

Charismatic Idols

How I long for the innocent days when we didn't put a price tag on the Holy Spirit's anointing.

My heart sank in January when the Orlando Sentinel began running articles about prominent Christian recording artist Clint Brown, who pastors one of the largest churches in Central Florida. The news was bad: Brown and his wife, Angie, were embroiled in a divorce and were dividing their financial assets. After looking at court records, Sentinel reporters published Brown's salary, the cost of his two homes, the value of his seven cars (including a \$95,000 Mercedes-Benz) and the amounts he spent on luxury items from pricey boutiques.

It was sad enough that a Christian leader's marriage was falling apart. It was sadder that the Browns were in court. But what was most tragic was that so many people in the Orlando area were hearing these reports about a pastor's lavish lifestyle. Of course, members of Brown's 6,000-member church defended him. But a larger group of already jaded unbelievers probably said to themselves, These preachers are all the same—they're just in it for the money.

We could argue all day about whether it's right or wrong for a minister of God to buy a \$40,000 Rolex or pay \$7,000 a month for his house. Brown draws a lot of his income from his recordings, and I will defend any person's right to make a decent living.

And besides, there's no rule in the Bible that says ministers can't own multiple properties or wear nice clothes. Church leaders are not required to be poor.

But the questions remain: Are Christian ministers, whose callings are a public trust, allowed to damage God's reputation—and smear the rest of us—by living any way they choose? Is it right to collect people's tithes—money that is set apart for a holy purpose—and use it to make ostentatious purchases?

Some prosperity preachers think so. It seems they've rewritten the Bible to suggest that greed is now a virtue.

I can't judge what is in Clint Brown's heart. I love his music, and I pray his marriage is restored. But his situation is further evidence that we face a crisis.

Greed has invaded the church. The message of Jesus has been hijacked by opportunistic preachers who use the pulpit to enrich themselves. They bombard our airwaves every day, selling promises of instant blessings in return for "\$1,000 seeds."

Their message is like an oily, sleazy smog that threatens to suffocate us. This corruption has polluted our movement and maligned our witness.

I'm tempted to walk away from it altogether when I see such bold, flagrant disregard for biblical standards among leaders who claim to have a direct hotline to God. How I long for the innocent days when we didn't put a price tag on the Holy Spirit's anointing.

Rick Warren, the Southern Baptist pastor who wrote the book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, is not identified with the charismatic movement and has probably never given a "\$1,000

seed” to any prosperity preacher. Yet his book has hovered near the top of a New York Times best-sellers list for a year and is now the highest-selling hardback book in American history. He has made millions in royalties, but one of the first things he did with his money was give back to his church every dollar they ever paid him in salary.

Warren and his wife also decided they would not upgrade their lifestyle just because they struck it rich. They started a charitable foundation and pledged to use their profits to fund missions projects.

This pastor’s humble approach to success seems almost foreign to most of us. We forget that the early disciples were too radical about revival to be distracted by materialism. We overlook the fact that the apostle Paul—who wrote many of the Bible passages we preach about prosperity—spent his last days not in a mansion but in “rented quarters” (Acts 28:30, NASB).

I fear for the American church. Many of our leaders, behaving like Eli’s immoral sons, are dipping their hands into the offering plate and taking by force things that don’t belong to them (see 1 Sam. 2:12-17). Some of us are acting like Elisha’s servant, Gehazi, who traded his spiritual calling for a little silver and a couple of nice outfits (see 2 Kings 5:20-27).

And in many of our churches, the spirit of Achan rules—a spirit that covets material things that God has said are off-limits (see Josh. 7:20-22). Achan’s concealed greed caused all Israel to lose the battle. What will be the cost of the unrestrained selfishness we charismatics parade before the world?

Leaders in the New Testament church—who learned their theology while in prison—didn't care about expensive spa treatments, plastic surgery or Gucci handbags. Yet in many Christian circles today, we view these worldly status symbols as evidence of God's blessing.

May He forgive us for rejecting true worship to bow before golden calves.