

Fair Warning

For more than two years I've been advising our readers that some charismatic churches in this country are headed for serious trouble. I know many of you are probably tired of my waving this red flag, but I can't stop now. My sense of alarm is growing by the day.

More warning bells went off recently when I learned that the British government had shut down one of England's largest congregations, Victory Christian Centre in London, because of financial mismanagement. Pastor Douglas Goodman, known for his American-style message of instant prosperity, has restarted his church at a new location while he faces criminal charges in court.

I know this situation is on the other side of the Atlantic, but let's not assume that a similar government crackdown can't happen here. What is going on in American pulpits today makes this crisis in London look like a tea party at Buckingham Palace. My prediction: The greed, manipulation and financial foolishness on display in American churches today is going to be exposed—and some people are going to the woodshed if they don't get their acts together.

Don't get me wrong: I don't think the majority of churches are guilty of financial mismanagement—and I know charismatics aren't the only Christians capable of creating this type of scandal. But a small group of people in our circle could ruin it for the rest of us.

Have you noticed that the message is all about money these

days? Just turn on Christian television or visit a few conferences, and you'll start waving red flags too. We've been taken hostage by what I call the charismatic cartel. These people conduct ministry like an underground spiritual mafia—pocketing huge profits while they fleece the flock. It's really sad what's happening out there:

- * I know of a traveling "faith" preacher who routinely requires a \$7,000 spending allowance—in addition to his honorarium—when he speaks at a church. He also requires luxury transportation to and from the mall.

- * A prominent TV preacher now tells his audiences that those who give \$2,400 in the offering will receive a "24-hour miracle." (I wonder if it comes with a money-back guarantee?)

- * Many preachers now ask people in the crowd to stand if they can give large amounts of money in the offering. Then, those who make the pledge are promised prophecies or special blessings.

- * A preacher on a Christian television station in my city recently promised donors that if they would give "right now" they would get a new house in return for their generosity. I guess they figure heaven is running some kind of game show.

You'll never convince me that Jesus is pleased with this craziness—no matter how you try to sanctify it with religious buzzwords. My Bible says that men who love money aren't fit for the ministry. It also says that God doesn't like it when His shepherds extort money from God's people to enrich themselves (see Ezek. 34:1-10).

I'm not looking forward to the day when God sends agents from the IRS or the FBI to root out corruption in "Spirit-filled" churches. But it will happen soon unless we repent of our selfishness and boycott those who are turning God's house into a den of thieves.