

When Can You Sell the Anointing?

More and more ministries are 'selling' spiritual gifts to anyone willing to pay. What does the Bible say about these tactics?

Flipping through a magazine recently, I came across a church conference advertisement that at first glance seemed run-of-the-mill. All of the essential information was there—dates, times, speakers, location. Then I noticed words to this effect printed at the bottom: "The first 100 paid registrants will receive a personal prophecy."

Can ministers really promise someone a prophecy? What if God didn't have a prophetic word for each of the first 100 paid registrants? We've all been exposed to excesses in church fundraising through the years, but today it seems as if dubious strategies for receiving offerings and generating funds belong to the realm of the banal.

We no longer even take time to complain. Ministries unabashedly portray God as a sort of slot machine. Ludicrous guarantees and assertions are considered old hat.

If the church is going to have an impact on a lost and dying world, then we must guard our ministries against spiritual fraud and financial dishonesty. God's Word provides us the necessary antidotes for these maladies.

Believers who receive the truth of Scripture will learn both to discern which ministries are deceptive and to give to ministries that are pleasing God in the way they manage His money. Those of us in leadership, who know what the Bible teaches, must remember that to God, the end never justifies the means. Whether a ministry is building a sanctuary or assisting indigenous leaders overseas, leaders remain

responsible before God for the proper handling of His finances. We are charged to be mindful that the funds belong to Him while they are yet in the hands of His people.

Selling the Gift

We learn in Acts 8 that a tremendous anointing was released through the apostles Peter and John when they laid hands on new believers in Samaria, a nation in the midst of a great revival. Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem to assist Philip with ministry.

The Samaritan converts had been baptized in water, but they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. As the apostles began to lay their hands on people, the Spirit moved with divine power. Though we aren't told the specifics, signs and wonders likely were displayed, as well as the manifestation of tongues.

Whatever transpired, it was enough to astonish Simon the Sorcerer, who promptly offered to buy the power of God from the apostles (see Acts 8:18). Peter responded with wrath and pronounced a curse over Simon as recompense for his proposal.

Yet Simon was only doing what came naturally to him. He was a sorcerer by trade. That is, he was accustomed to people paying him to dispense his craft. Out of this context—what might be called a merchandizing paradigm—Simon suggested the apostles do what he himself did regularly: sell the gift.

American culture is thoroughly subject to a merchandizing paradigm, a natural consequence of our nation's rabid consumerism. We want to get something in return for every dollar we spend.

We feel better if there is an exchange of goods or services for the money we release. As a result, we in the church invite people to support our car wash for the youth department instead of just asking our congregations to give the necessary money for a youth missions trip.

We sell the saints cookies, doughnuts and candy because our members are much more likely to purchase than to give. Do not misunderstand me: There is no sin in our holding car washes or bake sales. But these sorts of fund-raising ventures reflect the paradigm in which we live and function.

Less benign are some of our in-house methods for taking up offerings. Often when we collect offerings, we create an environment that encourages people to give to be seen, a motive Jesus clearly sought to deter (see Matt. 6:2-4).

We believe we must promise people some immediate result—in this case recognition—because the merchandizing paradigm dictates that they receive a return on what they've put down. By indulging our congregations in this way, we actually help people forfeit the heavenly reward that comes from giving out of a heart to worship God.

The world's preoccupation with supernatural utterance and prophecy compounds the prevalence of a merchandizing attitude in the church more than we realize. We live in an age that is mesmerized by the supernatural or even the pretense of supernatural work. Fortunetellers, psychics and tarot card readers have moved into the mainstream, utilizing technology to hawk their wares via television and the Internet. Soothsaying has become a multibillion-dollar industry.

As church leaders, we realize that people will flock to a conference that centers more on personal prophecy, healings and manifestations than on Jesus. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves catering to the culture and giving people what they want instead of the Word they need. We will perpetuate rather than curtail the tendency among many saints to expect immediate paybacks on all they give—whether those paybacks amount to special attention, a prophecy, a healing or a car.

Ironically, when we operate out of a merchandizing paradigm,

we are not even able to give the saints the supernatural touch they desire. We can't sell what we do not own. When we try, we perpetrate deception.

Prophets for Profit

A man deeply familiar with God's grace, the apostle Peter understood that the power to baptize others with the Holy Spirit was not his to peddle to the highest bidder. Let us recall that Peter was the disciple who had denied the Lord three times. He was the disciple whom Jesus had publicly rebuked. He was the disciple who had fled from the cross.

After all of this, Peter became the apostle who declared the inaugural message of the church on the day of Pentecost and, subsequently, the senior elder in Jerusalem. He recognized that were it not for the grace of God—the wonderful enduring love of Christ—his gifts would amount to nothing. How could he help but react passionately when Simon asked him to sell what the Lord had merely entrusted to his care?

As leaders in the church we are tempted to forget that what we have is not our own. I cannot sell you a prophecy because I do not own one. God will not sell you healing because there is no offering you could give to pay for it.

Furthermore, in order to sell what is not yours, you must first steal from someone else. I contend that ungodly fundraising practices are more rampant than ever in the church because we have stolen God's influence in an attempt to co-opt it ourselves.

The ability to move a crowd, to lead people in giving and to convince a congregation to make sacrifices—these constitute God's gift of influence. In his book *Spiritual Leadership*, church leader and prolific writer J. Oswald Sanders aptly teaches that leadership is influence. As leaders, our influence must always remain in the hands of our Lord. It must never become something we consider as ours.

If Peter had attempted to sell the anointing to Simon the Sorcerer, then Peter would have been responsible for ensuring that all of the people Simon prayed for actually received the Holy Spirit. What an enormous responsibility. So often ministers promise entire crowds that they will become debt-free or that they will receive new cars or new homes. The truth is that God holds us personally responsible for these promises.

General pronouncements of blessing over those who give faithfully are not the same as specific guarantees, which we must be ready to back up. For example, if I tell the congregation they will be blessed by the Lord as they continue to be faithful in their giving, I have made a biblically valid statement.

Jesus told us that it is more blessed to give than to receive (see Acts 20:35). Paul encouraged the Philippians that as a result of their faithfulness, all of their needs would be met according to His riches in glory (see Phil. 4:19). Jesus also said, “‘Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over’” (Luke 6:38, NKJV).

On the other hand, when I promise people that God will give them each a new car if they participate in this or that offering, or when I declare that everyone who gives today will be debt-free this year, I am treading on scripturally shaky ground. An offering must be given as a person purposes in his or her heart—not as he or she is coaxed through manipulation (see 2 Cor. 9:7). If we announce from the pulpit that the Lord has promised a new car to everyone who gives a certain amount, then people who have not purposed to give anything may give out of coercion.

In 2 Corinthians 9, the apostle Paul presents the greatest New Testament example of a balanced approach to fund raising. At the time of his writing, Paul had waited a year for the church

at Corinth to make good on its promise to send a relief offering for struggling believers. Paul indicates in his letter that he is sending representatives to receive the offering and carefully shares with the people at Corinth all of the blessings associated with giving.

His challenge is as strong as any I've heard, but he is careful not to merchandize any of God's gifts. He promises no one a specific financial reward for obedience and makes only promises that he knows are well within the boundaries of Scripture.

Buy Now, Pray Later

The church-conference ad that pledged prophecies to the first 100 paid registrants didn't just suggest that one could "buy" a prophetic word; it also failed to mention anything about whether those registrants needed to be living godly lives or remaining faithful to their spouses. It didn't even specify whether the registrants had to be Christians. In fund-raising letters and public appeals for money, ministries often make blanket promises to recipients with no knowledge of their personal relationships with the Lord.

While we know that God is able to speak to anyone, are we subtly implying in our fund-raising practices that if a person pays the fee or makes a contribution, then nothing else matters? Consider Simon the Sorcerer's approach: He was asking the apostles to ignore whatever issues may have been in his life and just sell him the blessing.

God's promises always have prerequisites, and those who declare His promises also are responsible for making those requirements clear. Because God is not a Las Vegas casino, you can't just enter His presence, play the right cards and receive from Him. God is a God of covenant relationship, and His covenant with us requires that we do more than just give of our finances.

A person can't just send a ministry \$20 and make God pour money into his lap while he is living in adultery or being unfaithful in his giving to the local church. Too often we treat God's Word like a phone book instead of a love letter. We just roll through the book, find what we need and "claim it." God's Word is a letter of covenant love that requires us to understand the promises within their contexts and to see the whole of our relationship with Him—not just our immediate needs.

As a believer, never allow a promise of financial blessing to make you ignore areas of your life that God wants to address. Beware of ministries that promise you the stars while having no knowledge of your walk.

Both the people of God and unbelievers have developed negative views of ministry because of questionable fund-raising practices. When people fall prey to the use of trickery and coercion, they feel violated and struggle with being able to trust leaders in ministry again. The unfortunate result is that solid local churches and ministries of integrity get caught in the tailwind of the untoward practices of others.

Ministries can begin to remedy the wounds of the saints by emphasizing with enthusiasm these clear principles of giving:

- * God loves and will abundantly bless the cheerful, bountiful giver (see 2 Cor. 9:6-8).
- * When we give to please God and not man, we can expect the God who sees in secret to reward us openly (see Matt. 6:3-4).
- * When we give abundantly, God has promised not only to enrich our finances, but also to enrich us in all things (see 2 Cor. 9:11).

Let the Lord renew your desire to give and then give bountifully. Find ministries that teach you to give sacrificially but that do so without becoming sensational in

their method. Invest in ministries that promote giving to God as a way to please Him rather than a way to get something from Him.

The truth is, God will bless us regardless of whether or not we pay Him. Paul never implies to the Corinthians that somehow they must give in order to be loved by God. The Lord longs to pour out His manifold blessings, but He wants His church to have the attitude of Peter.

Let us understand that what we have received from Him is far more than what we can ever give back to Him. No human price can be placed on God's gracious blessings in our lives.

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