

In various ways throughout this project, it has been clear that each of these three churches falls at a different place along the Prosperity spectrum. The entertainment-focused Easter event held at Victory is consistent with their goal to grow the church and also with their commitment to the Prosperity Gospel insofar as this massive event demonstrates their incredible success. The remarkable turnout for this event demonstrates the efficacy of the Prosperity Gospel as all who attend can see the state-of-the-art facilities. Despite its size, Lakewood Church does not hold the large community events that Victory does. In contrast to Victory, Oasis Church focuses on helping community members in need through smaller scale projects. Its ministries encourage church members to give their time and money to help the less fortunate members of the community. These churches represent a variety of ways they reach out to the public spanning

from entertainment to outreach, and reflect the ways Prosperity churches interact with their communities.

3.6 IN-HOUSE MARKETING CONCLUSIONS

The sermons, events, pastors, and ministries at these three churches show us how they present the Prosperity Gospel among insiders. Additionally, each church takes a different approach to the Prosperity message and together they demonstrate the spectrum of ferocity regarding the potential physical, material, and spiritual effects faithfulness can have on our earthly lives. While Victory Family Church is more open about the negative aspects of Prosperity Theology such as ill health or poverty for those lacking in faith, Oasis and Lakewood choose to focus on the positive aspects. The analysis of in-house presentation reveals these churches are committed to providing practical advice and inspiration. There is also evidence that the way the churches measure their success is by the number of members and regular attendees, which gives them incentive to cast a broad net in terms of content, events, and ministries. All three use more insider language in their sermons than they do at public events and online. They all mention the Holy Spirit and divine healing more offline than online, but do not emphasize spiritual concepts as much as they emphasize earthly concepts during sermons. While the findings of this chapter provide the most insight when compared with those of the online chapter, they still independently illuminate how the Prosperity Gospel is presented amongst insiders and what themes the pastors are emphasizing.

All the senior pastors indicated an effort to provide their congregations with practical advice for daily living. While they still support the foundational principles of Pentecostalism,

their focus is on giving their members support and encouragement in their personal and professional lives. Their sermons often include evangelical hot button issues like “family values” and the decaying morals of “the world,” but gone are the damning sermons of their Prosperity forefathers. The increase in practical preaching is considered common knowledge, and seen merely as a more applicable way to present the same gospel that Tomy Graham would promote. Pastors acknowledge this modern approach, but say it does not affect the foundational principles, but instead embraces teaching, which is seen as less judgmental than more traditional preaching. Osteen, in particular, speaks about his commitment to non-judgment. What is emphasized within this practical preaching paradigm are things like marriage support, professional advice, and daily affirmations. Inspiration for personal or professional settings is the focus, and is placed within a Christian framework. Within these sermons, the pastors say success is accomplished through the practice of Christian principles like diligence, humility, and faithfulness.

Among the three churches, this shift towards practical preaching is also a shift away from more traditionally spiritual themes. The churches claim to believe in and support the traditional Pentecostal beliefs like glossolalia and divine healing, yet speaking in tongues is not practiced openly at any of the churches. The sermons at Oasis and Victory included discussions on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but I did not observe any congregant or pastor participating in it. Likewise, healings were discussed as part of their core beliefs, but spontaneous healings were neither expected nor practiced during the services. Traditionally, Pentecostal services and revival-style events include a portion of the service dedicated to healings where it is common for people to experience spontaneous divine healings. These three churches, however, depict healing as a long-term act that is possible through faith, but not something expected to occur

during the weekly services. Lakewood Church does offer a separate service that is moderated by Osteen's mom, Dodie Osteen, who claims she was miraculously healed of cancer. In this service, people are encouraged to come and pray for healing. This is not televised or promoted on television. All three churches, though, have adopted a less theatrical approach to the healing gift of the Holy Spirit than traditional Pentecostals and do not embrace the approach of divine spontaneous healings during services. All the people who provided oral histories acknowledged a belief in spontaneous healing despite a lack of emphasis of it during services. The shift in how divine healing is presented among these churches indicates a move towards a broader message where healing is still expected, but will most likely take place privately and more gradually through faithful prayer.

One of the aims of this study was to determine whether this practical approach to sermons still emphasizes traditional Christian and Pentecostal themes such as salvation, gifts of the Holy Spirit, healing, and charity or whether these themes have been replaced among these Prosperity churches. My findings show that these churches tend to avoid controversial content such as speaking in tongues and focus instead on practical application of the Bible and inspiration for their congregations. Additionally, they aim to attract more people to the church through secularized public events and "invite a friend to church" days where they assure people the content will be friendly to the "unchurched." While their doctrinal foundation has remained intact (as stated on their websites and in their oral histories) the content presented is only tangentially related to this foundational belief system. The move towards more practical preaching may or may not be a dilution of the message, but definitely marks a shift in emphasis.

Megachurch pastors and Prosperity Gospel pastors are often accused of this "watering down" the gospel in order to appeal to a wider audience, thus increasing the size of their

churches. While it is difficult to say if that is the case, there is evidence that the focus of the content has shifted towards a more secularized, practical approach. These three churches did note that the number of members and regular attenders was an important way for them to determine how effectively they were ministering to their congregations. They all acknowledged it is difficult, and a bit uncomfortable, to quantify a church's success. What is supposed to be a spiritual endeavor—saving souls—ends up becoming one that is focused on earthly measures. The number of people lining the pews, dollars collected in the offering plates, and viewers of television broadcasts, become ways to determine and boast success. As such, there is an incentive for them to present material that is widely acceptable to attract the largest number of people. Additionally, these numbers become more than just good news; they are evidence of the churches' faithfulness and the efficacy of Prosperity Theology more generally. Pastors are being implicitly asked to become motivational speakers, coaches, and friends who gently push their congregations to be better while avoiding talk of punishment or sacrifice.

This positive approach is not without challenges. In order to remain optimistic and encourage audiences to do the same, pastors must navigate the underbelly of Prosperity Theology by avoiding or carefully navigating the issues of illness and poverty within their community. Inevitably, members of every church deal with loss, illness, and financial hardships, but within Prosperity churches, this puts the theology or the faithfulness of the individual into question. My findings indicate each church addresses this difficult issue differently. When pressed, both Oasis and Lakewood claim to not know why people who are seemingly faithful and living righteous lives do not receive the financial and physical blessings of God. This difference in presentation among the churches is one of the more critical schisms within the Prosperity Gospel movement. Prosperity Gospel proponents are often questioned and/or criticized for this

darker aspect of their theology, and there are a variety of approaches to handling it (including saying simply that they do not know why some people get sick or are poor). The positive ideas about God being on your side and his wanting to bless you are an appealing aspect of Prosperity Theology, but the idea that poor and ill people must necessarily be failing God in some way comes under fire by critics.

The three churches in this study showed a range of approaches for dealing with this theological difficulty. Their differences are a reflection of the different ways Prosperity Theology can be presented even among insiders. How churches grapple with the concept of those who are not prospering could be based on the pastors' perception of audience preference or it could be a theological gray area where Prosperity proponents have a range of understandings to explain why a person might not be living a "victorious" life. Regardless, the difference in marketing this element of the Prosperity message varies even among the three churches I researched, and warrants further investigation to discover how the movement will manage this issue. It is notable that this more controversial element of Prosperity Theology is not addressed in more public forums such as the church websites and Twitter feeds. This issue of why one might not be receiving God's blessing was only discussed within sermons, and was not covered elsewhere. Victory Family Church is the most outspoken of the three churches in grappling with this theological challenge, but even for them the discussion is only within the confines of the sanctuary.

Among the three churches, it is clear that each has its own individual style and mission. There is a definite spectrum on which these three churches fall, with Victory Family Church demonstrating the most overt support of Prosperity Theology. Victory's pastor, sermons, and events all strongly demonstrate their affiliation with the movement, and project an image of

success as evidence that God is blessing them with growth and development. The church also seems the most willing to provide entertainment at the expense of traditional presentation of the theology. While Victory's pastors say they never compromise their message, they are willing to lighten it up, push Christian comedic boundaries, and focus more on secular elements to holidays if it means getting the message of Christianity to more people. Lakewood, too, is committed to reaching as many people as possible, which means broadcasting its sermons worldwide. What is shown on television is a more broadly appealing message than what is shown in the unedited services. Furthermore, charismatic elements that were once a part of John Osteen's Lakewood Church are now reserved for the small group meetings rather than the Sunday services. Oasis presents its message of prosperity with a focus on giving and outreach rather than a focus on the individual gaining greater success. While all three churches fall on the Prosperity spectrum, clearly they approach the theology differently, and each applies the idea of abundance in different ways. For all three, though, it is clear that how they present the message is intentional and done with the audience in mind.

4.0 AUDIENCE

Pentecostals were once thought to be primarily white, undereducated, and low-to-middle class, but their demographics shifted as they began to behave more like evangelicals in their worship, sermons, and marketing.¹⁹⁶ Pentecostals now represent every class and color, and even their religious foundation is broadening as more people who grew up unchurched or in a different denomination join the tradition. In this study, both Lakewood and Oasis pride themselves on their congregation's racial and economic diversity, and they are intentional in their efforts to appeal to a variety of ethnicities and classes. This chapter examines the online and offline audiences to determine who is attending services, watching the broadcasts, and buying the books and products associated with Victory Family, Lakewood, and Oasis Church, and how these audiences respond to the churches' message. This chapter analyzes what attracted these people to the churches and leaders and what keeps them coming back. It will also discuss the audiences' relationship with Prosperity Theology and having that label placed upon them and their churches. Perhaps most importantly, this chapter describes how audience preferences have the potential to influence changes in the theological content being presented through their feedback.

Evangelicalism has been a powerful cultural and political force over the last thirty years, and its base gained influence (and criticism) due to some notable public officials like President George W. Bush and Governor Mike Huckabee. The branding of evangelicalism has provided

¹⁹⁶ Miller et al, *Spirit and Power*, 13.

the tradition with popular exposure through the successful *Left Behind* book series and other commercial successes. Much of this success occurred in spite of the producers' commitment to the theological underpinnings of Christianity rather than a dilution of the message. The financial and sexual scandals of Christian televangelists in the late 1980s spurred a period of image and brand renovation within the Prosperity movement and evangelicalism more generally.¹⁹⁷ There has been a strategic effort to unify the worldview, mobilize voters, synthesize church experience, and ultimately create power and influence for the movement and its leaders. This strategy has been incredibly successful, particularly with voter mobilization and political influence. As their power and influence grew, so did the appeal of the movement more generally. Evangelical churches grew and, perhaps more importantly, attracted young, financially stable families, all while mainline churches membership rates decreased.

The growing power of evangelicalism only increased the churches and pastors' commitment to business practices, marketing strategies, and executive organization. Evangelical churches began holding conferences and offering seminars discussing the most effective business practices to implement for optimum appeal and growth. They emphasized updated worship style, technological advancements, and more casual dress norms for pastors and congregants. Rather than focusing on outreach in the form of missions and charity, evangelical churches focused on recruiting, such as encouraging members to bring friends to church, and hosting large events like car cruises and seasonal parties to attract new members. Victory Family Church's annual Eggstravaganza is an example of such marketing, which attracts thousands of visitors each year. These methods encourage more people to visit the church and ultimately attract new members as a certain percentage of people who visit end up joining or attending regularly.

¹⁹⁷ Bowler, *Blessed*, 107.

While the churches claim these events are a form of proselytizing, there is no way to know what percentage of these new recruits were familiar or intimate with the Christian message before their decision to attend. Many were likely members of other similar churches before attending Victory. Victory's "How Will They Hear?" fundraiser was designed to raise money to market in the community with the goal of growing the church. The campaign's message is that if church members do not give to Victory, people in the community will not receive salvation. Victory's pastors claim that the church needs to reach the unchurched members of their community or they will never hear the Gospel. The idea that these churches are primarily attracting non-Christian or secular people is unrealistic. Most of the people I spoke with at all three churches had been raised as Christians, and had simply switched to the current church after feeling "led" by the Spirit to do so. Indeed, many of the people in this study had come to their current church from another evangelical, Pentecostal, or mainline Protestant church. While the churches claim they are competing with the Sunday paper and Starbucks, it is more likely that their marketing efforts are in competition with other churches (mainline and evangelical).

By employing traditional marketing tactics, evangelical churches are attracting savvy, sophisticated, and social members who facilitate a dynamic energy that encourages new members and involvement among current members. The age, class, and lifestyles of their congregants contribute to their ability and willingness to be involved in the churches' programs as volunteers, teachers, and speakers. Because the churches are largely made up of young families, they are involved as a unit and infiltrate a variety of age groups' ministries. Families also provide the church with great growth potential as they age, marry, and have children. Evangelical churches are known for having ministries that accommodate every age, but their focus tends to be young married couples with children. By attracting people at this stage, they

encourage lifetime loyalty and active membership. While each of the research churches has programs designed for older members, it is not their focus. It is difficult to tell whether that is why older people are not as plentiful at the churches or vice versa. Despite the apparent prioritization of young families, all three churches say they have programs designed to meet the needs of people at every stage in their lives and Christian journeys.

While evangelicals are often criticized for their conservative views on gay marriage, women's rights, and government-provided social services, their branding helps offset this image by providing a contemporary church experience. In place of the stained glass windows, dusty hymnals, and Sunday-best attire, are lively music, conversational preaching, and casual clothes. The evangelical worldview is markedly conservative, but their in-house atmosphere is innovative and modern, and so is their audience. The people that make up these three churches are young and professional, even if their religious/political beliefs are more reactionary. Like the churches themselves, their congregants see themselves as current and vibrant, and want to present themselves as such. While some of their views seem antiquated to mainstream culture, evangelicals embrace technology and maintain contemporary sensibilities more generally, and want to come across as in touch with popular culture.

In addition to a desire to present themselves as current, Prosperity adherents have an added incentive for making a good impression. According to their theology, faithfulness reaps earthly rewards, so the more outwardly successful they appear, the more spiritually successful they are assumed to be. Prosperity Gospel followers believe transcend traditional spiritual components by including earthly expectations for their professional, personal, and financial life. They assign a great deal of power to their faithfulness, and expect success and well being in this life. Speaking with members of each of the three churches revealed them collectively passionate

about the power of prayer, God's active role in our daily lives, and their desire to "receive" God's blessings. All three churches encourage their audiences to be open to God's gifts, and each of the people I spoke with is actively trying to live a life that pleases God. In doing so, they expect God to inject himself into their professional and personal lives through blessings and guidance.

Both online and offline, congregants stated (or retweeted) their preference for practical Christianity over spiritual Christianity. They were not as interested in abstract spiritual concepts or Scriptural exegesis, but preferred to learn about how their faith could be applied to them living their best life now. It seems that part of the objection some of my narrators have with the designation of Prosperity Theology is that it is just one component of what they really want: *practical* Theology. While they believe in Prosperity Theology, they see its importance lies in its focus on everyday life more than just "getting stuff." They believe God can help direct your career, your finances, and your success, but only through the daily application of Christian principles in a practical way. In their oral histories, professional and financial success was important, but they also emphasized other practical concerns like child rearing, marriages, and other relationships, and believe God can intervene in these areas too through prayer and faithfulness.

The Prosperity audience members are making it clear that fire-and-brimstone preaching is not helpful to them as they navigate their everyday life. They are looking for a message that makes them feel comfortable with their spirituality in an "every day" way. They reveal that the more obtuse spiritual elements like the gifts of the Holy Spirit, eternal reward/punishment, and even evangelizing are not applicable in their daily life, and are therefore being preached less frequently.

The availability of self-help and inspirational content on television and the Internet increases audiences desire for that material as they become accustomed to positive and uplifting content, and their preference for this material translates to their religious life. Because the Prosperity Gospel corresponds seamlessly with this message, the pastors are willing to satisfy the demand. As a result, much of the Prosperity churches' content is indistinguishable from Oprah Winfrey's Super Soul Sundays on the OWN television channel or other self-help authors' literature.

4.1 OASIS CHURCH AUDIENCE

Analyzing the relationship between pastors and their audience offers many insights, but it can be difficult to determine in which direction the influence is flowing. While the audience undoubtedly has preferences regarding sermons, ministries, and worship, it is not obvious whether their opinions are influencing the pastors' decisions or whether their pastors inspire their preferences. It is clear that the Oasis congregation influences the content presented to them. Pastors Phillip and Holly Wagner both acknowledged their goal of providing practical Christian principles to their members, and claimed this was not just their vision, but what they know the congregants want. Holly said, "We talk to the members of our church and we know how important it is for them to feel like the Bible is still relevant and applicable to their lives." She went on to say that because of that, she and the other pastors aim to present biblical teachings, Scriptures, and stories in a way that when they leave church that day the members can apply it to their daily lives. Knowing the audience's preference influences the theological direction of the church makes it even more important to understand them.

During my oral history meetings with Oasis Church members a few themes emerged. First, they are committed to Oasis and are very active in the church's various ministries. They believe God brought them to Oasis through a divine plan for their lives. They believe God can and will bless those who follow him. Many of them were introduced to the church through a recommendation from a family member or a significant other. Lastly, many consume the products of the evangelical subculture outside of Oasis through television, music, books, and other religious products and events.

I formally met with over a dozen people who attend Oasis Church, and spoke with dozens more during my visits on site. I began with Marketing Director Kristen Tarsiuk, who offered valuable insight into the church's marketing, but also is an active member who attended the church before she worked there. My contacts developed through snowball sampling as she suggested a few regular attenders of Oasis who she thought would be insightful. After having worked with Gerardo Marti on his book, *Hollywood Faith*, the Oasis staff and congregants are familiar with the research process and were extremely amenable to providing oral histories and observation. The meetings took place in coffee shops, over the phone, through email, and in the Oasis offices. Without exception, the members of Oasis who spoke with me were open and enthusiastic about their faith and church.

Despite being unfamiliar with my personal religious experiences or beliefs, the Oasis church members often spoke to me as if I were one of them. For example, when I began a phone call with Sebastian, a long-time member of Oasis, he asked if he could begin by praying with me. After I agreed, he opened with a prayer in which he asked for God's hand to be in our conversation and for our conversation to be productive. As he prayed, I was reminded of my experiences growing up in the evangelical tradition where the prayers often take on a particular

cadence and rhetoric and are quite personal in their content. He was sincere and asked God to speak through him, to offer clarity, and to “bless our conversation.” His prayer was intimate and unfettered despite the fact that he and I had just met. Sebastian was extremely comfortable praying audibly, as if the act of public prayer is a normal and important part of his daily life. He spoke as if he felt our conversation was one of importance and divine appointment. While the other Oasis members I spoke with did not pray with me, they repeated some of the same rhetoric that Sebastian used, and expressed how important prayer was as a component of their Christian walk. Each of them was open about their faith and expressed an excitement to share it with others.

Most of the Oasis members with whom I spoke had some kind of Christian background (Protestant and Catholic), but had not grown up in an evangelical church. Among my narrators, the majority found Oasis through friends or family. Oasis’s Hollywood location makes them somewhat of an anomaly in terms of how they grow because of the transient and/or transplanted nature of so many of people in the area. While many churches rely on family growth through marriage and births to account for much of their increase, Oasis relies more heavily on word-of-mouth and marketing within the community to grow their congregation. Los Angeles’ nature as an entertainment city means a lot of people arrive there later in life. They often join churches to develop a network of friends or their existing friends encourage them to come. Even the church’s pastor, Holly Wagner, was once a working actress, and as such is deeply familiar with the entertainment industry that pervades the Los Angeles area. The pastors and staff are keenly aware of the city’s unique make-up and interest in the arts, and adapt their marketing to account for it.

Among those who came to Los Angeles for work in entertainment and came to the church through word of mouth was current Director of Ministries, Nicole Reyes. Like so many, she came to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career, and was encouraged to attend Oasis by her sister, marketing director, Kristen Tarsiuk. Nicole says when she started attending Oasis, she liked that the people there “looked like [her],” and were “friendly and lively.”¹⁹⁸ Presumably she means they were young and had her casual style, which made her feel comfortable and at home. Like many Oasis members, Nicole feels a strong connection with her fellow congregants. This connection with the other church members was a theme among my Oasis oral histories. During our conversations, the church members spoke about the other members as much as they spoke about the sermons, ministries, and pastors. They described having a strong bond with one another and often remarked about how they like that the audience is made up of people who are similar to them and share their ideals, but also their lifestyle and temperament. This connection is a key element of the videos and events Oasis produces. They encourage members to be involved in each other’s lives, to pray with one another, and to hold each other accountable in their Christian walk.

Part of what makes some of the members feel close to their “church family” is that they do not live near their biological family. Others said the congregation helped them heal wounds from their real family. Nicole grew up in a Christian home and shared some deeply personal stories with me about her upbringing coming from what she calls a “dysfunctional” family. She says Oasis has helped her deal with some of the pain she experienced growing up. “The Lord has done a work in me and helped to heal some of the wounds from my upbringing, and this was done through the ministries and people at Oasis,” she said. Despite (or perhaps because of) some

¹⁹⁸ Oral History via phone with Nicole Reyes, March 25, 2013.

difficulties in her childhood, Nicole became a Christian in her youth. She said she even felt called to work in ministry at the age of twelve, but did not believe it could be a reality because she did not “see other women doing jobs that she would want to do.” As a result, she tucked away her desire for ministry and began working towards a career in the arts. Ultimately, that artistic drive is what brought her to Los Angeles, but she said, “God had other plans.”

After taking her sister Kristen up on the invitation to attend Oasis, Nicole went from congregant to employee. She abandoned her dreams of working in show business for what she considers a “higher calling” living out her lifelong dream of working in the ministry. She says since she was hired, she has occupied many jobs at Oasis, and goes where God leads her in terms of her position there. In addition to her own personal growth, she says during her time at Oasis, the church has grown up with her, and has changed in many ways. A few of my narrators also noted that Oasis had changed even since Gerardo Marti conducted his research for his book, *Hollywood Faith*. Nicole said since Marti’s research period, the church has become even more “practical, authentic, and transparent” in terms of how it connects with members. It is unclear what inspired these changes specifically and whether Marti’s book had an influence on the church’s direction.

Like so many of my narrators, Nicole said the pastors’ sermons at Oasis are relatable, practical, and Bible-based. Most of the Oasis members focused on these traits rather than on the spiritual aspects of the services and pastors. Nicole did acknowledge the Pentecostal foundation, however, by calling what Oasis does, “Smart work, but Spirit-led.” In other words, they are founded upon spirituality, but try to apply it in a practical and relatable way. This expressed foundation of the Holy Spirit is why some of my narrators were defensive with regards to the idea that the message of the church might be diluted with inspirational content. They believe

their foundation in the Bible and the tenets of Christianity is strong, and while the presentation might be more practical, they do not believe it makes the message any less powerful. The content, they say, is merely approached in a practical way, but it is still led by and infused with the Holy Spirit.

The practical approach to church and the focus on “relatable, everyday” content also sets the tone for how the congregation behaves as well, and many narrators noted the casual vibe of the audience. The church’s down-to-earth environment was described as evidence that it was humble and inclusive. The congregants said it was important to them that the church did not seem like it was just for “perfect” people, but no matter where people are in their spiritual journey that they are welcome at Oasis. This language is typical of what some call a “seeker” church. Seeker churches are designed to be welcoming to everyone and devoid of any Christian condescension. These churches are accused by some of being watered down, and not substantive in their preaching. The congregants were split as to whether they would classify Oasis as a seeker church, but most said the church was welcoming to everyone.

When Kristen Tarsiuk described that welcoming atmosphere, however, she was quick to point out it is not a gay affirming church. She said people might think all churches with a down-to-earth atmosphere affirm gay relationships, but Oasis does not. While the casual and welcoming atmosphere at Oasis includes everyone, it does not affirm lifestyles that are not in line with their interpretation of biblical principles, according to Kristen. This conservative view of homosexuality is consistent with the evangelical worldview and evidence of Oasis’s traditional underpinnings. Oasis is not alone in their commitment to “traditional” marriage, and Lakewood and Victory Family Church also hold this as one of their beliefs. The congregants, too, embrace this position, which is consistent with the evangelical political position. This

commitment to and emphasis on traditional marriage does not carry over to a focus on traditional theology. The dissonance between the modern style and conservative beliefs within evangelicalism is one reason some might categorize the changes within the tradition to be superficial rather than substantive. Their modern style and technology might appear to be a front for their conservative theology, but their sermons seem to be changing while their conservative politics are remaining intact (at least those of the leaders).

It is not just the church's casual atmosphere or practical preaching that appeals to its members. Prosperity Theology, specifically, was a focus of many of the oral histories and an important part of the congregants' practice of their Christian faith. Sebastian focused specifically on the Prosperity Gospel when sharing his testimony and journey to Oasis. "I came back to Christ after I had a financial miracle," Sebastian told me. He is a member of Oasis Church and works under head pastor, Philip Wagner. He grew up Catholic, and while he says he never felt a connection with that tradition, he says he felt God's presence in his life at a very young age. "I remember being eight or nine and hearing the voice of God telling me what to do." He says he heard that voice audibly several times in his life, and even though he wasn't always a "good" Christian, he always felt close to God. Sebastian says even when his family was Catholic he noticed that they "did better financially" when they attended church. Clearly, Sebastian felt Prosperity Theology was effective even outside of the evangelical tradition, and sees regular church attendance as a part of the Prosperity equation.

The financial miracle that brought Sebastian renewed faith in God's blessings occurred during his college days. After his family lost their business he was broke and had only two weeks to find thousands of dollars he needed to enroll in his final year of school. He believed his academic opportunity was over and he would be forced to drop out of college, just short of

graduating. It was then that he got a phone call telling him that the school was offering him a full tuition scholarship. He says he was not an exceptional student and he was not remarkable in sports or arts. Sebastian claims he did not deserve that money by academic standards, but the Jesuit school he was attending gave it to him anyway. To him, it was a miracle. Sebastian saw this as evidence that God wants to bless us, and believed it was because deep inside he was a follower of Jesus. This event encouraged Sebastian to become even more faithful and devoted to his Christian walk. Eventually he converted from Catholicism to evangelical--or as he calls it--“born again Christianity,” but he says it was not until he attended Oasis that he really turned his life around.

After becoming an evangelical Christian, Sebastian was introduced to Oasis through a girlfriend. He says the sermons of Philip Wagner and the other pastors inspired him to clean up his life and immerse himself in the church and its community. He has now been with them for several years, and was handpicked by Wagner to join the staff as an intern. Of the members who provided oral history, Sebastian was the most vocal in terms of his commitment to Prosperity Theology. He had no reservations about the label, and said God “obviously” wants his followers to be blessed. He compared the relationship of God with his followers with that of a Father and his children. “Naturally, a father wants his children to be taken care of, happy, and healthy.” He did not provide an explanation for why some people experience illness or poverty, but he did say that when we follow God’s voice, it guides us down the “right paths.” Beyond Oasis’s message of prosperity, Sebastian also seeks out the message from other outlets. Sebastian said he loves listening to other Prosperity leaders like Joyce Meyer and Creflo Dollar and likes their message that God wants to bless and provide for his people. While interning at Oasis part-time, Sebastian says he spends the rest of his time “making money through odd jobs,” but says he never worries

about money because he knows that through faith God will provide. Clearly, Sebastian has embraced Prosperity Theology, and does not share the reservations about the designation that some of the pastors and members expressed.

Like all the Oasis members with whom I spoke, Sebastian was enthusiastic and passionate about his faith and his belief that God is willing and eager to provide for his followers. Every Oasis Church member I spoke with has an infectious love for their church and a strong verbal commitment to their beliefs. They were eager to share their experiences with me, and their openness towards my research and me was refreshing. Part of their enthusiasm in speaking with me might stem from the church's focus on spreading their message through outreach and community events. The members are asked to reach out to friends and loved ones who are in need or who are looking for a church home. This encouragement might produce congregants that are more comfortable sharing their testimonies and talking about the church. The church seems to have a sense that Los Angeles is a city where many people come seeking something new or are leaving something behind. Because of the nature of the city, Oasis developed a marketing campaign that is somewhat different from the other two churches. The marketing of Oasis is geared toward people who are new to the area and need a familial community support. Many of Oasis's events and small groups are designed to make new residents and new Christians feel welcome and encourage existing members to reach out and befriend those who might be lonely or seeking a church home. In our conversations, Oasis members all said they ended up at the church through word of mouth and the pastors say many of their members are people that were introduced to the church through one of their outreach ministries (e.g., Treasures, which is a ministry for sex industry workers; Alexandria House, which provides emergency shelter for families).

In addition to the unique marketing challenges within Los Angeles, the entertainment focus of the city provides a high bar of artistry for the church to meet for the audience. The pastors realize the audience has become accustomed to a very high caliber of performance, and they feel the pressure to meet the demand. One Oasis member had come to Los Angeles seeking work as a dancer, but has since abandoned the field. She decided she would instead use her gift for dance at Oasis, and she believes her talents are being used for God's glory within Oasis's worship parameters instead of for her own glory in show business. The audience at Oasis Church has more passion and interest in the arts than the other two churches I observed, but a commitment to high-energy worship is not unusual in the evangelical community. The Oasis marketing team is aware of the audience's high expectations when it comes to worship and performance arts, and expressed a commitment to meet these demands. The marketing director said the church is committed to excellence in every area including dance, music, and video production. Many people said they felt energized by the worship experience at Oasis and inspired by the performances of those on stage. The members confirmed this expectation when I asked them why they loved Oasis and what kept them coming back. Many of them said the worship portion of the service was critical to their overall church experience, and said the Oasis singers and dancers inspired and energized them.

Overall, the Oasis audience was proud of its faith, but also proud of the church. They were attending, not because it was the church they grew up in, but because they believe in the message and vision of the Wagners. They were often not completely comfortable with the Prosperity designation, but believed in the theology that God is willing and eager to bless those who are faithful to him. Like Oasis's pastors, the congregants said acquiring wealth was not their focus, but material blessings were a natural byproduct of God's goodness and what happens

when we heed his voice. The pastors and the members maintained a consistent message about their faith and vision for Oasis. The message presented at Oasis resonates with the audience and fulfills them. The congregants also tend to supplement the message of Oasis with additional books, music, and broadcasts by other prominent Prosperity Gospel and evangelical leaders. This demonstrates their commitment to the message and participation in the broader evangelical subculture.

4.2 VICTORY FAMILY CHURCH AUDIENCE

Living close to Victory Family Church allowed me to attend more often and to be more involved in the events and ministries than I was at Oasis and Lakewood Church. When I attended, I sometimes brought my toddler son, who would attend their children's ministry for his age group. This afforded me many interactions with the volunteers and staff for both adult and children's ministries at Victory. During our oral history meetings and casual interactions with the congregants, I was struck by the commitment so many of them have for not just Christianity in general, but specifically to Victory Family Church. Most of them volunteer their time and energy to a variety of ministries and events at the church, and believe the church is the cornerstone of their community.

The interactions, observations, and oral history conversations showed a congregation who is middle to upper-middle class, white, and conservative politically. All of the people I spoke to had grown up in Christian churches, mostly evangelical, and came to Victory when they felt their needs were not being met at their previous church. There were a few themes that surfaced through our conversations. First, Victory members are keenly aware of the negative associations

some people have with evangelicals, Pentecostals, and/or Prosperity Theology. Because of this awareness, they are uncomfortable with the Prosperity designation, but are enthusiastic about the Prosperity message. Second, they share John Nuzzo's political conservatism, and are comfortable with his commentary on his social and cultural opinions on issues like gay rights, abortion, and even the Pledge of Allegiance. Third, they agree with Nuzzo's contention that their Christian "values" and "foundations of our country" are under attack by the broader public.¹⁹⁹ Lastly, they are unattached (and sometimes unaware) of the church's Pentecostal roots. While these themes emerged to varying degrees among the oral histories, there were clear patterns that help shed light on the Victory Family Church congregation and their beliefs, actions, and motivations.

Because I grew up in the evangelical community in the area of Victory Family Church, I personally know people who attend this church and, as a result, was able to talk to many of them about their church and beliefs. Because John Nuzzo is so outspoken in his belief in and support of the Prosperity Gospel designation, I expected the congregants to be equally enthusiastic. However, Victory members are cautious about this designation. This incongruity between the organization and their members regarding their comfort with the Prosperity label demonstrates the difficulty in applying it to particular churches and the awareness many people have in its potential negative connotations. It also speaks to the many factors that influence a person's religious leanings outside of their pastor's persuasions.

The church members' reservations about calling Victory a Prosperity church did not translate to a lack of support for the concept of Prosperity Theology more generally. In fact, they were the most passionate of all three churches about how "blessed" they felt and their belief that

¹⁹⁹ John Nuzzo, "Decision 2012," sermon October 14, 2012.

God materially rewards those who follow him. Their hesitation about the label comes in part from their awareness that many (Christian and non-Christian) people do not like the financial focus they believe exists at Prosperity churches. Many congregants expressed concern that the community might see them as only interested in gaining wealth or “getting stuff,” and they claimed this was not the focus of the church. Regardless of their fears of how they might be perceived they all agreed that God does not want his followers to be poor, sick, or unsuccessful. Like Nuzzo’s sermons, their discussions were not focused on giving or helping those less fortunate, but instead on the ways God wants to give to those who serve him. While the audience shows more reservations about announcing its Prosperity leanings, it is equally enthusiastic as Nuzzo about God’s blessings for his faithful followers.

One member of Victory Family Church, who is about 35, sent me email, out of the blue, months after our conversations to tell me he disagreed somewhat with the classification of his church as a Prosperity church. He told me that he believes Victory shouldn’t be seen as primarily interested in money. He said:

I can understand the perception that Victory is a Prosperity Gospel church, but I do not think that is entirely accurate. I have attended Victory for close to 10 years and I can tell you the church is not strictly focused on the prosperity message. The theme of the church has been to experience God in every day life, in all areas, not just financial. Faith does play in to alot [sic] of the messages and series...I consider myself prosperous because I am blessed with a good family and great friends and I have all that I need. Money can buy many things, but not those. I know prosperity churches can be criticized for their messages being too light, but I would rather hear a message to encourage me and push me along life's road.

What Michael expressed is typical within Prosperity Gospel congregations. While they believe God provides for those who follow him, they do not want outsiders to see them as “strictly focused on the prosperity message” or “too light” on theology. His awareness and concern about how others see his tradition speaks to the way members relate to outsiders. His interpretation of the designation of “Prosperity Theology” also speaks to the problematic nature of the wording itself. Naturally, including “prosperity” in the phrase implies a financial focus, yet scholars and even those within the Prosperity community have yet to find a better way to classify the movement. In the end, Michael and many of the other narrators felt the emphasis of the church was not on money or “getting rich,” but in the way the church uplifts, encourages, and helps them “experience God in everyday life.” This focus on a more practical gospel rather than strictly prosperity seems to be the most repeated theme among pastors and congregants.

Tom and Pat from Victory Family Church echoed Michael’s concerns about the image of their church as a Prosperity Gospel church. Tom and Pat have been married for over forty years, and say they follow God’s lead in deciding where to attend church. As I met with them in their lovely suburban home I began to share my research goals and some of the things I hoped we could discuss. Tom began by clarifying the idea of “prosperity” with me saying, “This isn’t just financial. God wants to bless his people in every area of their life; he wants you to prosper as your soul prospers.” He was referencing 3 John 1:2, which is an oft-cited verse among Prosperity Gospel proponents and their literature. Pat agreed, and asked me, “What does prosperity mean to you?” I told her that the phraseology is clumsy, but when I use the term I’m referring to God’s earthly and heavenly blessings. They were comfortable with this clarification and they both agreed that it makes them “upset” when people think of Prosperity Theology as only being about money.

While they balked at the Prosperity Gospel label, Pat and Tom embrace the principles of Prosperity Theology wholeheartedly. They said everything in their life was a gift from God. “All of this, look around, our house, our family, it is all from God.” Even though they said prosperity isn’t just about finances, Tom believes the reason people think Christians should be poor is because of Catholicism. He said the vows of poverty they take have skewed people’s understanding of Jesus. “Jesus had a treasurer,” he said, “He obviously had money with him or else why would he need a treasurer?” He went on to say that in order to travel as Jesus did, he had to have funding, and Tom believes this is evidence that Jesus does not want his followers to be poor.

In addition to the Prosperity Gospel designation, Tom and Pat were also not comfortable with the term “Pentecostal.” I asked if they considered themselves to be Pentecostal, and Pat said she doesn’t like the way people use that term negatively. When I asked what she would call herself she answered, “I’m a born-again, spirit-filled, follower of Christ.” Her self-imposed label avoids all denominational, organizational, and orthodox terminology and allows Pat to use terms with which she feels comfortable. For Pat, providing her own labels allows her to avoid other terms that she believes are loaded such as Pentecostal, evangelical, or Prosperity Gospel.

The self-labeling like Pat demonstrated is indicative of the larger post-denominational movement, which downplays hierarchical, organizational identities, in favor of individualism. “In addition, the individualistic, subjective, and anti-institutional spirit of contemporary life has weakened members’ denominational loyalty, as congregations increasingly chart their own course.”²⁰⁰ As scholars continue to examine this push toward anti-institutional evangelicalism, it would be wise to consider whether this will stand to affect their shared-identity and the

²⁰⁰ Corwin E. Smidt, *American Evangelicals Today* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 222.

implications that might have on political mobilization. This powerful subculture could lose political leverage if they do not agree on key cultural issues. Indeed, some scholars believe the growing ethnic diversity, differing generational priorities, and even privatized faith, such as viewing sermons online, could contribute to declining political cohesion.²⁰¹

When describing their decision to attend Victory Family Church, Pat said she had looked on the Internet for a “rhema” pastor.²⁰² Among the list of local rhema pastors was John Nuzzo from Victory. They joined the church within its first year of existence when it was still located in a movie theatre. Tom quipped, “We just joined because we liked the smell of popcorn after church.” The truth is they “loved” John Nuzzo because he “preached the full message of God.” Pat said she had been searching to find a church that preached the message of Jesus and the Bible without “watering it down.” They both agreed that Nuzzo provided that message for them.

One thing Tom and Pat did seem concerned about was the “persecution of Christians” they see happening. They believe people have the wrong idea about what Christians represent, and said people only look at the “extreme” behavior instead of the general Christian population to base their opinions. Throughout the oral histories of Victory Family Church members, the issue of labels and misrepresentation came up repeatedly. The congregants I spoke to felt they were victimized in the media, popular culture, and society in general. Often, they would refer to things like prayer being taken out of schools and the gay marriage debate as evidence of the way their worldview is under attack. Their concerns are a reflection of what Nuzzo proclaims from the pulpit. The congregants echoed the sentiments of Nuzzo who spoke in many sermons about how Christians are called “bigots,” “homophobes,” and intolerant. Nuzzo believes the general

²⁰¹ Ibid., 226.

²⁰² “Rhema” is word frequently used by Kenneth Hagin as an understanding of the Bible that includes an emphasis on the Holy Spirit and other Pentecostal and evangelical theological components. www.rhema.org provides a list of Kenneth Hagin Ministries’ core beliefs.

public sees evangelicals in a negative light. His message that Christianity in America is under attack is a frequent refrain in churches, but also in evangelical popular culture such as Sarah Palin's recent *New York Times* Best Seller, *Good Tidings and Great Joy: Protecting the Heart of Christmas*. In this book, Palin, a vocal evangelical Christian, describes what she considers to be a "war on Christmas," by secularists and non-Christians. The idea of a war on Christmas has been a talking point among evangelicals for many years. Victory members embrace Nuzzo's belief that Christians are under attack and believe they must work to protect Christian values through voting, proselytizing, and supporting the church, and they have taken these concerns to heart.

Even though Victory members believe that Christianity is under attack, my narrators were passionate about their faith, happy with their church, and involved in the evangelical subculture. They agree with Pastor John Nuzzo about the importance of voting and being active politically, but the age of the narrator correlated with how fervent they were about "typical" evangelical hot button issues like gay rights, welfare programs, and even abortion. Victory congregation skews slightly older than Oasis, and as such, has more a range of enthusiasm for traditional evangelical issues such as gay marriage and the environment. While I did not ask their specific association politically, Victory members tended to bring politics up on their own and showed an eagerness to demonstrate their conservative affiliation. The Victory congregants maintained the traditional conservative worldview, but the older members tended to be more steadfast and unwavering in their positions. The younger members, while maintaining similar positions, tended to couch their views in more flexible language that indicated their awareness of the public image of evangelicals as stereotypically ultra-conservative. The way the different age

groups approach social issues mirrors larger societal shifts of younger people adopting more liberal points of view and having more flexibility with the way they approach issues.²⁰³

Victory congregants were more interested in talking politics than they were talking about more spiritual concepts like speaking in tongues, healing, or life after death. Tom and Pat were an exception to this, and were eager to talk about spirituality. Tom and Pat went to the church of my youth for many years, so I knew they had attended a congregation where overt acts of the Holy Spirit were common. Knowing this, I asked if they minded that those elements were not as prevalent at Victory Family Church. Pat said she is not bothered by the lowered frequency of these displays of Pentecostalism because she feels the Spirit working at Victory regardless of whether people speak in tongues or experience spontaneous healing. Tom said he was not sure why glossolalia was downplayed at Victory, but assured me he had seen pastors exhibiting the gifts of the Holy Spirit “many times” even though the congregants do not display the gifts during the services or otherwise. He did not say where or when the pastors spoke in tongues. Tom and Pat have attended Victory for nearly twenty years, so they attended the church when it consisted of only a few dozen people and the service was conducted in a movie theater before it opened. Perhaps the pastors demonstrated overt displays of the gifts of the Holy Spirit during the church’s early days, but they did not do so during my research period. Neither of Tom or Pat expressed dismay that the Pentecostal traits were no longer a part of their weekly church experience.

Indeed none of the members lamented the lack of overt Pentecostalism at Victory. They said that a belief in the gifts of the Holy Spirit does not necessitate their practice in a loud and proud way. Many of them said the healings were done in a “quiet” way and they thought it was

²⁰³ Smidt, *American Evangelicals Today*, 8.

good that the church was not trying to be too “showy.” This is another way they expressed an awareness of their image as a church, and a desire to keep their Christianity within socially acceptable parameters. Most of them, however, claimed they believed the Holy Spirit could move through the gifts described in the New Testament and supported Pentecostalism in a general sense. Some of the congregants, however, were not aware of the term Pentecostalism in general, or its role as the foundation of their church, but still supported the idea that the Holy Spirit is alive and at work in the world, the church, and the lives of individuals.

Even though Victory congregants seem to embrace the tenets of Pentecostalism, they do not insist on these elements being an integral part of the service, ministries, or sermons. This shift from previous Pentecostal churches and congregations appears to be driven in part by a desire to maintain a modern image. Because Victory wants their church to be an “emergency room” church where all are welcome and can come as they are, they also do not want to scare them away with highly spiritualized content. For people who are not accustomed to seeing or participating in speaking in tongues, healings, and being “slain in the Spirit,” it can appear odd or even scary. A church that is aware of its image, marketing, and branding, and measures its success by the number of people who attend, might want to avoid Pentecostal elements. In the case of Victory Family Church, they theologically endorse the elements of Pentecostalism, but do not promote an active demonstration of those components within the weekly services. The audience supports this approach and is aware that the way the services are conducted has an impact on the way it is seen in the community.

4.3 LAKEWOOD CHURCH AUDIENCE

There is a surprisingly small amount of scholarship on Lakewood, the nation's largest church, and its audience is all but forgotten in the shadow of Joel Osteen's fame, fortune, and charisma. Lakewood Church's massive congregation and broad name-recognition is what makes it simultaneously intriguing and intimidating to explore. In *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, Meredith McGuire discusses Osteen and his audience, and theorizes that the Lakewood church population is probably eclectic and "not committed to an entire package of beliefs and practices or even to the congregation, so they may participate only in the aspects of the church that appeal to them."²⁰⁴ McGuire goes on to lament that the size of Lakewood's congregation and its countless casual attenders makes it almost impossible to \ sample adequately. While my investigation is not a representative due to these same obstacles, it is a start in looking at what this massive church population believes, how they practice the Prosperity Gospel, and whether they parallel their pastor's beliefs and behaviors. McGuire hypothesized that the individuals in Lakewood's congregation are inclined to participate only in the elements of the church that appeal to them and disregard or ignore the things that they do not embrace. This "cafeteria Christianity" is thought to be more common in large congregations, particularly those that have no denominational or hierarchical structure. Furthermore, Osteen's particular focus and rhetorical style are broad, sweeping, and leave room for wide theological interpretation.

My conversations with members and casual attenders support McGuire's theory, and provide evidence for a congregation that lacks a shared identity outside of their attendance at

²⁰⁴ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 228.

Lakewood and appreciation for Osteen. The diversity of the congregation is well-documented and undeniable. While Osteen and his staff do not provide demographic statistics to the public, it is clear that Lakewood appeals to a variety of races, classes, and ages. Beyond the different demographics represented, the members come from virtually every religious tradition and connect to Osteen's message from a variety of contexts. Among the fifteen people who shared their oral histories many were raised as Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and even a Jewish man who says he is still Jewish, but likes Joel Osteen's message of hope.

There is no question that a more expansive investigation into the Lakewood congregation is warranted. This analysis is a good place to start, however, as we get an in depth look at what attracted these people to Lakewood and the message of Osteen, and how they see themselves fitting into the larger context of the Lakewood congregation. Some patterns materialized among the oral histories including an appreciation for the positivity and inspiration within Osteen's sermons, a sense of being a part of something big by attending Lakewood Church, and a belief that Lakewood represents what Christianity should be and should have been all along, but was not.

I met with Jane after a Sunday morning service at Lakewood. She was wearing khakis and a silk shirt and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Jane is 32-years-old and says she's been attending Lakewood for three years. She approached me with a wide smile and an outstretched hand, and made me feel like a welcome visitor in her church home. Despite the massive size of Lakewood's facility, Jane seems at ease, and used to the oversized surroundings. We sit on a bench on the ground floor, and she shared her story of finding her church home at Lakewood.

Jane said she, “grew up in a ‘Christian’ home, but we only went to church on Christmas and Easter, and we did not talk about the Bible or anything.” One day Jane saw Joel Osteen on television and decided she should take advantage of the “megachurch around the corner.” She says after she attended her life changed for the better. “I got a better job, a better outlook, and a better life, and the only way I can explain it is through the work God is doing at Lakewood,” she said. For Jane, just attending Lakewood helped to improve her life. She did not mention her own faithfulness or any changes she had made personally, but instead implied that the “work God is doing” here includes helping her life circumstances improve. She also mentioned how being at Lakewood made her feel like she was a part of Christianity in a positive way, “not the negative stuff you hear about Christians excluding people and being haters.” Jane is acknowledging that certain elements of Christianity are criticized by the American public/media, but she does not feel that Lakewood is included in those critiques. Her association with the church does not make her feel like she is judging others because of her belief that Lakewood is not a church that places judgment on outsiders or non-Christians.

Jane’s sentiments align with many other Lakewood congregants who said they were proud of the way Lakewood keeps their message positive, avoids judging anyone, and focuses on personal betterment. Osteen’s focuses on how the members of the audience can improve professionally and personally rather than more difficult topics like helping others and political issues often discussed by evangelicals like gay rights and abortion. Osteen’s audience appears to appreciate his approach and finds the positive focus to be refreshing and inspiring. Some congregants did lament that Osteen did not include more biblical stories or theological “grit.” Even among those congregants, however, they said overall his message kept them coming back for more and satisfied them enough to stay at Lakewood.

Another Lakewood member, Nikki, grew up in a Catholic home, but converted to Pentecostalism as an adult. An African-American in her thirties, she is new to the Houston area, and began attending once she got settled in the city and looked for a church home. While she was raised Catholic, Nikki says she never felt connected to the message. She did not enjoy the tradition, and like so many among the current generation of churchgoers, Nikki decided to seek out a new way to practice her Christian faith. She began to attend a primarily African-American Pentecostal church where she says glossolalia was a “huge” part of the weekly experience. When she moved to Houston she was looking for a similar church experience, but decided to go to Lakewood Church instead to “see what the fuss was about,” and because her children (who had attended separately) loved the children’s ministries. I asked her if she had ever seen anyone practicing the gifts of the Holy Spirit at Lakewood Church and she said no and that she was disappointed that no one did. She said it was confusing to her that people were not being filled with the Holy Spirit, and she thought she might someday end up back at a more traditional Pentecostal church because she missed it so much. For now, though, Nikki likes the worship, sermons, and ministries at Lakewood, and is willing to overlook the absence of the overt displays of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Nikki’s experience at Lakewood Church is evidence that some people notice and dislike the absence of traditional Pentecostal expressions during the services. Other members echoed Nikki’s disappointment that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were not present during Lakewood’s services, but felt the worship made up for it. One woman said the lack of glossolalia and healing during the services did not bother her because she “feels the Spirit moving at each service” regardless. Others agreed and said they wished more traditional elements were included, but it is not a major concern because God is using Lakewood to reach so many people. Many narrators

repeated this idea that the size of the audience is more important than the theological depth of the material. They noted that Lakewood is being broadcast to so many people in addition to the huge in-house congregation, which for them makes up for any theological dilution perceived. For these people, the most important thing is the number of people who attend and watch the services online and on television rather than maintaining the outward expressions of Pentecostal traditions.

It is this enormous global audience that makes Lakewood and Osteen's sermons different than the others in this study. While the other churches also have online viewing and listening features that allow people to hear the sermons without attending the services, they only reach a fraction of the audience that Osteen reaches. Because Osteen's online sermons are edited versions of the in-house message, I talked to some of Osteen's followers who watch the broadcasts and/or watch online, but do not attend his Houston church to assess their attraction to Osteen's message. By contacting some of the people who tweeted to Osteen, I was able to ask people all over the world what they loved about Osteen's message and how he fit into their religious life.

One of the people I reached was Howard, an older Jewish man from Santa Ana, California who tweeted the following to Joel Osteen:



Figure 28: Tweet to Joel Osteen, Accessed March 3, 2013, www.twitter.com/howardgordon

Howard's tweet says a lot in fewer than 140 characters. Clearly, he does not see a conflict between his Jewish faith and Osteen's message. Because he represents a different voice, I was eager to see how Judaism and Christianity interact for him, or if he sees Osteen's message as secular.

Howard revealed during our conversations (which were conducted over the phone and email) that he was dealing with difficult personal circumstances when he came across an Osteen television broadcast that captivated him.²⁰⁵ "My first thought was, this could be for anyone!" he said. Ever since then, he said he has Tivo'd the weekly broadcasts and watches them often. He said Osteen's message is both inspiring and insightful and not "hypocritical" like many of the previous televangelists. Howard tunes in week after week, and believes there is no conflict between his Jewish faith and Joel's message.

Howard says his family was and still is "very" Jewish and he even considered becoming a rabbi. While he did not take that path, he still considers himself to be devout. He attends temple, and is involved in Jewish community and religious life. Howard says that Osteen's message, while rooted in Christianity, is for everyone regardless of religious background because

²⁰⁵ Oral History via phone with Howard on September 13, 2013 and via email from September 1-October 15, 2013.

he brings people together instead of tearing people apart. While Howard says he does not follow any other Christian ministers or buy evangelical products or music, he discovered Joel Osteen at the same time he was reading the best-selling book, *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne. This book was promoted heavily on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and is a modern incarnation of the positive thinking philosophy of Norman Vincent Peale and others. In many ways, it is a secular version of the Prosperity Gospel (or the Prosperity Gospel is a religious version of *The Secret* depending on your perspective). Given that Osteen’s message is often compared to this and other similar philosophies, it is not surprising that Howard would be drawn to both. Howard’s interest in both speaks to the similarity between the message of Osteen and those of non-religious motivational speakers. While Osteen has been criticized for this similarity, it broadens his appeal to include non-Christians like Howard who see Osteen as uplifting.

In addition to enjoying Osteen’s inspirational content, Howard has adopted Osteen’s approach to prayer. While many Jewish people participate in prayer, Howard says Osteen convinced him that prayer alters our current circumstances and help us gain health and personal betterment. He agrees with Osteen that prayer is a way to talk directly to God and ask him for things that we desire. In Howard’s case, he says he asks for strength getting through life’s difficulties and he prays for the safety and health of his family. He says he believes God does intervene in the life of his followers and God will “give you good things if you’re a good person.” The tweet below from Joel Osteen speaks to the same message:

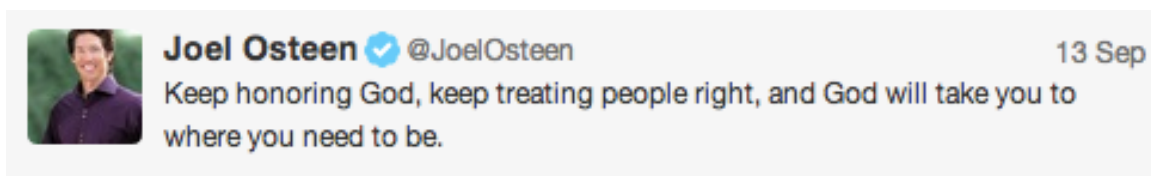


Figure 29: Joel Osteen Tweet, Accessed September 13, 2013, www.twitter.com/joelosteen

Howard says when he tunes into the Osteen sermons it feels like the pastor is talking directly to him. In fact, he said the experience feels similar to “reading a horoscope,” where Osteen inevitably says things each week that fit directly into Howard’s own circumstances. This reference to astrology was striking in that critics of astrology believe the predictions and proclamations are so broad that they fit everyone’s personality and/or circumstances in some way. Critics would say the same is true for Osteen’s sermons. By preaching broad inspirational messages, Osteen says things that are applicable to everyone regardless of where they are in their life. Some believe with this approach, what Osteen gains in followers he loses in theology. If anything, in the case of Howard, this less theologically based message would be more appealing due to his official religious affiliation of Judaism. In the end, Howard says Osteen’s message is not limited to any particular religion, but about the general concepts of God and goodness. He says, “Joel is not a swindler, and he has a positive message that everyone can benefit from—what is the harm in that?” For many, such a wide-reaching non-controversial message is a break from the divisiveness that can appear within and among religious denominations.

Because of Howard’s Jewish heritage, it is notable that he claims Osteen’s message is about God rather than Jesus. Howard says part of the reason that Osteen is so appealing is because he isn’t just focused on Jesus. Being Jewish, Howard says he is not interested in the part at the end of every sermon, when Osteen encourages viewers to give their lives to Christ. Howard’s approach of only taking away the parts of Osteen’s sermons that resonate with him, is not unusual, but is consistent with Meredith McGuire’s theory that this approach would be even more common among Osteen’s vast audience. Howard’s sense that Osteen is for everybody regardless of their faith or upbringing also gives legs to Meredith McGuire’s hypothesis that

people who “follow” Osteen do not necessarily mirror his beliefs or behaviors. Because Osteen lacks a denominational affiliation and his messages are broad and only marginally theologically focused, Osteen opens the door for people who would otherwise see the Christian message as exclusive.

During interviews, Osteen acknowledges his desire to reach as many people as possible. Indeed, Philip Wagner of Oasis has defended Osteen on the grounds that he is able to reach so many people with the Gospel. Howard is evidence that Osteen’s message is indeed reaching people who would probably not hear it otherwise. The caveat, of course, is that these people may or may not be converting to Christianity. Like Howard, they could be maintaining their existing religious faith and simply embracing the more inspirational elements of Joel Osteen and Prosperity Theology.

Many of Lakewood’s online and offline audience members emphasized a belief that Lakewood’s style and size are evidence of things to come. They talked about the televangelists and “fire and brimstone” style preachers of times past, and said Osteen offered a kinder, gentler Christianity that speaks to the needs of the current generation. Journalists write about the millennial generation as the “me” generation and the post-Boomer era is described as being more socially isolated due in part to technology and a decline in social capital.²⁰⁶ Osteen’s inspirational preaching style is a good fit for this “seeker” generation focused on individualism and self-help. His audience believes Osteen’s style is how church will look increasingly as people are drawn toward positivity and inclusion.

Not surprisingly, all of the Lakewood members, attenders, and viewers I spoke to believe the Prosperity message prayer and faithfulness reap rewards on earth. They embrace Osteen’s

²⁰⁶ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

message that God wants his followers to be happy and blessed. They are enthusiastic about the good things they believe God has in store for them in the days ahead, just as Osteen claims. The Lakewood audience agrees whole-heartedly with Osteen's promises of abundance. It is unclear whether they believed this message all along or whether Osteen's views influence their perspective. It would be difficult to continue to stay at Lakewood or listen to his sermons if you disagreed with the Prosperity point of view because it is virtually Osteen's only talking point.

Overall, Lakewood's audience is supportive of Osteen's message of hope and victory and believes his presentation emphasizes the inspirational themes that are important to them. While the audience acknowledges Osteen's sermons are less traditional than many Pentecostal preachers, members say the message of Jesus is not compromised by his approach. Furthermore, they believe the lively and passionate worship style is evidence of the strong work of the Holy Spirit in the church. Lastly, they believe in the Prosperity Gospel and believe that even that act of regularly attending Lakewood improves their lives through the inspiration and positivity they receive from Osteen's sermons and the worship experience. Ultimately they believe health and wealth are byproducts of faithfulness, but one way to be faithful is to attend a church like Lakewood. Lakewood's status as the largest church in America is evidence that the inspirational message of hope and victory strikes a chord with people, not just in the Houston area, but also around the world that find Osteen's message uplifting.

4.4 AUDIENCE CONCLUSIONS

The congregants of Lakewood, Oasis, and Victory Family Church embrace Prosperity Theology and find their churches' messages to be satisfying and inspiring. Through their online and offline

endorsement of the general inspirational message, all three congregations seem to be influencing or at least reinforcing the content that the pastors present to them. Overall, they are enthusiastic about motivational speech and Prosperity-based content, and encourage the pastors to continue preaching it. Additionally, the congregants prefer practical topics such as relationship, career, and life advice rather than more spiritual content like life after death or the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Despite their endorsement of the Prosperity message, the congregations showed varying levels of comfort with the designation itself, revealing themselves to be aware of some of the perceptions people can have about the movement. For the most part, the church members and attenders were satisfied with their churches' pastors, ministries and community. There were some who noted the content presented at times lacked spiritual depth, but ultimately felt reaching a greater number of people was preferable to meeting the spiritual needs of more "mature" Christians.

There are some inherent obstacles when researching large groups of people who all have individual experiences, motivations, and preferences that inform their religious beliefs and behaviors. In this study, there are thousands of people attending each church (and untold numbers connecting with the leaders/churches online), making it impossible for my sample to speak adequately for why they attend their church, watch a television broadcast, or follow a leader on Twitter. What the oral histories and observations speak to, however, is how some of the people came to attend each church, what makes them continue attending, and how they perceive the focus and mission of the leader(s). Through the narratives and observations, the congregants helped paint a picture of the many ways people are attracted to and remain committed to Prosperity Theology. Furthermore, by comparing their perception of the church's

message with the goals of the marketing directors and pastors, we see the ways the pastors and their audiences share foci.

The most striking finding regarding the audiences of the three research churches is how their beliefs, behaviors, and philosophies mirror what is being presented to them. Regardless of how the churches and pastors officially describe their mission and beliefs, the message that is presented to the audience is the best predictor of the audience's point of view. Because Lakewood Church in particular has a broader, more complicated audience due to its television broadcasts, it is the best group to look at in terms of message congruency with their pastor, Joel Osteen. The online and television audience expressed more enthusiasm for more general messages of hope, victory, and inspiration, which is precisely the content Osteen presents on Twitter and in the edited broadcast version of his Lakewood services. Lakewood's in-house audience, however, was more theologically sophisticated and is more enthusiastic about elements of the message that are in line with a typical neo-Pentecostal congregant.

This differentiation between Lakewood's online and offline audience was not as noticeable among Oasis and Victory Family Church members. Unlike Joel Osteen's online followers, who were less interested in the Pentecostal, evangelical, and Christian components of his message, Wagner and Nuzzo's online followers were more theologically focused. Because Oasis and Victory Family Church minister almost exclusively to their local following, the online users are mostly actual church members. As a result, their online users are more theologically focused, and tend to respond to the pastors with doctrinal fervor. While this is in contrast to Lakewood's online audience, it helps illuminate how different churches use digital media in different ways. For Lakewood, their digital presence expands Joel Osteen's larger brand and audience, but for local churches like Oasis and Victory it supplies their members with a greater

sense of community and a way to communicate with their pastors and fellow church members. The online audiences for these three churches are different, but the pastors seem ready to meet their needs by providing the content that their followers desire.

In addition to the three audiences demonstrating a preference for the content they were exposed to, they all showed knowledge and commitment to Prosperity Theology. All of the narrators believe, at least to some degree, that God has the desire and ability to bless his followers, and does so through prayer, particularly to those who are faithful. Without exception, each church member acknowledged this to be among his/her core beliefs, demonstrating a commitment to Prosperity Theology. While each person expressed individual qualifiers, exceptions, and nuance to their commitment to Prosperity Theology, they all agree on the basic principle that God wants to bless those who follow him. Given the commitment each of the churches shows to the Prosperity Gospel it is important that their members seem to be in agreement about its validity. The congregations of all three churches embrace the message presented by the pastors, which is a marketing success in its maintenance of the needs of their current audience.

Another pattern among narrators is a tendency to emphasize the elements of the pastor's sermons that resonate with them, while minimizing elements that are less consistent with their existing views. Osteen's audience, which includes more people from faiths outside of Protestant Christianity, is predictably the most flexible with their adherence to theological content presented. All three audiences downplayed elements of the pastors' sermons that were less applicable to them or incongruent with their theological standpoint, but Lakewood's audience did so most often.

Despite the theological cherry picking by congregants, all of the churches' audiences were supportive of the Prosperity Gospel message, and echoed the talking points of the pastors. Narrators frequently repeated themes such as God wanting to bless his followers and success and health as evidence of faithfulness. While some members wished there was more "meat" to the sermons, no one lamented the self-focused, inspirational, and practical content presented to them each week. The three congregations also reflected the individualistic approach to theology through their omission of themes like charity, community, and social justice during our conversations. Their focus, like their pastors, is primarily on self-help rather than community, however, that is not to say the churches or congregations are not involved in outreach, it is simply not prioritized in the same way that relationships and personal success are.

Despite their devotion to the principles of Prosperity Gospel, all three audiences grappled with the designation in different ways. Curiously, while Victory Family Church's sermons are the most Prosperity-focused of the churches in my study, the members were not comfortable with the label. Despite these reservations, they were enthusiastic in their support of the tenets of Prosperity Theology. Their hesitation is driven by a fear of public perception not a discomfort with the doctrine of the Prosperity movement. This fear could be a result of or exacerbated by Pastor John Nuzzo's frequent references to how Christians are being mocked and persecuted by the government, media, and general public, and they must stand up for themselves in elections and other civic life. Nuzzo often encourages his members to be bold in their faith, and aware of the ways Christians are being silenced. Such rhetoric reinforces the existing evangelical belief that they are under attack by secularists and other religious groups in the United States.

In general, Victory members expressed a strong commitment to the church and a connection with Nuzzo. They say he preaches "the whole Gospel message" as opposed to the

“watered down” content you hear at other churches. My narrators from Victory also acknowledged Nuzzo’s irreverence, and said it was evidence that he doesn’t say things just to please his audience, but is true to himself. This was important in the oral histories of the narrators. Victory members were also aware that Nuzzo tends to keep the message focused on new Christians, and that was their understanding for why the sermons sometimes lack theological “meat.” While they realized this lighter message might appeal to more people, they did not think it was simply to grow the church, but it was to save more souls. The perception of the Victory members was that the message of the Bible was not compromised by this approach, and this was precisely what the pastors said as well. The sermons do include greater theological references than those at Lakewood or Oasis, but, like them, they tend to be applied practically. This might be the “lighter” content to which the members are referring.

In contrast to Victory Christian Church, Oasis Church as an organization was not comfortable with the Prosperity Gospel designation, but their members were enthusiastic about the doctrine. More research could uncover the reasons for this disconnect between the congregants and their leaders in terms of enthusiasm for the label, and to determine if indeed this is more common than these two examples. It could simply speak to the challenges of relying on such a relatively small sample when the beliefs and experiences of the church members are so diverse and influenced by so much more than simply the pastor’s views. The beliefs of the congregants with whom I met were consistent with the church’s mission to serve and to give generously, and they were passionate about excellence. The mission is clearly being conveyed to the audience, and members respond favorably to it.

Lakewood’s audience is arguably the most racially, ethnically, and generationally diverse among the three churches, and had the least cohesion with regard to its beliefs and practices. As

Meredith McGuire theorized, perhaps due to its size, the congregants do not feel the same sense of obligation to maintain all the beliefs of the pastor, and instead pick the elements of the church, pastor, and sermons that appeal to them. The Lakewood congregants were committed to the idea that blessings were an important part of the Christian message, and were in agreement with Osteen's message of inspiration. They consistently stated that they believe that regardless of their current circumstances, they could rise above difficulties through the blessings that Jesus was waiting to bestow upon them. Many of the Lakewood members were not even familiar with some traditional Pentecostal elements like speaking in tongues, and were unaware of the church's background within this tradition. Despite this theological ignorance, they all said believed that the Holy Spirit exists and that he has a hand in the events on earth.

Overall, the audiences showed a general consistency with their pastors, and where there was dissonance the members did not seem to mind. They dismissed any discord between their beliefs and those of their pastors. The audience is embracing the Prosperity message, as well as the practical preaching and ministries designed to enhance personal relationships and professional life. The audiences are responding positively to these themes while generally showing less interest in more spiritually dense messages. They repeatedly emphasized their preference for messages that spoke to their personal needs, hurts, and desires, while being less concerned with traditional Pentecostal components. The congregants praised the pastors for making the Bible applicable to daily life.

While it can be difficult to determine causation with regards to whether the audience is influencing what content is presented by the pastors or whether the pastors are influencing what content the audience prefers. Regardless of the direction of influence, all three audiences show support for the Prosperity Gospel message and the practical approach of these pastors. It is also

difficult to determine the turnover rates of congregants at the churches, but all three churches are growing, which indicates they are attracting new members while maintaining most of their existing members. Because the churches measure success by the number of people attending, it is in their interest to maintain the satisfaction of their congregations. The pastors use the churches' growth as evidence that their members are satisfied with the content, ministries, and worship provided. Accordingly, they continue to provide the content they believe facilitates the growth of their congregations and generally the audiences respond favorably.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The embrace of marketing, media, and technology as means of reaching a broader audience, has long been a part of the evangelical tradition. Scholars have analyzed the group's use of business practices and noted the success the tradition has had using these methods in broadening the reception of their message. Evangelical churches acknowledge this use of traditional business models in order to grow their congregations, but claim the changes are superficial rather than substantive. Observing and meeting with staff, pastors, and congregants of Oasis, Lakewood, and Victory Family Church revealed several things about its strategies that illuminate how market, whether it has doctrinal implications, and how the audience is responding. First, the churches purposefully temper their theological rhetoric somewhat in an effort to remain broadly appealing. Second, the language used becomes more inspirationally-focused when the speaker perceives the audience to have more church outsiders. Third, the audiences are comfortable with the theological simplicity and respond favorably to the practical preaching and ministries. These are three churches that measure success by the number of people who attend, and their growth indicates victory by their own measure. The larger the churches become in terms of attendance, the more incentive they have to make the message as widely appealing as possible, and the research indicates they are attempting to maintain more general inspirational content as a result.

While the churches all claim their Pentecostal roots have not been compromised by recent efforts to modernize the music, ministries, and message, the focus of their sermons are

noticeably different from the focus of their official tenets (outlined on each of their websites). All three churches have charismatic roots and still officially embrace the idea of the Holy Spirit being active in our lives and manifesting itself through the gifts of the Holy Spirit outlined in the New Testament. Despite this official alignment with Pentecostalism, they do not emphasize traditional elements during sermons and there are no outward displays of glossolalia and healings in the Sunday services. If they occur at all, they are relegated to separate services designed specifically for that purpose such as Lakewood's healing services led by cancer survivor and Joel's mom, Dodie Osteen. In addition to downplaying these Pentecostal elements, the sermons focus primarily on practical issues, relationships, and careers rather than more traditional Christian foci such as salvation, eternal life, and charity. The messages now resemble the "spirituality" promoted by entertainers and television personalities such as Oprah Winfrey, and demonstrate a hybrid of religion and entertainment that could be called secular spirituality in an effort to appear current.

The sermons of these churches, while rooted in Christianity, focus on earthly life rather than heavenly concepts. They make biblical content applicable to daily life, and in so doing avoid more spiritual ideas. Even when Pentecostal elements are highlighted it is done without encouraging the more controversial elements like speaking in tongues or spontaneous healing. The Holy Spirit is referred to as an entity that can improve your life, inspire you, and help you accomplish your goals. The pastors speak of the power of the Holy Spirit to improve your circumstances rather than as a conduit to God or an abstract spiritual being. This approach is in contrast with the Pentecostal preachers of thirty years ago who prided themselves on outward displays of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, passionate preaching, and appearing behaviorally different from mainstream society. These churches make every effort to resemble secular society

in architecture, clothing, socializing, and interests. The modernization goes beyond the superficial, however, and into the presentation of the message, making it is clear that there is a theological shift as well.

While the offline messages of all three churches use more insider language than the online message, there has been a shift away from more traditional themes across the board. This substantiates Mara Einstein's hypothesis that greater marketing would result in the changing of the "product to suit the market."²⁰⁷ Regardless of their decision to maintain the tenets of traditional Pentecostalism, they have adjusted the message's foci to suit the audience.

The decision to present a more inspirational message and downplay the spiritual components and strict moral expectations, could affect evangelicals' ability to maintain a shared identity and worldview. One of the most important accomplishments of the evangelical movement has been their ability to mobilize voters and maintain a strong religious cultural identity, making them powerful politically and socially. By tempering the theology, they might increase in size while decreasing in strength. While this outcome remains to be seen empirically, there is some evidence that suggests their unified worldview is weakening. Their political behavior in the last two presidential elections, while still notable, was not as cohesive as in previous elections, and some scholars note the generational division among evangelicals as younger Christians embrace progressive ideas about environmentalism and even gay rights.²⁰⁸ Such incongruity among evangelicals could be exacerbated by less rigorous theology and ultimately fracture their sense of shared identity. While the growth of the churches in the midst of doctrinal tempering undermines the Finke and Stark model of church growth, the less

²⁰⁷ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, xi.

²⁰⁸ Smidt, *American Evangelicals Today*, 8; Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*.

stringent theological approach could be manifesting itself in a subtler disjointed religious group rather than a smaller one.²⁰⁹

While the theological tempering occurs across venues, the presumption of who makes up the audience affects the degree to which the less doctrinal approach is taken. In other words, the more secular the audience is perceived to be, the more secular the message presented is. Accordingly, online these pastors post more inspirational or informational content rather than theological content. Likewise, in the case of Joel Osteen, his television broadcasts omit the more traditional Christian elements including worship, tithe, and Victoria Osteen's sermons, which are more Bible-focused than her husband's. The broadcasts include only Joel's sermons, which are lighter, more casual, and include more general references to God and biblical content.

It is unclear whether this audience-determined presentation is intentional, but each church has marketing directors who are particular about how the church and its pastors are presented online and offline. As such, it is plausible that their awareness of Twitter's more theologically diverse audience as compared to the in-house congregation would have an impact on the content they choose to present. The churches' rubric of success as measured in numbers of people attending provides an incentive for them to appeal to the largest number of people. Therefore, emphasizing elements online, which are more attractive to seekers and the "unchurched" fits with their marketing goals. This approach is also taken at church-hosted community events where area residents are invited to attend and existing members are encouraged to bring friends. These events often exclude references to theology and overt Christian elements, even in the case of Victory Family Church's annual Easter event. Even the name of the event, Eggstravaganza, speaks to the secular rather than religious aspect of the tradition.

²⁰⁹ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

The content in the sermons of the three churches, while more traditional than the online message, is skewed toward practical concerns, and therefore less religiously conservative than traditional Pentecostalism. Largely gone are the warnings of eternal damnation and punishment for sin, and in their place are inspirational messages and advice for relationships. The pastors have embraced a message of hope and victory and avoid more controversial topics as a means of attracting the largest possible audience. The audience, however, is responding favorably to this shift. All three churches are growing, so much so that in all three cases the churches relocated to larger, more extravagant buildings to accommodate the expanding audiences. The churches are growing due to word of mouth, presence in the community, and intentional marketing. Lakewood and Oasis Churches are growing among racial minorities as well, and accommodating them through Spanish language services and resources.

The audiences embrace the idea that their church is designed to make the unchurched and “seekers” feel comfortable. They accept the notion that the sermons might not be as doctrinally dense, and say they prefer the more practical preaching. All three groups noted how important it is for them to feel like God cares about the details of their life. When the pastors make the sermons relevant to their daily lives, the congregants say they are able to apply the message immediately making them feel like they can be better spiritually, professionally, and personally. Their satisfaction with the practical approach to Pentecostalism is evident in their oral histories with them, but also simply in the ever-growing numbers of people attending the churches.

Audience enthusiasm is not limited to the walls of the church; indeed, online congregants are interacting with their pastors and encouraging the presentation of inspirational content. The huge online following of Joel Osteen is particularly enthusiastic about his motivational thoughts and responds accordingly by retweeting, replying, and “favoriting” the tweets of this mega-

pastor. While the other two churches provide largely informational content online, their audiences too respond most favorably to the inspirational content. Indeed, all three audiences have embraced the language of Prosperity Theology using words like “blessed,” “victory,” “hope,” and “purpose” to describe where they are in life and where they want to be when tweeting to their churches and pastors.

Joel Osteen’s television and Internet reach is so broad that he is often ministering to people who are not affiliated with Pentecostalism or even Christianity. Staying “positive” works well among his religiously diverse audience. Audience members appreciate the inspiration, but are sometimes unfamiliar with and even opposed to the traditional elements of Pentecostalism. They, however, connect with his message that God wants the best for those who follow him and the idea that God is interested and involved in our personal lives. Osteen’s belief that there are “better days ahead,” encourages his viewers and followers regardless of their religious background and/or preferences.

The Prosperity Gospel, despite its name, is not all about money. For the pastors, churches, and congregants, the message is about the ways God wants to and will intervene in the lives of those who trust and follow him. While financial success is included in this worldview among the oral histories, it was not the primary focus. Indeed, they seemed most interested in a more general idea of “blessings” that included financially, personal, and professional success. They also believe marriage and familial success was related to their faith. Because of this understanding of the relationship between faith and daily life, the pastors emphasize practical principles in their sermons thereby lessening the emphasis on traditional doctrine. Despite the theological tempering, the churches, pastors, and congregants claim the core tenets of

Christianity and Pentecostalism are maintained. They do not believe their religious devotion or Christian foundation is weakened by a more practical approach.

The decision by these churches to take a more practical approach, however, raises questions about whether evangelicals more generally will be able to maintain their unified worldview and shared-identity. As the churches within Prosperity Theology grow larger, making millionaires, best-selling authors, and celebrities out of many of their leaders, it is unclear whether this success will translate to a stronghold politically and culturally. If, as Meredith McGuire theorizes, the larger congregations such as Lakewood Church lack theological cohesion, they might not maintain the societal influence for which evangelicals have become famous.

This study of Oasis, Lakewood, and Victory Family Church indicates the churches are taking a secular approach to marketing their message by appealing to more practical rather than spiritual concerns of their congregations. As the churches continue to grow, in part by attracting people unfamiliar with more traditional Christianity or who have left stricter churches, they will be faced with the complications of meeting the needs of an audience with a wide range of theological preferences. If Osteen's approach as the pastor of nation's largest church is any indication, Prosperity pastors will focus on wide-reaching ideas of inspiration, hope, and victory with a focus on ministering to people regarding their daily lives, marriages, and careers. Accordingly, these messages will continue to replace more spiritual concepts and condemnation for sin.

Despite the rapid growth of evangelicalism and Prosperity Gospel, the findings here elicit questions about whether their growth will correlate with greater cultural and political power. Doctrinal tempering might bring larger numbers of people, but not necessarily the shared

worldview that comes with strict adherence to a particular theology or moral code. If the goal of these churches is greater size rather than greater power or ability to mobilize, they might be sacrificing strong theological commitment for a larger audience.

The sermons and Twitter feeds of these churches also point to a shift from traditional Pentecostalism toward a more commercialized spirituality also embraced by Oprah Winfrey and others who focus on positive-thinking and personal betterment. While secularization theory has not been widely embraced among religious scholars and sociologists of the United States due to high adherence/attendance rates, my findings point to a some shifts in the churches' content toward secularization that warrant further investigation. The use of business and marketing techniques to increase attendance could have inspired a shift toward non-denominational, earthly-focused, broadly palatable Christianity.

Ultimately, the audience is left to decide whether it accepts the deeper (sometimes unspoken) doctrinal elements the church claims as its official tenets. Many audience members like Joel Osteen viewer, Howard, take the parts of the message they prefer and disregard the more traditional theological elements. It remains to be seen how this practical approach will affect audience loyalty, community outreach, and evangelical influence more broadly. For the pastors, the success of their churches is judged almost completely on the number of people they reach in person, online, and, if applicable, on television. While all three churches still maintain some outreach programs, their marketing strategies are designed to increase the number of people in attendance as a symbol of potential souls reached. Their measure of success is based on "earthly" bodies in the same way their message is based on earthly success. As such, they have an incentive to continue to make their messages, ministries, and music as widely appealing as possible.

APPENDIX A

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH SAMPLE (Oral History)

Project Title: Presents of God: The Marketing of the American Prosperity Gospel

Researcher: Susie Meister Butler

Introduction: You are being asked to take part in an oral history research study being conducted by Susie Meister Butler for a dissertation under the supervision of Paula Kane in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

According to the Oral History Association, “oral history is a method of gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life.” You have been approached for an interview because you are or were affiliated with one of the three churches being studied in this project.

Purpose: The goal of this oral history project is to analyze the marketing of the American Prosperity Gospel.

Procedures: The interview will take approximately one hour. During the interview you will be asked questions about your religious background, your affiliation with one of the churches in this study, and your beliefs/ideas/feelings on Prosperity Gospel and other Christian traditions including, but not limited to evangelicalism and Pentecostalism.

The interview will be recorded through notes by Susie Meister Butler transcribed. The results of your interview might be included in a dissertation project.

Risks/Benefits: The risks associated with participation in this interview are minimal. There are no direct benefits to you from participation, but your willingness to share your knowledge and experiences will contribute to the study of American religion.

Confidentiality: Unless you check below to request anonymity, your name might be referenced in the dissertation and in any material generated as a result of this research. If you request anonymity, the notes of your interview will be closed to public use, and your name will not appear in the transcript or referenced in any material obtained from the interview.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this interview is voluntary. Even if you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the interview without penalty, or request confidentiality, at any point during the interview. You may also choose not to answer specific questions or discuss certain subjects during the interview or to ask that portions of our discussion or your responses not be recorded in the notes.

Contacts and Questions: If you have any questions about this research project or interview, feel free to contact Susie Meister Butler at smb113@pitt.edu.

Statement of Consent: I agree to participate in this oral history interview, and to the use of this interview as described above. My preference regarding the use of my name is as follows:

___ I agree to be identified by name in any transcript or reference to the information contained in this interview.

___ I wish to remain anonymous in any transcript or reference to the information contained in this interview.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

WEBSITE AND SOCIAL NETWORKING: MEASUREMENT AND SCALE ITEMS

Content Analysis Word List:

1. Inspiration--Intercoder reliability = 66.66 similarity
 - Victory
 - Bless
 - Hope
 - Goodness
 - Joy
 - Peace
 - Dream
 - Encourage
 - Believe
2. Health--Intercoder reliability = 83.33% similarity
 - Wellness
 - Miracle
 - Body
 - Illness
 - Heal
 - Sick
3. Salvation--Intercoder reliability = 100% similarity
 - Saved
 - Faith
 - Hell
 - Eternal
 - Heaven
 - Grace
 - Atonement

- Sin
4. Promotion--Intercoder reliability = 100% similarity
- Event
 - Interview
 - Watch
 - Tonight
 - Appearance
 - Book
 - Television
 - Guest
 - Crowd
5. Wealth--Intercoder reliability = 100% similarity
- Money
 - Abundant
 - Job
 - Success
 - Payday
 - Reward
 - Career
 - Economy
 - Favor
6. Charity--Intercoder reliability = 85.71 similarity
- Needs
 - Help
 - Generous
 - Giving
 - Give
 - Offering
 - Poor
 - Missions
7. Holy Spirit--Intercoder reliability = 100% similarity
- Holy Ghost
 - Holy Spirit
 - Speak in Tongues
 - Prophecy
 - Gifts of the Holy Spirit

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