

THE MEDIA'S PLACE IN RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALISM: A CASE STUDY OF  
LAKEWOOD CHURCH

A Thesis

by

PATRICIA CALDERON

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2009

Major Subject: Communication

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## ABSTRACT

The Media's Place in Religious Individualism: A Case Study of Lakewood Church.

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This thesis addresses how the Joel Osteen ministry uses mass media at its Lakewood church, located in Houston, Texas, and at its services around the nation. I studied this ministry's religious use of media to understand what it communicates about the church or ministry itself. To assist in my analysis, I have applied the concept *religious individualism*. Herein, this concept describes an individual who sees him- or herself as separate from their Christian community (or affiliation) which stems from a belief in a God who is also directly involved in the lives of individuals. Religious individualism is acted out in four observable characteristics which include: displaying emotion to seek attention, taking personal responsibility for one's spiritual growth, expecting God's future blessing, and seeking one's personal needs in a church above communal needs. I used this definition to determine whether Lakewood illustrated these traits in order to make an inference on how this would inform its use of mass media.

I applied both field observation skills and qualitative content analysis in this study. My own observation was used during my own observation of the Lakewood services, while content analysis was used to analyze blog and newspaper articles covering Osteen-led services. Findings from both methodologies revealed that the Osteen ministry does not

merely employ mass media as a tool but integrates it into the very image of the church, making its use necessary and natural. This conclusion was reached as both methodologies showed Lakewood and the Osteen ministry exemplifying each trait of religious individualism. In observance of its religious individualism, it appeared natural for the ministry and church to use media as it helped enforce the importance of each trait to the audience. Likewise, the results from both the field observation and content analysis show that the audience responded to Lakewood's use of mass media as inseparable from the services. Perhaps paradoxically, it became necessary for the ministry to use mass media to reach an audience that expected to be addressed in a personal way, based on a value of personal needs being met.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

David Brainerd once said that we must never “be content with a superficial knowledge” (Edwards, 1985, p. 496). This was said in reference to the “divine truths” of Biblical theology but it can be applied, to a lesser degree, to any area of knowledge as well. Furthermore, it is every Christian’s duty to use his or her knowledge to write and speak with clarity and honesty, revealing reality in a demonstration of the definitive reality, who is God. To exclude Him from academic research would, as John Piper (2000) states, “[denigrate] it as an instrument of pride and will inevitably distort reality” (p. 298). It is then with this belief and duty that I approached my study on Lakewood church and the Osteen ministry. However, I did not go alone. Therefore, it is with great gratitude to acknowledge the many of whom who came alongside and helped me abide to this principle.

First, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Campbell, and my committee members, Dr. Rothenbuhler and Dr. Gatson, for their guidance and support throughout the course of this and other areas of my research. In their own ways, each professor has kept me accountable to the goal I set before myself and challenged me to look deeper into our world.

Thanks go to Lakewood church for permission to use the image of their facility in Appendix A. Thank you to those who took the time to proof-read this thesis for me at its many stages of completion.

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## CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: A PROFILE OF LAKEWOOD CHURCH AND ITS IMPORTANCE  
FOR SCHOLARLY RESEARCH

Recently, *The Houston Chronicle* profiled the largest church in North America and its use of the media in communicating its popular message to the masses (Dooley, 2007). Known as Lakewood church, located in Houston, TX, it brings in a record 45,000 people each weekend and purchases air time on several cable and network channels to broadcast its sermons around the nation and world, reaching a combined seven million people a week (Lakewood Church website, 2007). Michael O. Emerson, a Rice University sociology professor and director of the Center on Race, Religion, and Urban Life argues, “This is not a Houston church; this is a national church, at the least. It goes beyond the borders of the country. ... It is part of the exportation of the American culture and this is a huge, huge component of American culture right here” (Dooley, 2007).

Lakewood has a national presence, not just because of its size but also because of its high profile due to its weekly services being broadcast nationally. Thus because of this it has the potential to influence a large portion of American churches and culture. . It therefore is important to consider Lakewood’s use of mass media, as playing an important role in informing American religious culture as Lakewood’s religious beliefs may filter down to many American Christians. Lakewood’s potential to influence on American religious culture can be inferred due to the amount of people who can engage with the Lakewood

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This thesis follows the style of the *Journal of Media and Religion*.

ministry through the pastor's public appearances around the country, church- and pastor-authored publications, its church services, and television program.

Lakewood church, and its pastor, Joel Osteen, have made apparent the desire to connect to American culture through the use of the media, and it appears people and media outlets are responding positively in great numbers. In light of Lakewood's influence within the United States and the world, it is not merely advantageous but imperative to study this ministry led by Osteen in order to gain a better understanding of the changing nature of mass mediated religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study then is to analyze how the Osteen ministry uses mass media and what their use communicates about the church itself. The goal of the study is not to identify the possible effects of a religious use of mass media at Lakewood church but how the church uses mass media to support the teachings of Joel Osteen. From there, I can make inferences about what Lakewood's example means for other Christian churches that use mass media. To achieve this, I engaged in both first-hand observation of the Lakewood services and a qualitative content analysis of blogs and newspaper articles that cover recent Osteen services throughout the nation. My analysis also involved making a determination as to the degree to which my observations and those of the blog/newspaper authors concur with a set of characteristics describing a concept I call *religious individualism*. While this term will be defined in depth in the following chapter, its basic definition describes a type of individual who sees him- or herself as set apart from his or her ostensible Christian community based on a belief in a God who is

personally and emotionally involved in the lives of each individual. This belief is manifested through several characteristic actions, 1) by emoting in order to direct attention to oneself, 2) taking full control of one's spiritual growth, 3) expecting God's personal favor, and 4) placing one's personal needs in a church above communal needs. By establishing a framework by which to analyze my findings, I am able to draw conclusions based on Lakewood's religious use of media.

The field observation portion of my methodology allowed me to see Osteen's influence at Lakewood church from a congregant's point of view. The observation is organized by the characteristics of religious individualism and various instances (relating to liturgy, sermon, and setting) within it. The content analysis is also organized by these characteristics, drawing examples from the observations of the blog and newspaper authors. Both methodological chapters also include a section on the religious use of mass media as observed in the Lakewood service and other Osteen ministries. The purpose of this organizational style is to first establish how Lakewood's services illustrate the concept of religious individualism. From there, I infer what my observations of media use mean in light of this concept.

#### UNDERSTANDING LAKEWOOD CHURCH

As the largest church in North America, Lakewood easily qualifies as a megachurch (Dooley, 2007). A megachurch is defined as any church with an average weekly attendance of 2,000 attendees or more (Thumma, Travis, & Bird, 2006). Megachurches are not a new phenomenon. Thumma, Travis and Bird (2006) of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research compiled one of the largest and most thorough studies on megachurches in North America. Their findings were recently compiled in a

book titled *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* by Thumma and Travis (2007). Quantitative in execution, the Hartford study documents the physical and spiritual characteristics, as well as misconceptions of megachurches today, through the use of surveys. They remind readers that megachurches have been around for many centuries but not since the 1970s has the rapid increase in attendance of such institutions so captured the attention of the public media (Thumma et al., 2006). To date, there are over 1,250 megachurches in America (Thumma et al., 2006). These churches are highly concentrated in the southern part of the United States and located near suburbs. Thirty-four percent of megachurches are non-denominational, with the Southern Baptist denomination coming in second at sixteen percent. Fifty-six percent of megachurches theologically aligned themselves with evangelicalism, according to surveys distributed amongst church leaders. Thirty-five to thirty-nine percent of megachurches described their churches as having “many” (defined as 41-60% of attendees) 35 year-old or younger congregants, with a college degree and children under age 18. Forty-one percent described their churches as having “few” (11-20%) congregants over sixty years old. Seventy-nine percent described their congregation as being in a “good to excellent” financial situation. Regarding the nature of worship services, ninety percent described their services as “joyful, inspirational, and thought provoking” with ten percent focusing on “formal liturgy” (Thumma et al., 2006).

Each of the above megachurch descriptors also portrays the physical and spiritual makeup of Lakewood church. It is located in the southern region of the U.S near new and affluent suburbs of Houston, Texas. From my observations during the preliminary research period in the spring of 2007, the majority of people in attendance appeared to be

under fifty and middle class. From its website, Lakewood (2007) describes its own sermons as “encouraging” which I would argue falls under the realm of both joyful and inspirational. Knowing that Lakewood fits into the general megachurch description allows one to see where the church differs from most megachurches and where it has conformed.

While it is important to have some insight into the types of services that can occur in a megachurch, it is equally important to know why people attend megachurches. In an ABC News interview, dating from October 17, 2007, Scott Thumma described the appeal of megachurches as coming from a number of different levels. He stated, “For some they're appealing because people can wander into them anonymously. [People can] experiment with religious life without having to be singled out as a visitor or a guest. For other people, they're appealing because they offer kind of a one-stop shop for your spiritual needs” (Berman, 2007). However, these reasons for one's attendance at a megachurch are not all inclusive. A more thorough profile of those who attend a megachurch and why will be explored in the next chapter.

As I mentioned previously, Lakewood church displays the characteristics of a typical megachurch, as defined and profiled by Thumma et al. (2006). However, it did not begin that way. The church ministry began in a feed store in 1959 and eventually moved to the Houston Compaq center in 2005 (Dooley, 2007). The church started under the direction of Joel Osteen's father, John Osteen, a former Southern Baptist Minister who left his denomination to pursue his Charismatic leanings, as labeled by Dooley (2007). These beliefs dealt with the “gifts of the Holy Spirit” such as divine healing, a belief that is still practiced at Lakewood church today. In fact, there are few differences

in the liturgy and theology in the Lakewood today and the one begun almost sixty years ago. The following paragraphs will discuss a few of these similarities and differences in order to understand the Osteen ministry and place its use of the media in its own historical context.

According to Richard Young (2007), author of *The Rise of Lakewood Church and Joel Osteen*, John and his wife Dodie Osteen, parents of Joel Osteen, both conducted services at Lakewood, which was now located in its own church building. The services began with music and a call for anyone who felt a need for prayer to come forward. Young (2007) states that Dodie led during most of the service, which also included an appeal to the congregation to make a financial offering. After the music, Young (2007) states, “[Dodie] would invite anyone who needed prayer for physical healing to come forward. As people came forward, Dodie, John, and other Lakewood prayer warriors prayed for their recovery as they laid hands on them and anointed them with oil” (p. 73). John followed, and preached the sermon, ending with an oral invitation to anyone who desired to become a Christian to come forward and “meet Jesus Christ as their Savior” (Young, 2007, p. 73). Joel Osteen’s Lakewood church uses the same pattern established by his mother and father. His wife, Victoria Osteen leads most of the service while Joel presents the sermon.

Osteen moved into his father’s position in 1999 when John died and as Lakewood’s, weekend attendance stood at 6,000 people (Dooley, 2007). By 2000, Osteen began to add extra services to accommodate new attendees and purchased cable airtime in American markets to increase the visibility of its television program (Dooley, 2007). In 2004, Osteen published his first book, *Your Best Life Now*, through Warner

Faith, a division of Time Warner Book Group, which was soon on the *New York Times Best Seller List* (Dooley, 2007). This first book sold over five million copies within the United States, and has since been translated into over twenty-five different languages (Dooley, 2007). In 2006, Lakewood's attendance reached 45,000, according to John Vaughn of Church Growth Today (Dooley, 2007). Most recently, Osteen has published his second book, *Become a Better You* (2007) through Free Press, which spent twenty-nine weeks on the *New York Times* (2008) "Best-Seller List." With numerous television appearances, along with making Barbara Walter's "10 Most Fascinating People of 2006", it is clear that Osteen's popularity has had phenomenal growth in a short period of time.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE THEOLOGY OF THE OSTEEN MINISTRY

Osteen's beliefs regarding God and humanity's standing with the Almighty are a significant portion of my analysis on the presence of religious individualism in the Osteen ministry events. This section describes what Osteen specifically believes and advocates in respect to the Bible, God, the Christian trinity, the nature of humanity, and the Christian life. His stated convictions are later contextualized into my discussion of religion to illustrate how Osteen's theology fits the concept of religious individualism.

On the official Joel Osteen Ministries website (2008), there is a statement of beliefs endorsed by the Osteen ministry. This statement includes a belief in the Bible being "inspired by God" and it being the basis of "faith, conduct, and doctrine" ("Our Beliefs," 2008). God is described as one being but "exists in three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" ("Our Beliefs," 2008). In regards to Jesus, Lakewood believes he is "the Son of God who came to this earth as Savior of the world" ("Our Beliefs," 2008). This belief in God and esteem for the Bible is confirmed again in both of

Osteen's (2004/2007) books where he appeals to Scripture to substantiate his arguments. In the first chapter of *Become a Better You*, Osteen (2007) retells the story in Genesis of Adam and Eve and the first sin. Adam and Eve ate the "forbidden fruit" and hid from God because they realized they were naked. He says, "I love the way God answered them. He said, 'Adam, who told you that you were naked?' In other words, 'Who told you that there was something wrong with you'" (Osteen, 2007, pg. 9). Osteen uses this situation to illustrate his beliefs regarding the God of the Bible's nature and attitude toward humans.

In this quote, it is evident that Osteen believes God holds humans in high esteem. Osteen's God sees nothing wrong with His creation. The remedy then for humanity's adversities is in the attitudes of individual believers. Osteen (2007) goes on to say in his book, "God says, 'You need to reject those ideas [of failure and inadequacy] and discover what God says about you'" (pg. 9). According to Osteen (2007), his readers have the power inside them to be successful because God gave it to them. Success is visually manifested through material wealth and physical health (Osteen, 2007). Osteen (2007) argues that the power to obtain good health and prosperity is activated through spoken word as the believer's words invoke change in the world and within the person. He states, "When you talk about the good, you will draw out the good" (Osteen, 2007, pg 166). This is confirmed in the statement of beliefs, which explain that believers need to be responsible for their own relationship with God and are "overcomers and more than conquerors and God intends for each of us to experience the abundant life He has in store for us" ("Our Beliefs," 2008). In essence, God has a plan for each person that involves success and "abundant" living that followers of Osteen can receive by faith. This belief



lies at the heart of religious individualism as it illustrates that God has a personal interest in each individual, that success can be expected, and that believers are responsible for spiritual growth.

In order to execute the plan of a successful life, Osteen argues that believers must be discontent with their current situation. In fact, being content with one's current successes could be considered profane in Osteen's theology. They must "enlarge [their] vision" to include physical and material success (Osteen, 2004). Osteen (2004) states, "Get rid of that small-minded thinking and start thinking as God thinks. Think big. Think increase. Think abundance. Think more than enough" (pg. 11). While Osteen (2004) later advocates contentment in his book, *Your Best Life Now*, he uses satisfaction as a tool for gaining greater prosperity. He writes, "If you don't learn to be content where you are, you are never going to get where you want to be" (Osteen, 2004, pg. 278). Furthermore, Osteen argues that other acts of kindness or righteous living are a means to greater success. For example, keeping all the commandments can secure God's favor and future blessings for the believer. He states, "If you will simply obey His commands, He will change things in your favor" (Osteen, 2004, pg. 66). Thus, a successful negotiation between humanity and God is established on the condition of the individual's display of faith and righteous living. An expectation of godly favor on the basis of good works is another key characteristic of religious individualism and appears to be a principle aspect of Osteen's theology.

Lastly, should the believer follow the commandments and maintain the right attitude, he or she can expect God and other people to treat him or her better. Osteen interprets Psalm 8:5 as proof for an expectation of godly favor saying, "The Bible clearly

states, 'God has crowned us with glory and honor.' The word honor could also be translated as 'favor,' and favor means 'to assist, to provide with special advantages and to receive preferential treatment'" (pg. 38). By upholding a "favor-minded" attitude, Osteen argues that believers can also expect others to treat them differently. He writes, "[God] has crowned me with favor, therefore, I can expect preferential treatment. I can expect people to go out of their way to want to help me" (Osteen, 2008, pg. 39). Osteen's theology again illustrates an emphasis on an expectation of God's blessings, which reflects the entitlement characteristic of religious individualism.

Osteen's theology situates itself within the Christian tradition. He affirms a reverence for the Bible, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The particulars of his beliefs depart from humanity as inherently sinful and describe it as basically good with a person's only hindrance being the limitations the believer has placed upon him- or herself, especially in regards to material possessions. Osteen advocates an expectation of favor based on the condition of right living and positive attitudes, which is an illustration of the sense of entitlement characteristic in religious individualism. Osteen also believes words have a power to change situations in support of the person, which each individual has a responsibility to utilize. This duty reflects the personal responsibility trait in religious individualism. Based on Osteen's theology, it is necessary to see the Osteen ministry as an exemplar of religious individualist churches. Such an argument will be explored further in the analysis of the ministry's services. In the next section, I will place Osteen's belief system within the context of the Christian tradition.

## CONTEXTUALIZING OSTEEN'S THEOLOGY

Now that Joel Osteen's theology has been discussed, it is essential to address Osteen's theology in respect to Christianity. I will begin with how Osteen's theology fits the requirements of Christianity, Protestantism, and how it associates with the Word of Faith movement. Osteen's theology adheres to the general Christian beliefs which are laid out in the Apostle's Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead<sup>1</sup>. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic<sup>2</sup> Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen (Church of England, 1999).

This creed describes the sacredness of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It affirms a belief in the forgiven state of Christians, a resurrection, and eternal life. It also stresses the importance of the necessity of being in the presence of other believers. Each of these points is touched upon in Osteen's theology, especially in his statement of beliefs.

Because Osteen's theology is derives from John Osteen's beliefs, it is necessary to describe his theological roots as it informs the theology's current manifestation. Both John and Joel Osteen's theology falls into the realm of Protestantism. Protestantism is characterized by two defining characteristics which are "justification by faith alone" and "the Protestant Principle" (Smith, 1991). Faith is considered a personal response to God and the means by which salvation from an eternity in Hell are obtained. Good works,

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<sup>1</sup> Some denominations, such as Methodism, omit this phrase. Other translations state that Jesus descended into Hell.

<sup>2</sup> The Roman Catholic Church capitalizes "Catholic" in their translation.

while important in demonstrating faith, ultimately do not contribute the individual's spiritual fate. The Protestant Principle implies a fight against idolatry that influences several areas of the Protestant faith (Smith, 1991). The most noticeable area however is the "protest" against a reverence for saints or use of statues in worship services as anything of humankind is inherently imperfect. Furthermore, based on this principle, Protestants do not believe in Papal infallibility nor rely on priests to act as mediators between humankind and God (Smith, 1991). Only God is perfect and only Jesus can perform the duties as a mediator (Smith, 1991). Osteen reveals his Protestant ties because he refers to himself as a pastor and not a priest, nor is his service a part of any Catholic diocese. Indeed, Osteen's church is classified by many as a non-denominational Protestant church (Dooley, 2007, and Thumma et al., 2006). However, overt Protestant distinctions are concealed in Osteen's ministry as the words "Protestant" and "Protestantism" never occur in either of Osteen's (2004/2008) books or website (Lakewood, 2008, and Osteen, 2008).

John Osteen was originally ordained as a minister by the Southern Baptist Convention, a Protestant denomination, early in his ministry (Young 2007). John Osteen described his Baptist roots as "easy-believism" where a call to a life of holiness was underemphasized in favor of a one-time emotional conversion (Young, 2007). In addition, John was taught in the Southern Baptist tradition that "all supernatural things ended when the last apostle died" (Young, 2007, pg. 39). However, in 1958 Young (2007) reports that John believed he became baptized in the Holy Spirit which granted him supernatural or spiritual gifts such as prophesying, healing, and speaking in tongues. He left the denomination in order to pursue his commitment to preaching about the spiritual gifts and to begin Lakewood church (Dooley, 2007).

John Osteen first learned of spiritual gifts through a Pentecostal preacher.

Pentecostalism is a denomination that has produced other Protestant denominations, such as Assemblies of God and Church of God in Christ. Most Pentecostals will agree with the belief that the spiritual gifts mentioned in the Bible are present today (Grudem, et al., 1996). The types of spiritual gifts referred to in Pentecostalism are described in 1 Corinthians 12: 4-6 of the New Testament which include having wisdom and knowledge, discerning the presence of good or bad spirits, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, prophesying, having faith, performing miracles, and the ability to heal. These gifts are believed to have been given by the Holy Spirit and are distributed at the Spirit's will (Grudem, et al., 1996). Pentecostalism can trace its roots to the 1906 Azusa Street revival where a Christian revival led to a number of participants speaking in tongues and participating in theatrical worship services where men and women of different ethnicities were described as howling and convulsing together throughout the event (Hayford et al., 2006 and Grudem et al., 1996).

Because John Osteen chose to avoid association with the Pentecostal denomination when he began his non-denominational church, it is more accurate to describe his theology, and that of his son's, as Charismatic. The Charismatic movement is not a denomination but rather a description or classification of a type of Christian that also believes in the modern presence of spiritual gifts (Grudem, et al., 1996). Unlike Pentecostalism, the Charismatic movement does not consider the Azusa Street revival part of its history but rather looks to its parent denominations, or Protestantism in general, and diverges from that out of an interest in spiritual gifts. Both John and Joel believe miraculous healings can occur and often point to Dodie Osteen whom they believe was

healed by God of cancer in 1981 (Young, 2007). John was known to speak in tongues and often prophesied to his congregation regarding God's future blessings (Young, 2007). Joel Osteen however has refrained from such displays in favor of cultivating what he considers his true gift of "encouraging" (Lehmann, 2008).

Yet, Osteen's theology can only be described as Charismatic to a degree as it actually situates itself within the Word of Faith movement. Like the Charismatic movement, Word of Faith is not associated with any particular denomination. While both share a strong value for spiritual gifts, Word of Faith places added emphasis on oral proclamations or "positive confession" in order to activate the gifts. It is considered a part of an American Christian subculture made up of denominational-independent churches, ministries, and mass media broadcast networks that are "bound together in a relational network based on a shared understanding of the Bible" (Harrison, 2005, pg. 5). The basic teachings of the Word of Faith movement borrow from the traditions of Christianity, Pentecostalism and New Thought, a religious movement developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that focused on positive thinking. It is considered a subset of Charismatic Christianity that developed in the United States after World War II. Word of Faith soon gained acceptance amongst American Black churches that historically fought for the material needs of its community (Harrison, 2005). Milmon Harrison, in his book, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary Black American Religion*, profiles the core beliefs of the Word of Faith movement dividing its theology into three principles: "knowing who you are in Christ, the practice of positive confession (and positive mental attitude), and a world view that emphasizes material prosperity and physical health as the divine right of every Christian" (pg. 8).

The first principle describes a type of contract between God and the believer where the believer is entitled to certain privileges that the individual can then receive by naming their desires and claiming it as theirs by faith. This “name it and claim it” attitude or positive confession is often derided as unbiblical by those outside the movement according to Harrison (2005). He states that proponents of the second principle believe words have power to invoke change for the individual (Harrison, 2005). Acknowledging shortcomings or even illnesses are said to be akin to accepting those circumstances and an indicator of a weak faith that most likely brought on the negative situation. The third principle states that part of the believer’s privilege is financial prosperity. Harrison (2005) describes Word of Faith teachers arguing that if God gave great prosperity to Jesus (whom they believe was wealthy during His time on earth), then believers are entitled to the same blessings as well. Osteen’s theology fits into this category as his ministry believes that faith serves as a spiritual gift and force activated through spoken words or laying on of hands that, when used, has the ability to heal bodies and change circumstances.

This section discussed where Osteen’s theology fits in terms of the Christianity, Protestantism, Pentecostalism, the Charismatic movement and finally, the Word of Faith movement. A detailed contextualization of the roots of the Osteen theology and its own theological departures from the orthodox Christian tradition was necessary in order to fully understand the evolution of the Osteen theology. The Osteen theology shifted away from traditional Christianity and Protestantism toward Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement based on a belief in the modern presence of spiritual gifts. Yet, with its additional focus on material prosperity and obtaining spiritual privileges, the Osteen theology then became associated more with the Word of Faith movement.

Understanding Osteen's theology demonstrates how Osteen and his ministry fit into the context of the Christian and Protestant tradition, along with the concept of religious individualism. In terms of the history of Lakewood church, one can see that the format of the services and even the messages Osteen preaches are not new. Osteen has followed in the footsteps of his parents and has adapted the service and the ministry to reach a wider audience through a religious use of mass media. Furthermore, while my research may address the religious use of mass media at one church, the themes discussed and demographics observed in my research are not unique to Lakewood. Indeed, Lakewood church appears to fit well within Thumma et al.'s (2008) profile of American megachurches. Therefore, when studying how Lakewood and the Osteen ministry use mass media within its services, I hope to learn not only what its use indicates about this church but for other churches that use mass media as well.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW: AN OVERVIEW OF RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALISM AND STUDIES WITHIN RELIGION AND MEDIA

Individualism is a concept that has long been associated with religion. Scholars ranging from Durkheim (1912/1995, 1897/1951), Parsons (1973, 1974), Douglas (1970/1996), Weber (2003), and Bellah (1996) have each attempted to define individualism with respect to a religious life. Each of these theorists' contributions are important, and I will address each briefly. However, I argue that Bellah et al. (1996) appears to incorporate each of the theorists' descriptions of individualism in respect to modern American religious culture, which helps provide a basis for this thesis's discussion of religious individualism. Bellah et al.'s (1996) definition best fits the environment of Lakewood church and its use of mass media within its service. In order to arrive at a clear definition for religious individualism, it is best to begin with the basic understanding of two of the key terms. As Durkheim's definition for religion and studies on individualism continue to influence the sociological, economical, and anthropological realms, I will begin with him. His definition for religion describes the basic elements that any scholar should be able to find when seeking to understand a culture's particular "religion." Durkheim (1912/1995) classifies religion as, "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (pg. 44). If Osteen's theology and religious individualism are truly religious experiences, then they should fit Durkheim's definition of religion because his

definition not only applies to social groups but the doctrines and rituals that form the identity of such groups.

Osteen's unified system of beliefs and practices was discussed in the introduction and is illustrated in his ministry's statement of beliefs. These beliefs center on a clear designation between the sacred and the profane. In light of Durkheim's definition, it appears that Osteen views humanity and its success as a sacred object. While God is a sacred being that is worshiped at Lakewood church, much of the service and setting of the church revolves around the attendees, making the individual a sacred being as well. Health and material prosperity are to be pursued by believers and those that are successful in obtaining these things are set apart as people to emulate. Furthermore, Osteen and his followers take great care to avoid mediocrity and those who choose to remain unsuccessful. Thus, Osteen and his followers strive to have the best marriage, the best job, the nicest car, and the best parking spot. Being successful is evidence for the followers that they are in good standing with God and is a state of being that must always be pursued (Osteen, 2007). Consequently, not having success is evidence of allowing negative thoughts to rule the person's life, which would be sin according to Osteen. According to Durkheim's (1897/1951) explanation of the sacred/profane dichotomy, the sacred object then is success but the profane is the ordinary. Thus, Lakewood meets the Durkheim's criterion for the presence of a sacred and profane dichotomy. The final condition necessary for Lakewood, and the theology encompassing it, to be considered a religion according to Durkheim is in regards to the existence of believers who adhere to the system of beliefs and practices. Lakewood easily fits this last standard as believers who embrace

Osteen's theology regularly assemble together at Lakewood church, and attend Osteen ministry events and other mediated gatherings.

Now that Lakewood can be classified as its own religion, religious individualism should also be held to Durkheim's criteria. Regarding Durkheim's first condition for defining religion, religious individualism has four defining characteristics that make up its unified set of beliefs. Each of these beliefs is necessary but insufficient by itself to be classified as religious individualism. For example, one of the characteristics of religious individualism is emoting to set oneself apart from others. All other elements of religious individualism must be present alongside this characteristic in order to be considered an example of religious individualism. The beliefs and practices of religious individualism are all relative to the sacred being, which in this case is the individual. Emoting to distinguish oneself communicates to others and enforces within the person that the individual is a sacred being and deserving of attention. Expecting God's blessings by earning the Almighty's affection through good deeds, having full authority over one's spiritual growth, and considering one's needs in a church above all others, each serve to set apart the individual from those complacent with mediocrity. The actions designate the person as part of the larger group, or Church, of religious individualists who share similar beliefs but little dependency upon one another. These beliefs are enforced by the Osteen ministry and practiced within the Lakewood church.

Durkheim (1912/1995) believed that individualism was the religion of modern society. Individualism, or the individual, was born out of a society that demanded both community and regulation. This led to Durkheim's (1912/1995) conclusion that the religious sphere, which stresses community and discipline, was inherently social and the

social was inherently religious. Individualism then became a delicate balance that he laid out in *Suicide* (1897/1951), where isolation due to an erosion of social norms to the point where the life goals of the individual do not correspond to the expectations of society led to anomic suicide and too much involvement within a highly regulated or oppressive society led to a resigned suicide. At one end of the spectrum, the individual is part of a weak community and on the other end, the individual has lost him- or herself within the community. It can be claimed then that individualism must have some degree of rules that dictate behavior within a society that allows the individual to balance the two extremes. These rules will also provide order in distinguishing between the sacred and profane, another key element in defining religion.

According to Talcott Parsons (1974/1999), the individual is able to separate the sacred from the profane by participating in the Expressive Revolution. The Expressive Revolution, according to Parsons (1974/1999) was a “new religious movement of far-reaching importance” that emphasized emotional satisfaction as the source of order behind lifestyle choices and values (p. 316). Parsons (1974/1999) explained this “religion of love” by analyzing the 1960s counter cultural movement’s sharp reaction of independence toward what he considered the rationalistic tradition of American society. It can be gathered that the Expressive Revolution was akin to Durkheim’s (1897/1951) individualistic balance between isolation and conformity as members of the counter culture must still be guided by an agreement within the community over what constituted love and emotional satisfaction (Parsons, 1974/1999). In keeping with Durkheim’s (1897/1951) concept of religion, the Expressive Revolution is a community with rules that govern behavior. The rules also provide a distinction between the sacred and

profane. Parsons (1974/1999) details a romanticized view of the American spirit where a lack of dependence upon the nuclear family unit and other elements of a regulated society becomes a sacred object within the Expressive Revolution in comparison to the profane rationalism and conformity of older generations. Thus, individualism according to Parsons would not only include Durkheim's (1897/1951) delicate balance but also an emphasis on emotions as a core and sacred value to regulate behavior in solidarity with other members of the counter culture.

One of the goals of this chapter is to provide a conceptual and operational definition for religious individualism. In order to get there, it is important to create a framework for religious individualism beyond the sacred and profane rules that govern behavior within the community. Instead, it is important to describe how a religious individualist can act peacefully within society and under an authority in particular. While Parsons (1974/1999) and Durkheim (1897/1951) have provided a definition for individualism which involves a societal balance between isolation and conformity for the ultimate benefit for the individual, they do not discuss the social circumstances necessary to make their individualism thrive. Mary Douglas (1970/1996) addresses individualism in a structured analysis to describe how an individualist can exist within a social structure that is different from the individual's own individualist community. She places the idea of self within two dimensions: a Group (horizontal) axis that measures how much a person's life is controlled by their own community and the Grid (vertical) axis measures how much of the control the members' accept. Out of each quadrant emerge four extreme characterizations: the Isolate, Positional, Individualist, and Enclave. The Individualist can be juxtaposed with the Enclave as both value a freedom from the grid or regulation

from the community. Both desire an egalitarian approach to the world where there is no real authority present, which contrasts against the high Grid and Group Positional characteristic. However, the Individualist distinguishes itself from all others by being weak in Grid and Group (Douglas, 1970/1996). The Individualist shirks the commitment to the community in favor of obtaining personal benefits that are controlled by individual competition (Douglas, 1970/1996). Parsons (1974/1999) would say the primary personal benefit is emotional satisfaction that influences decisions for an individualist. In regards to one's approach toward the larger Christian community, an Individualist, according to Douglas (1970/1996), would find little obligation toward others within the Christian faith. This could be translated into one's reasons for not joining a church, to even basing one's reasons for joining church on an individual gain. While the Individualist values an egalitarian society, he or she is not above using power and wealth to meet his or her own needs. The Individualist, from a Christian perspective, would then be against viewing themselves as under an authoritative structure where autonomy is not valued. He or she would also have few qualms about pursuing an individual faith regardless of how it would affect others within that faith community. Individualists differ from Isolates as the former is more active in society than the latter who feel there is little they can do to control their fate in life. Individualists are not separated from the world or community and can influence the American public. As these characterizations are ideal types, one should not expect to find a perfect example in society. As with Durkheim's (1897/1951) theory of individualism, social changes can influence the movement within the Grid and Group. While Durkheim (1897/1951) discusses the ultimate consequence of an inability to work within societal extremes, Douglas (1970/1996) describes the social conditions necessary

to make each of her categories thrive. Douglas' (1970/1996) Individualist best fits the type of ideal individualist that is desired by the Osteen ministry as Osteen's presence within mass media designates him as an active member of society but distinguishes him and his followers as individual members of the larger Christian community.

Whereas Douglas (1970/1996) explains how the Individualist interacts with other members of society, Weber (2003) describes how this type of person in society develops from particularly Protestant and capitalist origins. His arguments help establish how religious individualism is especially compatible with Protestant theology. Knowing this further illustrates how the Osteen ministry, a primarily Protestant movement, is a good example of religious individualism. Max Weber (2003), in his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* describes this connection, allowing one to filter out the many different applications of individualism as a concept and concentrate only on its religious implications (Lukes, 1971). Weber (2003) argues that the tenets of Protestantism influence a work ethic that allows capitalism to prosper. This distinction of Protestantism further filters out other forms of religion to narrow the definition of not only a religious individualism, but of a Protestant individualism to understand the Protestant Lakewood Church.

According to Weber (2003), Protestantism differs from Catholicism, the other major strand of Christianity, in its particularly individualistic perspective towards the Christian faith. Weber's discussion of Protestantism however is within the context of 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritans who helped define the economic structure of the United States but that does not mean his observations are not valid today. Weber (2003) states, "In what was for the man of the age of the Reformation the most important thing in life, his eternal salvation, he was

forced to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been decreed for him from Eternity. No one could help him. No priest for the chosen one can understand the word of God only in his own heart” (p. 104). Protestantism then, in Weber’s eyes is an important solitary journey each believer must take toward greater understanding of God. Catholicism contrasts this, where the highly disciplined religious life was mainly deferred to monks and priests (Weber, 2003). However, Martin Luther, the leader of the Reformation movement, reasoned that each person is his or her own priest; the individual is responsible for his or her own progress in the Christian faith (Weber, 2003). Such an argument not only put a responsibility for the layperson to be more disciplined in his or her faith, but also expanded the religious life beyond church walls.

Yet, the layperson was not meant to be absent from the church. While Protestants resemble the lowly pilgrim making his or her journey toward greater faith, other Protestants and religious authorities serve as exhorters and catalysts for growth to come along side the sojourner. Such an explanation of Protestantism reflects Durkheim’s (1897/1951) and Douglas’ (1970/1996) balance between isolating oneself from society and disappearing into the regulated society of religious authorities and rituals. It can be concluded then, that Protestantism, based on Weber’s (2003) description of it, is a form of individualism, as defined by Durkheim (1897/1970). This type of individualism becomes particularly religious not merely in the religious behavior that is entwined with Protestantism but primarily in how the Protestant approaches his or her relationship with God. Weber (2003) argues that the Protestant believes he or she has unmediated access to God. Indeed, this appears as one of the defining characteristics of many Protestant denominations in contrast with Catholicism. This distinction was emphasized especially in the First and Second Great



Awakenings (mid 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively) where personal relationship with God was emphasized along with a commitment to holiness in all aspects of life (Murray, 2002). An individual commitment to holiness and God explains the attitude of personal responsibility toward faith that Weber (2003) described as free access to the Almighty which obligates the believer to not defer the responsibility to someone else. Thus, a religious form of individualism is founded upon an individualistic view of one's relationship with God. In addition, a Protestant would be able to exercise this attitude through seeking out the emotional satisfaction that Parsons (1974/1999) described in his definition of individualism. The discussion of Weber has demonstrated that religious individualism is compatible with Protestantism. Religious individualism is religious and individualist as illustrated through the theories of Durkheim. Douglas and Parsons refined the definitions of individualism to show that religious individualism is not against authority but that it has clear boundaries of acceptable behavior. A discussion of Bellah et al.'s role ties each of the theorists together to establish a definition for religious individualism.

#### NARROWING THE DEFINITION OF RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALISM

In Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton's (1996) book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, the authors illustrate how a Protestant, as described by Weber (2003), can use emotional satisfaction as a means of acting out the individualistic religious attitude and societal balance-making of both Durkheim (1897/1951) and Douglas (1970/1996). In their theoretically comprehensive and ethnographic study, Bellah et al. (1996) characterize individualism as a truly American quality that "values independence and self-reliance above all else" and divide individualism into two areas: a "'hard' utilitarian shape and a 'soft'

expressive form” (p. viii). While the former focused on the bottom line such as gaining revenue, the latter focused on feelings, much like Parsons (1974) description of the Expressive Revolution (Bellah et al., 1996, p. viii). By including each of the elements of individualism as argued by the different theorists, the study by Bellah et al. (1996) successfully reflects the type of individualism best suited for observing Lakewood church. The authors demonstrate its relevancy to my study by providing concrete illustrations of the religious attitude and behavior of individualism in some Protestant churches today.

The first example includes a woman named Nan Pfautz who believes her relationship with God “transcends” her commitment to any particular church. Stating, “I believe I have a commitment to God which is beyond church. I felt my relationship with God was O.K. when I wasn’t with the church” (Bellah et al., 1996, p. 228). According to Bellah et al. (1996), Pfautz’s commitment to her church was not born out of a need to connect on a deep level with a local body of fellow believers; rather it was her choice to join an existing group within which to act out her personal relationship with God (p. 228). The authors claim that her concept of God and the perceived relationship to His people is highly individualistic (Bellah et al., 1996). This sort of expression of religious belief also reflects Weber’s (2003) description of the Protestant who is able to view faith as a private enterprise, free from the close oversight of religious authorities. This is confirmed by Pfautz’s pastor who states that, “God becomes the guarantor of what [I] ha[ve] ‘experienced in my life, [because] there is nothing that happens to me that is not for the fulfillment of my higher self” (Bellah et al., 1996, p. 229). According to Pfautz’s pastor then and as argued by Bellah et al. (1996), everything God does is for the fulfillment of this higher self or even more personally, to bring emotional satisfaction to Pfautz and others like her.

Further, Pfautz's pastor's words reflect Parsons' (1974/1999) argument that emotional satisfaction is the motivation behind the unique bond between a believer and God. Bellah et al. (1996) also illustrate this in their profile of American pastor Larry Beckett, whose church is described as "independent, conservative, and evangelical, and as neither liberal nor fundamentalist" (p. 230). Beckett portrays humankind's relationship with God with what Bellah et al. (1996) describe as "a liberal dose of humanistic psychology", saying, "Because God has created them in his image, because he loves them and sent his son to redeem them, they have infinite worth and value" (p. 231). By claiming then that believers are worthy of God's special attention, Bellah et al. (1996) illustrate how a religiously focused individualist can perceive him- or herself to have a privileged position before the Almighty. The authors describe churches like Pfautz's and Beckett's that emphasize this favored attitude toward individual believers as "expressive individualist". Expressive individualism stresses emotions as a guiding principle for decisions. This closely relates to Parsons' (1974) Expressive Revolution, where individuals value churches that do things for them over what they can do for a church (Bellah et al., 1996).

Thus far, I have looked at the various interpretations by several key theorists on the concept of individualism. Douglas's (1970/1996) approach reflects Durkheim's (1897/1951) as they both argued that the individualist is apart from social constraints but visible within society. Parsons' (1974) description of an emotionally driven individualism illustrated the type of behavior an individualist may employ as he or she seeks out emotional satisfaction. Weber (2003) explained that the difference in a religiously focused individualism is not so much in actions but rather in how the individualist approaches a relationship with God. This would entail viewing faith as a solitary journey with fellow

believers and religious authorities serving as encouragers on the sidelines. Bellah et al. (1996) address each of the elements of individualism to illustrate both the mentality and behavior behind a religiously focused individualism. Bellah et al.'s (1996) definition of religious individualism is summarized as *exercising behaviors and values informed by religious/spiritual beliefs that promote the needs and emotional desires of the individuals over those of a church community or other relationships*. This definition reflects not only Bellah et al.'s understanding of religious individualism but incorporates each of the different theorists as well. Additionally, the definition can be used as a framework for my observations at Lakewood church. Using these scholars as a theoretical basis, my own understanding of *religious individualism* then develops several characteristics that distinguish it from both general individualism and a more communally-focused brand of religion that exists within the Protestant tradition. This diversion from the Protestant tradition then categorizes religious individualism as an iconoclastic approach to the Christian faith as it values individual preferences over an enforcement of a communal identity.

My description of the traits of religious individualism, which incorporates each of the theorist's contributions to the definition of religious individualism, divides the observable characteristics into four investigative categories. The categories should be considered necessary in fulfilling the definition of religious individualism but insufficient by themselves in being a clear representation of religious individualism. None of the traits can be categorized in a vacuum as religious individualism per se but each characteristic is read in light of the definition. These categories of religious individualism include: (1) expressing emotion as a means to demonstrate religious individualism to others, (2) viewing the relationship with God as a personal one, (3) having a privileged attitude towards the

relationship, and (4) seeking personal benefits over communal benefits of church. Below, I will address these characteristics with a specific description of each one's corresponding behavior to illustrate what I looked for at Lakewood church.

As one of the key characteristics of religious individualism is a focus on emotions, as argued by Parsons (1974), it is important to identify any displayed emotion that is meant to communicate a personally pious attitude toward faith and church. These emotions would include crying, jumping up and down, and lifting hands, arms, and face to the sky, as each of these actions visually distinguish the social actor against other attendees. This is contrasted with a communally-focused approach toward religion where there is an expectation to conform uniformly to a corporate display of emotion because it creates visually equal degrees of spirituality/religious commitment amongst a congregation. Uniformity could range from the expectation of silence and limited movement to a jubilant atmosphere and a high degree of movement. In either case, the actions seen are to visually communicate a sense of belongingness amongst social actors. Attempting to feel as if one belonged to a larger group is not a priority to the religious individualist as much as is the value of knowing how one personally benefits from ritualistic group interactions. Thus, the differentiating factor behind an emotional display where we are able to characterize it as religious individualism is the intention to single oneself out within a congregation. Based on this, I used the characteristic of emotional displays not to evaluate the degree of religious individualism a person may be demonstrating, but to understand what is being communicated through each display.

The second characteristic involves looking further into the intention behind the expressed emotion. Viewing a religious individualist's relationship with the Almighty as

personal facilitates behavior meant to distinguish oneself within a congregation through displaying emotion. Thus, the second characteristic involves the religious individualist believing he or she has a “personal relationship” with God. This phrase has been adopted by the larger evangelical culture but is especially descriptive of religious individualists who view themselves as one of the solitary pilgrims Weber (2003) describes. For the religious individualist, being in a personal relationship means being responsible for his or her own spiritual growth. Responsibility can come in the form of taking an active role in choosing what spiritual tools will best serve the need of communing personally with God. These tools could range from religious media, to religious doctrines, or even to the fellow believers with whom one chooses to associate oneself. A religious individualist will feel free to incorporate any or none of the tools as he or she sees fit. Thus, the burden falls on the believer to grow in faith to the degree that should the believer not be satisfied with his or her faith life, it is because the person did not pray enough, believe enough, or become spiritual enough. Even these acts of the belief are seen as a form of work to the religious individualist as they enforce within the believer and demonstrate to others that he or she has a successful faith life.

Intertwined with the second characteristic is the nature of the relationship between the religious individualist and God. Because it is personal and individual, the person must believe he or she holds the special attention of the Almighty. If a spiritual tool does not assist in fostering such a thought, a religious individualist will discard it. I will study how this belief is communicated to congregants by the Osteen ministry by looking for words and phrases that highlight the “specialness” of the individual believers in the presence of God, or those that indicate the religious individualist is privileged in some way to receive the

Almighty's blessings and attention. In both cases, the religious individualist views him- or herself as having a unique power to bend the God's ear and secure blessings.

In terms of faith, God is seen as serving the emotional satisfaction of the individual, which again illustrates Parsons' (1974) Expressive Revolution. According to a religious individualist, God's primary desire is to make believers happy and to bring them to a higher spiritual plane. By seeking out the same desires through the Almighty, a religious individualist would see even good works such as tithing, continuing to believe in God, and having a good attitude as claims for a higher degree of faith and reasons for God's favor toward the person. The individual then is able to have a privileged attitude toward the Almighty as he or she harnesses the blessings of God through good behavior that is apparently being monitored and recorded by God. Religious individualists will not merely hope for a good life, but expect it because it is deserved.

The fourth characteristic of religious individualism involves looking at whether a religious individualist's attitude toward church is used as a means to receive individual benefits over communal benefits. As reflected in the first and second traits, the individual benefits involve emotional satisfaction and an emphasis on a personal and unique relationship with God. This manner can be observed through either the individual believer's perspective of the church service/atmosphere or the church employees' treatment of the congregants. Much like Pfautz' description of why she attends church, I note in the second half of my study the congregants' reasons for attending Lakewood (Bellah et al., 1996). Specifically, I looked for whether congregants state that their church presence fulfills their need for achieving greater belief in God over a need to belong to a like-minded people. I also looked for whether they place an importance on the church's role in achieving personal

emotional satisfaction as an explanation for attending or enjoying the church. In regards to the church employees' treatment, I sought confirmation of my hypothesis that I would observe an obligation to meet the congregants' spiritual and emotional needs from a religious individualist perspective. This would involve designing the service, sermon, and overall church atmosphere to appeal to the religious individualist's needs, whatever the church may perceive those to be. For example, one need the church may seek to meet would be securing the attendee's emotional comfort throughout his or her church experience. For example, ensuring that the church did not intimidate first time churchgoers would be an important need that must be met in a religious individualist church that seeks to increase its numbers. This type of church would seek to minimize overtly religious symbols and décor in order to ensure first time churchgoers feel comfortable in what may be a new environment to them in accordance to what the church believed were common experiences by first-time churchgoers.

I have just discussed the four characteristics of religious individualism, which include displaying emotion, personal responsibility, sense of entitlement, and personal needs. When each characteristic is present, they combine to exemplify religious individualism. Were one trait absent from an analysis, it would cause all other examples of the categories to become void. Thus, a religious individualist display of emotion necessitates a religious individualist sense of entitlement, a value of personal needs, and a personal responsibility toward faith. I demonstrate in this thesis how the Osteen ministry consistently illustrates these characteristics to establish that it is an archetype of religious individualism.



Due to its display of each trait, much of Lakewood church's sermon, church setting, and service involve the setting apart the individual as the sacred object. The individual as sacred is a concept that is at the very heart of the matter for religious individualism. Everything communicated within Lakewood is conducted for the promotion of the individual, making him or her "essential" to the environment of the church (Rothenbuhler, 2005). Rothenbuhler (2005) writes about the church of the "cult of the individual" saying institutions build itself around "the construction, display, critique, and improvement of selves" (Rothenbuhler, 2005, pg. 99). This statement reflects personal needs trait of religious individualism as it promotes the desires of individuals over communal identities. Furthermore, a sense of entitlement communicates an attitude of privilege that drives individuals to set themselves apart by being better, richer, and happier than others. The personal responsibility toward a faith life intensifies this need as it indicates that the believer has the ultimate duty in bringing rising above the profane state of mediocrity. Therefore, each characteristic of religious individualism should be seen as an overt attempt to promote the self as sacred and avoid contentment in weakness.

The definition for religious individualism must be filtered through the perspective of mass media as it is distinctly tied to every Lakewood service. Lakewood church has chosen to use its own mass media to include a mass and international audience. As I mentioned above, the purpose of my study was to see what is unique in how Lakewood church uses media. This is especially important considering how religious individualism has been a strong presence in many different forms of mass media such as print, radio, and television. I discuss this argument in the next section as I attempt to trace a historical connection between a religious use of mass media and religious individualism.

## THE MEDIA'S PLACE IN PROTESTANTISM: PRINT, RADIO, AND TELEVISION

A religious individualist is not an island but one that engages with society. Thus it becomes necessary to consider how the religious individualist uses the tools of contemporary society in order to support his or her religious behaviors. In the case of this particular study, a key aspect of religious individualism is the willingness/propensity to embrace media – a ubiquitous presence in contemporary society – which may help express or perform his or her beliefs. The traits of religious individualism include high displays of emotion, combined with an independent attitude toward God and the church, being religiously independent involves not only exercising emotionally fueled behaviors that distinguish oneself within a congregation, but also attributing these actions to a fundamental belief in emotional satisfaction as a means to grow closer to God. Religious individualism then becomes a matter of the heart, as religious individualism is used to satisfy and validate the individual's emotions. In building an argument for the use of media in religious individualism then, it is important to see how religious use of mass media appeals to the heart, or the emotional nature of audiences. This section will trace the religious use of mass media in religion beginning with print forms of media, then radio and television.

Religious authorities within churches, denominations, or faiths can use mass media to seek out an audience who shares the same beliefs, and vice versa. In the case of print media, one is more able to encounter and promote differing religious beliefs by printing new ideas to share with others across towns and cultures. This is significant to discuss as print media was one of the first forms of mass communication. Whether through the mass production of Bibles and other sacred texts or religious pamphlets/books, religious

groups everywhere use media to reach and appeal to a large audience. While many printed religious texts have sought to appeal to the intellect, each mass print text by its very character has the potential to affect the emotional and independent attitude of religious individualism by emphasizing its purpose as a tool to suit individual religious needs. Many popular Protestant religious texts in American culture, such as Joel Osteen's (2004/2007) two books *Your Best Life Now* and *Seven Steps to a Better You*, do not appear to serve as an authority over the religious person but are seen by their author as instruments to a greater understanding of the individual's faith. For example, Osteen says in his introduction to *Your Best Life Now* that his book is designed for a person to "live at [his or her] full potential" (pg. X). Osteen states that the reader will find "practical suggestions and simple choices to help you stay positive" (pg. X). Osteen does not describe his methods as absolute truth, nor does he present himself as one who holds all the answers. Instead, his steps are only suggestions and the reader is in control of using them or not. If Osteen's book were presented as the ultimate authority over a person, that individual would not be interacting with the rest of society because they would have no need to seek society's advice and would therefore not be a true religious individualist. This yielding of absolute authority to the religious individualist reflects primarily Douglas' (1970/1996) Grid and Group Cultural theory where individualism is not absent from society or unresisting any authority's oversight into the individualist's life. Thus, in keeping with the second trait of religious individualism, where a religious individualist takes personal responsibility for his or her own faith, a person can also use print media at his or her own discretion.

However, there is a difference between Osteen's books and mass-produced doctrinal statements or sacred texts. Whereas the former attempts to appeal primarily to the heart, the latter appeals to the head in addition to the heart. Osteen has said in the past that encouraging people is his method of self-improvement and spiritual growth (Dooley, 2007). He achieves this not by stressing doctrinal arguments, which could appeal to the head and eventually the heart, but through emotionally charged personal stories (Dooley, 2007). This reflects the first characteristic of religious individualism and enforces the theory that religious individualists do primarily seek out emotional satisfaction as a means of spiritual growth. As I will demonstrate through an examination and discussion of other types of mass media forms outside of and connected to Lakewood church, appealing to the heart is an effective means of not merely reaching a large audience but a religiously individualist one.

The next major development in communicating religion through mass media came in the form of radio as early as the 1920s. Researchers Robert and Helen Lynd (1929) embarked on a massive ethnographic study of the town of Muncie, Indiana, which was given the pseudonym of Middletown. The goal of the study was to document cultural changes within a Midwestern community between 1890 and 1925 (Lynd & Lynd, 1929, pg. 8). Amongst other discoveries, they found that listening to the radio was a popular, albeit new, leisure activity in 1925 (Lynd & Lynd, 1929, pg. 269). The researchers also observed a growing disillusionment with organized religion and corresponding decreased church attendance (Lynd & Lynd, 1929, pg. 359). Such a combination provides a context for the appeal of religious broadcasting as they can supplement or replace local religious habits. Lynd & Lynd (1929) quote one listener: "Last night I heard a ripping sermon from Westminster church somewhere in California. We've no preachers here that can compare

with any of them” (pg. 270). This short statement reveals a discontent for only the local offerings of sermons with the media’s satisfaction of this need by providing outsourced sermons for Muncie residents.

According to Erling Jorstad (1993), author of *Popular Religion in America: The Evangelical Voice*, a book that details American Evangelicalism and its rise through the religious use of media, Protestants have had a long history with the media as a means to fulfill the “Great Commission” (p. 125). The author divides Evangelical radio programs into four categories: 1) Traditional worship with an eye on local markets and tastes; 2) news radio with a religious focus; 3) Bible study and; 4) a mixture of contemporary religious music and inspirational programs (Jorstad, 1993, p.126). Each of these categories can be syndicated creating a national, if not global, market, which allows listeners a wider access to Protestant culture at their convenience. Giving listeners a sense of independence in regards to their choice in religious program in conjunction with or in substitution of the traditional local offerings provided through their church was a key development in the media’s contribution to religious individualism. The four types of religious radio programs employ a mixture of heart and head foci. Each of the programs relies on listener donations or revenue gained through advertisements.

With an eye on mass market interests, radio producers must appeal to market tastes. A 2007 article from the online magazine *Christian Music Today* discusses modern Christian radio’s target demographic. They describe the typical listener as a woman in her late thirties, a typical “Soccer Mom” who listens to Christian radio “almost exclusively” on route to dropping her children off to their various athletic activities. This typical listener also maintains the buying power for her family, which makes her very attractive to advertisers,

along with radio stations in need of revenue. Author Mark Geil (2007) states that station directors expend a large amount of effort and research into identifying this typical listener's interests. Part of their research effort involves developing focus groups consisting of women such as the one described and testing out new music and content on them. He states, "Her tastes affect what's played on radio, and not just the music. She is the target of the ads, the promotions, even the morning show banter" (Geil, 2007). Geil (2007) claims that songs are selected to please this listener and to protect, from the listener's perspective, the sensibilities of any children who may be in the car with her. According to one slogan of a nationally syndicated radio station, "The Fish," the goal of radio programming is to be "Safe for the whole family" and "always positive and encouraging" (Geil, 2007). According to this statement then, everything within the content of the radio station is designed to be upbeat. As a result, much of Christian radio today strives to meet the emotional needs of the target audience by ensuring she is continually cheerful. Religious individualists, who may make up the majority of modern Christian radio's audience, can influence the content of radio programming by ruling with their emotions as they are entertained by the content.

The effect of the radio and its focus on pleasing the target audience has made its way into American churches as many churches are using Christian songs frequently heard on the radio as part of their worship service. Many Christian musicians are aware of this trend and format their songs to not only be easy to listen but to sing along as well. Aaron Shust, a Christian musician, states, "All of our songs are written with the intention of wanting a congregation to sing along. Basic melodies enable people to sing along right away. Hidden complexity might come out in the studio, complex guitar riffs that a church worship band might not play on a Sunday morning" (Geil, 2007). By selecting songs that are popular,

encouraging, and simple, American churches can exemplify the personal needs/benefits trait as it demonstrates adapting the church to please the individual's emotional needs.

The next development involves the rise of television in American households. Schultze's (1991) book *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion*, documents the rise of religious television, with a focus on televangelism in particular, and how it attracts and affects a religious audience. Schultze (1991) argues that the important characteristic of televangelism is not so much the content of the programs but the television personalities found on the programs. Television, like its predecessor the radio, often seeks to meet the emotional needs of its viewers. Schultze (1991) traces this fixation on heart and personality in the Christian faith back to the Revivalist period (1880s-1930s) where famous evangelists such as Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, and Billy Sunday used their "dynamic edge" to reach small town America in order to spread the Gospel (p. 98). He reminds readers that revivalism was "always a combination of entertainment and religion" (Schultze, 1991, p. 99). With the purpose of awakening the locals from their lost or dulled faith, the evangelists employed dramatic and often emotional appeals to the audience (Schultze, 1991). Schultze (1991) describes one of Sunday's sermons saying "Sunday jumped energetically around a stage or pulpit, bellowing forth his 'sermon' while shedding his jacket and rolling up his sleeves" (p. 100). Such antics were vastly different from the local offerings to which his audience members were accustomed.

The use of dramatics to gain an audience was not solely for winning converts but also for gaining revenue. Many expenses were involved in promoting the gospel and these early evangelists had to ensure they were still able to pay the bills at the end of the day. Of course, many of these evangelists had to provide for their lavish lifestyles, which Schultze

(1991) also documents. This is no different with the televangelists today. Unlike commercial programs, televangelist programs purchase air-time with money gained through viewer donations, which undoubtedly influences the content shown. Schultze (1991) likens their efforts to “sweeps week” on network programming where sensationalism trumps true story-relevant content (p. 108). He states, “Each show had to accentuate action and emotion, even if it meant sensationalizing the religious message. Dramatic impact became the yardstick for success for most televangelists” (Schultze, 1991, p. 108).

With a mass audience that is connected through the media, televangelism has created what Thomas Luckmann (1967) has called, “the invisible church”, a congregation with no real physical church building but rather a group of believers who gather together through a medium based on a shared loyalty to a television personality. This congregation may have differing beliefs from one another and rarely if ever communicate with the preacher or other congregants. In addition, with such a wide reach and limited interaction, televangelism eliminates the need for accountability that is usually found in smaller churches. Believers may not only come as they are but are also free to stay as they are if they so choose. Contrasting this, smaller churches allow congregants to see the flaws of their own pastors, which is something not always available to viewers of televangelism who are dependent upon the thirty-minute segments offered by the televangelists (Schultze, 1991).

Televangelist consumers may be absent from Christian churches, but they are not absent from influencing its progress. In keeping with the definition of religious individualism, which requires a person to identify with the Individualist, not the Isolate, the religious individualist has affected the Christian church as churches have sought to bring the televangelist audiences back into the un-mass-mediated fold. Reflecting the personal



needs/benefits characteristic of religious individualism, churches must compete with televangelists and attempt to gain members through entertainment-focused worship, dramatic preaching, individualistic thinking, and anonymous attendance (Schultze, 1991). Likewise, according to Schultze (1991), the members are free to be entertainment-focused viewers similar to the viewers of televangelism, both of whom are able to see church or the program as a product chosen for their enjoyment and consumption (Schultze, 1991). Thus, an individualistic attitude appears closely related to the appeal of televangelism.

I have just discussed how mass media can apply to the definition of religious individualism and reflect its characteristics. Print media, especially in the form of religious books, can inform the religious individualist of spiritual knowledge but a true religious individualist will not use these materials as a sole source of authority. Radio, or more specifically, contemporary Christian radio, can emphasize emotions as an integral aspect to a religious individualist's faith through programmers' song selection criteria. In an effort to attract the similarly large audience that Christian radio captures, many churches are also adapting their music to those that are already heard on the radio. Television, and televangelism in particular, focuses on amusement and stirring up emotions as an important way to grow in faith. Likewise, churches have adopted this practice as a means to appeal to religious individualists and compete with other forms of entertaining media. In each of these examples, it is clear that the concept of religious individualism is not contained to churches only but can be reflected in many forms of mass media. The next challenge however is to study how religious individualist churches use media, a challenge that will be addressed in my study.

## UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OF THE MEDIA IN RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALISM

It is important to discuss how mass media theorists have researched the media as a way to understand how one should approach the study of religious individualism. One of the landmark studies on the subject of mass media and modern religious society was conducted by Parker, Barry, and Smythe in 1955. They studied how the media connected in different social, class, and sectarian contexts (Parker et al., 1955). Bishop Sheen was a major presence on national television at this time, which allowed the researchers to study his effect upon the public as Catholicism gained prominence in American culture with the help of Sheen's program. They found that it was better to understand the different ways such broadcasts were interpreted and used than to assume some sort of unified 'effect' of them on audience beliefs or behaviors (Parker et al., 1955). Their conclusion on the media's connection with society is a model for how this study will attempt to understand the Lakewood church. Rather than study the possible effects of participating in the Lakewood church, either within the service or watching it from television, this study hopes to analyze how the media is used to reinforce the teachings of Joel Osteen.

Peter G. Horsfield (1997) argues in his article "Changes in Religion in Periods of Media Convergence," that religious leaders have shifted the way they think about the media. Traditionally, the media was seen instrumentally as it assisted religion in communicating their message to mass audiences. Yet, according to Horsfield (1997), rather than interpret the media as one, albeit large, social institution, some have come to see the media as encompassing all areas of culture, thereby shaping the public's ideas of reality and values. This has moved religion from using the media to communicate its message, to the media

using religion and creating its own positions and meanings. The second major shift involves moving away from a concern with the media's effects to how the media are used. Horsfield (1997) explains, "Media, individually, and as an institution, are now so pervasive and such an inextricable part of people's lives and culture that we now see all other social collectives (including religious faith) through the lens of our enculturation in media" (Hoover & Lundby, 2006, p. 177). Thus, the audience should no longer be seen as a passive recipient but one that actively engages with the media to make meaning and satisfy needs (Hoover & Lundby, 2006). It is with this understanding that I investigate how Lakewood assists its audience to use the media for reinforcing Lakewood's concept of religious individualism.

Janice Peck (1997) in her article, "Psychologized Religion in a Mediated World", looks at the world of psychologized religion, which emphasizes a pursuit of emotional satisfaction amongst its followers and its use of the media. She defines psychologized religion as one that employs a combination of "accommodation and recharismatization" (Hoover & Lundby, 1997, p. 233). It accommodates by borrowing language from other psychologists to build scientific legitimacy primarily for those without a scientific background and "recharismatizes" the public by emphasizing "private transformations" with the aid from mass media (Hoover & Lundby, 1997, p. 233). Peck (1997) quotes a practitioner of this category of religion who argues that the mass media have made the world "such a small place" and it becomes each individual's duty to use positive thinking, spiritual reflection, and prayer to create change both in his or her life and around the world. Such aims reflect the televangelism tradition with its emphasis on personal and global change established through the assistance of the media. Yet, this association with emotionally satisfying psychology introduces a type of religion reminiscent of the "New Age"

movement. It also corresponds to Parsons' (1974) Emotional Revolution and the first trait of religious individualism which deals with emotional displays. Indeed this description has filtered down modern American Evangelicalism as churches and believers, such as those profiled in Bellah et al's (1996) *Habits of the Heart*, elevate the individual and the positive elements of their faith tradition.

Lang and Lang (1953) provide a pivotal ethnographic study of television and its effect on a mass audience in their article, "The Unique Perspective of Television and its Effect" from the *American Sociological Review*. What makes this study both important to the study of the media and particularly to this study of religion and mass media is their focus on the mass audience. There are many influences upon the audience that enforce or contradict the messages individuals receive through the media. Thus, Lang and Lang (1953) state, the "effect of exposure to TV broadcasting of public events cannot be measured most successfully in isolation" (p. 3). It is important to study how the group affects the individual, especially in media situations where the spectator is not only watching the event, but part of the event itself. This is the very type of situation that describes the audience's role in the Lakewood church. A large, and seemingly anonymous, church audience watches Osteen and becomes a part of the event with their physical and emotional participation. Simultaneously, there is another audience who watches the event through mass media, either via television or the internet. They also have the ability to watch Osteen and participate in the event but their actions are unseen by those in Houston. In order to understand both avenues of spectatorship, Lang and Lang (1953) designed their study, which focused on the televised MacArthur Day in Chicago, contrasting the reactions of the participant observers on the scene and those watching the event over television. They looked specifically at how

the event was “interpreted, magnified, and took on an added significance” for both types of audiences (Lang & Lang, 1953, p. 3). Likewise, these qualities are a focus in my study of Lakewood Church. Regarding their findings, Lang and Lang (1953) state that, “Whereas a participant was able to make direct inferences about the crowd as a whole, being in constant touch with those around him, the television viewer was in the center of the entire crowd” (p. 11). According to the researchers, this attention toward the viewer affected the participant’s perception of the event as a whole as one eye would always be toward the camera.

Contrasting with this, the viewer is always at the mercy of “the instrument of the perception” (Lang & Lang, 1953, p. 11). What the camera chooses to focus upon, the viewer must focus upon as well. Lang and Lang’s (1953) research demonstrates the media does affect our view of events as the camera acts both as eyes that see and are seen.

This section addressed how different media theorists have appeared to have applied the concept of religious individualism. I began with Parker, Barry, and Smythe (1955) who decided to study how religious broadcasts were interpreted and used rather than study its effect on audiences. This mirrors the goal for my research into Lakewood church to see how and for what purposes Osteen uses mass media in his ministry. Horsfield (1997) found that the public sees every social collective, including religion, through the eyes of the media. According to his conclusions then, it is necessary to analyze how the audience responds to the use of the media within their social realm. Lang and Lang (1951) provide an important framework for such a study by demonstrating how the media is both the primary lens for television audiences and the center of attention for live audiences. Each study has played a crucial role in structuring an argument for analyzing the use of media at Lakewood church.

Based on their findings, I can argue for the importance of studying use over effect, while also taking into account the response of the audience.

#### A PROFILE OF RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALIST CHURCHES

As I mentioned in the discussion of religious individualism above, religious individualists are not isolated as many can be found in Evangelical churches, which may also exhibit the qualities of religious individualism in order to appeal to religious individualists. Kimon Howland Sargeant (2000) describes a church that fits this profile. He uses the popular Willow Creek Church, located in the suburbs of Chicago, which he cites as “a primary example of innovation among evangelical churches” as his case study for understanding seeker churches in America (Sargeant, 2000, p. 55). A seeker church, according to Sargeant (2000) is a church that actively seeks out people who are uncomfortable with mainline Christian churches. Bill Hybels, senior pastor of Willow Creek, describes his church thusly, “[We] merely apply Jesus’s methods to our generation. While He told parables, we use drama. While He built upon the common knowledge of His day, we tap into current events. While He addressed crowds from a mountainside or a boat, we enhance our communication through twentieth-century technology” (Sargeant, 2000, p. 55). Sargeant’s (2000) case study on Willow Creek is a crucial reference for my own research as Hybel’s church, like Osteen’s, embraces the presence of mass media to enhance the services. While Willow Creek may not purchase airtime on cable networks, it is clear based on Hybel’s statement that they still use other elements of mass media to appeal to religious individualists.

According to the author, churches like Hybel’s have tried to stay away from tradition and ritual in an effort to attract religious individualists who favor unique and personalized

services. Religious individualist pastors argue that rituals are not “authentic” for they prevent genuine heartfelt expression over “socially acceptable appearances” (Sargeant, 2000, p. 56). Sargeant’s (2000) description of an anti-ritual attitude in churches mirrors the first characteristic of religious individualism where emotional expression is valued for being a means to distinguish oneself amongst a congregation.

While religious individualist churches may shun the idea of rituals, the churches have several traits that illustrate their attempt to attract the typical religious individualist. One characteristic that is common amongst the churches is the denial or downplay of their denomination in order to reach religious individualists who feel uncomfortable with the possibility of committing to a particular denomination (Sargeant, 2000). Sargeant (2000) also cites the design of the churches as a form of ritual. In order to remove any obstacles for the religious individualist, churches such as Willow Creek have removed many of the symbols that people have associated with the traditional church environment. For example, according to Sargeant’s (2000) survey “three out of four [nondenominational] churches (74 percent) do not display any religious symbols in their worship areas” (p. 61). This includes the highly ornate icons or banners common to traditional Christianity to the simple cross of Protestantism. The lack of religious symbolism extends to the church architecture as religious individualist churches attempt to resemble the “antiseptic professional buildings of suburban, corporate America” in order to capture the attention of those who frequent those sites (Sargeant, 2000, p. 61). The leaders of Willow Creek concur, describing their design strategy thusly, “Music, facilities, and the use of the arts should all reflect the culture within which we live” (Sargeant, 2000, p. 61-62). The type of culture Willow Creek seems intent on recreating appears to be one that is abreast with popular television, music, films, and

trends (Sargeant, 2000). This statement illustrates the fourth concept of religious individualism, or personal needs/benefits trait, as the church will adapt its environment to the degree where all communal commitment to a denomination is sacrificed in order to make the religious individualist comfortable. The churches then serve as a backdrop for whatever type of spiritual sentiment the religious individualist may desire to attach to the environment. If the person desires to bring their Presbyterian or Catholic beliefs into the sanctuary, he or she can feel safe doing so as those beliefs are not overtly criticized.

In addition to the design and symbolism of sacred spaces, the liturgies or ceremonies of the churches are also a means to attract the religious individualist. As much as these churches will deny they have anything resembling “liturgy”, which shares the same negative connotation for them as “ritual” does, there is a basic formula to the services. Sargeant (2000) describes their church liturgy as containing, “contemporary music, relevant preaching, entertaining drama and multimedia presentations, and friendly encounters in a nonthreatening environment” (p. 64). Each of these components is carefully created with the religious individualist in mind. The routine is designed to make them comfortable so that they may not feel lost in the crowd, energized so that they will not feel bored, and appreciated so that they will ultimately come back again. All efforts are made to emphasize and please the center of the service, which is the individual. Again, this reflects the personal needs/benefits trait but with a description of how the churches can use media to appeal to the religious individualist who may feel more comfortable with more references to popular culture. The sermons from the churches differ from traditional ones as religious individualist sermons are tailored to the individual emotional needs of the congregation. An example of this observation can be



found in the pastor of Willow Creek, Bill Hybel's, reason for taking communion.

Hybel's states, "If you make a covenant with the Lord to take communion, I think you're going to sense smiles from Heaven; I think God's going to say 'That means a lot to me; your covenant moves me. Thanks for caring enough about me to remember me once a month'" (Sargeant, 2000, p. 72). It is therefore the emotional and personal benefits, the feelings of God's gratitude and favor, which are supposed to drive religious behavior. This is the very essence of religious individualism in a church setting and encompasses each of its characteristics.

As Hybel's words demonstrate, there are still rituals in the religious individualist church but they are designed to be supportive of individual feelings. Whether it is through minimizing denominational affiliation, religious symbolism and architecture, or even religious elements in services, these churches will sacrifice communal identification for the purposes of securing the comfort of the religious individualist. Observing how Willow Creek adheres so well to the characteristics of religious individualism, I used Sargeant's (2000) findings as a template of what I expected to find at Lakewood church.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter sought to demonstrate how churches use media and how their use supports the definition of religious individualism. Before that could be discussed however, a definition for religious individualism needed to be developed and the relationship between individualism and religion needed to be addressed. I chose to use the definition of religious individualism as discussed by Bellah et al. (1996). In order to understand how they defined both individualism and its effect on religion, I looked at several scholars' who exemplify Bellah et al.'s concept of religious individualism.

Durkheim (1897/1951) and Douglas (1970/1996) both saw individualism as a balance between complete autonomy and absolute compliance with societal expectations. Parsons (1974) saw individualism as a means of expression and an exercise in pursuing emotional satisfaction. Weber's (2003) concept of individualism is similar to the previous scholars but showed that a religiously focused individualism can be traced to an individualistic view of one's relationship with God. From these scholars, I described Bellah et al.'s (1996) definition of religious individualism, which is *exercising behaviors and values informed by religious/spiritual beliefs that promote the needs and emotional desires of the individuals over those of a church community or other relationships*. After establishing a definition, I next addressed several characteristics that would assist in determining categories of observation for my study. These characteristics were: expressing emotion as a means to demonstrate religious individualism to others, viewing the relationship with God as personal to the believer, believing he or she holds God's special attention and favor, and seeking the personal over communal benefits of a church. These traits combine to set apart the individual as sacred and assist in making ordinary lives something to be avoided, or symbolic of a profane state. I then used the characteristics of religious individualism to inform my analysis of the use of media in religious, particularly Protestant, circles. The last half of the chapter analyzed several historical and contemporary studies in religion and media studies. The analysis focused on how other scholar's research can be applied to both the case study of Lakewood church and the concept of religious individualism. Lastly, it was important to describe the type of church that seeks to attract religious individualists, much like Lakewood.

Based on the range of scholars included in the literature review, this study now has the framework necessary to develop a methodology for the case study of Lakewood church. The purpose of the research into Osteen's televised sermons is to see how media use enables and reinforces feelings of individualism in Osteen's sermons. The definition for religious individualism provides a theoretical insight into how to analyze the observations that will be gathered at Lakewood church. The findings will focus on visually emotive acts that distinguish individual congregants amongst others in attendance. The relationship between the media and individualism is a strong one that has been long established by theoretical and empirical research. Previous research, such as those cited in the literature review, has utilized ethnographic methods such as participant observation as a means of understanding both the media and religious services' relationship with individualism. Similarly, this study also uses participant observation as a means of data analysis.

In order to guide the analysis, the study relied on the first and primary research question:

*(R.Q. 1) How does the religious use of the media enable and reinforce feelings of religious individualism in Osteen's services?*

Through first hand observation, this question focuses on how the media is used as a means to communicate religious individualism within the Lakewood church services. Details on the methodology behind the observation will be discussed in the following chapter. With the definition of religious individualism being the primary tool for analyzing media use, I organized my analysis of Lakewood church to address each of the three characteristics. Furthermore, while the first question involved looking at how

Lakewood communicates religious individualism through the media, R.Q. 2 concentrates on the live audience's response to such methods:

*(R.Q. 2) How does the congregation respond to the religious use of the media in the service?*

This question reflects Lang and Lang's (1953) study, which illustrated how the MacArthur Day participants interacted with the media's presence. Their findings discussed the non-verbal reactions participants had to the media's presence. They noticed how audience members maintained their focus on the television cameras throughout the event. This is a subject that I explored in the Lakewood church case study by observing audience nonverbal feedback during the services.

Lastly, the study will incorporate a second data source, which included mediated responses to Osteen's service such as newspaper articles and online blogs. Through a qualitative content analysis, this area of research attempted to blend R.Q. 1 and 2 by interpreting the written responses to the Osteen ministry and how religious use of media can reinforce religious individualist feelings in attendees. This leads to the study's third and final research question:

*(R.Q. 3) Do the descriptions of Lakewood church's services from other observers concur with the present study's definition of religious individualism?*

Thus, this last question is answered by analyzing the responses of those who have attended one of Osteen's services in order to both see how the media is being used and how attendee's perceive its presence. I expected the findings to confirm what should already be evident in my observations. The purpose for a content analysis was to bring contextual information to the services, verify findings, and solidify any conclusions that

may arise from the observation. In addition, a content analysis of media sources citing Osteen is a fitting choice for a man and ministry that rely so heavily on mass media in promoting himself. Previous scholars, such as Bellah et al. (1996) or Lynd & Lynd (1929) who used interviews to support their findings from the participant observations of local churches and church goers are reflected again in the purpose of this study's content analysis of Osteen's national and global response.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH FINDINGS: FIELD OBSERVATIONS

In the previous chapter, I discussed the definition of religious individualism and its four characteristics. These characteristics guide the analysis of Lakewood church as I answer two of the three research questions. For the first question, “*How does the religious use of the media enable and reinforce feelings of individualism in Osteen’s services,*” I used my observations of the Lakewood ministry’s service and their religious use of media. The second research question, “*How does the congregation respond to the religious use of the media in the service?*” also involved observation of the services but with a particular focus on congregational reactions towards the presence of mass media. The third question is addressed more thoroughly in the fourth chapter.

#### FIELD OBSERVATION METHODOLOGY

The research period at Lakewood church occurred during the months of November and December 2007 and consisted of over five weeks of observation of fifteen church services, both on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings. I also observed the televised broadcasts of these same services and analyzed any differences from the live services. To answer the first two questions, I participated as one would as a regular congregant at the church while noting the movements of the camera and the attendees who appeared on Lakewood’s screens. The degree to which I participated reflects Adler and Adler’s (1987) description of the role of the peripheral member, which is participation on a minimal level in order to allow the researcher better opportunities to observe his or her surroundings. This allowed me to blend in with other participants so as to not disturb the

environment but still be able to observe camera movements and audience reactions in detail. Because my participation is limited only to the degree that I do not disturb the environment, my methodology can be classified as non-participant observation. I desired the congregants to see me as another attendee of Lakewood services but as not one employing emotional displays in order to qualify as a religious individualist participant. Thus, my participation in the rituals granted me membership inside the Lakewood church as I acted the part of an attendee but lack of intensity in participating did not make me a core member of the group of religious individualists.

I framed my analysis around the traits of religious individualism discussed previously to illustrate how Lakewood's use of mass media promotes and incorporates religious individualism into its setting, liturgy, and sermons. Using a thematic analysis approach, I organized my observation notes into themes of the emotional display, personal responsibility, sense of entitlement, and personal needs/benefits traits. The observations of the media's presence were then divided into two themes for thematic analysis which were audience reactions and observable uses of mass media. The subcategories described the different areas of the Lakewood service which included the liturgy, sermon, and setting. I concentrated on these three subcategories throughout the observation period. After this, I drew out examples of religious individualism which was then organized into the four characteristics and media presence themes. My analysis of the traits as exemplified in the Lakewood services assists in answering the overall question of what religious individualism presents to the study of mass media in churches today. The thematic analysis approach allowed me to gain a clearer view of how and

where religious individualism can be manifested at Lakewood church by concentrating on each trait as a specific observational theme.

#### OBSERVING MEDIA USE AT LAKEWOOD

For five weeks in 2007, I observed Lakewood church with the intention of trying to understand how this church promotes religious individualism and incorporates mass media into all areas of its services. In order to understand how Lakewood uses the media, it is important to first address where Lakewood's cameras and screens are within their sanctuary. This will provide clarity for when I discuss the camera angles and shots in my analysis. One must also consider that none of the cameras are hidden from the congregation, allowing the cameras' presence to be more salient to those present. Such an observation is necessary for my analysis of the second research question.

There are six cameras within the Lakewood sanctuary. These include: three crane cameras with one on a rolling cart, two stationary cameras in the center of the sanctuary controlling long and close up shots, and one camera held by a cameraman who walks along the floor of the sanctuary. One crane camera that moves along the back stadium seating plays a more active role in the second Sunday service. Along the ceiling there are three men controlling the overhead lights in the sanctuary (see Figure A). On Saturdays, technicians operate the two stationary cameras and one crane camera in order to project images of the stage and audience to the screens within the sanctuary. On Sundays however, cameras are used to not only project images, but to tape the services that will be edited later for broadcast.

There are three services each weekend at Lakewood church. Each service begins with Lakewood's theme song followed with four songs led by Lakewood's musicians.



Similar to the congregational songs sung at Lakewood, the theme song is upbeat. It speaks of being successful in life with phrases directed toward the audiences such as “You’re an over-comer/More than a conqueror” and “Discover the champion in you.” I will address how the lyrics reflect religious individualism later in the chapter. Victoria Osteen then asks the congregation to present their financial offerings to the church. Music, sung only by the musicians, plays as congregants pass a bucket in which to donate their money. Another song is sung after each person has an opportunity to offer their contributions. Victoria then prays for the congregation and permits anyone who desires to receive individual prayers to come near the stage. Those in the congregation who choose not to have prayer are prompted to sing two songs by Lakewood’s musicians until each congregant has received prayer. Joel Osteen then begins his sermon and closes the service with a request for congregants to raise their hands if they now believe in Jesus. In terms of the content of the service, there are few differences between the Saturday and Sunday night sermons. Osteen and his wife make more speech errors, such as stutters and mispronunciations, but overall the message is identical to Sunday’s. The moment for tithing, along with the songs and time for prayer all precede the sermon for each service. It appears that this order of worship is to accommodate the filming format which tapes only the congregational confession, sermon and a closing statement, which occur toward the end of the service.

The filming format is a major aspect in how Lakewood presents itself to those outside and within the congregation. In addition to using cameras to project images of Osteen onto the screens in the sanctuary, the cameras also project images of the Lakewood singers in a highly stylized format resembling professional concert videos.

Furthermore, Lakewood utilizes the screens to direct the congregation to certain biblical passages, alert parents of their need in the day care center, project images from the Lakewood theme song, and project advertisements/announcements of upcoming events or ministries. From this list of uses, it appears the media is an integral aspect to the functioning of Lakewood church. Because of its significance to the services, how a religious use of mass media is linked to religious individualist churches will be an important connection to address throughout the chapter.

#### ANALYSIS OF THE OBSERVATION

While the services incorporate mass media, they also include the characteristics of religious individualism. In order to analyze each characteristic, I needed to observe the setting, liturgy, and sermons of Lakewood church. The next chapter will include more in-depth analysis of attendees who have shared their thoughts through blogs and newspapers. For this chapter however, the main purpose of my analysis involves establishing whether the characteristics are present in order to see how Lakewood uses mass media to communicate and reinforce the concept of religious individualism.

The first characteristic, which looks at emotional displays, is discussed more thoroughly when I address the second research question as it involves observing audience reactions for expressing emotion. The other traits (i.e. personal responsibility, sense of entitlement, and personal needs) answer the first research question through my analysis of the setting, liturgy, and sermon. In relation to the characteristic of the personal relationship a congregant can have with God, I observed Lakewood teaching congregants this trait in its liturgy and sermons. Both elements of the service also rely on mass media to communicate personal responsibility to congregants. The sense of entitlement and the

seeking of personal needs from church traits were also observed at Lakewood. However, much of my analysis of the setting of Lakewood relies on the personal needs trait, which is discussed last.

#### OBSERVING THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY TRAIT

The personal responsibility trait not only discusses an individual's personal duty to maintain spiritual growth, but it also stresses a one-on-one relationship with his or her Creator. This trait was illustrated in the liturgy subcategory, which includes songs sung at Lakewood. There are exactly eight songs sung at each service. During each week of observation, I observed that emphasizing a personal relationship with God was a popular theme within Lakewood's music. For example, lyrics stating, "Here I am to worship," "Cause if it had not been for you/ standing by my side where would I be?" and "I belong to you/ You belong to me, Lord" address the individual relationship the believer has with God. Few songs addressed the relationship with God as a relationship that is experienced together as a group. During the November 4<sup>th</sup> service for example, only the song, "How He Loves You and Me" included the idea of many people loving God at one time. Therefore, while the congregation may sing the songs together, use of "I" and "me" over "we" and "us" illustrate a value of communing individually with the Almighty.

During the Sunday service, Osteen begins his sermon by telling the congregation to greet the television viewers. He also greets the viewers by looking directly into the camera and telling them how happy he is to have them join him that day. Before the greeting, cameras are used to tape and project images from the sanctuary. The focus then is on the congregation as cameras punctuate key moments throughout the service by projecting congregational responses corresponding to the first characteristic of religious

individualism. This is an observation that will be discussed further in the latter part of the chapter. Concerning the sermons specifically, the cameras continue to tape and project, but are also used as the eyes for the television audience.

During the period of observation, I found through thematic analysis that each of Osteen's sermons illustrates personal responsibility theme, in addition to other themes that will be discussed later in the chapter, regarding spiritual growth especially through his organizational format. The basic organization of Osteen's sermons begins with a problem directed toward the audience. Osteen refers to himself as one who no longer struggles with this flaw. For example, the November 11<sup>th</sup> sermon discussed how it is necessary to consider oneself "the apple of God's eye." Osteen began his sermon saying that "people," which appeared to include the congregation, believe themselves to be ordinary. This is a false perspective, according to Osteen. Osteen demonstrated how he does not have this problem when he stated in this sermon that he knows he is special and "one of a kind." He then cites verses from the Bible in each of his sermons to support his ideas, often expounding on a person from the Bible who overcame a similar defect. In the November 11<sup>th</sup> sermon, this biblical person was Paul of the New Testament who overcame his own weaknesses to become a better person. Osteen then closes his sermon restating the problem and the rewards the audience will receive should they too overcome their flaws. The topics from Osteen sermon include: being comfortable with how God made a person by cultivating talents, being God's masterpiece, being a good example, knowing how God makes miracles out of mistakes, and knowing how God gives strength to fight battles.

Each of Osteen's sermons emphasized the personal responsibility the audience has in solving their problems. For example, the November 4<sup>th</sup> problem focused on the consequences of not being comfortable with oneself. Osteen argued that, "You need to be the best you can be." He referred to his life and that of King David from the Old Testament as examples to emulate as both "Never gave in to that temptation [to be more like someone else]." Osteen also argued that God has given each person talents that the person must nurture. Reflecting the second characteristic, no one, not even God, can perfect a person. According to Osteen, God gives opportunities to improve but it is the person's responsibility to take advantage of them. He said in his sermon regarding mistakes that, "God always gives us another opportunity... [God says,] 'I'm going to give you another chance.'" Even when God supplies the strength to "fight the battle", as Osteen states in his November 18<sup>th</sup> service, it is still up to the individual to have a positive attitude. He says, "You have the power to live in victory. You have the power to endure tough times. But this isn't going to do us any good if we have the wrong image on the inside." Thus, a religious individualist cannot trust in God to induce change but must rely on his or her own determination instead. While the sermons of Lakewood emphasized God's power being limited by humans, the songs at Lakewood illustrated the individual relationship congregants should have with God.

#### OBSERVING THE SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT TRAIT

The sense of entitlement characteristic describes believers who see themselves as deserving of God's blessing based on a good standing with the Creator. Believers also see God as a deity whose main purpose is ensuring the happiness of individuals. This observational theme can be observed most clearly in the songs sung at Lakewood, reasons

given for tithing, and the content of the Lakewood sermons. Like the personal responsibility trait, I found that the over half the of songs sung during each service also described the special attention God pays to believers and the favor believers expect from participating in a relationship with the Almighty. On November 11<sup>th</sup>, for example, the songs sung that did refer to the sense of entitlement characteristic were: “Sweeter,” “Say So,” “Free to Worship,” “We Win,” and “Song of Hope.” Throughout these songs references were made to indwelling power can be found in the song, “We Win” which states in its chorus, “We win because of You/We overcome and conquer in Your name/We win because of You/All things are possible/We win...We got the victory.” This victory, while coming from God, is found within the believer, giving him or her confidence of success in future endeavors. “Free to Worship” refers to God’s personal attention to believers in each stanza. The second stanza states, for instance, “Once I believed (that) I could never be close to Your heart/Now, I know the truth/I belong to You/Yes, I know/You have redeemed me by grace/The distance has been erased.” This song encourages believers to see themselves as close to God in an emotional and personalized way by referring to God’s heart and belonging to Him.

Other songs during the research period addressed the expectation of future blessings. For example, the lyrics in the song “Favor,” sung on November 4<sup>th</sup>, state “It’s my season, it’s my time for the favor of the Lord.” The song “I am Blessed to be a Blessing,” sung on November 18<sup>th</sup>, includes the lyrics, “You draw me into where You dwell and I’m welcome,” which along with the title phrase, addresses a privileged attitude of believers toward God. As mentioned earlier, even Lakewood’s theme song addresses a sense of entitlement as listeners are described as having indwelling power with

references to being “champions” and “More than a conqueror.” These songs illustrate that a believer should expect to be welcome in God’s presence and experience favor or blessings.

Also, Victoria Osteen tells the congregation each week why they should tithe. Her reasons illustrate the trait of personal entitlement, by describing a cause and effect relationship between performing a good deed (tithing) and receiving a reward from God based on this behavior. During the November 11<sup>th</sup> service she said that the congregation can be confident that God will bless their lives and they can say to God, “You’re gonna do everything in my life because I am faithful to you.” On December 2<sup>nd</sup> she stated the audience can tell themselves, “I am a tither; I’m a giver and I’m expecting the stores of heaven to open up.” The “stores of heaven” are not merely a spiritual reward of achieving a closer relationship with the Almighty, but include tangible changes in a believer’s life due to being faithful. “Everything” in a person’s life means a belief that God provides spiritual, emotional, and physical satisfaction. According to Victoria Osteen, those who tithe have the power to receive such provision that non-tithers do not have. This demonstrates that Victoria’s reasons for a privileged attitude toward future blessings from God come from a belief in the lasting value of good deeds. Because Victoria is considered a “co-pastor” with Joel Osteen, her statements illustrating the privileged attitude characteristic demonstrate how religious individualism can be enforced into a congregant’s mind.

Similar to the theme of personal responsibility, Osteen’s sermons contain references to a privileged attitude toward God based on a unique power to obtain His attention and favor. Osteen states in the November 8<sup>th</sup> sermon for example that being

comfortable with oneself will cause the individual to “see favor” with God, “see doors open” and is a “key to fulfilling your destiny”. This “destiny,” much like the “everything,” in life Victoria describes appears to include spiritual, emotional, and physical fulfillment. Reflecting the sense of entitlement trait, a person can harness the power of God for individual purposes by acting upon the opportunities the Almighty gives to those who develop their talents.

In the same sermon, Osteen emphasizes the importance of “Celebrating yourself.” This is another common concept from Osteen’s sermons as the November 11<sup>th</sup> service also discussed that a believer’s “very presence brings God’s praise” and that it is important to focus the mind on the good deeds one does. By focusing on the good, the person can claim his or her own value based on recent actions. In his November 18<sup>th</sup> sermon, Osteen said believers should also say to themselves, “I am strong in the Lord.” However, as mentioned previously, all the power becomes nullified when a person neglects the work necessary to having faith in him- or herself. Thus, Osteen’s sermons illustrate the sense of entitlement trait by relating individual worth in God’s eyes to positive actions. This teaching was reinforced by Victoria Osteen who also portrayed good behavior and an expectation toward future blessings as a cause and effect relationship. Similarly, the songs sung at Lakewood emphasized the inherent worth of individuals in God’s eyes. These examples demonstrate how a sense of entitlement is a valued concept at Lakewood church.

#### OBSERVING THE PERSONAL NEEDS/BENEFITS FROM CHURCH TRAIT

The personal benefits or needs trait describes a believer who expects a church to accommodate his or her concerns about how church should function or how congregants



should be treated. A religious individualist church would anticipate these concerns and accommodate the believer accordingly. In addition, both the church and believer would encourage placing self above the community with the community serving as a source of emotional gratification for one another. None of Osteen's sermons explicitly tells audience members to come to church to satisfy personal needs over communal ones. However, this does not mean such exhortations are absent from Osteen's attitude and Lakewood's service as a whole. The setting and liturgy of the service at Lakewood church reflect the personal needs trait best.

Lakewood's setting resembles other churches that use mass media to tape, televise or otherwise assist in the communication process in their religious services such as Willow Creek as described by Sargeant (2000). Like Willow Creek, Lakewood's sanctuary is void of any spiritual and specifically Christian symbols. Originally a basketball stadium, Lakewood covered the concrete floors with carpet, replaced gift shops with bookstores, twin basketball nets for twin waterfalls and likewise. The sanctuary itself preserves the stadium style seating and layout to accommodate a large attendance of members. The stage is toward one end of the sanctuary with more seating on the ground floor facing the stage (See Appendix A). On the stage is a wooden podium and risers on both sides for the choir. Against the stage wall are photos of blue skies and white clouds (See Appendix B). Surrounding the doors leading out of the sanctuary from the stage sides are stone colored caves made from fiberglass with working waterfalls and artificial foliage above them. Whenever there is music, a live band lifts from the lower parts of the sanctuary up to the stage so that the congregation can see them play. Above the stage are three large screens projecting the cameras' view of the service.. Lastly, quietly rotating

behind Osteen is a large golden globe. Based on Osteen's attention to detail in memorizing his sermons and in illustrating the other traits of religious individualism in the liturgy, one can assume Osteen takes a similar degree of care to the design of his church.

It is being argued that a religious individualist is going to bring his or her own religious ideas into the church. This stems from the personal responsibility trait where believers are the sole deciders over what and to what degree they will believe. Thus, in keeping with the personal needs/benefits trait, the Osteen ministry should accommodate each varying belief by not obligating the individual to adhere to a particular denomination or religious affiliation. By maintaining a religiously impartial décor, Lakewood appeals to the individual who is able to project his or her own beliefs against a neutral backdrop. Indeed, in an interview with Osteen he states that he aims to present himself as unbiased as possible in order not to offend or generate controversy, "I don't want to give anyone a reason to flip it [the televised broadcast of Lakewood church] off," (Romano, 2005). While being religiously neutral in the church's décor may be a wise marketing decision, it is also necessary for reaching religious individualists who will seek personal benefits over communal ones from Lakewood.

Osteen's desire to not have anyone turn away from his program exemplifies the attention to detail he has regarding how the Lakewood setting appears on television. None of the cameras or screens that are in plain view of those attending can be found when viewing the same service again on television. During Osteen's sermon, the majority of camera angles include long and close up shots of Osteen, close ups of individual congregants, and sweeping crane angle shots that pass just under the large

screens at Lakewood. Lakewood's camera placement then constructs two different experiences of the church. The first, for the attendee, reveals some of the production behind Lakewood, while the second, for the viewer, attempts to conceal it. The viewer is invited to be part of the congregation by masking the fact that they are brought forth by the media. Indeed, as Osteen always looks directly into the cameras when addressing and acknowledging the presence of the television audience, it is apparent that they are encouraged to think of themselves as one of the attendees. It can be inferred then that the Osteen ministry perceives inclusion and acknowledgement as a personal need of television viewers. Whereas congregants can achieve individual experiences through the liturgy, Osteen has demonstrated the personal needs trait by creating a Lakewood setting especially made for the television viewer.

In regards to liturgy, Lakewood's staff illustrates the personal needs trait by describing the individual advantages of participating in the service. For example, Victoria Osteen's reason for tithing addresses the personal benefits by appealing to the congregants' personal interests in tithing. The benefits, as mentioned previously, involve receiving appreciation from God who will make positive changes in the spiritual, emotional, and physical areas of the believer's life. On November 4<sup>th</sup>, Victoria said, "God wants to do good things today and we get to experience that through our tithes and offerings." During the period of observation, none of her appeals included an overt duty to contribute financially to the Osteen ministry for the benefit of the ministry. Such a request compromises the individual experience in using the tithe to commune personally with God. Her call to prayer also involved emphasizing personal benefits as she told the audience to think of the prayer time not as an obligation but as a moment where they have

an opportunity to meet with God individually. Specifically, Victoria says each attendee should reflect on the belief that “God is being faithful to you, not just anyone in the room, but you” (November 4, 2007). Thus, while the congregation contributes to the liturgy together, they are told to value above all the individual experience and benefits gained from participating. Congregants are not encouraged to think of liturgy as a communal obligation to a higher authority or for the benefit of anyone else, including the Osteen ministry.

Each of the characteristics of religious individualism was found in the setting, liturgy, and sermons of Lakewood church. The personal responsibility trait was found in the songs and sermons as each emphasized an individual’s duty to improve one’s life and spiritual relationship with God. Likewise, the lyrics in the songs, Victoria’s reasons for tithing, and Osteen’s sermons exemplified the sense of entitlement characteristic by discussing the special attention God gives to those who perform good deeds. The personal needs characteristic was seen in the setting and reasons for participating in the liturgy as each appealed to individual benefits over communal ones. In addition, the church used cameras throughout the service, which helped convey Osteen’s influence to television viewers and create individual experiences for them as well. The media appears to be a central aspect to the Osteen service whether one is in the sanctuary or watching it at home. It can be used to merely tape and project images for the congregation or be a set of eyes for the viewer. My analysis demonstrated that Lakewood showed the traits of religious individualism in the structure of its service and seems to promote the characteristics through its liturgy, sermon, and setting. Therefore, when the Osteen ministry uses the media, it is being used alongside its displays of religious individualism.

To answer the first research question, Lakewood's use of media enabled feelings of religious individualism by allowing the concept to be imparted to a large audience by projecting the service to the congregation and to television viewers. Lakewood's decision to edit Osteen's sermon in a way that it creates a different image of Osteen for television viewers illustrates how the church uses mass media to conceal itself in order to create a personal experience for the viewers, or accommodate their needs as reflected in the personal needs/benefits trait. As discussed in this section, I observed Osteen in sermons covering the personal responsibility, sense of entitlement, and personal needs trait. When combined with my argument for the presence of the emotional displays trait in the audience's response to presence of mass media in the service, I can demonstrate how Lakewood, both in its live and broadcast versions of the service cover each of the four characteristics of religious individualism. From this argument, I will show how my observations of Lakewood church illustrate its compatibility with a religious use of mass media.

#### AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO THE MEDIA'S PRESENCE

The purpose of analyzing audience reactions to the presence of media at Lakewood is to demonstrate that their reactions, and therefore the congregants, are representative of the four characteristics of religious individualism. The observation of the audience elicited numerous examples of audience members illustrating the emotional displays trait. My examples for this trait focused on any observation of audience members attempting to distinguish themselves amongst a crowd by becoming more emotionally involved in the service than others when a camera is nearby. Evidence for audience members displaying the other characteristics will be addressed in next chapter. The analysis of congregational

reactions will be divided into two areas of observation: as they appeared within the sanctuary and as they appeared in the television program.

#### OBSERVATIONS FROM THE LIVE SERVICE

I observed the congregational responses from the live services by viewing those who appeared on the screens in the sanctuary and by observing whomever the cameras stopped to tape. The Saturday services have few shots of the audience as the cameras focus on the stage. For example, for every four-minute song (the typical length of a Lakewood song) on Saturday, there is an average of six long/crane shots of audience with an average duration of five seconds and no close up shots. Such limited shots of the congregation during the songs on Saturday night appear to be due to the smaller number of cameras operating during the evening services. This is contrasted with the songs from the Sunday services, which include eight long/crane angle shots of the audience lasting an average of four seconds each and six close up shots of congregants up to three seconds on average. There are no shots of the audience during the sermon for either the Saturday or Sunday services. Because the screens are well above the stage, it is necessary to crane one's neck in order to get a view. The stage, on the other hand, is on the ground floor which, for those not seated in the front rows, would require peering over the shoulders of congregants seated in front of oneself. This made it easy for me to determine which attendees were looking at the stage and which ones were attempting to view the screens. For both the Saturday and Sunday services, I observed the audience concentrating more on the screen rather than the stage or other congregants. The tendency to prefer watching the screen to watching the actual stage could be attributed partially to limited visibility

but even those in the front row seats still chose to view the screened version of the service rather than the one on stage.

In addition, much of Lakewood's functioning relies on the presence of the large screens. Not only are images from the service projected onto the screens, but they also display advertisements/announcements for upcoming events/ministries, parental alerts from the day care center, lyrics to some of the songs, and references to Bible verses during the sermon. With such a wide range of uses, the presence of media tools is necessary to satisfy the personal needs of an audience who Lakewood believes may desire this information. Based on this observation then, the audience's response to the media's presence seems to be a dependence upon and preference for a mediated version of the Lakewood service.

When cameras do cut to the audience, they seek out the most animated of congregants. Animated congregants were those who enthusiastically sang or danced along to the music. In addition, they were congregants who had visual displays of emotion such as crying, lifting hands and faces upward, or laughing. From my observation, those who received the cameras' attention displayed more visual displays of emotion than the majority of those whom the camera ignored. The majority of the congregation usually clapped and sang along but performed no particular emotional display to distinguish themselves amongst each other. By electing to tape those who are more extroverted than others, Lakewood uses media to reinforce the first characteristic of religious individualism or the value of expressing emotions outwardly to single out oneself. My observations of Lakewood's demonstration of the emotional displays trait show that the church exemplifies each trait of religious individualism. In addition, by

choosing to focus on the screens within the sanctuary, audience members illustrate how Lakewood's use of mass media becomes integral to the functioning of the services.

#### OBSERVATIONS FROM THE TELEVISION PROGRAM

When projecting shots of Osteen giving his sermon to the congregation at the live service, the cameras focus only on Osteen using long and close up shots of him on stage. However, when broadcast to television viewers, the cameras cut to the congregation and their reactions, employing the different cameras within the sanctuary to get a variety of shots and angles. The most frequent camera shot appears from behind Osteen (a back shot) in order to capture both him and the congregation on screen. During the November 10<sup>th</sup>, "You are God's Masterpiece", broadcast of the Lakewood service, there were thirty-four back shots lasting an average of five seconds each within the course of Osteen's sermon, which had a typical twenty-nine-minute running time. With twenty-one shots lasting an average of six seconds each in the broadcast of the November 10<sup>th</sup> service, the second most frequent camera angle occurred when the camera cut to show individual reactions to Osteen. The reactions included laughter, smiling, note taking, applause, and rapt attention. The long and back shots illustrate the vastness of the sanctuary and amount of people attending the service, while the shots of individual reactions guide viewers to the proper response to the sermons. No members of the congregation who appeared in the broadcast of the Osteen service looked directly at the camera. The presence of the cameras appears, or at least attempts to portray itself, as a natural element of the Osteen service as congregants ignore its existence even when a camera is directly beside them. Such a reaction to the cameras will bear greater significance later in the chapter.



It can be inferred that Osteen takes great care in selecting which shots to include in the broadcast version of the sermon in an effort to construct his preferred message and image to television viewers. The finished products result in virtually the same image from program to program. This image is of a man who embodies the characteristics of religious individualism and, through his sermons, encourages his audience to do the same.

Describing Osteen's editing routine, Dooley (2007) states,

“On Sundays, after a weekend of services, Joel Osteen changes into athletic pants and sneakers...he takes his lunch tote to an upstairs room and edits the video take of the sermon with his director of broadcast media, Jon Swearingen. On a recent Sunday, the main goal was to eliminate excessive audience applause. But there was a phrase he used that didn't sit right. By cutting and pasting from the 8:30 a.m. service, they changed one word for broadcast. ‘I try to get it as right as I can now even though it's a small thing,’ Osteen said.”

This editing to perfection is hidden from those who visit Lakewood church who are able to see the service unrevised.

Osteen's editing process also conceals aspects of his character not shared with those who watch only the services through the television. For example, during the November 4<sup>th</sup> 2007 “Be Comfortable with Who You Are” service, Osteen cried at both Sunday services when he discussed how he felt when he realized he did not have to be like his father and learned to be comfortable with who he was. In the broadcast version however, the pause Osteen took to cry and dry his eyes was absent and immediately cut to when Osteen was more composed to speak. In the live service, the pause was filled with yells of encouragement from the congregation. “Cry it out, Joel!” and “We love you!” rung out within the sanctuary as some people applauded or snapped pictures. By editing out displays of emotion, Osteen uses the media to construct a separate message tailored specifically to television viewers. The two messages may facilitate two responses from

the congregation. The live service portrayals incite a perceived closeness with Osteen and the congregation as he lets the attendees see his emotions or flaws in his delivery. The broadcast version, however, elicits a sense of consistency as Osteen attempts to project a uniform image of himself for each program. Additionally, the different audiences have different needs according to Osteen (Dooley, 2007). As Osteen takes great care to ensure nobody has a reason to turn off his program, he must make sure no one can interpret his display of emotion as insincere (Dooley, 2007). His display of emotion is reserved for the religious individualists in the audience because that is by whom it will be best received.

To answer the second research question concerning the congregation's response to the media's presence, I observed audience reactions by studying the congregation at the live services and observing them again through Osteen's television program. The congregation demonstrated a clear preference for and dependence upon the media's presence as attendees chose to watch the service on the screens within the sanctuary even when they were seated in areas that provided a clear sight of the stage. This made the presence of the media both necessary and natural to the functioning of Lakewood. Lakewood used the presence of media tools in the service to reinforce the first trait of religious individualism by consistently selecting to capture on camera attendees who displayed emotion that distinguished themselves from amongst the congregation. The observations from the television programs found that congregants appearing in the TV program were ignoring the cameras, which made their presence at Lakewood appear natural to those watching. While such a response is typical of most televised events, there appears to be an intentional move to blend the church and media experience. It would be

similar to a televised sporting event maneuvering the camera in such a way as to make the viewer feel as if they are participating in the action. In this case, my observations indicated that a person viewing Lakewood church over the television would not just be watching the service, but become part of it by being encouraged to participate in its rituals. Lastly, I also looked at the differences of the messages between the live services and broadcast versions. Osteen regularly portrayed himself as a person who adheres to the values of religious individualism through his services which covered the different characteristics. By hiding his own displays of emotion or flaws in delivery for the broadcast version, Osteen allows the congregants to see a more human side of him while he ensures that the television viewers receive an image of consistency.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I found each trait of religious individualism at Lakewood church's services. Lakewood's setting reflected the fourth characteristic as it allowed individuals to project their own beliefs against a religiously neutral backdrop. Their liturgy stressed the importance of personal responsibility in one's religious life, established a sense of entitlement toward God, and appealed to the personal benefits of participating. The sermons contained references to a privileged attitude built upon good works and an individual duty to improve one's relationship with God. To answer the first research question, Lakewood's use of media promoted specific traits of religious individualism by employing cameras to tape and project images that reinforced the characteristics onto the sanctuary screens. The screens enabled Lakewood to communicate religious individualism to a large audience. Lakewood also created an experience specifically adapted to television viewers by concealing evidence of the media's presence, which

allowed viewers to feel included in the service and still receive an separate service just for television audiences. This reinforced the personal needs trait of religious individualism as the church altered itself to suit what it may perceive to be the viewer's needs for inclusiveness and independence. Lakewood demonstrates its commitment of including television viewers into the service but allowing them to maintain independence by ensuring the cameras create an experience for viewers that minimizes the media's presence and editing the service to create a uniform image of Osteen specifically for viewers. Lakewood continued to reinforce religious individualism by repeatedly choosing to record those who displayed emotion to set apart themselves from others. In regards to the second research question, the congregation's response to the media's presence was one of preference and dependency. Congregants chose to ignore the existence of the cameras, which allowed its presence to appear as a natural element to the service. Congregants were also encouraged to feel close to Osteen as he showed them his delivery flaws and emotional displays. Television viewers, on the other hand, were treated to an Osteen that appears the same for each program.

Based on my observations, I have concluded that Lakewood church employs media to facilitate and reinforce religious individualism to its congregation and television viewers. The congregation responded favorably to the media's presence as they used it to enhance their Lakewood experience. Their responses showed then that the role of the media at Lakewood is to be seen as a natural extension to the service and is necessary to its functioning. In order to satisfy the personal needs of its audience, Lakewood tailors specific images of Osteen to suit both the congregation and television viewers. The media is integral to the functioning of Lakewood to the degree that congregants prefer to

view the service through its lens. Even though they were watching and participating in the live service, the congregants, like the television viewers from Lang and Lang's (1953) study, chose to place themselves at the mercy of the "instrument of perception" (11). This produced a situation where each audience member could create his or her own experience that excluded all others. The audience may have believed together but they did not belong together. Such a reaction to the media illustrates its compatibility to religious individualist churches. Churches where individual preferences are valued over communal obligations, where congregants are encouraged to take responsibility for their relationship with God, can naturally embrace a medium that allows its audience to construct personal experiences. In the next chapter, I discuss what congregants have said regarding these experiences and whether they preferred and/or relied upon the media to create them.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESEARCH FINDINGS: CONTENT ANALYSIS

The previous chapter focused on how Lakewood uses media to enable and reinforce religious individualism. It also covered how the congregation responded to the use of media at the services. In this chapter, I address how those who have attended a service led by the Osteen ministry describe their experience to see whether they display the traits of religious individualism and whether they rely on or prefer the media's presence to enhance their perceptions of the event. Using a qualitative content analysis of newspapers and blogs, I answer the third research question: *Do the descriptions of Lakewood church's services from other observers concur with this study's definition of religious individualism?* Along with answering the third question, I used my findings to further establish the conclusions gained from the observation regarding the media's compatibility with religious individualist churches.

#### METHODOLOGY

Blogs were chosen as a good source of data, as blogs can serve as public personal diaries, with the goal of informing others about events or opinions from a personal point of view. In order to analyze personal observations, I need access to personal opinions. These personal opinions are limited, however, in the blogs' coverage of actual Osteen-led ministry services in order to make an accurate comparison to my observation of Lakewood. I chose newspapers that covered Osteen-led services as they too inform others of events but come with an additional goal of objectivity. Blogs and newspapers were chosen over interviews with other congregants and viewers of Osteen's program because blogs provide a wider

snapshot of how Osteen and his ministry are perceived within the larger American culture. Blogs allow the observer to “listen in,” so to speak, on the authors’ thoughts about the ministry and services.

Furthermore, as Osteen has continually sought the attention of the American media, it is only appropriate to observe how the public has responded to his presence. While Osteen has used different forms of gaining exposure, through books, the internet, and television, I have focused on his religious services. The primary issue of my thesis is to understand whether religious individualism is represented in the services and how individual attendees respond to the presence of mass media within the services. Limiting the scope of my analysis to accounts of how individuals experienced mass media first-hand these services therefore also eliminates those who may view Osteen’s services with the aid of television or the internet. Their experiences, while valid, would not be a fair comparison to the data gathered through the observation of Lakewood. Observers watching Osteen through the television or internet cannot make an accurate determination of whether congregants prefer or rely on mass media to enhance their experience within the service as they can see whether congregants are viewing the screen or the stage. In addition, mediated observers cannot determine if mass media is an integral part of the live service when all evidence of the media’s presence is carefully avoided on screen through camera angles. Indeed, mediated observers have no other choice than to view the service through mass media but this may not necessarily be true for other observers of the live services. Personal blogs covering the Osteen-led events provide the individual feedback from the congregation’s perspective while newspaper articles provide insights from those who may not have a personal investment into his ministry.

## METHODOLOGY: OBTAINING DATA FOR ANALYSIS

Data from the blog entries were gathered using the blog search engine service, Technorati, using search terms “Joel Osteen” and “Lakewood Church,” which may have been personally “tagged” by the blog authors as a description of their blog post. Technorati was chosen as a method for collecting data because of its specialization in searching for blogs. Newspaper articles from January 2007 to 2008 were gathered through a Google newsreader with the search term, “Joel Osteen” and “Lakewood church.” Blogs and articles were determined based on the author’s focus on a Lakewood church service or any religious service led by Joel Osteen’s ministry. This eliminated articles and blogs about the life of Osteen, interviews featuring the preacher, or reviews of his books. Once a blog or newspaper article was found to fit within the parameters of the study, they were examined for how the author described the Osteen-led service or evaluated the service. The results of the examination were evaluated with R.Q. 3’s goal of identifying religious individualism and media use through a content analysis approach using the four characteristics as codes. Based on the analysis, an argument for whether a mediated response concurs with the observation of the Osteen ministry can be determined.

While the sample size may appear small, I chose three blog entries to analyze in depth because they most closely fit the requirements of my study and because my requirements for the data greatly reduced the overall sample size. Each blog covered personal observation and analysis of the blog author’s recent attendance of a Lakewood church or a service led by Joel Osteen. These sources of data were determined to be suitable for answering R.Q. 3 because they featured detailed first-hand accounts of the author’s face-to-face observations of an Osteen-led service. When searching for blogs regarding Osteen’s



ministry, the majority of sites featured overwhelmingly negative reviews by those who relied upon the media for their interpretation of Osteen. In fact, in the last 122 days since February 12, 2008, there were a mere forty-two (nine-percent) positive or neutral posts about Joel Osteen, out of a total of 470 tagged posts about him on Technorati. Two featured positive responses that relied on mass media interpretations by containing favorable readings of Osteen's daily email devotional. The rest were from two websites dedicated to reposting Osteen's email devotional, without personal commentary. These were deemed neutral posts because they featured no positive or negative evaluations. However, regardless of whether a writer's response was positive, negative, or neutral, the deciding factor in rejecting them for the content analysis was their dependence on mass media for their interpretation rather than actual observation of the services. Only three blogs entries, which will be analyzed in the proceeding paragraphs, fit this criterion. This is the primary reason behind such a small sample size for the content analysis of the blogs. Likewise, I chose to analyze in depth three newspaper articles that also featured detailed first-hand accounts of observations from Lakewood/Osteen events. The limited sample size was to create a balance between the blogs in order to compare a public diary style with a journalistic style.

#### **METHODOLOGY: QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS**

I used content analysis of the blogs and newspapers to determine whether they contained observations that illustrated the traits of religious individualism. The first characteristic, displaying emotions for distinguishing oneself amongst a crowd, was used to analyze observations of audience behavior. I watched for descriptions of changes in emotion when audience members participated in the service and when they met Osteen. My analysis did not look for what attendees expressed, or even the degree to which they

expressed it. Instead, I attempted to understand the purpose behind the individuals' displays of emotion. For example, should an audience member become visibly excited over meeting Osteen, I wanted to see how the different authors would explain this behavior, whether the emoting came from themselves or from observations of others. Would they consider such displays as proper decorum when meeting Osteen; would they note whether attendees attempted to differentiate themselves in any way? Only by understanding the meaning behind emotional displays can I begin to contend for the presence and importance of emotional displays within the Osteen ministry.

The remaining three traits were used to examine observations from the service and the writers' thoughts about the services to determine whether there were observable examples of the traits of religious individualism. I wanted to know whether the writers' would describe a personal responsibility toward faith in God, a sense of entitlement toward God's favor, and the importance of their personal needs at Lakewood over communal needs. The descriptions came from the authors' observations and opinions of the service and quotes by those whom the authors chose to include in their blogs/newspaper articles. Combining the observable examples of the traits of religious individualism, I am able to conclude whether religious individualism is present through the eyes of other observers. In addition, I looked at words describing the use of the media at Lakewood church in order to understand its role at Lakewood, from the perspective of the authors.

For the sake of focusing the analysis on Osteen-led services and the reactions therein, I also analyzed descriptions of the media's presence within the service, either through discussing the placement of cameras, stage lighting, television screens, etc. I also looked at any evidence of the media's presence upon the writers in the manner in which he

or she describes the service. Questions that were addressed were: Did bloggers or newspaper reporters find the media's presence as contributing and essential to the overall experience of the service or as an impediment to true understanding of the event? Did they use references to the media to describe the settings? Examples of such words include, stage over chancel, or audience over congregation, cameras, etc. questions were explored in this chapter in order to understand the mediated response to the Osteen ministry. Through finding evidence of the media's presence with the Osteen service, I am able to assess whether the Osteen ministry uses media as a reflection of religious individualism.

By noting any occurrence of words and phrases that may affirm the findings from the observation regarding illustrations of religious individualism within the Osteen service, this method of data collection reflects a directed approach to qualitative content analysis. This approach is explained by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) who describe it as using an existing theory or prior research to identify key concepts as initial coding categories. By applying an operational definition for each category, the researcher can qualitatively analyze the content for the codes. In this study, the theory I am using is the definition for religious individualism and my categories refer to its four characteristics. Operational definitions related specifically to blogs and newspapers will be discussed more thoroughly at the beginning of the sections for each category.

My methodological approach follows in the theoretical tradition of ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology involves the study of how people create their sense of reality, which encompasses one's own perception of "objectivity, factuality, and orderliness" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 36). In the actual entry or article, I looked for words and phrases that expressed the perception of the Osteen event in regards to the presence of

religious individualism and mass media within the service. An ethnomethodological perspective toward content analysis is useful for my study because using media-related words to describe Lakewood's service implies that the author's perception of the Osteen event is media-focused. Likewise, words and phrases reflecting religious individualism imply a religious-individualist focused event occurring within the Osteen service. As argued by Lindlof (1995) words reveal how we perceive reality; thus, words should be closely analyzed to understand one's reality.

After obtaining three each of blogs and newspapers that fit my criteria for analysis, a procedure that is discussed further in the next section, I developed operational definitions of each trait as pertaining specifically to a blog and newspaper context. The definitions were created first to be consistent with the definition for religious individualism and the findings from the field observation. While closely reviewing each blog or article, I then noted all examples of the predetermined coding definitions. Data that could fit into more than one coded definition were reexamined and placed under the closest identifiable trait. After all the blogs and articles were coded, I compared my findings with the conclusions from the observation to see if the data supported it. I also analyzed what these examples conveyed about how religious individualism within the Osteen-led services is understood by the authors in order to see whether word choices revealed the different authors' perception of the services as being religiously-individualist focused.

In regards to the religious use of mass media found in the Osteen ministry services, I created operational definitions for what constituted language referring to religious use of mass media. Following the same procedure as I used in analyzing the data for the traits of religious individualism, I reexamined any examples that did not directly relate to mass

media usage. These examples were placed under a sub-category of “entertainment” and used to describe one facet of religious use of mass media. In keeping with an ethnomethodological approach, all media-related examples were then analyzed to see what they communicated about how a religious use of mass media is perceived in the services.

Thus far, I have discussed my reason for selecting blogs and newspaper articles as sources of data because it reflects how Osteen’s influence is beyond his church’s walls and can be found easily within American culture. I chose a content analysis approach because blogs and newspapers represent social texts meant to communicate observations and opinions to a public. I narrowed my data to first-hand accounts of the Osteen/Lakewood services, which eliminated the majority of blogs and newspapers that relied on mediated interpretations of the event to form arguments. In the next section, I begin the analysis of the data to demonstrate how each source emphasized at least one trait of religious individualism. First, I will include a short description of each article and blog entry then divide the analysis into the four different characteristics of religious individualism. I will then address how the blogs and articles cover the media presence at the services.

#### OVERVIEW OF BLOGS AND NEWSPAPERS

I analyzed three blogs and three newspaper articles that contained observations of Osteen/Lakewood services. One blog, written by a lawyer from the East Coast (2007) features commentary on a recent experience at Joel Osteen’s traveling evangelistic service that has many of the same rituals of the Houston Lakewood service. Called “An Evening with Joel Osteen,” the service has the same singers and songs from Lakewood’s service, a time for tithing and prayer, a sermon by Osteen and an appeal to the unconverted to believe in Jesus. The lawyer (2007) states that he is a Christian and dislikes “99.9%” of

televangelists” (paragraph 4). He compares Osteen to motivational speakers and focuses his analysis on Osteen’s emphasis on human willpower. The lawyer (2007) also comments on the media’s presence at the service and how it affects the overall tone of the event.

Another blog features weekly responses to the Houston Lakewood service as seen through the eyes of an unnamed female. The author describes each church service she has attended at Lakewood church. She notes who performs the music, what songs are sung, what scriptures are mentioned, the main points of the sermon, and the general atmosphere of the church. This last section can range from audience reactions, her thoughts on Lakewood church as a whole, to recent news on Osteen. While her blog features little analysis of the sermon, the author does mention the perspective of personal responsibility toward faith needed for attending Lakewood church.

The third blog looks at another “Evening with Joel Osteen” and is written by a conservative Christian male. This man initially approached the service with a decidedly negatively biased attitude. He states, “True confession: I came with expectations in hand that “An evening with Joel Osteen” would be bread and circus for the spiritually impoverished... though in fairness I tried to leave my hatchet at the door” (2007, paragraph 3). The conservative writer (2007) describes the service, analyzes Osteen’s sermon by focusing on the personal needs trait, and observes the media’s presence within the event.

The next three articles were selected because they cover recent services led by Joel Osteen and his ministry. They also provide the author’s observations, along with interviews with Osteen employees and members of the congregation. The most recent article is titled “Pentecostalism for the Exurbs: Joel Osteen’s God Really Wants You to Dress Well, Strand Up Straight, and Get a Convenient Parking Space” by Chris Lehmann (2008) from *Slate*

online magazine. This article analyzes Osteen's (2007) most recent book, *Become a Better You* (2007), and the church services at Lakewood. Regarding the church service, Lehmann (2008) focuses on a sense of entitlement as communicated through Osteen's sermon. Lehmann (2008) also observed and discussed the media's presence at Lakewood.

The next article is from *The Houston Chronicle* and is titled "Lakewood is Home, But Osteen's Reach is Vast," by Tara Dooley (2007). This article focuses on Osteen's use of mass media to communicate his message. Dooley (2007) provides a background of Osteen and describes both a Lakewood service and "An Evening with Joel Osteen," noting the presence of the media at each event and the services' appeal to personal needs. In her article, Dooley (2007) interviews Osteen employees and observes the audience's emotional displays during the service.

The last article is titled, "Best-selling Pastor Gives Local Fans a Better View" by Sandi Dolbee (2008) from the *San Diego Union Tribune* and looks at a service from the Osteen ministry. This article describes Osteen's recent visit to San Diego for another "Evening with Joel Osteen" and the reactions his audience had upon meeting him. Dolbee (2008) observed the use of mass media while also analyzing the setting and sermon during the service. Her comments focused on the attendees' personal responsibility toward faith and the service's appeal to the personal needs of the audience.

#### OBSERVING EMOTIONAL DISPLAYS

The first characteristic of religious individualism is the deliberate display of emotion amongst a congregation in order to distinguish oneself within a crowd. I looked for evidence of this behavior by looking at the blog and newspaper author's reasons behind any display of such behavior. I counted audience reactions to the service and also to meeting

Joel Osteen as potential examples. What made them true examples of emotional displays in accordance to religious individualism were descriptions of audience members attempting to stand out or emphasizing a need to emote during the service.

The female's blog and the conservative's (2007) blog both mention audience reactions and emotional displays in their reviews of Osteen's services. In the female's November 10th, 2007 entry, which was a service attended for my field observation, the unnamed female author provides her own perspective of the Saturday night service. Regarding the music portion she states,

Great night of worship as usual! It's always great to see how much the audience loves to participate in worship. Everyone is on their feet as soon as the first notes are played. There is always a lot of anticipation in the air (2007b, paragraph 2).

This quotation reflects the findings from the observation where I found attendees participating heavily with the music portion of the service. The description of "anticipation" reflects my observations of attendees' behavior when they suspended all conversations while they stood, clapped, and cheered as the Lakewood introduction music came over the sanctuary. While the author does not mention any emotional displays that distinguish attendees from one another, she does state that the audience "loves to participate in worship," which contributes to the expectation that attendees should participate in the service and not be merely spectators. In fact, Osteen said during each service throughout the period of observation that attendees should not "be a spectator; be a participator."

Participating is a more active response to the Osteen service and provides a greater chance of distinguishing oneself with emotional displays than if one were only watching the service on the periphery level. Participating, according to the blog author, includes standing up "as soon as the first notes are played" which would correspond to appearing highly engaged in



the music. To see the author repeat Osteen's appeal, illustrates the importance participation plays for individual audience members of the Lakewood service.

The expectation to participate appears to be so accepted that it seems out of place to see a majority of attendees remain as merely spectators. Indeed, to observe an audience member not being engaged with the service deserves explanation to determine whether the lack of participation is due to a resistance or disinterest toward the Osteen ministry. This is the same thought the conservative (2007) had during his experience with "An Evening with Joel Osteen." He states,

"I was somewhat proud that those present from my community were on the whole not participatory in the music and theater. Most did not know the words well enough to engage in correct contemporary praise posture. Maybe people at an Osteen event just come to watch?" (2007, paragraph 11)

The conservative blogger's (2007) reasons for being proud can be contextualized by his dislike of Joel Osteen and his ministry which he describes as useless as "a bottle of vitamins in an operating room" (paragraph 25). He seems to see the audience's disengagement with the service as validation for his own feelings of animosity toward the service. He mentions that the audience did not use a "correct contemporary praise posture" which he defines as being participatory. Instead, the attendees were spectators, watching the service as if it were another Joel Osteen televised program. As the audience is not the local Houston congregation, one can assume that they are more accustomed to seeing Osteen through the media either by his television program, media appearances, books, email devotionals, or podcasts. Considering this then, the prospect of being encouraged to engage with the service may feel unfamiliar to those in attendance who then react by a lack of participation. Nevertheless, the conservative author's (2007) reflection over the lack of emotional displays

indicates its value in fostering an ideal Osteen environment. Such an environment would emphasize the traits of religious individualism as being of primary importance.

Dooley's (2007) and Dolbee's (2008) articles also cover audience reactions during the Osteen services. Dooley's (2007) description of the attendees likens them as fans meeting a celebrity to explain their excitement. She states,

Emerging from an elevator and flanked by security, he stepped into the arena hallway to the shock and then excitement of the first woman who noticed his arrival. A reception line quickly formed. He shook hands, signed books and listened to stories charting journeys from San Diego, El Paso or Colorado Springs to see him in Las Vegas.

"I have one question," a woman said as Osteen shook her hand. "When are you going to run for president so I can vote for you?" (Dooley, 2007, paragraphs 41, 42)

Dooley (2007) observed audience members display their enthusiasm for Osteen by treating a chance encounter with him as a celebrity sighting, attempting to distinguish themselves from one another and vying for his attention. Their reactions are similar, on a smaller scale, to audience members who attempt to call attention to themselves through public displays of emotion during the Osteen service.

Dolbee's (2008) article covering the San Diego "Evening with Joel Osteen" also mentioned emotional displays by those who attended the event. Like the audience members from Dooley's (2007) article, several attendees treated meeting Osteen as meeting a celebrity. She states,

Just the sight of Joel Osteen, golden boy of God, pastor of the largest church in America, author of best-selling books and star of the most-watched religious broadcast on television, made Vanessa Richardson swoon. "I couldn't hardly sleep last night," said Richardson, who teared up as Osteen walked into a store conference room at the Miramar Marine Corps Air Station yesterday, wearing a blue suit the color of his eyes and a pearly smile the size of his home state of Texas (Dooley, 2008, paragraphs 1, 2).

Dolbee's (2008) observation of audience reactions is similar to Dooley's (2007) experience where attendees are apt to display emotion for and in front of Osteen. Their response reveals the presence of emotional displays in relation to the Osteen services. The female writer and conservative blogger (2007) both demonstrated the importance of participation by valuing its presence and questioning its absence. Dooley (2007) and Dolbee (2008) observed audience reactions to meeting Osteen as examples of attendees attempting to distinguish themselves from one another. Based on the observations from each of the authors, the appearance of emotional displays during the Osteen service demonstrates the importance the characteristic has to the audience.

#### OBSERVING PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The second characteristic of religious individualism involves the individual feeling a sense of personal responsibility toward spiritual maturity, believing it is ultimately up to him or her to grow in faith. I looked for references to individuals relying on him- or herself for spiritual growth or focusing on an obligation to oversee one's faith when discussing the reasons behind committing to a ministry. The lawyer (2007) identifies this trait as an important point in Osteen's sermons. He states, "Most of Joel's sermons revolve around an individual's ability to succeed in life. He stresses that an individual who believes in himself can ultimately accomplish anything" (2007, paragraph 5). A person who believes in him- or herself is a person who does not rely on religious authorities or fellow believers for spiritual growth. As discussed in the field observation, Osteen's sermons emphasize the relationship between spiritual maturity and success in life. According to Osteen, many temporal problems are caused by a lack of faith that can be solved by simply believing in one's own abilities to overcome any situation (November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007). For the lawyer to say that "most"

of Osteen's sermons draws upon personal responsibility illustrates the importance this trait has to the Osteen ministry.

The female writer also mentions personal responsibility but from the point of view from a regular attendee. She links this trait to taking it upon oneself to join groups or ministries to cultivate one's gifts. The female writer states, "I enjoyed the sermon on developing what God has given you. Lakewood has a lot of opportunities to do just that. There are a lot of ministries to choose from that will help you develop what God has entrusted you with" (2007a, paragraph 8). Her statement describes an individual who believes with others but does not belong with others. Her reason for participating in ministries is for demonstrating a personal responsibility toward faith but in this entry, cultivating relationships with other believers is not mentioned.

The conservative blogger (2007) quotes Osteen's mother, Dodie Osteen, who was at the "Evening with Joel Osteen" event and whose comments reflect a personal responsibility toward faith. He calls her statement the "line of the night," which is, "If you have a problem, find a verse in there (the Bible) and tell the Almighty what you need" (2007, paragraph 14). Such an approach toward a predicament illustrates the duty believers have, according to Dodie, to solve it themselves. God will help them but it is up to the believer to know what he or she needs in order to remedy the situation. Because the ultimate responsibility falls upon the believer, seeking God, or even praying is seen as a form of work that is employed to grow in faith. Another example of personal responsibility from the conservative (2007) comes from his analysis of the event as a whole. He observes, "At the end of the day, Osteen encouraged his crowd not to seek Christ as the solutions to their problems but something else. That something else seemed to be a clever but highly charged

view of self” (2007, paragraph 24). This assessment appears to be an illustration of the third characteristic, or the sense of entitlement. However, it is apparent that the conservative author (2007) is focusing more on how relying upon oneself as the solution to a problem elevates the person to a more powerful status than if the person is forthcoming about his or her dependency upon others to reach success. A person cannot have a highly charged view of self if the person is not actively attempting believing in him- or herself. The conservative’s (2007) analysis illustrates the prevalence of the personal responsibility trait at the Osteen event both as communicated by members of the ministry and as observed by attendees.

Lehmann’s (2008) article from *Slate* magazine also describes a type of solitary pilgrim as representative of the teachings at the Osteen ministry. He states, “There’s the stark individualist ethos that lies behind the definition of scripture as first and foremost an agent of identity change” (Lehmann, 2008, paragraph 3). Like the conservative’s (2007) quotation from Dodie Osteen, scripture is a tool for success but it is still up to the individual to wield its power. By seeing the Bible as a “handbook” of sorts as Lehmann (2008, paragraph 9) describes it, individuals take personal responsibility toward faith as they keep scripture and other tools of faith as options on the road to spiritual maturity. Even God is seen as subject to the decisions of the believer as Lehmann (2008) describes God matching the “job description for a lifestyle concierge” (paragraph 8). While this depiction also illustrates an exaltation of self, Lehmann (2008) also goes on to show how God fulfills an assisting role as Osteen leads the way. God helps Osteen sell a house that he chose to sell; God ensures that the engineers create ramps to ease parking access for Lakewood at the location Osteen chooses, and so on (Lehmann, 2008, paragraph 8). While God may be busy

helping Osteen and other believers, Lehmann (2008) points out that, according to Osteen, individuals still have a responsibility to do most of the work themselves. He quotes the pastor as saying, “You must think differently, and you need to take a different tack, take different action. You cannot prepare for defeat and expect to live in victory” (Lehmann, 2008, paragraph 6). Lehmann’s (2008) article demonstrates the value personal responsibility has to the Osteen ministry both in its view of scripture and God, as the power of both is fully contingent upon the individual’s desire to use them.

Dolbee (2008) who covered the San Diego “Evening with Joel Osteen” cited numerous examples of Osteen ministry emphasizing a personal responsibility toward faith. She cites a theologian from Westminster Seminary, Michael Horton who, like Lehmann (2008), sees Osteen’s opinion of God as “a cosmic bellhop who is there to make sure Americans are having a good time” (Dolbee, 2008, paragraph 13). Once again, God is seen as subject to individuals who may use the Almighty for their own purposes. Dolbee (2008) cites a fan of Osteen who summarizes his teachings as “You’ve just gotta believe” (paragraph 21). God serves as the supplement for people as they are responsible for “having a good attitude and trusting in God to overcome adversity” (Dolbee, 2008, paragraph 16). Such a perspective is reminiscent of Osteen’s sermon discussing God’s ability to “make miracles out of mistakes” where God is powerless if the person does not trust in him- or herself or have a good attitude about life. Such an individual must ultimately depend on him- or herself for improvement of circumstances or as Dolbee (2008) quotes Osteen, “You have to conceive it on the inside before you can receive it on the outside” (paragraph 27). Dolbee’s (2008) description of the Osteen event demonstrates that critics and fans alike can observe the personal responsibility trait as an important aspect to the Osteen services.

The lawyer (2007), Dolbee (2008), Lehmann (2008), and the conservative (2007) identified the presence of personal responsibility as an important theme within the Osteen services. The female author demonstrated how individuals can apply this concept to their reasons for joining a church or its ministries. To see the personal responsibility trait both in the teachings and audience responses at Lakewood being observed in blog and newspaper articles indicates that the Osteen ministry fulfills this aspect of religious individualism.

#### OBSERVING A SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT

The third characteristic of religious individualism involves a sense of entitlement from individuals who expect God to do good things to them based on actions. A religious individualist displaying this third trait is likely to think of God as making the person's happiness the first priority. I looked for evidence of this characteristic by analyzing the description of the services with respect to a sense of privilege regarding future blessings or God's special attention paid toward the individual within the blogs and newspaper articles. The only blog to truly touch upon the concept comes from the female author who covers the idea but only as a summary of the sermon. One key point she gathers from the sermon is "Celebrate who God made you to be," which, as I mentioned in my observation, is an example of self-exaltation. When self is esteemed, the link between effective development of "God-given gifts" and fulfilling "your God given destiny" creates a sense of entitlement toward future success in life for the individual (2007a, paragraph 6). One's future does not stem from a hopeful attitude but from a clear expectation based on the previous action of self-improvement. For the female author to identify the relationship between actions and future success as key points in Osteen's sermon illustrates its presence and importance to Osteen's service.

Lehmann's (2008) *Slate* article describes Osteen's ministry as part of the "Word-Faith" movement, which he defines as, "believers [who] possess, in divinely sanctioned snatches of scripture, the stuff of miraculous self-healing and prosperity" (paragraph 4). From this explanation, Lehmann (2008) appears to portray Word-Faith believers as those who see blessings from God as rightfully theirs. By placing Osteen in the Word-Faith category, Lehmann (2008) confirms the prevalence of the entitlement trait for the Osteen ministry. Another quote provided by Lehmann (2008) gives insight to Osteen's view of God. Lehmann (2008) cites Osteen as saying that God "wants you to succeed; He created you to live abundantly" (paragraph 6). This description of the Almighty conforms to the entitlement trait as it shows a God who desires to serve believers by emotionally satisfying them with success and "abundant" lives. Lehmann's (2008) portrayal of Osteen's belief system illustrates a theology based on a spiritual privilege that the writer claims originates from an "obsession with blood heredity" where believers are encouraged to think of themselves as God's special creation (paragraph 7). To explain Osteen's concept of the privileged relationship between individuals and God as an obsession, Lehmann's (2008) analysis reveals the importance placed upon the concept within the Osteen ministry. The female author observed Osteen stressing self-worth and an expectation toward future blessings which also signifies the importance this characteristic has to the ministry. Based on these observations, the Osteen ministry conforms to the third trait of religious individualism, or the sense of entitlement.

#### OBSERVING PERSONAL NEEDS/BENEFITS

The fourth characteristic is appreciation of personal needs above communal needs within a church service, which involves a shifting of every area of a church service to orient



toward the needs of the attendee. Any mention of the importance or presence of personal needs being verbally communicated as a value was considered evidence for this trait.

Additionally, I used the different authors' references to the Osteen ministry attempting to appeal to the broadest audience rather than obligate individuals to conform to its own religious expectations. I found evidence for the personal needs trait in the conservative's (2007) blog entry. His blog included in-depth analysis of Osteen's sermon and observation of personal needs being valued. He states,

Osteen encouraged his crowd not to seek Christ as the solution to their problems but something else. That something else seemed to be a clever but highly charged view of self. Self-interest, Self-gratification, Self-fulfillment, Self-realization, Self-actualization, with a little bit of sanitized obligatory righteous buzz words thrown in to make it appear evangelically kosher for the uninitiated (2007, paragraph 24).

While his analysis demonstrates self-reliance stemmed from an exalted view of self, each of the conservative author's (2007) "self" adjectives address putting the individual above others for the sake of his or her needs over the requirements of the community. According to the conservative Christian blogger (2007), by seeking their own interests, gratification, fulfillment, etc before others, individuals will solve their own problems in life. This notion of putting self first being emphasized in Osteen's sermon should also be evident throughout the service. In fact, the conservative blogger had a similar conclusion in his analysis of the music playing before the event. He said,

The pre-game music was surprisingly toned down (really not unlike that of an RUF [Reformed University Fellowship] meeting). I sensed that the organizers were more worried about turning folks off than they were about meaningfully engaging in crowd prep (2007, paragraph 11).

While this is the conservative author's opinion, it is apparent that he sees a pattern of accommodation to the needs of first time churchgoers who may feel uncomfortable with

overtly religious displays and symbols. Such a conclusion corresponds to the personal needs trait where church services are designed to meet the expectations of a particular group of people over establishing a set identity to which newcomers are to conform. The conservative author's (2007) analysis of the Osteen event provides evidence that personal needs are valued above a selfless attitude both in Osteen's sermon and in his service.

Dooley's (2007) coverage of the Las Vegas "Evening with Joel Osteen" also included an observation of the Osteen service adapting to the perceived entertainment expectations of its Las Vegas audience. She says,

Though more a family-friendly affair than the standard attraction, the event might well have matched any Vegas show on the strip in one regard: High and highly entertaining production values (Dooley, 2007, paragraph 34).

The high regard for entertainment at the Osteen event is meant to "capture the attention" of audience members much like any other media-heavy event (Dooley, 2007). The comparison between the Osteen service and mass media will be discussed further in the next section but for now it is important to see the great lengths to which the Osteen ministry will go to satisfy the perceived entertainment needs of its audience. Dooley (2007) describes the Las Vegas service as having smoke rising and lights swirling much like a concert experience, which may suit those unfamiliar with the Lakewood service. This accommodation in production content appears extended to Osteen's sermon content as well. Dooley shares a reaction from an attendee who says, "He doesn't preach above your head. He brings it down to earth" (Dooley, 2007, paragraph 31). Osteen's preaching style reveals a decision to attract non-churchgoers by bringing his belief system down to their level of understanding rather than expecting attendees to reach his. Dooley's (2007) observation of the Osteen ministry shows a clear attention to the expectations of its audience, whether it be related to entertainment or

comprehension of the sermon content. The conservative blogger (2007) also believed the Osteen ministry was attempting to conform its service to meet the perceived needs of an audience rather than expect individuals to adapt. Because both of the authors' analyses included references to personal needs above communal needs, I can infer that the Osteen ministry does reflect the fourth characteristic of religious individualism.

#### OBSERVING THE USE OF MASS MEDIA

Now that other observers have confirmed the presence of religious individualism, I can discuss what the findings mean in reference to the presence of media at the Osteen services. The ultimate goal in establishing this connection is to demonstrate how a religious individualist church is compatible with using mass media within a church service. The argument for compatibility involves studying how religious individualism is applied to the religious use of mass media to suit the needs of Lakewood church. I looked for observations regarding the Osteen ministry's use of media, or words referring to the media's presence and any mention of reasoning behind media use. These two types of observations allowed me to illustrate the depth of the media's presence within the Osteen ministry. The first blog to discuss audience reactions to mass media use is the lawyer's (2007) entry on his experience at "A Night with Joel Osteen." In the final part of the lawyer's analysis of the Osteen service, he discussed what he thought of the night. One observation he made was that there was a concession stand in the arena where the program was held. He says, "It was the first time I ever saw people munching on French fries and hot dogs during a sermon. Entertaining" (2007, paragraph 10). His observation illustrates a blending of entertainment and church services where attendees treat the event as part leisure and part worship.

The conservative Christian blogger's (2007) description of "A Night with Joel Osteen" also illustrates audience reactions toward the use of media. He observed that, "The overall production value of the stage, set and imagery was very good, while at the same time simple and in most ways not overly distracting" (2007, paragraph 10). However, while the writer (2007) believes Osteen's use of the media is not intrusive, its presence is prevalent enough to affect his choice of words like "stage", "pre-game music," and "set" to describe his environment (paragraph 10 and 11). This choice in words reflects the prevalence of mass media at the service to the degree that it influences descriptions of the event. The conservative (2007) is self described as a Director of Church Relations so it is assumed that a man such as he would be familiar with the correct terminology of church building structures and rituals. One can only presume then that he has made a conscious choice to portray the Osteen event as representing more of an entertainment/media event than an actual religious service.

The newspaper coverage also addressed both audience reactions and observations of religious use of mass media at the Osteen services. Dooley's (2007) article discusses more of the Osteen ministry's religious use of media. She quotes Duncan Dodds, executive director of Lakewood church and Osteen ministries who gives insight into Osteen's production decisions. He states, "We are vying for the attention and the minds and hearts of people. So is every media [sic] out there, whether it is television, movies or concerts. We work hard to make it excellent" (Dooley, 2007, paragraph 38). Dodds' explanation reveals the Osteen ministry's attempt to blend ministry with media. Their reasons behind this come from the Osteen ministry not seeing itself competing with other churches for attention, but with other forms of media. Her observation confirms the hypothesis of the important place

of the media in Lakewood church. Dooley observed firsthand how Osteen employs media in his church. She describes his editing process and the image he creates for television audiences. She says,

Positive and happy are the personality traits projected onto television screens around the world each week. He can be emotional in his sermons, such as a recent one in which he had to stop to control tears while relating a story about his daughter — a moment deleted before the sermon aired (Dooley, 2007, paragraph 27).

Her observations reflect my own findings from the observation of the Lakewood services.

One picture of Osteen, which is ready for media consumption, is void of any type of emotion that could cause viewers to feel uncomfortable. Another picture of Osteen, especially tailored to Lakewood attendees, creates a more intimate atmosphere through his emotional displays. For Dooley (2007) to observe the Osteen ministry deleting Osteen's tearful moment from the actual broadcast reveals a specific purpose behind their media use. They seem to desire to create two different representations in order to appeal to two different audiences.

Dolbee's (2008) article on the San Diego "Evening with Joel Osteen" describes the audience's reaction to the presence of the media at the event. As an observer, Dolbee (2008) describes the atmosphere as being "part concert and part church" which illustrates the blending between entertainment and religion that the Osteen ministry has attempted to achieve in its services (paragraph 22). She also cites one couple who shares their pleasure with being at the event even though they were facing the area behind the stage and could only follow the service by watching the screen – their experience was thus mediated at a live event. The couple explains, "You can hear him. It's all about hearing him" (Dolbee, 2008, paragraph 25). The couple that is content with a screened version of Osteen illustrates a

degree to which some of the audience is accustomed to the presence of mass media at the service to the point where seeing an un-mediated Osteen is no longer important. Dolbee's (2008) coverage of the Osteen event indicates a blur between mass media/entertainment and church services as experienced by the reporter and audience members. The lawyer (2007) and the conservative (2007) also illustrated this blur by their choice in words to describe the services. Dooley's (2007) explanation for the presence of the media within the service revealed that the Osteen ministry attempts to create two different and tailored messages for two audiences.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I addressed how both blogs and newspaper articles have described the presence and use of mass media and each of the characteristics of religious individualism at Osteen services. The findings indicated a presence and value of each of the elements of religious individualism. This was especially true with the different blog and newspaper authors who concluded that emotional displays were expected behaviors at the Osteen service. The authors also observed during Osteen's sermons and other congregants' opinions that there was an expectation of each individual having a primary responsibility in his or her own spiritual growth. Similar to the sense of entitlement observed in Osteen's sermons and theology, the reason for expectation appeared to be drawn from the individuals' concept of God. God, as described by the authors, is powerless unless believers trust in themselves, but nevertheless He strives to please humans. The authors described God as a "cosmic bellhop" or a "lifestyle concierge" and believers as those who can point to their "blood heredity" for proof of future blessings. The authors also observed the Osteen ministry's encouragement to place self above others and accommodate attendees through

sermon content or other areas of the service, such as music. The Osteen ministry did not appear to expect attendees to conform to a particular religious belief in order to participate in the service. Indeed, it is Lehmann (2008), not Osteen, who categorizes the ministry as part of the Word of Faith movement.

In regards to mass media use within the Osteen services, many of the examples demonstrated a blurring between the lines of entertainment and religion. For example, the lawyer (2007) observed an entertainment atmosphere within a church-like service while the conservative Christian (2007) chose media/entertainment words to describe the setting of the Osteen event. Dolbee (2008) saw audience members disregarding the importance of an unmediated Osteen. Additionally, it appeared that the Osteen's ministry's purpose for using mass media was to appeal to two separate audiences. Considering the evidence for the perception of blurring between media and religion on the audience's part, this purpose indicates compatibility between a church like Osteen's and mass media.

The reason for studying blogs and newspaper articles was to answer the third research question, *Do the descriptions of Lakewood church's services from other observers concur with this study's definition of religious individualism.* Based on my analysis of the data, I would argue that the observations from the blogs and newspapers match the conclusions gathered from my field observation. Regardless of whether an author was sharing his or her own personal thoughts or discussing what they saw or heard at the events, every blog or newspaper article contained at least one or more example of a characteristic of religious individualism. This observation demonstrates not only the presence, but the importance of every characteristic in each service. For the authors to observe traits of religious individualism and, in some cases, respond in accordance to certain characteristics

gives concrete illustrations of how religious individualism can be experienced on a personal level. For example, both the female author and the conservative Christian blogger confirmed the value and expectation placed upon those displaying emotion at Osteen services. Audience responses in regards to the media's presence likewise revealed an influence to the degree that it affected choices in language and perceptions. This was evident in the conservative's (2007) description of the setting of the Osteen event where it appears he forgoes descriptors relating to church structure and rituals for more media/entertainment-friendly words. Other authors, while conscious of its religious nature, chose to describe the event as similar to a concert or compared it to other media/entertainment events rather than other church services. Their responses suggest then that, in their eyes, the distinction between the two is not clear.

Concerning these observations then, there appears to be a misconception of the popular term of "culture war," where religion and an entertainment culture are believed to conflict with each other. However, a church, such as Lakewood, that finds mass media as necessary to its operation will be compatible with a culture that values mass media as essential to its daily life. Mara Einstein (2008), in her book *Brands of Faith*, confirms this notion saying that there is a "symbiotic" relationship between the religion and entertainment culture, and that, "In all, these institutions are much more alike than they are different" (p. 14). Both institutions seek to communicate a message that is appealing to its target audience, both seek to creating new identities for its consumers, and both employ similar values (independence, equality, love, etc) to gain the acceptance of its participants. Therefore, it is expected that the observers would see the Osteen ministry's services and



mass media as blended together when both entertainment culture and the ministry share a similar value.

Based on Lindlof's (1995) argument that words shape perceptions of reality, I can conclude that because the authors and audience members see the traits of religious individualism, they will also see the media's presence as natural elements of the Osteen services. They are linked in the sense that that a church that values the characteristics of religious individualism will use mass media in a way that the Osteen ministry has already embraced as it helps reinforce and communicate these traits to a large audience that already appreciates mass media. Because of my conclusions, the issue of whether audience members "prefer" the mediated version of the Osteen event proved to be a difficult question to answer. It appears that from the authors'/audience's perspective there is no true "unmediated" version of Osteen or his service. One cannot favor a different version of the event or the man when one is never given another option. Dolbee (2008) shares the experience of a woman who was content with seats that gave her an obstructed view of Osteen. In this woman's eyes, seeing Osteen via a screen or actually watching him onstage are essentially the same experience. Such a belief can only occur when mass media and an Osteen service are interwoven to each other.

Nevertheless, the audience's experiences are tailored to create individual but generally uniform encounters with Osteen. Similar to my findings from the field observation, the authors saw Osteen and event coordinators encouraging attendees to project their expectations onto the service. This meant adapting the music, sermon content, and the environment to suit the perceived tastes of an audience more accustomed to entertainment than a church-like event. The Osteen ministry then has created a service where attendees are

not required to conform to any preconceived notions of church, but rather are supported to come and remain as they are. Therefore, a service such as Osteen's promotes an atmosphere most compatible with the presence of mass media, which allows for developing separate messages for different audiences, because of its demonstration of the traits of religious individualism.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study has been two fold. First, to demonstrate how Lakewood church and the Osteen ministry exemplify the characteristics of religious individualism and, secondly to analyze how this concept informs their use of mass media within the services. I have addressed the definition of religious individualism, which incorporates the theories drawn from scholars such as Durkheim (1912/1995, 1897/1951), Parsons (1973, 1974), Douglas (1970/1996), and Weber (2003) but is encapsulated in the discussion of Bellah et al. (1996). Durkheim (1897/1951) and Douglas (1970/1996) viewed individualism as neither being fully autonomous, nor in full compliance with societal constraints. Parsons (1974) believed individualism to be a form of expressing or pursuing emotional satisfaction. Weber (2003) focused on one's relationship with God as being personal and individual. Each scholar's arguments exemplified Bellah et al.'s (1996) definition of religious individualism, which is exercising behaviors and values informed by religious/spiritual beliefs that promote the needs and emotional desires of the individuals over those of a church community or other relationships. After establishing a definition, I next addressed several characteristics that would assist in determining categories of observation for my study. These characteristics were: emotional displays to distinguish one from others, believing in personal responsibility in developing one's faith, viewing oneself as entitled to God's special attention and blessing, and seeking the personal over communal benefits of a church.

The four traits were used as a codebook for observing the services and analyzing the blogs and newspaper articles. They covered the beliefs and actions of those leading the

service and of audience members. Specifically, I looked for examples of emotional displays meant to distinguish oneself apart from others in the audience, personal responsibility in maintaining spiritual growth, a sense of entitlement over future blessings from God, and an appeal to the personal needs of individual congregants. Examples of the presence of mass media during the field observation included observations of camera angles/shots, direct eye contact and interaction with cameras, in the analysis of the televised services. For the content analysis of the blogs and newspaper articles, I looked at words used by the authors that illustrated a mediated perspective of the service, while also analyzing the Osteen ministry's expressed reasons for using mass media. The field observation provided first hand observations of the Lakewood services and its attendees. The content analysis of blogs and articles, which also covered first hand observations, allowed me to confirm my findings and strengthen the argument for the media's presence being necessary and natural to a religious individualist church. I used these two methodologies to answer my three research questions which looked at how the media enables and reinforces religious individualism within the Osteen services, how the congregation responds to media use within the services, and whether other observers' observations of the services concur with this study's findings in relation to the definition of religious individualism.

Throughout the observation period, I found examples of the Osteen ministry illustrating and promoting the traits of religious individualism within the Lakewood services. Its endorsement of the traits became, in some cases, an expectation of "proper" behavior at Lakewood. Osteen exemplified this expectation in regards to the emotional displays characteristic when he said during each service that the audience should be participators, not spectators of the church service. In addition, references to God coordinated with the sense

of entitlement trait to which any opposing ideas would be considered incorrect within the Lakewood environment. For example, God must be seen as a deity whose sole purpose is for the ensuring the joy and comfort of believers. To not adhere to such a theology would be incompatible with the sermons and songs performed at Lakewood that stressed this trait throughout the services.

Religious individualism seemed reflected in almost every action at Lakewood. The purpose for attending a service, as stated by the staff, demonstrated the personal responsibility trait by stating the reason to attend was to fulfill some aspect of a personal spiritual journey. By focusing on self fulfillment as the motivation to participate in church rituals, such as tithing, Lakewood encouraged attendees to believe together and not belong together. The responsibility of communing with God was not upon the staff of Lakewood or fellow believers, but upon the individual him- or herself. As Osteen states in his sermons, even God cannot force change or meaningful participation as only the individual has the power to act. Likewise, Lakewood had a continuous focus on the perceived needs of individual congregants and adapted its church accordingly. Lakewood's staff has illustrated this by forgoing the use of religious symbols in order for attendees to project their own religious sentiments, or lack thereof, into the service. To use mass media at Lakewood appears to be increasingly compatible with the nature of the ministry. As Lakewood sees its attendees as separate and unique, it is necessary and a natural extension of itself to create a separate message for the television audience. This message is of a happy and seemingly perfect Osteen who is the personification of the teachings of Lakewood which make up the characteristics of religious individualism. Creating a different message becomes necessary for the Osteen ministry if it is to appeal to a largely unseen audience even more diverse than

the over 45,000 people who attend the church on the weekends. The fact that the Osteen ministry feels compelled to appeal to this audience is an illustration of its religious roots as it attempts to proclaim the Gospel to the nations. Furthermore, because this mass message must appear to be individualized or customized to the perceived needs of the unseen audience it is a reflection of its religious individualist roots where personal needs are valued above others and believers are seen as solitary sojourners.

The content analysis of blog and newspaper articles that specifically covered events led by the Osteen ministry came to a similar conclusion. The different authors observed each trait of religious individualism being promoted or considered expected behavior within the services. For example, they saw Osteen and the staff encouraging attendees to see God as serving humankind for their emotional satisfaction and deserving of their Creator's special attention. The authors also saw the ministry, as well as themselves, expecting attendees to display emotion to be set apart from others. They observed members of the ministry encouraging attendees to expect future blessings from God but not to expect the Almighty to force change into their lives as each individual is responsible for his or her own success. Lastly, the authors observed personal needs being considered of higher importance than communal needs both in the text of the sermons and design of the service.

Mass media usage within the Osteen-led events provided insight into how the media is perceived amongst attendees. The authors observed or demonstrated a blending between media/entertainment and religion. Dolbee (2008) saw attendees who were content in coming to a service and only seeing Osteen through a screen. In their eyes, viewing Osteen over a screen and being able to see him face to face were experiences of equal value. The other authors used words related to media/entertainment to describe their setting. Their word

choice was an example of my ethnomethodological approach toward studying the blogs. Considering this approach, the authors' word choice reflected how they perceived the reality of the Osteen services.

It has been established in this study and in others why many churches use mass media. For example, Sargeant's (2000) study on Willow Creek found that churches use media to communicate to a certain audience. Their pastor states, "While [Jesus] addressed crowds from a mountainside or a boat, we enhance our communication through twentieth-century technology" (pg. 55). Such a motivation is not a secret, nor is it seen only in churches. Numerous books and studies talk about the "marketing" of churches, some of which have already been addressed in this thesis (see for example Einstein, 2008; Thumma, Travis, & Bird, 2006; Hoover, 2006; Muggeridge, 1977; Roof, 1999, Owens, 1980; and Twitchell, 2004/2007). My study however observed that Lakewood and other Osteen services considered their use of mass media not as an addition to the church, something to be employed and then put away. Instead, my observations revealed that mass media became an essential element of the service and was grafted into the very nature of the church. This latter type of mass media use is incorporated into every service and can be experienced by congregants in a tangible and unavoidable way. For example, as mentioned in the fourth chapter, attendees and congregants cannot experience an unmediated Osteen service when no true unmediated version of either Osteen or his service is readily available to attendees as his image is projected on screens throughout the sanctuary. In one case, even when direct face-to-face contact with Osteen is unavailable, participants appear undeterred indicating that an "unmediated" portrayal of Osteen is inconsequential (Dolbee, 2008). Therefore,

where past studies looked at religious use of media as types of tools used by churches, my study showed how mass media can become absorbed into all areas of a church.

In respect to religious individualism, I have shown how one church that demonstrates the characteristics can find media use integral to the functioning of its church. Such a perspective exemplifies the grafting of mass media at Lakewood where religious media use becomes ingrained into the image of the church and into those who attend. I have already discussed how it is necessary and natural for the Osteen ministry to use media to communicate a separate message for the television audience. Yet, the scope of media use at the different Osteen events extends much deeper than that. I observed, for example, cameras filming congregants at the Lakewood services leading me to conclude that the filming assisted in enforcing the expectation to display emotion amongst the congregation. Furthermore, filming the audience, along with placing the cameras in highly visible areas (see Appendix A), illustrates the mediated nature of the services. From my personal observation, it is difficult to avoid experiencing the media's presence when cameras continuously scan the audience awaiting their reactions.

The media's presence is also felt when the Osteen ministry films its music portion to resemble professional concert footage and when Osteen greets the television audience at the Lakewood services. As with camera placement, these two observations demonstrate a blending of media/entertainment with religion. Such a mixing is natural when the church regards mass media in a similar way that entertainment culture values it. In addition, the blending is necessary for the Osteen ministry to create a concert-like atmosphere in order to appeal to a particular audience. Reflecting the personal needs/benefits trait, the Osteen ministry appears concerned with satisfying the perceived needs of desired individuals with



experiences to which they can relate and where they feel appreciated. Each way the Osteen ministry uses media illustrates how its use is necessary in order to communicate to a particular audience and part of their nature as it reflects their execution of the traits of religious individualism.

All the characteristics are important for understanding why churches may choose to utilize mass media in a religious way similarly to Lakewood's use. For example, each trait assisted in revealing the purpose behind the incorporation of mass media at Lakewood by showing that its application went beyond utility and into meaning making and identity creation. Lakewood's use of mass media assisted in communicating Osteen's theology and enforcing an identity centered on religious individualism. The personal needs/benefits trait describes how the staff appears to treat the audience and how one can expect to be treated in the service. Lastly, the emotional displays trait addresses how the audience should act during the services. As the characteristics deal with beliefs, treatment, and actions, the traits involve every area of a service. One will not display emotion to set oneself apart during the service when the other characteristics are not encouraged within the service. Moreover, a belief that a person is entitled to God's special treatment presupposes a belief that God is particularly mindful of him or her. To neglect one is to cause all others to become void as each trait necessitates the other. The observations gathered would not be an example of true religious individualism as laid out by Durkheim (1912/1995, 1897/1951), Parsons (1973, 1974), Douglas (1970/1996), Weber (2003) and of course, Bellah et al. (1996). It remains to be seen whether churches that do not show all four characteristics as clearly as Lakewood will also blend media and religion to the degree where the line between the two is indistinguishable. Therefore, we need more research into whether churches that use mass

media within its services find media use necessary and integral to their functioning as was the case at Lakewood church.

My research argued that when religious individualism is present in a church it can provide a reason for congregants and church staff to view a religious use of mass media as essential to the operation of its church. Further research is needed to determine whether churches that utilize multiple forms of mass media for their services and ministry also illustrate the different characteristics of religious individualism. For example, some churches appear to integrate their entire service with mass media by using videos to broadcast sermons from other pastors creating multisite campuses of the same church. The main difference between the campuses is the inclusion of local staff, who provide live music and other areas of ministry (Park, 2008). This would be a ripe area of research into the how the congregation and staff view these mediated services and whether there is a correlation between the presence of religious individualism and mass media use within the services.

One surprising result from my research not yet mentioned is the lack of discussion amongst bloggers of the actual Osteen-led services. As mentioned previously, the small sample size of blog data was due to this limiting factor. More research is needed to understand why there is a glut of information on the internet regarding Osteen's media appearances but little to no discussion can be found of first-hand experiences of being at an Osteen-led event. While Osteen's media appearances may be more accessible to an internet audience, it still does not explain why so many people, even from his own congregation, remain silent about his services as many of his congregants do not appear to blog based on the small number of blog posts located in this research that describe parishioner's experiences with Lakewood.

Another area in need of investigation is the religious use of entertainment. I discussed how the Osteen ministry created an environment similar to a concert experience to satisfy the congregation's personal need of being comfortable at church. More research is needed to understand a church's commitment to entertainment and whether religious individualism can explain the decision to use it. In addition, it would be interesting to determine if churches view a total integration of entertainment in their services as necessary and natural, similar to how Lakewood viewed their religious use of mass media. My study found members of the Osteen ministry comparing their church service to forms of entertainment rather than other churches. In light of this, it would be necessary to study whether additional churches make similar comparisons. By understanding this area of research, we will not only know more about why media use is present in certain churches, we will also gain a greater knowledge in the study of mediated religion.

The overall implications of this research point to a potential shift in how religious use of mass media in the context of a church may point to a particular form of practice and belief. With mass media providing mega-churches and their pastors more prominence within the religious and secular sphere, there is a potential for society to see a new face of evangelicalism as a faith that seeks compatibility with mass media. Of course, this compatibility has been renegotiated by the religious in order to conform to their religious beliefs. Therefore, the new evangelicalism is not easily defined as different churches adapt its religious use of mass media to suit the perceived needs for each congregation. On an individual level, the new evangelicalism is a customized faith, informed by mass media, with churches serving as validating centers where many strokes of Christianity are welcome on the canvas of religious individualism.

This study has argued for religious individualism as the motivating belief system driving the religious use of mass media within evangelical churches. My findings showed its use to be compatible with a church that also demonstrates religious individualism in its services. However, this harmonious relationship between religion and media presents several ramifications for the future. An increasing compatibility with mass media and religious individualism offers a noteworthy alternative source for information, religious guidance, spiritual support and community not only for the religious individualist, but also for the rest of society. A possible result of this shift may see churches that illustrate religious individualism losing their hold among church-goers who came freely as an exercise of religious individualism, leaving for the same reason. For the religious individualist church, the challenge is not keeping up with other churches but rather, they must compete with other forms of mass media and entertainment. Only time will tell where the media will take these churches and how religious communities will respond to it.

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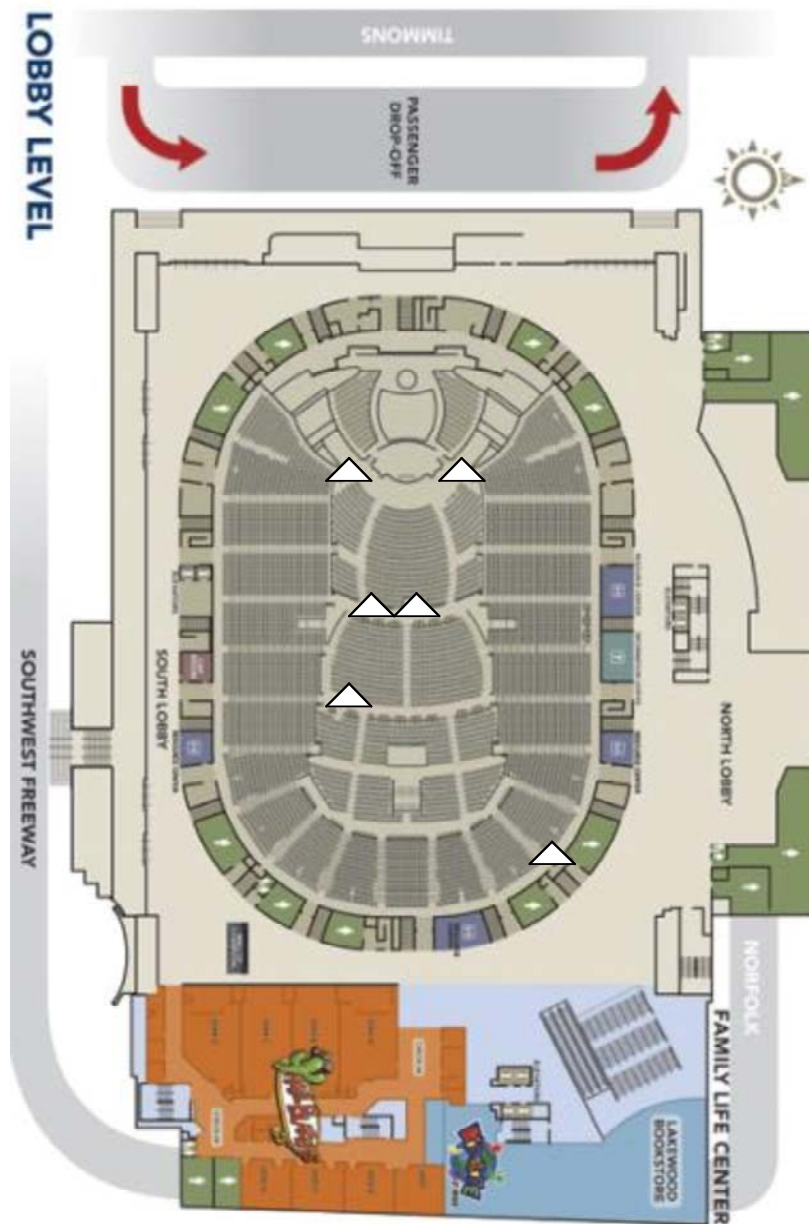
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\*Blog authors' names and URLs have been omitted to ensure his or her privacy.

## APPENDIX A: LAYOUT OF LAKEWOOD CHURCH



Used with permission from the official Lakewood church website (2007). In the center of the diagram is the layout of Lakewood church's sanctuary. The white triangles depict the placement of cameras within the sanctuary.

## APPENDIX B: PICTURE OF STAGE AND SCREENS AT LAKEWOOD CHURCH



From personal collection. This is a view of the Lakewood sanctuary prior to the beginning of Lakewood's second Sunday Service.

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