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Does Joel Osteen Not Know, or Does He Not Care?

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Here we go again. Joel Osteen is in the news once again, this time for saying that Mormonism is just another form of Christianity. Osteen, pastor of “America’s largest church,” as the media repeat over and over, was speaking to *The Washington Times* in an interview that covered a variety of issues. It was the quintessential Joel on display.

Speaking to the newspaper on Monday, Osteen said, “I see faith in America at an all-time high.” His comments came just as a major research project detailed a significant loss of vitality in America’s Christian congregations. That loss of vitality can be traced, among other things, to a loss of theological and biblical conviction. Joel, of course, is proof positive that you can build a crowd without building a church. He is not inclined to deal in much theological conviction.

In the interview, he distilled his message in these words: “Part of our core message is that seasons change, and when you believe, if you don’t get bitter, and you don’t get discouraged, you may not change overnight, but you can get peace.”

He also told the newspaper: “People need to be reminded that every day is a gift from

God, and bloom where you're planted and be happy where you are, and to make that choice to get up every day and be grateful."

That message includes some truth, of course — but it doesn't even come close to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Hell will be filled with people who bloomed where they were planted.

On Mormonism, Joel said:

"I believe that [Mormons] are Christians I don't know if it's the purest form of Christianity, like I grew up with. But you know what, I know Mormons. I hear Mitt Romney — and I've never met him — but I hear him say, 'I believe Jesus is the son of God,' 'I believe he's my savior,' and that's one of the core issues."

"I'm sure there are other issues that we don't agree on. But you know, I can say that the Baptists and the Methodists and the Catholics don't all agree on everything. So that would be my take on it."

Osteen just stated his belief that Mormons are Christians. He then expressed the thought that Mormonism "might not be the purest form of Christianity, like I grew up with," but he affirmed Mormon statements that Jesus is the Son of God and that He is Savior.

Evaluating Osteen's boyhood understanding of Christianity would be a project unto itself, given the shifting theology of his preacher father, the late John Osteen.

The main point of concern in Joel's latest comment is the lack of any biblical standard of judgment and the total abdication of theological responsibility. He relegates doctrinal disagreements between Christians and Mormons to the status of theological debates between Protestant denominations and then includes Roman Catholicism. There are plenty of issues there, and the issues are not the same when comparing Baptists to Methodists, on the one hand, and Protestants and Roman Catholics, on the other. Comparing any form of Trinitarian orthodoxy with Mormonism is another class of question altogether.

Joel reminded the paper's staff that he has never attended seminary. This is true, of course, but there are thousands of preachers who never had the opportunity to attend seminary who have a sufficient grasp of and commitment to biblical truth that would prevent such carelessness.

By now, it is clear that Joel Osteen's carelessness is deliberate and calculated. This is not the first time that he has encountered the question of Mormonism. Back in 2007, he told Chris Wallace of FOX News that Mormons are indeed Christians:

“Well, in my mind they are. Mitt Romney has said that he believes in Christ as his savior, and that’s what I believe, so, you know, I’m not the one to judge the little details of it. So I believe they are.”

The little details of it? Mormonism does not differ from historic biblical Christianity in only the “little details,” and a faithful Mormon would be the first to point this out. Mormonism begins with a plurality of gods, not with the monotheism of the Bible. Jesus Christ is an exalted man — not the incarnate Word. The list of categorical doctrinal differences continues throughout the entire belief system.

The very essence of Mormonism is the claim that historic Christianity is fundamentally in error, and that true Christianity did not exist on earth from the time of the Apostles until Joseph Smith. Mormonism can hardly be charged with hiding their movement’s teachings — the *Book of Mormon* and the other fundamental texts of the Latter Day Saints are published in plain sight.

In a remarkable exchange with Chris Wallace, Osteen muddied the waters further:

WALLACE: So, for instance, when people start talking about Joseph Smith, the founder of the church, and the golden tablets in upstate New York, and God assumes the shape of a man, do you not get hung up in those theological issues?

OSTEEN: I probably don’t get hung up in them because I haven’t really studied them or thought about them. And you know, I just try to let God be the judge of that. I mean, I don’t know.

Here we face a fundamental dilemma. When Joel Osteen hears a summary of Mormon belief that mentions God assuming “the shape of a man,” does he lack the theological discernment to hear how that differs from biblical Christianity, or does it not concern him? In other words, does Joel not know, or does Joel not care?

In the end, we have to conclude that he does not care enough to know, and that is the greater tragedy for a Christian minister. He doesn’t “get hung up” on doctrinal issues, nor has he “really studied them or thought about them.” His own words indict him.

Evangelical Christians are going to face many questions in this season, and the question of Mormonism is now front and center. It will call upon all of us to do what Joel Osteen proudly has not done — to study and think about these issues. In this political moment, we will have to think carefully and act judiciously without confusing the theological questions. We will need the full wealth of Christian conviction.

We will also need deep doctrinal discernment mixed with urgent spiritual concern. The

Latter Day Saints include some of the most wonderful and kind people we will ever meet. They put a great emphasis on character and on the moral values of our common concern. They talk freely and passionately about their own beliefs, including their beliefs concerning Jesus Christ. Furthermore, they put action behind their commitments, sending their young people on mission and fueling a worldwide movement that remains one of the fastest-growing on the planet.

But their beliefs concerning Jesus Christ are not those of historic Christianity, and their understanding of salvation differs radically from the message of the New Testament. It is the responsibility of every Christian — and most certainly every Christian minister — to know this.

Joel Osteen told *The Washington Times* that he is constantly “looking for new ways to influence the culture.” Our culture admires those with low theological commitment and high emphasis on attitude. In Joel Osteen’s case, it is the secular culture that has influenced the minister, and not the minister that is influencing the culture.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

Cheryl Wetzstein, “Osteen: Americans’ Faith at ‘All Time High,’” *The Washington Times*, Monday, October 24, 2011. [Add odd irony to this equation -- since *The Washington Times* was founded in 1982 by the Unification Church of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon.]

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Mormonism, Democracy, and the Urgent Need for Evangelical Thinking,” Monday, October 10, 2011.

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