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AN AUDIENCE FOR POLITICAL GAIN

Abstract

Although he ultimately disputed the scope and semantics of it, televangelist Joel Osteen's "endorsement" of presidential candidate Donald Trump in a Fox News interview trended on social media for a few days in March 2016. The support sparked intense debate and prompted Osteen's Houston-based mega-church to issue a statement that categorically denied an official Trump endorsement. Osteen has been adamant that he has not supplied an official endorsement for the subsequent elections (including 2020 and 2024). Using Edwin Black's second persona theory, this paper will explain why neither Osteen nor his ideal audience would ever officially grant a public endorsement of a political candidate. The second persona analysis identifies the characteristics of the "implied" audience in Osteen's discourse and creates an opportunity for a third persona analysis—those silenced or negated. In doing so, it will seek to identify the candidate Osteen's ideal audience member would most likely support and discuss the moral implications of that choice.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Joel Osteen, Media, Presidential Endorsement, Social Media

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ARTFULLY DODGING A PRESIDENTIAL ENDORSEMENT: HOW JOEL OSTEEN USES RHETORIC TO BUILD AN AUDIENCE FOR POLITICAL GAIN

I. Introduction

On the weekend of March 11–13, 2016, a Fox News Radio interview featuring Joel Osteen went viral on social media. A short clip featuring Osteen’s opinion about Trump from the October 2015 on Fox News Radio was circulating on YouTube and Twitter. In the clip, Osteen referred to Trump as “...an incredible communicator and brander” and said Trump has “...been a friend of our ministry. He’s a good man.”¹ The Twitter universe quickly labeled the video as an official endorsement by Osteen and YouTube content creators were beginning to comment on the implications of such an endorsement. A few days later, Osteen’s Houston-based megachurch, Lakewood Church, released a statement categorically denying that he had endorsed Donald Trump.² Though Osteen sought to quash the rumors by vehemently denying he endorsed Trump, he was nevertheless criticized for his viewpoint.

In the subsequent presidential election cycles (2020 and 2024), Osteen avoided any public discussion of either Biden or Trump. His “near endorsement” of 2016 remains in the minds of political pundits, who know that pastors can be critical to securing a high level of support of Trump by evangelicals. Whether one should expect Osteen to be political, however, is a different question entirely. Osteen grew up in a Southern Baptist Church with evangelical roots alongside his father, who eventually made it an independent church after being “baptized in the Holy Spirit” and leading a charismatic movement. He stepped into his current role quickly, less than one year after his first sermon and after his father died. This gave Lakewood church a completely new and unexpected direction. It was not long before the church’s membership blew up as Osteen abandoned the evangelical and/or charismatic frameworks his father put in place in favor of a place where all could come and be accepted. Given his emphasis on everyone coming and being accepted for who they are, it is surprising that he would make a statement about a political candidate, which could potentially make some of his congregants uncomfortable.

If you are unfamiliar with Osteen, you might wonder why his presidential endorsement, or lack thereof, could become a trending social media topic. A presidential endorsement from Osteen matters because he is the senior pastor of the largest church in America, Lakewood Church, which has more than forty-five thousand adult attendees each week. His church meets weekly in the Compaq Center—the former arena for the Houston Rockets professional basketball team.³ He has a massive national and international platform. Osteen’s sermons reach two hundred million households in the United States and an international audience across six continents.⁴ He is a *New York Times* bestselling author, and Barbara Walters recognized him as one of the ten most fascinating people in the world.⁵ To call him a social media influencer is an understatement. As of January 1, 2024, Osteen had over twenty-six million Facebook followers, five million Instagram followers, three million YouTube followers, and ten million Twitter (now X) followers.⁶

Osteen is, by far, the best-known and perhaps the most influential televangelist and religious voice today. His calling Trump a “friend of Lakewood” and “a good man” stands in contrast to

¹ Grace White, “Joel Osteen Denies Twitter Rumors of Trump Endorsement,” *USA Today*, March 15, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/03/15/joel-osteen-under-fire-trump-comments/81799700/>.

² Michael Gryboski, “Joel Osteen, Lakewood Quash Rumor of Endorsing Donald Trump,” *Christian Post*, March 16, 2016, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/joel-osteen-lakewood-church-rumor-endorsing-donald-trump-159293/>.

³ Amanda Cochran, “Lakewood Church: The Houston Megachurch by the Numbers,” *Click2Houston*, June 3, 2023, <https://www.click2houston.com/news/local/2021/12/03/lakewood-church-the-houston-megachurch-by-the-numbers/>.

⁴ Lakewood Church, “Our History,” accessed January 1, 2024, <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/about/history>.

⁵ Barbara Walters, “The Ten Most Fascinating People of 2006,” ABC News, December 12, 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=2716887>.

⁶ I visited his Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter accounts in my browser on January 1, 2024. These numbers are accurate as of that date.

Trump's public statements mocking disabled individuals and veterans, bragging about marital infidelity, and attributing a reporter's questions to her menstrual cycle.⁷ Evangelical America is desperate for someone to show off the "good side" of their chosen candidate. It matters now because Osteen has amassed a national and international platform that positions him to shape public perception, and perhaps public policy. Such an endorsement would help Trump, who faced ninety-one felony counts, of which he has been charged with 34. It is not likely in Osteen's interest, however, to offer such an endorsement. Analysis of his rhetoric suggests he may instead be positioning himself for political gain now that Trump has returned to the White House.

A key element of this positioning is to build an audience that is sympathetic to an apolitical approach. In deploying this audience, Osteen seeks to leverage a base of followers that will maintain the power and control of Lakewood Church in the greater Houston area. The maintenance of this base will give him access to the credibility needed to hold his position of authority as America's pastor. This study will look at how Osteen uses rhetoric to build an audience, the tenets of his rhetoric and second and third persona to craft his audience. It will then examine how he seeks to engage and deploy this audience politically.

What political gain might Osteen be seeking, specifically? Well, it has been suggested that he stands to benefit from the Trump presidency because his prosperity gospel is a good match with the extravagant way that Trump operates. The author Sarah Posner, in her 2017 article entitled "Joel Osteen is the Quintessential Religious Figure of the Trump Era," expands upon this link between Trump and Osteen.⁸ In the subtitle, Posner places her conclusion that Trump represents the pinnacle of the Republican Party's embrace of prosperity gospel values.⁹ This article from 2017 represents the first Trump term, but given the ongoing conversation about a White House ballroom in this second Trump term, its major points seem as applicable as ever. Osteen wants to continue to latch onto this embrace of the prosperity gospel to financially benefit from the politicians who seek to be around and take photographs with him.

On this topic, as well as the topic of Osteen's political alignment with Trump, it is worth quoting a 2019 *Financial Times* article by Edward Luce:

After one of his Madison Square Garden shows, Osteen and his wife Victoria were invited by Trump for a private meeting at Trump Tower. "Trump took out a box of gold watches and said to Victoria: 'Pick out any one you like,'" related a person who was present at that meeting, who asked to remain nameless. "Then he offered Joel any Trump tie he liked. He could not have been more charming." This was before Trump became president. Even then, however, Trump knew that any public association could damage Osteen. Though Osteen is politically conservative, he does not wear it on his sleeve. In contrast to most southern preachers, he keeps his thoughts to himself on abortion and homosexuality. His congregation is racially diverse. Among those spotted at his Nights of Hope is Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives. When Barack Obama was president, he pulled Osteen aside after a White House prayer breakfast to be photographed together. "Politicians like to associate with fame," says the University of Akron's John Green. "At the end of the day, they are all in the popularity business." Wealthy people crave selfies with Osteen. Presidents may covet his blessing.¹⁰

In the above quote, Edward Luce speaks about how Osteen and Trump met privately before Trump became president. Luce also quotes a source who suggests that Trump knew that public association with him would hurt Osteen. Luce also takes for granted that Osteen is conservative, stating that he is obviously politically conservative outright. This is an example of what I am here calling the Financial Aesthetic Working Consciousness persona theory.¹¹ The article argues that it seems that Osteen does quite a bit of political maneuvering behind the scenes. This

⁷ "Transcript of Mitt Romney's Speech on Donald Trump," *New York Times*, March 3, 2016.

⁸ Sarah Posner, "Joel Osteen Is the Quintessential Religious Figure of the Trump Era," *Rolling Stone*, August 31, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/joel-osteen-is-the-quintessential-religious-figure-of-the-trump-era-125003/>.

⁹ Posner, "Quintessential Religious Figure."

¹⁰ Edward Luce, "A Preacher for Trump's America: Joel Osteen and the Prosperity Gospel," *Financial Times*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/3990ce66-60a6-11e9-b285-3acd5d43599e>.

maneuvering provides an interesting backdrop to Osteen's rhetoric for the purposes of this article.

II. Audience, Second Persona and The Three Tenets

A. Audience

The rhetorical concept of audience offers a viable new approach for analyzing Osteen. This work addresses the concept of rhetoric from the perspective of the role of the speaker in the construction of their audiences. As such, to understand the attraction of Joel Osteen, one must identify the characteristics of the person he ultimately challenges listeners to be. He calls his listeners to hold key values, goals, practices, and beliefs. One must also understand how he persuades listeners to embrace his ideology and whom he ignores as he attempts to persuade. Since Osteen is a careful rhetorician, this approach enables engagement of the artistry and complexity of Osteen's well-crafted words. Osteen's language treats his audience as if they have no problems, are not hurting and do not face the problems of the world in the same way that normal people do. He seeks to lift people out of the malaise of middle class living and towards a transcendental goal of seeing life as more than meets the eye. This tactic works marvelously and creates a metamorphosis of the collective audience from struggling to "blessed."

That metamorphosis also functions to allow for a similar transformation on the individual level as people strive to become the best version of themselves. Benson similarly notes a rhetorical strategy that allows the listeners to connect to a speaker that treats the given audience as if they are the ideal audience.¹² He also states that a successful rhetorical approach in a given situation and shows how it amplifies the audience by lifting it to its full potential.¹³ Analysis of Osteen's sermons suggests that he accomplishes this by always reminding his congregants that they are "blessed." His congregants are invited to view his preaching as inspirational because it does not "call out" anyone. Instead, it "calls on" them to be the best version of themselves.

It should be acknowledged, however, that just because an analysis of Osteen's sermons suggests that he prefers his audience to take an apolitical stance, that does not mean it always works. People are complex and sometimes vary in their receptivity of the message that is presented to them. Also, some members of his church only attend Osteen's weekly meetings and do not attend any other events that they have during the week. The best that Osteen can do is suggest that people think a certain way and guide them in a particular direction. Some of his members may have their own political beliefs that they don't share within the context of his ministries. In fact, the reluctance to take a side politically on the part of his audience may reflect a deeply held belief that Christians are not supposed to take political stances.

B. Second Persona

The notion that Osteen and his ideal audience would never publicly endorse a political candidate is better understood when one understands Osteen's second persona. The scholar Edwin Black developed the concept of a second persona in rhetoric. As Black notes, "rhetorical discourse implies an auditor, and that in most cases the implication will be sufficiently suggestive as to enable the critic to link this implied auditor to an ideology."¹⁴ He encourages critics to devote their attention to analyzing discourse because the discourse contains an "implied," "imagined," or "invoked" audience, the second persona.¹⁵ At the core of his argument is the belief that a close analysis of any discourse reveals "a model of what the

¹¹ This phrase, which I am coining here, is about the idea that there are facts, such as Osteen's political conservatism, which are taken for granted in popular discourse. In popular discourse, a Southern preacher is assumed to be politically conservative, so that the *Financial Times* article above can state this without it being challenged. Given the relative paucity of academic sources that are willing to speak on this specifically, appealing to independent journalism should suffice to ground the popular discourse academically.

¹² Thomas W. Benson, "Rhetoric as a Way of Being," in *American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism*, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 314.

¹³ Benson, "Rhetoric as a Way of Being," 315.

¹⁴ Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory*, ed. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 334.

¹⁵ Black, "Second Persona," 333.

rhetorician would have his real auditor become.”¹⁶ Once the rhetorician asks auditors to become a particular thing, the critic is then able to make a moral judgment about the characteristics of the language user. Black’s second persona is more of a speaker-focused approach as opposed to the listener-focused approach of the audience employed above.

Black’s work also equips one to identify the imagined audience Osteen conjures when constructing a message. Osteen’s discourse is designed to make the listener believe he does not promote a particular political, social, or economic agenda. However, Black’s work forces one to analyze the tokens in Osteen’s discourse, which are “the cues that tell auditors how they are to view the world.”¹⁷ In his sermons and books, Osteen invites people to see the world through the lens of toxic positivity. This often distracts from a close analysis of Osteen’s writings that, when coupled with Black’s theoretical framework, reveals the actions, viewpoints, roles, and characteristics of the imagined person in Osteen’s discourse. Black’s work ultimately helps me approach the question, “Who is Osteen’s imagined audience?” His audience is ultimately whatever he needs them to be in each circumstance, and they have by necessity been intentionally trained and crafted to be situationally emergent. To tease this idea out further, we will explore the three tenets that identify and distinguish Osteen’s ideal auditor and imagined audience, after describing them.

C. *The Three Tenets*

This research will now discuss the three tenets that guide Osteen’s ideal auditor, identify his imagined audience, and thereby explain why neither Osteen nor his ideal auditor would publicly endorse a presidential candidate. It will then use the same theoretical lens to discuss which candidate Osteen would most likely endorse.

Osteen’s core message contains three dominant tenets. He summarizes them in the following statement,

To live your best life now, you must start looking at life through eyes of faith, seeing yourself rising to new levels. See your business taking off. See your marriage restored. See your family prospering. See your health restored. See your dream coming to pass.¹⁸

For Osteen, his second persona is wealthy, healthy, and relationship conscious. The above epigraph summarizes these three tenets in Osteen’s discourse. First, he encourages his audience to manifest the idea that will acquire more wealth when he says, “See your business taking off.” Although the average person does not and will not own a business, Osteen plants the idea that it’s possible. Second, he requests that his listeners be relationship-conscious when he tells them to “See your marriage restored” and your “family prospering.” Despite the country’s high divorce numbers and families being in trouble again, they can dream.¹⁹ Finally, he encourages his audience to be health-conscious when he tells them to “See your health restored.” He focuses on health despite major problems in his state with healthcare availability and coverage.²⁰ Osteen’s focus is on distraction from reality; he hopes that you will not squint too closely when you look in the mirror. Rather, he hopes that you will remember the above framework and rise above your circumstances.

The interrelatedness of the three categories of this framework is conveyed in the statement “see your dream coming to pass.” His discourse equates being wealthy, healthy, and relationally prosperous with one’s dream coming to pass. If systemic issues are blocking you from resolving your issues; you will never hear about this in an Osteen sermon. If life is dealing you a bad hand, you can overcome it by being “blessed.” Having listened to over a hundred Osteen sermons, he constantly talks about people realizing their dreams, never acknowledging that most people don’t have inherited privilege the way he did. Osteen is constructing an auditor

¹⁶ Black, “Second Persona,” 335.

¹⁷ Black, “Second Persona,” 334.

¹⁸ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: FaithWords, 2004), 4.

¹⁹ Brad Wilcox, “The Good and Bad News About Family Life in America,” abridged version of testimony before the U.S. Senate Joint Economic Committee hearing “Improving Family Stability for the Well-Being of Children,” February 25, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8v_b1bRjyIU.

²⁰ Sally Strong, “New Survey Confirms Big Gaps in Texas Health Care Availability and Coverage,” University of Houston, October 20, 2022.

who desires to be financially, relationally, and health conscious and thereby realize their dreams. In doing so, he hopes to connect these concepts and inspire people to strive beyond their circumstances to be more. Osteen knows perfectly well that if he doesn't give them a roadmap that shows them how to do so, they will keep coming back for more inspiration.

Throughout the years, Osteen has repeated an inspirational rhetoric that is built on the theme of prospering. He emphasizes it in his second book, *Become a Better You*, when he asserted, "God wants us to prosper. But, it is not just about money; it is also about health and good relationships...."²¹ Two years later, he reemphasized this in his third book when he said, "Is today the day for you to accomplish your goal, to land your dream job, to find love, to restore your health?"²² Osteen reaffirms this three-part ideology in a sermon posted to his YouTube channel on October 30, 2023. He shares, "...get ready, release is coming. Release from sickness and chronic pain. Release from poverty and lack. Release from depression and anxiety. Release from loneliness, unfulfilled relationships."²³ A release, in other words, from the bondage to the problems of this world into a framework that emphasizes wealth, health and strong relationships.

D. Artfully Dodging an Endorsement

The question of whether Osteen would endorse a presidential candidate is answered by his second persona, who also is focused on relationships that are wealth and health conscious. This persona of his rhetoric would never allow Osteen to endorse a presidential candidate because he deliberately manages relationships in a manner focused on accumulating wealth and maintaining good health. He has made a living avoiding uncomfortable conversations about religion and politics. Osteen's relationship-driven auditor aims to avoid these discussions by appearing apolitical. Osteen's affirmation of Donald Trump is noteworthy because he attempts to always present himself as apolitical. But given the high stakes of a presidential election, Osteen must at least give a wink and a nod to his chosen candidate. After interviewing Lakewood congregants about Osteen and Trump, Edward Luce of the *Financial Times* determined that Osteen is a "Preacher for Trump's America."²⁴ When Osteen receives such an assessment, he knows that it benefits him and his image as America's preacher. Now that he is completely silent, he is more than happy to let the press do his talking for him.

One of the ways the relationship-conscious Osteen maintains his apolitical status is by intentionally avoiding divisive political topics. He demonstrates this posture when he notes (on numerous occasions) that he never addresses controversial political issues in his sermons and interviews.²⁵ When asked why he employs this strategy, he states, "You know, the reason [I avoid divisive political topics] is because I feel like I'm called to reach a broad range of people. When you start getting political, almost immediately, you divide 50-50. And so, I didn't want them to think he's [Joel Osteen] Democrat or Republican because half of them are going to turn you off."²⁶ Osteen is of course such a controversial figure that he probably could be a little more revealing of his political stance without facing massive fallout. But if he did so, that might be surrendering some of the power of his role as rhetorician to his audience or the media, something he is reluctant to do.

Also, when one considers that the church he serves has more than fifty thousand members, besides being a *New York Times* bestselling author and a world-famous preacher, it is understandable that he is reluctant to part with power. Using Osteen's framework of the ideal

²¹ Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 32.

²² Joel Osteen, *It's Your Time: Activate Your Faith, Achieve Your Dreams, and Increase in God's Favor* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 7.

²³ Joel Osteen, "Your Time for Release," YouTube video, 28:10, October 30, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QOzC7QvWWY>.

²⁴ Luce, "Preacher for Trump's America."

²⁵ Joel Osteen, "Interview with Joel Osteen," by Larry King, *Larry King Live*, CNN, June 20, 2005, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/20/lkl.01.html>; Joel Osteen, "Interview with Joel Osteen," by Paula Zahn, *Paula Zahn Now*, CNN, July 18, 2005, <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0507/18/pzn.01.html>; Joel Osteen, "Pastor Joel Osteen on FNS," by Chris Wallace, *Fox News Sunday*, Fox News, December 23, 2007, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2007/12/23/transcript-pastor-joel-osteen-on-fns.html>.

²⁶ Joel Osteen, "Pastor Joel Osteen: An Everyday Message, Magnified," interview by Guy Raz, *Weekend All Things Considered*, NPR, April 28, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/151573487>.

personas, endorsing would inhibit the ability to accumulate wealth through relationships. If Osteen communicated his political preference, that could affect his bottom line. Both sides will ultimately claim that Osteen clearly supports them. In summary, it behooves Osteen and his ideal auditor to avoid divisive topics and appear apolitical.

If Osteen's ideal audience cannot avoid a political conversation, then he or she should implement a strategy that aims toward unity. Though Osteen primarily aims to avoid divisive political discussions, he has been unable to avert addressing all heated political topics.²⁷ In unavoidable situations, Osteen suggests that one should "keep it as civil as possible...take the high road...and treat [...] other[s] with respect and the honor that everyone [...] deserves."²⁸ Of course, this quote suggests that avoiding directly engaging the topic is still greatly preferred. Osteen has trained his audience to shrewdly sidestep anything that is related to the cares of this world and to focus on spiritual or "heavenly" things.

The ideal auditor should not only keep discourse civil to maintain his or her relationships but also strive to maintain his or her health-conscious persona. Osteen further demonstrated this belief when questioned about heated political debates. "Well, I don't like anger. I don't think it's healthy. I don't like to breed anger or for anybody else to do it. I like to be passionate...But just don't cross the lines."²⁹ Though special circumstances may draw one into a heated debate, the auditor should aim for a civil resolution. Civility should be the goal because it helps the person avoid dividing their base and helps the ideal persona maintain a healthy balance.

In 2007 and 2012, when presidential elections were on the horizon, Osteen was forced to enter divisive political conversations. During these times, he was asked questions that could clearly divide his base, such as, "Is Obama a Christian?" "Is Mitt Romney a Christian?" "Should Harriet Miers's religion be used as a selling point for her court nomination?" or "What do you think about Romney's affiliation with the Mormon Church?"³⁰ These are undoubtedly controversial topics. However, regardless of how controversial the topic, Osteen believes that the ideal persona should "keep it as civil as possible...take the high road...and treat [...] other[s] with respect and the honor that everyone [...] deserves."³¹ He does not say anything to contradict his health, wealth, and relationship-consciousness ideology.

While others might focus on why each candidate's faith should be questioned, Osteen takes what he terms "the high road" and focuses attention on the reasons why their faith should not be questioned—their commonality. This approach allows him to emphasize what the individuals share. They are alike because they agree, "Jesus is Savior, Jesus is the Son of God, and God raised Jesus from the dead."³² In this way, the auditor does not have to choose a side or align themselves with a particular group. Rather, they can strategically position themselves as one whom either side can claim as a member of their group. To Osteen, this is more important than taking the side that Jesus, who most often sided with the poor and outsiders, took.

Another way that the ideal auditor can appear apolitical is through his or her consistent public support of a sitting President, regardless of preferences for candidates. In a 2005 interview with then talk show host, Larry King, Osteen notes that he supports every person in office,

King: Do you ever involve politics in sermons?

Osteen: Never do. My father never did.

King: Never mentioned President Bush?

Osteen: Well, only to pray. We prayed for President Bush, Clinton, all of them.³³

²⁷ Osteen, *Fox News Sunday*; Osteen, *Weekend All Things Considered*; Osteen, *CBS This Morning*.

²⁸ Osteen, *CBS This Morning*.

²⁹ Joel Osteen and Victoria Osteen, "Piers Morgan Interviews Joel and Victoria Osteen," interview by Piers Morgan, *Piers Morgan Tonight*, CNN, January 26, 2011.

³⁰ Osteen, *Fox News Sunday*; Osteen, *Weekend All Things Considered*.

³¹ Osteen, *CBS This Morning*.

³² Osteen, *Fox News Sunday*; Osteen, *Weekend All Things Considered*.

³³ Osteen, *Larry King Live*.

This quote gives the appearance of impartiality. The content of these prayers is not addressed, and Larry King's question is left unanswered. Osteen lives to fight another day by not revealing his father's true political thoughts. This is what he sees as the key to his apolitical approach.

III. An Apolitical Approach, The Constitution of Subjects and the Third Persona

A. An Apolitical Approach

In his rhetoric, Osteen describes how to engage a sitting president. He advises people to "swallow their pride and support whoever is in office. Pray for them and appreciate their service."³⁴ Although neither Osteen nor his individual second persona would publicly endorse a presidential candidate; we can determine whom he would endorse based on what we know about his discourse. As Black explains, "Actual auditors look to the discourse they are attending for cues that tell them how they are to view the world."³⁵ Since Osteen encourages wealth consciousness on the part of his listeners and attempts to persuade them to accumulate as much wealth as possible because God wants them to be wealthy, neither Osteen nor his audience would have voted for a candidate like Joe Biden in 2020. Biden's constant attention to social issues and how government systems can help the poor and the middle-class would be too uncomfortable to discuss within the confines of Lakewood Church. Biden promised to reduce wealth inequality, and he vowed to raise the taxes of the wealthy.³⁶ While Biden's proposal would raise close to \$4.1 trillion, Trump's plan would cut the taxes of the wealthy by \$300 billion.³⁷

Trump's plan is a follow up to his first term, where he refused to engage Hillary Clinton's agenda regarding income inequality. Certainly, one can reasonably question whether Clinton, who is wealthy by the financial standards of the average American, supports actual income equality. After all, Clinton's positive relationship with Wall Street has been well documented. Additionally, her refusal to release transcripts of her speeches given to Wall Street groups has led many to assume that she is pro-Wall Street.³⁸ Nevertheless, her tax and income-related proposals clearly did not favor the wealthy to the extent that those of Donald Trump did. Trump made part of his platform a tax plan that disproportionately benefited the top one percent.³⁹ Even though Trump was (at the time) the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, pro-Republican news sources still agreed that Trump's tax proposals overwhelmingly benefited the wealthy.⁴⁰

During all this, Osteen remained silent. He is alone in the top 1% of televangelists in America, with only Kenneth Copeland surpassing him in terms of estimated net worth.⁴¹ Of course, Osteen adopts the style of a politician in terms of discussing his own net worth. He emphasizes that he stopped taking a salary from the church in 2005. Despite this, he has an estimated net

³⁴ Osteen, *CBS This Morning*.

³⁵ Black, "Second Persona," 334.

³⁶ Merrill Matthews, "Biden's Already Reducing Wealth Inequality—by Killing the Economy," *The Hill*, May 3, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/3475488-bidens-already-reducing-wealth-inequality-by-killing-the-economy/>; Jim Tankersley, "Biden Wants to Raise Taxes, Yet Many Trump Tax Cuts Are Here to Stay," *New York Times*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/22/business/economy/biden-trump-tax-law.html>.

³⁷ Stephen Gandel, "Comparing the Biden and Trump Tax Plans: Will You Pay More?," *CBS News*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/biden-tax-plan-comparison-trump/>.

³⁸ Anupreeta Das and Brody Mullins, "Hillary Clinton's Wall Street Dilemma," *Wall Street Journal*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/hillary-clintons-wall-street-dilemma-1454637448>.

³⁹ Sahil Kapur, "Rising Income Inequality Causes Republicans to Shift Rhetoric—but Not Policy," *Bloomberg*, November 12, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2015-11-12/rising-income-inequality-causes-republicans-to-shift-rhetoric-but-not-policy>; Rob Garver and Eric Pianin, "Experts Weigh Donald Trump's Tax Plan, and Find It Wanting," *Fiscal Times*, May 17, 2016, <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/2016/05/17/Experts-Weigh-Donald-Trump-s-Tax-Plan-and-Find-It-Wanting>; Edward McCaffery, "Trump Tax Plan: Great News for the Wealthy," *CNN*, September 29, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/28/opinions/mccaffery-trump-tax-plan/>.

⁴⁰ Stuart Anderson, "Donald Trump's Plan to Make Americans Poor Again," *Forbes*, May 22, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2016/05/22/donald-trumps-plan-to-make-americans-poor-again/>; Mary Kate Curry, "Trump Will Cost Us: Donald Trump's Plan for Creating Jobs and Reducing the National Debt Won't Make America Great Again," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 11, 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2016-03-11/donald-trumps-economic-policies-will-cost-americans>.

⁴¹ This estimation is based on Osteen being worth \$50 million. See the footnote below for the source.

worth of over \$50 million, with the church's annual tithing coming in around \$40 million.⁴² In doing so, he has mastered the idea of occupying the position near the top of the evangelical world while keeping his rhetoric apolitical. In keeping his wealth a secret, Osteen can build an audience that is financially blessed and is able to build on that wealth without ever contemplating it or questioning its value. This apolitical approach is perfect for him to repay his audience for financing his private endeavors.

B. *The Constitution of Subjects*

Charland expounds upon several themes in Edwin Black's work in his discussion of constitutive rhetoric. He also positions the researcher to address the collective identity Osteen draws upon and the strategies he utilizes to construct and persuade his second persona. Building on Louis Althusser's work, Charland argues that constitutive rhetoric is an "interpolative process of identification in rhetorical narratives that 'always already' presumes the constitution of subjects"⁴³ and strategically situates them within a "textualized structure of motives [that] inserts them into the world of practice."⁴⁴ In further explaining how interpellation works, Charland notes that "this rhetoric of identification is ongoing, not restricted to one hailing [one discursive encounter] but is usually part of a rhetoric of *socialization* [emphasis mine]."⁴⁵ Osteen uses sermons as tokens collectively to "call an audience into being" and to continuously socialize his audience with his three-legged tenet of health, wealth, and relationships.

C. *Third Persona*

The final theoretical framework for this research is Wander's work on "Third Persona." Wander's theory addresses, "Who/what—racially, economically, relationally, and psychologically—is left out" of one's rhetoric. This critical lens works in tandem with Black's concept of second persona in that the commended actions, viewpoints, roles, and characteristics of the implied audience also function as tokens for the type of identity one should avoid. As Wander explains it, "What is negated through the second persona forms the silhouette of the third persona."⁴⁶ In other words, the third persona acknowledges that when a rhetorician implies who a person should be, she/he inevitably implies who a person should not be. Through the third persona, we see that the people left out of Osteen's rhetoric are inevitably equated with negative markers, such as maybe "liberal" since Trump (a Republican) is a "friend of Lakewood and a good man." Osteen's radically individual approach

Osteen mentions in 2005, "Concerning depression, sometimes it's clinical. A lot of times, it's an attitude."⁴⁷ Osteen's discourse targets those who have a mental illness, blaming them for their condition. While he admits that depression could be viewed as a medical condition, his statement that it is an "attitude" conveys his belief that many people who are depressed have made a choice to be that way. His ideal auditor is to take his or her cues regarding mental health from this statement and proclaim oneself to be living a life of victory. If you pretend everything is ok in this church context, perhaps you will convince yourself that they are ok.

The difficult and sometimes unbearable experiences of people who struggle with mental health issues are largely ignored in Osteen's discourse because their health condition contradicts the state of his health-conscious ideal auditor. For his ideal auditor, mental illness, along with any other health issue, must be resolved immediately or at least quickly because, according to Osteen, it is a negative condition of which God does not approve. In Osteen's discourse, mental illness is portrayed as something that, in most cases, can be overcome with just an attitude adjustment. As a result, the experiences of persons who are unable to overcome a mental illness

⁴² Dwight Adams, "Joel Osteen in Indianapolis: Why the Televangelist Is So Beloved and Controversial," *Indianapolis Star*, August 9, 2018, <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2018/08/09/joel-osteen-house-net-worth-lakewood-church-wife-why-televangelist-so-beloved-and-controversial/935789002>.

⁴³ Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 134, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638709383799>.

⁴⁴ Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 142.

⁴⁵ James Jasinski, *Sourcebook on Rhetoric: Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 138.

⁴⁶ Phillip Wander, "The Third Persona," in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory*, ed. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 369.

⁴⁷ Osteen, *Larry King Live*.

are invalidated. These persons are depicted as refusing to use their agency to resolve the issue. In other words, they are either choosing to stay sick or they have the wrong attitude.

D. Osteen and Heteronormativity

Osteen's discourse also promotes a heteronormative agenda. Homosexuals are another group he ignores or devalues. For Osteen, one must be married (or attempting to get married) and heterosexual.⁴⁸ Osteen's rhetoric promotes heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to "institutionalized structures and beliefs that define and enforce heterosexual behavior as the only natural and permissible form of sexual expression."⁴⁹ Through his heteronormative rhetoric, Osteen negates LGBTQ+ people and those who support them.

Osteen says the following in a Fox News interview with Piers Morgan:

Morgan: Well, one of the moral mazes for any preacher—I think a Christian preacher in particular—is homosexuality. And there's been lots of coverage in the news with the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" campaign obviously. What is your view, because it seems to change depending on the interview that I've read or seen? Is homosexuality a sin in your eyes?

Osteen: Yes. I've always believed the scriptures show that it's a sin. I don't believe homosexuality is God's best for a person's life.⁵⁰

First, we should acknowledge the fact that Osteen referred to homosexuality as a sin, which is disturbing and dangerous for LGBTQ+ individuals who sometimes face violence and eviction from housing arrangements in response to their choice to identify as such. This is not surprising given Osteen's Southern Baptist and evangelical roots and the historical stance of these two groups against homosexuality.⁵¹ The surprising aspect of this response is that it is a departure from his strategy of staying neutral relative to divisive issues, which indicates that he likely understands that almost none of his congregants will object to his heteronormative stance.

Unfortunately, in an evangelical context, members of the LGBTQ community have been targeted by harmful rhetoric at the hands of churches with evangelical roots. This paper has discussed how Osteen and his second persona are supposed to avoid addressing controversial issues that clearly have the potential to isolate certain groups of people. However, his statement, "I don't believe homosexuality is God's best for a person's life," depicts homosexuality as sinful and against God's desire for persons living their best lives. No matter how nicely Osteen attempts to present his words, this is not a neutral or non-divisive stance. It is a violent and dangerous position from a preacher whose public facing rhetoric does not normally allow for such a bold statement. However, even seemingly apolitical Christian leaders cannot always avoid letting their bias show.

Because of his anti-LGBTQ+ bias, Osteen ends up arguing that since homosexual persons do not choose to use their agency to be in tune with what he believes God believes is best for them, then they should not expect to prosper fully. One can only fully receive all of God's benefits when he or she is in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex. Clearly, Osteen's discourse perpetuates the systemic oppression of LGBTQ people. This strong stance could align him with Trump, who has consistently spoken negatively about members of the LGBTQ community.⁵² As Edward Luce acknowledged earlier in this article, Osteen does not wear his opposition to homosexuality on his sleeve.⁵³ This is a reference to Osteen's reluctance to talk about it in the pulpit. But Osteen talking negatively about LGBTQIA+ individuals on Fox News when he won't do so in his own pulpit could suggest that he is being strategic in conforming his message to his audience.

⁴⁸ Osteen and Osteen, *Piers Morgan Tonight*.

⁴⁹ Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 87.

⁵⁰ Osteen and Osteen, *Piers Morgan Tonight*.

⁵¹ Chrissy Stroop, "Anti-gay Evangelicalism Is the Norm: A Less Rosy Take on the Evangelical Tipping Point," *Religion Dispatches*, June 26, 2015, <http://religiondispatches.org/anti-gay-evangelicalism-is-the-norm-a-less-rosy-take-on-the-evangelical-tipping-point/>.

⁵² Matt Baume, "Donald Trump's 8 Worst Attacks on the LGBTQ+ Community," *Them*, August 27, 2020.

⁵³ Luce, "Preacher for Trump's America."

It certainly could be that Osteen's negative talk about LGBTQIA+ individuals and disabled individuals would steer his audience towards a generally conservative outlook. But analysis of Trump's statements, especially regarding disabled veterans, shows that he takes things quite a bit further than other conservatives have been willing to go. Given that idea, it is possible that Osteen is going further than he is normally willing to go on the topic of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Additionally, he understands well that opposition to LGBTQIA+ rights is a very important identity marker for Christians. This identity marker is one that specifically is helpful in relating Osteen to his audience, as well as possibly directing them towards Trump.

In the context of his rhetoric, this Christian anti-LGBTQ+ identity marker serves to connect Osteen to his auditors. In the "act of addressing" auditors, an advocate's message awakens or energizes certain possibilities or a specific identity (or subject position) for that audience. In certain cases, Charland notes that this process "is akin more to one of conversion" as audiences come to inhabit a "reconfigured subject position."⁵⁴ In regard to both mental health and heteronormativity, Osteen's divisive rhetoric reconfigures his position of remaining neutral regarding hot-button issues. Evidently, some issues are important enough for Osteen to take a position on, even if they will prove divisive. Because of the Christian conservative political identity of his congregants, these issues do not include poverty, immigration or systemic evil. These he probably identifies as "liberal" according to his evangelical Christian viewpoint. Despite his past statements to the contrary, civil relationships need not be maintained with every person of every type.

Though Osteen will not publicly endorse a candidate, his supporters and congregation know who he would endorse given the identity that he creates through his second persona and those he excludes (third personas) by whom he includes. His heavily financially focused discourse overwhelmingly aligns him with one of the presumptive presidential nominees more than it does with the other. Given the high stakes of the 2024 presidential election and the impact that popular religious personalities can have on them, more attention should be devoted to studying religious discourse using rhetorical analysis. Although a prominent televangelist, such as Osteen, may not publicly say, "vote for (or endorse) a specific candidate," his rhetorical discourse unquestionably suggests a candidate given his health, wealth, and relationship beliefs and whom he excludes. While Osteen has stopped short of giving an official endorsement, he has continued to produce rhetoric that is conservative in nature, leaving little doubt as to which side he is on.

IV. Osteen's Rhetoric and Political Positioning in 2024

In his sermon entitled "Your Move When Life's Unfair" (uploaded June 24, 2024), Osteen encouraged people to forgive others no matter what anyone did to them. He says: "Even if someone ruined your life, forgive them. On the other side of forgiveness is a chance to find your destiny."⁵⁵ His sermon prepares his audience to forgive people and try to see others the way that Jesus sees them, understanding that God is changing the hearts of individuals who may not even believe in God. Osteen goes on to say that there is forgiveness for people who did bad things in the past and that God was going to work with that person to bring about good things in their life. He spoke about how the last few weeks were difficult for people and a lot of his congregants said that they were upset about recent events, but they were going to be brought back into a place of victory. Osteen promised that God would "bring victory to them in every way that they are specifically praying for, victory to our nation and our city."

Even though it was carefully couched in his rhetorical frameworks of health, wealth and prosperity, interpreters have questioned what might have been behind these claims. While Osteen never mentions Trump, some commentators have suggested that he was comforting people who were distressed that Trump was found guilty of 34 felony counts. This article has noted Osteen's apolitical stance, but a careful listen to most of his weekly sermons in consideration of current events regarding Trump could suggest a link between the two. If so, Osteen has embraced his role as "America's pastor" in that he has found a way to speak about issues without explicitly mentioning them. Osteen makes sure to tell his congregants that God is

⁵⁴ Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 142.

⁵⁵ Joel Osteen, "Your Move When Life's Unfair," YouTube video, June 24, 2024.

in control no matter what happens, but he does seem to have a preference on how things turn out. He crafts an audience that he encourages to follow him in the appearance of neutrality, presumably because he knows how they are going to vote anyway.

Osteen features all the identity markers of Christian nationalism alongside all the modern language that makes people feel good about themselves. This hybrid allows him to appear to be conservative in right-wing contexts and neutral in left-wing ones. He hides behind the diversity of his congregation and a recent donation to the United Negro College Fund when questioned about activism. Osteen's rhetoric allows him to "rise above" any situation or conversation, making his opinion something that is very difficult to pinpoint. This is his "artful dodge," he bobs and weaves around questions like a boxer sidestepping and ducking jabs. Osteen makes sure that his dogmas and his mantras stick with his audience, distracting them from the problems and concerns of this world. He loves to encourage his auditors that the right attitude will help them through any situation, even a loss by his chosen candidate in the 2024 Presidential Election.

V. Conclusion

In this article, we have seen how Osteen has artfully dodged endorsing Trump ever since the 2016 Fox News Radio interview where he praises the Presidential candidate. We discussed his second persona as well as his ideal audience to understand why he will not endorse a particular candidate. The three tenets of health, wealth and relationship consciousness guided our subsequent analysis of his apolitical approach. We then returned to the idea of dodging the endorsement and spoke of the constitution of subjects. This is where the article looked deeper into Osteen's ideal audience through the idea of the third persona. The article ended with an analysis of Houston's political landscape and its implications for the 2024 election.

This article strives to look deeper into Joel Osteen's rhetoric for signs of political positioning. We will see how Osteen ultimately adjusts to an America that is rapidly becoming more diverse. His healthy, wealthy and prosperous message has survived thus far in the face of scrutiny and backlash from more conservative Christians. However, he remains an international symbol of Christian power; the American televangelist who no one asked for. With a purported net worth of over \$50 million, Osteen obviously has ways of opening doors for himself and the members of his congregation. Time will show whether his legacy is that of hope and generosity, or that of a charlatan who keeps his audience just healthy, wealthy and relationship conscious enough not to strive for more.

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