

The Truth About the Church's Fundraising Tactics

Let's suppose you are closing out your day with some salsa and chips when you flip on the television. You wince as you witness a repeat performance—not of another episode of *Survivor* but of a high-powered, high-pressure appeal for money during a talk show on your local Christian station.

"Ohhh, the anointing is so strong right now," the host says. "You need to give while the anointing is here!"

You believe in the anointing of God and in the power of prayer. You love and appreciate many of the people on this TV program and you know God uses them.

You certainly don't want to be critical. So you close your eyes, shake your head in disgust and turn off the set.

"This is embarrassing," you say to yourself. "Something isn't right. Lord, I don't understand—does it have to be this way?"

I know how you feel. I have seen this in church services and conferences and some of the same thoughts have surfaced in me.

Over the next several days you find yourself in conversations with Christian friends. Somehow the topic of Christian fundraising is mentioned.

The other people have strong opinions, from "It makes me sick" to "As soon as I see that stuff I turn off the TV."

I wish this craziness were the exception, but it seems it is becoming the rule. During one recent week I turned on the tube and witnessed the following:

*In a highly charged atmosphere, a motivational speaker told her audience to shout "Amen!" She was flanked by a group of

nodding, hand-clapping and hand-waving supporters. "Slap someone in agreement," she said.

Agreement with what? The speaker quoted Psalm 71:21 and promised if viewers would pledge \$ a month for 12 months (\$) that God had told her He would give them "increase and greatness."

The evangelist continued: "He'll stop that lawsuit. ... Greatness will be released in your job and finances and ministry and marriage even if you don't have the resources or have two nickels to your name or don't have a man to support you! Go to that phone and pledge \$ a month, and I prophesy to you that God will increase your greatness! Give now!"

*A well-dressed "bishop" who divorced his wife and remarried one week later forcefully told his audience to "obey the prophet of God and give." He said God gave him a word for the young people: "You are in tremendous credit card debt, but if you'll get up and pledge money and put it on your credit card, God will intervene for you. Don't let anything hinder you. Today salvation comes to your house."

(I wish I could remind this guy of Proverbs 22:26-27. It says that if you foolishly go into debt your very bed will be snatched from under you.)

*Another internationally known church leader told his TV audience that eight men were supposed to give \$1 million each in the offering. "You have a choice," he told them. "Obey God and win or disobey God and keep losing. You will lose God's blessing! Go! And praise God while you're dialing the phone."

*Another leader used this hook to urge viewers to pledge money: "The more you pledge, the more protection you'll have from God." During other broadcasts this person had implied that people would be healed if they would sow money into his ministry!

I can't help but remember the account of Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8:9-21. His greed lured him to ask Peter if he could buy the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Peter rebuked him sharply and said: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God" (NIV).

Stop the Madness!

The people I have described are sincere, but they are also misleading God's people. And if we don't bring some correction to their behavior soon the testimony of the American church will be ruined.

Referring to finances, the apostle Paul told the Corinthian church that their credibility was vital. "We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (2 Cor. 8:20-21).

Can we say this today in our churches and ministries when we raise funds? Personally, I believe things have gotten so out of hand that our meek and mild Jesus is picking up His whip to cleanse the temple one more time.

It's time to halt pressure-laden, deceptive, unbiblical, gimmicky practices that grieve God and hurt the cause of Christ—especially when we try to reach unbelievers. It's time to demote slick pulpit marketers who offer different colored "prayer bears," "prosperity bracelets" and other silly trinkets.

What's next? Action figures and bobble-head dolls of our favorite TV preachers?

Paul admonished the church at Rome that God's name was being blasphemed among the Gentiles because of them (see Rom. 2:24).

What would he say about us?

I am not a detached, armchair critic. I've been in the ministry more than 30 years in both local church and parachurch work. I know the financial pressures are real.

I also know God is a God of abundance and prosperity, and I believe He honors the generosity of sincere people—even if they are wrongly pressured. I also thank God for multitudes of ministers who do display sensitivity and integrity in raising funds. (Thanks to Billy Graham for 50-plus years of a superb example!)

In year's past, when church giving declined nationwide, I had to revise my local church budget, lay off a friend from a job, pray for a financial miracle and ask God a lot of questions about our goals.

My congregation got so desperate for God's presence and provision that we shut down every church activity (we even closed our office!) so we could seek God from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. for an entire week. Our choice was simple: Either trust the flesh or trust God.

When a church or ministry reaches a point of need, it makes sense to push the pause button and examine whether God's work truly is being done in God's way. Hudson Taylor, pioneer missionary to China, said this: "God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supply."

If God promised to supply all our needs, then shouldn't we evaluate if our current "needs" are actually "wants"? We may realize that we have wandered off-course.

How many ministry leaders make desperate pleas for projects that God never originated? Rather than manufacture a crisis by going on a fundraising binge ("We must raise \$50,000 by the 31st, or we'll have to shut down!") maybe we should be honest and admit God is using lack to get our attention!

Supernatural Provision

We've seen awesome financial miracles in my church. At the end of the year we were struggling we realized we needed \$30,000 to meet our budget.

After praying we informed people of the need. We requested prayer, reviewed biblical passages and invited a Spirit-led response.

While I was driving to our office on New Year's Eve, I stopped by a post office. A man I'd never met popped out of the lobby and smiled. "I saw you deposit your mail and felt God wanted you to know He's making a deposit in your account today," he said to me.

That afternoon a flurry of checks arrived. By the time the ball dropped at Times Square to signal the New Year, God had met our need with \$30,500!

I know God can provide. And I know He loves to pour out His extravagant love for us by meeting our needs. But we must stop misusing His Word and misrepresenting His character with our disgusting circus antics.

If we excuse ourselves by saying we couldn't care less what the world thinks of our financial pleas, the perception among growing numbers of both Christians and nonbelievers will continue to be that something is rotten in our ranks.

Whether we like it or not, perception is reality. We are turning people off, especially the younger "make it real" generation, when we manipulate people to fill offering plates.

Have we forgotten what happened to Jim Bakker and his PTL ministry?

"As the true impact of Jesus' words regarding money impacted my heart and mind, I became physically nauseated," Bakker wrote in his book *I Was Wrong* after his release from prison.

"I was wrong. I was wrong! Wrong in my lifestyle, certainly, but even more fundamentally, wrong in my understanding of the Bible's true message. Not only was I wrong, but I was teaching the opposite of what Jesus had said."

All of us need to ask ourselves if our attitude is "anything goes" in our church or ministry fund raising. Consider the following three guidelines related to finances.

1. Giving begins in the local church. According to the Bible, every Christian should be "added" to a church family and should financially support the church leadership with their tithes (see Acts 2:41-42; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; 1 Cor. 9:3-12). To avoid draining off resources or competing with others, early Christians entrusted their funds to the leaders for distribution of needs and even channeled additional funds to a needy cause through their local church (see Acts 4:34-35; 1 Cor. 16:2).

This parallels the Old Testament model, in which most giving was directed primarily to a centralized location (the temple) for distribution by the leaders (the Levites). Additional giving (above and beyond basic tithes and offerings in this context) was seen as "freewill offerings"—similar to our giving today to worthy evangelistic causes, mercy ministries and so on.

John Chrysostom, a father of the early church, observed church giving in A.D. 390 and stated that the believers "did not dare to put their offering into the hands of the needy, nor give it with lofty condescension, but they laid it at the feet of the apostles and made them the masters and distributors of the gift. What a man needed was then taken from the treasury of the community, not from the private property of individuals. Thereby the givers did not become arrogant."

2. We need guidelines for fundraising. The father of all modern fund raising is George Müller (1805-1898). He established

orphanages in England and provided for thousands of needy children. I've visited these former homes and pondered how God faithfully supplied all the needs without any inappropriate sales techniques or high-pressure manipulation.

Müller's guidelines are relevant for correcting much of the current fund-raising abuses, although I would add one qualifier to his first point: soliciting monetary help (see guidelines below).

Though I respect those who have a preference for never making specific needs known, I do believe there is biblical support for doing so (as Paul did with the Philippians and Corinthians) as long as information, not manipulation, is being shared. When Jesus said to give, not letting your left hand know what the right is doing (see Matt. 6:3), He was addressing motive, not method.

Müller's guidelines state:

- * No funds should ever be solicited. No facts or figures concerning needs are to be revealed by the workers in the orphanage to anyone, except to God in prayer. [This is not a biblical mandate, but it is interesting that Müller's work was fully supported in this manner.]
- * No debt should ever be incurred.
- * Money contributed for a specific purpose should never be used for any other purpose.
- * All accounts should be audited annually by professional auditors.
- * No ego pandering by publication of donors' names with the amount of their gifts. Each donor should be thanked privately.
- * No prominent or titled persons should be sought for the board or to advertise the institution.
- * The success of the institution should be measured not by the numbers served or by the amounts of money taken in but by God's blessing on the work, which is expected to be in proportion to the time spent in prayer.

3. We need to use discernment. It's time for the 21st century church to clean house or prepare to have Jesus clean our clocks as He did with the money changers of His day. We must not procrastinate or continue staging this embarrassing financial circus.

Chrysostom's words to greedy church leaders of his day need to be heard in our generation: "You have taken possession of the resources that belong to Christ and you consume them aimlessly. Don't you realize that you are going to be held accountable?"

Years ago some Anglican bishops in Africa took a courageous stand for financial integrity. When the Episcopal Church in the United States voted to ordain a practicing homosexual clergyman in August 2003, the African leaders announced they would not take any money from the American denomination. Then they exhorted the U.S. Episcopalians to repent.

Although the African Anglicans have great financial needs, Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria said this: "If we suffer for a while to gain our independence and our freedom and to build ourselves up, I think it will be a good thing for the church in Africa. And we will not, on the altar of money, mortgage our conscience, mortgage our faith, mortgage our salvation."

Imagine that! Rejecting offers of money to stay pure before God.

Maybe we can act similarly—putting principle before pragmatism—with our finances. We need to fix our eyes on the eternal priorities of the kingdom instead of the temporal needs of our flesh.

Let's repent of our dullness and disobedience. Let's realign our standards with God's. Then our hearts will be prepared to receive—should God open the windows of heaven and pour out an overflowing blessing.

Let's Get Blunt About It

Ten questions to ask before you give money to ministries:

1. Are the people who are asking for money modeling Christlikeness and servanthood or salesmanship and self-promotion?
2. Are they exalting Jesus Christ or exalting people and ministries?
3. Do they model prayerful dependency on God, or do they use pressure and manipulation to incite others to give?
4. Do they give people an opportunity to quietly and patiently hear from God, or do they insist that the giving must be done "now" or "instantly"?
5. Is there evidence of humility, purity and integrity in their demeanor and presentation, or do they use insincere hype, pushiness and striving?
6. Do they offer a sincere, faith-building presentation of Scriptures and testimonies or misleading promises and fear-inducing suggestions?
7. Does this ministry have a record of spiritual fruit that honors God, or is their reputation marred by unsubstantiated claims and exaggerated reports?
8. Do the people asking for money have godly lifestyles of humility and servanthood, or do they live as pampered people who require egotistical titles and lavish living?
9. Is the ministry financially accountable, or are false assurances used to gain credibility?
10. Do they ever imply that giving in an offering will increase a person's spiritual gifts or level of anointing?

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