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The Limits of Encouragement

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We would all like to be encouraging — and encouragement is one of the hallmarks of Christian ministry. After all, Barnabas was given his name as “Son of Encouragement” precisely in recognition of this invaluable ministry ([Acts 4:36](#)). Nevertheless, encouragement has its limits, and true biblical encouragement means encouraging that which is right and true, not that which leads to death. When the Apostle Paul urged Christians to encourage one another, he was encouraging them to encourage each other to faithfulness (see [1 Thessalonians 5:11](#)).

The limits of encouragement were all too apparent when [Joel Osteen](#) appeared on CNN’s [Larry King Live](#) on June 20. Mr. Osteen, pastor of Houston’s [Lakewood Church](#) and author of the best-selling book, *Your Best Life Now*, affirmed his desire to affirm over and over again. It was not pretty. At several points, Mr. Osteen simply dodged theological questions, dismissing them with “I don’t know.”

When Mr. King asked about “fire and brimstone,” Mr. Osteen replied: “No. That’s not me. It’s never been me. I’ve always been an encourager at heart. And when I took over from my father he came from the Southern Baptist background and back 40, 50 years ago there was a lot more of that. But, you know, I just — I don’t believe in that. I don’t believe — maybe it was for a time. But I don’t have it in my heart to condemn people. I’m there to encourage them. I see myself more as a coach, as a motivator to help them experience the life God has for us.”

That was thin enough, but consider this statement: “You may not agree with me, but to me it’s not my job to try to straighten everybody out. The Gospel called the good news. My message is a message of hope, that’s God’s for you. You can live a good life no matter what’s happened to you. And so I don’t know. I know there is condemnation but I don’t feel that’s my place.” What about those things clearly condemned in the Bible?

Mr. Osteen said he believes in heaven and hell, but it is not clear how anyone would find themselves in hell. He even left the door open for atheists to go to heaven. “You know what, I’m going to let someone — I’m going to let God be the judge of who goes to heaven and hell. I just — again, I present the truth, and I say it every week. You know, I believe it’s a relationship with Jesus. But you know what? I’m not going to go around telling everybody else if they don’t want to believe that that’s going to be their choice. God’s got to look at your own heart. God’s got to look at your heart, and only God knows that.” To the extent that I can make sense of that statement, it appears that Mr. Osteen is determined to avoid telling anyone — even atheists — that they face the reality of hell.

In another section of the interview Mr. Osteen told Larry King that he doesn’t like to talk about sin or call people sinners. When asked, “Is that a word you don’t use?,” Mr. Osteen answered: “I don’t use it. I never thought about it. But I probably don’t. But most people already know what they’re doing wrong. When I get them to church I want to tell them that you can change. There can be a difference in your life. So I don’t go down the road of condemning.” Change from what? Why?

I have avoided mention of Mr. Osteen thus far. His church claims to have over 30,000 in weekly attendance and he has an expanding base of operations and growing influence. He obviously means well and loves to help people. His message of smiling affirmation is well received by thousands who come to his church and by millions more who watch him on television and read his books. But affirmation and encouragement, devoid of biblical content and context, will quickly turn into a message leading “from death to death” ([2 Corinthians 3:16](#)). In contrast, the Gospel leads “from life to life,” telling us the truth about ourselves and pointing us to Christ for our salvation. We must encourage persons to believe in Christ, to repent of their sins, to trust in Christ alone, and to live for God’s glory. Anything less is an encouragement to eternal disaster.

CHECK IT OUT: Read the [transcript](#) of the June 20, 2005 edition of [Larry King Live](#) with guest [Joel Osteen](#).

