



Amplifications to ABC 20/20's Story on MinistryWatch.com Rusty Leonard

Employment

Some viewers may have been left with the impression that Mr. Leonard left his employment with Templeton Investment Counsel to devote his full efforts to starting MinistryWatch.com. Actually, Mr. Leonard and his wife founded the ministry in June 1998 while still employed by Templeton. He hired Mark Long to actually start the ministry but did work closely with Mark and the other ministry employees over the ensuing years. Mr. Leonard eventually left Templeton on January 2, 2000 and took a fifteen month sabbatical. In April 2001, he started managing money again in his own company, Stewardship Partners Investment Counsel. Mr. Leonard continues to serve the ministry in a part time, voluntary capacity as CEO and chairman of the board.

Fred Price

ABC made an error in regard to a quote from Fred Price. ABC edited a video clip

of Fred Price in such a way that left the impression that he was speaking about himself when he spoke of owning a 25 room mansion, a \$6 million yacht an airplane, a helicopter and 7 luxury automobiles. Reverend Price was actually using this as an example in his sermon. However, Reverend Price does live in a house valued at \$5 million and once owned a Rolls Royce apparently valued at \$120,000. Price is an unapologetic preacher of the prosperity gospel and it seems his life reflects its teachings.

ABC's Reporting


The claims made about the various preachers mentioned were researched by ABC 20/20. MinistryWatch.com gave advice and counsel but we had no control of the story and did not know what would be broadcast until the show was aired. Other than the error regarding Reverend Price, we believe that ABC did a good job in gathering

information about the various prosperity preachers that donors should know about. Indeed, there was far more that they could have reported on.

Compensation

20/20 reported that Rusty Leonard had a seven figure salary when he worked at Templeton. Mr. Leonard's salary was considerably less than seven figures but his total compensation, including performance-related bonuses, averaged over seven figures in the last five years he worked at the company.

Financial Disclosure

Churches are exempt from reporting financial information but ministries organized as Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3) are required by law to turn over their IRS tax returns to anyone who asks for them. 20/20's report left the impression that all religious ministries did not have to release financial information. 

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Biblical Reasons for Salary Secrecy Michael K. Whitehead

After seeing the exposé by ABC's "20/20" on March 23, 2007, regarding "Secretive Christian Ministry Spending," I decided to do a study on biblical reasons for financial secrecy in ministries.

After all, there must be lots of verses to support se-

crecy about ministry money. So many mega preachers with giga-budgets do it, and insist that it is right. Sure, the "liberal media" criticizes it. They don't like our conservative views, so they're naturally going to try to make our leaders look bad. The Devil is bound to attack the ministries that are doing the most good.

(Continued on page 2)

Editors Note: the writer used a quote about the 25-room mansion that was an example in a sermon, but the point is applicable in context of the article.

(Continued from page 1)

One 20/20 subject boasts "I live in a 25-room mansion, I have my own \$6 million yacht, I have my own private jet and I have my own helicopter and I have seven luxury automobiles." (Hmmm. He probably should have kept that secret.)

Another 20/20 target recently asked his audience to help him spread the gospel by giving him \$20 million to buy a new jet, promising God on the air that the plane "will never, ever be used as long as it is in our care, for anything other than what is becoming to you, Lord Jesus." An ABC affiliate obtained flight records that revealed that the jet, on its way to a meeting in Australia last October, made a two-day layover in Maui. Then it was on to the Fiji islands for another stop. Last December, the jet made the first of two trips to a Colorado airport, just a few miles away from Steamboat Springs Ski Resort. (<http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=2976684&page=1>) (They really should have kept that secret.)

Why shouldn't the "King's Kids" have a few nice things? The Bible doesn't say having money is bad. It's the *love of money* that's bad. (1 Tim 6:10) (The *lack of money* can be *really bad, too*.) So surely the Bible has a lot to say in favor of keeping ministry money secret.

Let me think. Where's that verse about "good deeds done in darkness?" Oh, here's it is: Ephesians 5:11: "Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them."

Hmm, no, that doesn't sound right. Let's try another one. John 3:19: "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil."

Nope, that's not the one I wanted. Somewhere in here it makes secrecy and privacy sound like a good thing. Now where is it?

Okay, here's something we can work with. 1 Peter 4:8 ... "...love covers a multitude of sins." "Covers"—that's it! Covers, conceals— keeps things quiet, for love's sake. But that "multitude of sins" part doesn't preach very well. I wouldn't want people to think that we were equating payroll privacy with "a multitude of sins."

This is not as easy as I thought. This could be a very short Bible study.

Okay, here's one. Matthew 6:4 "... so that your giving (to the poor) will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." Well, that's more like it. Finally a verse that says secrecy about money is a good thing. This proves that privacy of a donor's gift amount keeps him humble, and avoids bragging about how much he gave. Stands to reason that privacy about the amount of money a donee receives will also help keep him humble. Okay, so it didn't seem to work with the jet –set boys on 20/20, but it is possible.

Or how about this one. Mark 4:22: "For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light." No, that doesn't quite make the point.

Well, forget the proof texts. Isaiah 1:18 says "Come, let us reason together." We can surely find logical principles that we can agree upon.

Salary Secrecy protects poor donors from jealousy. Some small-minded donors have never seen six-figure salaries and they are tempted to jealousy if they know about a mega-preacher's giga-salary. Its better to keep the salaries secret, so as to trick-- er, encourage-- these poor donors into giving more than they would if they knew all the facts.

Salary secrecy encourages poor donors to "let go and let God." Let go of their money, and let God worry about how it is spent. Quit asking for accountability. Quit acting like a steward. Don't worry. Be happy.

Salary secrecy protects the minister from embarrassment. The Bible teaches kindness, and we ought to be kind to the minister, who might feel embarrassed by the amount of his salary. Who wants to have a 20/20 camera up your nose? How humiliating. Frankly, I don't personally know many pastors whose salaries are so large that they are embarrassed by it. More often, ministers salaries are so small, the church members are embarrassed—but that is not a good reason for salary secrecy, either!

The 20/20 website posted this ABC poll the day after the broadcast: Do you think Christian ministries should be required to reveal their finances? **4,701** people said Yes. People have a right to know that their money is being used responsibly. **170** people said No. Donors should trust that Christian ministries will use their donations for doing good. Total Vote: **4,871** **Nearly 96% of the votes said ministries should be required to reveal their finances.**

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

So is it time for a Sunshine Law to protect the public from abuse of charitable donations, in churches and para-church ministries? Public entities are accustomed to living under "sunshine laws" – prohibiting secret meetings and secret decisions. Federal law provides a "Freedom of Information Act" to permit citizens to compel disclosure about what governmental bodies do with "other people's money."

Churches are also handling "other people's money" – or more importantly, "God's money." Christians see themselves as more than donors. They are stewards. Stewards should be trustworthy, and that includes responsibility to give wisely where their gifts will be used wisely to bear much fruit. We merely sow and God causes the harvest, but we are responsible to sow wisely. Christians should expect transparency and accountability from local church leaders as well as mega-media-ministers. Trust -- and verify.

If the Church in America does not clean its own house, Government may ultimately show up with its own "cleaning crew." And we won't like the job Uncle Sam does when he cleans the church house. Far better that churches and denominations would take the lead in modeling openness of all financial information to the light of day, rather than risking government intrusion with legally-compelled Sunshine laws.

It is possible to get financial information about many non-profits who must file IRS Form 990. Even salary information about the top 5 salaries is listed on the annual form. That gives the donor a good idea about the pay ranges in proportion to the overall budget. But most churches are exempt from the Form 990 requirement. Larger churches are often refusing to disclose salary information about any individuals, except to a select "salary committee" –often controlled by the CEO. At most, they offer to provide to members some salary range information, and department totals. But why hide any of it from members or donors? Rather than waiting for the government to extend this reporting requirement to churches someday, perhaps churches and denominations should take the lead and begin to provide this information voluntarily.

One valuable resource highlighted by 20/20 is the website www.ministrywatch.com. MinistryWatch.com was founded by a businessman who had given millions to ministries over the years, and he realized how difficult it was for donors to get real accountability information from some organizations. He decided to investigate and grade national ministries on their "transparency." Non-transparent ministries get an "F"

on his report card. See Feb 2007's card here: <http://www.ministrywatch.com/mw2.1/pdf/TW2307.pdf>.

The Evangelical Council on Financial Accountability provides excellent standards for ministries who choose to join. (See ECFA's 7 Standards. <http://www.ecfa.org/ContentEngine.aspx?Page=7standards>.) Even though most churches do not join ECFA, large ones should, especially with big media ministries. Even small churches would benefit from voluntary compliance. What a liberating testimony: "We are stewards of God's money, and we use it as wisely as we can. We have nothing to hide."


"Dear Friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." Philippians 2:3-4 And let them see your financial records, too!

Resources:

Evangelical Council on Financial Accountability:
www.ecfa.org

Ministry Watch: www.ministrywatch.com

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MinistryWatch.com aims to spur donors to examine ministries and make discerning giving decisions.

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