



Not a Preacher's Life

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When NBC DATELINE aired a segment on televangelist Benny Hinn on March 6, 2005, the news magazine titled the segment, "A Preacher's Life." Though MinistryWatch.com was aware that the network had planned a story for that evening, some familiar with MinistryWatch.com wanted to be sure; hence, Wall Watchers staff received calls immediately as the segment began airing.

The first call was from a local pastor. Familiar with Benny Hinn, and all too familiar with the real preacher's life – tight finances, a 24/7 schedule, close scrutiny – he believes that the biblical pastor's life is in no way similar to Hinn's. So he called. When he was informed that Wall Watchers was taping the show, he asked, "What do you think of that title? Is that not outrageous? Preachers don't live anything like that! Nor should they! Jesus didn't."

And that, succinctly, is exactly what the many critics interviewed by NBC said – that Hinn, instead of modeling the sacrificial life lived by Jesus, is motivated by his own self-interests, hence turning the Gospel of Christ on its head. MinistryWatch.com has had a staff member attend a "healing" crusade of Hinn's in Charlotte, N.C., and he, too, reports many of the same activities that have led to criticism of Hinn and his motives and methods.

Such claims are serious, especially for a man claiming to be a preacher of God's Word. If true, they not only violate biblical admonitions, but also seemingly violate IRS regulations that govern churches. Hence, Hinn's critics claim that his activities are an abuse of donors' trust and, of even greater concern, misrepresent the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

Hinn is founder, chairman, president and CEO of Benny Hinn Ministries/World Outreach Church (BHM). Through his crusades – which collect untold amounts of cash, as well as donations through checks and credit cards – and television program, "This is Your Day," Hinn raises upwards of \$100 million annually, according to NBC.

The NBC DATELINE program, which was years in the making, and included the use of hidden cameras and hidden identities and visits to numerous of Hinn's "healing" crusades, collected a notable array of critics, from theologians to financial watchdogs. Among the critiques they launched at Hinn include, but are not limited to:

- Living a lavish lifestyle with funds intended for charitable purposes;
- Preaches a self-serving prosperity theology message;
- Manipulation of individuals at "healing crusades" for personal gain;
- Unsubstantiated claims of healings;
- Nontransparency/lack of independent board oversight.

Lavish lifestyle and 'church' status

Not only do Hinn's critics accuse him of living a lavish lifestyle, they note also that he provides luxurious comforts for friends and family and receives excessive compensation, and does so with funds intended for charitable purposes.

Critics: Benny Hinn's 'church' a case study of what a church should *not* be, as they say he is nontransparent and unaccountable, offers no proof for claims of healing, and proclaims a self-serving theology

Admittedly, BHM does not have a legal obligation by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to supply financial information to anyone because the IRS has recognized the organization as a "church." Benny Hinn first sought IRS church status in Florida under the name of Orlando Christian Center, Inc. The original application (IRS form 1023)

described what appeared to be a congregational church.

However, Hinn has since moved to Irving, Texas and the remaining congregational members merged with another congregation in Florida. Hinn kept the legal status, changed the legal name to World Outreach Church, Inc., but instead of using the "legal" name, he markets the church with the DBA (doing business as) name "Benny Hinn Ministries." Any congregational aspect has been lost, for the primary activities are that of a television show and healing crusade movement.

While BHM is arguably shielding itself behind the law in its refusal to be transparent, some critics have called for the IRS to investigate, while MinistryWatch.com has repeatedly asserted that the Bible calls ministry and church leaders – as well as donors – to higher levels of transparency and accountability than do any secular laws or regulations. Additionally, regardless of what excuses Hinn or his yoke may offer for not being transparent, donors are nevertheless accountable to God for the resources He has provided them – "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2 NIV). To learn more, read: "Discernment Required for Wise Giving" at <http://ministrywatch.com/mw2.1/pdf/>

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Reflections_Discernment.pdf).

Despite Hinn's refusal to release financial information to MinistryWatch.com and other interested parties, including NBC, the network noted, "Though Hinn refuses to make his financial information public, (he) has said that every dollar given to his ministry goes to the work of the Lord."

However, DATELINE was able to obtain documents that pointed to a lifestyle that is such that to describe it as lavish is understated. Decadent might be a more apt description. The program, with Stone Phillips serving as anchor and Bob McKeown reporting from the field, revealed exorbitant spending by Hinn and BHM.

Said McKeown, "Benny Hinn does manage to live very well." The reporter noted, "Hinn has acknowledged he's paid a salary of somewhere between half a million and a million dollars per year. He also gets royalties from the sales of his books."

And that is just the beginning. Personal perks for Hinn, family and his entourage include a \$10 million seaside mansion; a private jet with annual operating costs of about \$1.5 million; a Mercedes SUV and convertible, each valued at about \$80,000; what the church termed as "layovers" between crusades that included hotel bills ranging from \$900 per night to royal suites that cost almost \$3,000 for one night's stay.

Layover locations included Hawaii, Cancun, London, Milan and other exotic locations. "Steve," a BHM employee disguised to protect his identity, said, of these stops, "I made the comment I thought this was a vacation, and I was told it was." He also reported going on shopping sprees for Hinn. McKeown reported, "Hinn is a regular at Beverly Hills like Versace, Louis Vuitton, and Bijon, where Hinn's name is on the window, along with princes and heads of state."

McKeown also provided receipts showing Hinn's daughter receiving \$1,300 in petty cash; her boyfriend getting \$2,550 for babysitting; \$23,000 in cash dispersed to Hinn and his wife; and, \$25,000 in cash for expenses for a crusade – 30 minutes away from Hinn's home.

McKeown asked forensic accountant Keith Balla, "If this were Enron, or a similar corporation, would this not be a big deal to the IRS?" Balla replied, "Not only to the IRS would it be a big deal, it would be a public outcry on the shareholders."

Self-serving theology

Professor Michael Horton, a professor of theology at Westminster Seminary in California, offering his views of why more Christians do not offer a similar outcry, said, "We've lost a capacity to think critically and to weigh people in the light of what scripture teaches."

Indeed, the Bible itself does charge believers with being students of sound doctrine. "If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly

teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:3-10).

A student of these "elementary truths" will soon discover that Hinn espouses the theologically bankrupt and self-serving Word of Faith or "prosperity" gospel, which, by reducing God to a puppet for believers and insisting that faith can be "mustered," turns the true Gospel on its head. In reality, the Christian is called to abandon himself or herself to Christ – "Jesus looked at him and loved him, 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come follow me'" (Mark 10:21). Jesus stated clearly that he knows humans are in need of creature comforts – "For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them" (Matthew 6:32). So, the application of the verse from Mark is not that Jesus is being critical of possessions, he was being critical of putting them – or anything – ahead of God.

Also, Scripture teaches that even salvation by faith is itself a gift of God. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – *and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God* – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8, NIV emphasis added). So, to suggest that a believer can, by his or her own effort, provide salvation or live the Christian life by increasing his or her faith, is to teach a works theology, a violation of the precept proclaimed in the last portion of the verse.

Ole Anthony, founder and head of the Trinity Foundation, a Texas-based watchdog group, told NBC, "You're called to be a servant, a bondservant of Christ. Not to live like a king."

Added Horton, "Their (BHM) message is a message of greed. It is a message of selfishness. It is very obvious ribald, clear, crass terms. And they are living accordingly."

Manipulation for personal gain/ celebrity

Appealing to a person's self-interest as a legitimate presentation of the Gospel message is clearly contradicted by Jesus' call to His disciples of total abandonment. Critics say that Hinn employs two primary methods to manipulate those that watch him – promising healings to those afflicted with chronic or terminal illnesses, and claiming that donations are "seeds" being planted by the donor that will result in the gift-giver enjoying financial blessings.

Symbolic of Hinn's manipulation of "healed" individuals is the case of

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William, a boy who believed Hinn had healed him of damaged vision at a Las Vegas crusade. Hinn is seen on camera saying, "Our ministry should do all possible to help this boy financially, to even pay for his education."

However, that has apparently not happened. Though BHM told NBC they have set up a \$10,000 account for William, the church would not provide the network with documentation to prove its claim.

Randy Melthratter, William's uncle and guardian says it's not a question of the family needing the money. The real problem, says McKee-own is that, "...Melthratter also told us he's upset that the Hinn Ministry has been raising money using Williams' name."

As for William, who is now 13, and suffers from retina schisis, a degenerative and incurable eye condition, he has had his eyesight aided by special glasses. Asked about his "healing," William said, "I think God's just taking a break." Infuriated, Menthratter replied, "...that to me was like, you know, that's a heck of a thing for a little boy to make excuses for why God hasn't healed him."

Added Texas critic Anthony, about Hinn, "I'd say he's in the business of raising money, and – spreading his own celebrity."

Rodney Pitzer, the managing director of research for Wall Watchers, attended a Benny Hinn crusade in the spring of 2001 in Charlotte. Pitzer, who is disabled as the result of an auto accident as a teenager about 20 years ago, acknowledges he went with the intention of being a dispassionate observer, but revealed that towards the end of the crusade, when "people were in a frenzy," he was compelled to pray for his own healing. While some may not consider that bothersome, Pitzer noted, "Nobody wants to have a disability or have a loss. Nobody wants to consider that permanent. God has written eternity on our hearts, we feel like we're going to live forever. A lot of people have a problem accepting that a disability is permanent."

"Nobody wants to deny hope. However, the danger is in not moving on. The so-called healings from Benny Hinn seem to be attributed to Benny Hinn. That may not be God's plan that we all have perfect lives. God has things to teach us where we are."

This experience, combined with Hinn's high-pressure appeals for cash that he witnessed, as well as the accompanying unbiblical promises of financial blessings for donors, has led Pitzer to conclude, "Hinn manipulates people's losses, grief, sadness, and despair for his own benefit."

Regarding promises to supporters that if they will donate money to BHM, Hinn has mastered the "seed-planting" strategy of fundraising. Here are a few quotes gathered by MinistryWatch.com in its research of BHM:

- "As you sow your seed, miracles will happen as you do it!" (Benny Hinn, TBN, Praise-A-Thon, April 1, 2004)

- "The Lord is speaking to eight men to sow a \$1,000,000 each. If you will obey, one of you who lost millions, if you sow that seed God will restore everything that you lost...Obey God and win! I am speaking under the anointing. What God is asking for is a little to what he is going to give you." (Benny Hinn, TBN, Praise-A-Thon, April 1, 2004)
- "The more you give the more protection you will have for tomorrow...God will spare you if you sow today." (Benny Hinn, TBN, Praise-A-Thon, April 1, 2004)
- "Cause it doesn't take brains to figure the thing out, you give to get!" (Benny Hinn, This Is Your Day, October 28, 1999)
- "A man said to me, 'How much do I sow?' My reply was, 'What kind of harvest do you want? If you have big debt, sow a big seed.' That's just the way it is!" (Benny Hinn, This Is Your Day, August 14, 1996)
- "God multiplies the seed you sow, the supernatural power of God hits after you sow, not before, after." (Benny Hinn, This Is Your Day, August 19, 1996)

Many of the collections of money also seem to create hasty decisions by donors, again seeming to contradict scriptural precepts. From Proverbs we read, "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way" (Proverbs 19:2). And, "The plans of the diligent lead to profit, so surely as haste leads to poverty" (Proverbs 21:5).

Unverified healings

Just as BHM has not provided any documentation to support Hinn's claims that those who plant financial seeds with the ministry will enjoy a financial windfall, neither has it provided documentation to NBC that would prove Hinn's claims of healings.

Television producer Nathan Daniel, a former BHM employee who was hired to improve Benny Hinn's public image, instead reported to NBC, "There was never one complete record that would suit the criteria for documented miracle healing."

Daniel's criteria included: "proof of the illness or disease in the first place, evidence that there was a miraculous change, and documentation that the healing had continued." Even with those conditions, and promising to pursue the study of the cases "in a journalistic fashion" with "hard questions," BHM still agreed to have Daniel conduct the research. "They told me they were going to provide me access to their private records of over 200 – doctor documented – miracle healings," claimed Daniel.

Indeed, a great many folks attend Hinn crusades and untold millions watch him on Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) and through other outlets. As NBC reported, "About one or twice a month somewhere in the US, 50 or 60,000 people attend one of Benny Hinn's two-day crusades, all taped for broadcast on his TV show."

At the Las Vegas crusade, where William was supposedly healed, a total of 56 people were reportedly healed, according to NBC's count. When the network asked for verification that those people had indeed been healed, NBC reported, "In a letter from its lawyer, the ministry declined to provide proof of any those Las Vegas healings to DATELINE."

McKeown reported that BHM did provide the program with the names of five people from other crusades who would verify that they had been healed at a BHM crusade. Reported McKeown, "But when we investigated them, though all five people told us they believed they had been healed, they wouldn't or couldn't provide medical records to support any of those claims."

Another woman, reportedly cured of lung cancer, died two-and-a-half months from the disease after the crusade at which she was ostensibly healed.

Argued Daniel, "To me this was a fraud and deception put across people that are his donors."

Nontransparency/ lack of board oversight

Though the expression, "Last but not least" is overused, it is certainly apt when considering the significance of this issue. It is Hinn's refusal to be accountable to anyone – rooted in a conveniently defiant view of accountability (he is to answer only to God since he receives extra-biblical words, hence the self-serving Word of Faith moniker) – that is the primary precipitant for each of the critiques amplified above.

The early 20th Century theologian, Oswald Chambers, writing in his famous book, "My Utmost for His Highest," noted, "Our motive for surrender (to Jesus) should not be for any personal gain at all." Chambers' reflections are based on Peter's remarks to Jesus that, "We have left everything to follow you!" (Mark 10: 28). It is the apparent rejection of this fundamental biblical precept that has called into question Hinn's ministry. Clearly, if Hinn's motivation is abandonment to Jesus is pure, he would willingly – even eagerly – provide information about financial management and practices, programs and performance measures.

In addition to refusing to release financial information, Hinn is in a position to exercise not just substantial influence over the affairs of the organization, but total control. Copies of the original application, Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws were obtained from the IRS. A few items of interest in them include:

- Pastor and Founder, Benedictus "Benny" Hinn, shall be President and Chairman of the Board of Directors...for the duration of his life.
- The Vice-President is appointed by the Pastor and Founder and is a member of the Board.
- The Board was picked by Hinn.
- The Pastor and President of the Corporation shall have the au-

thority to suspend any member of the Board of Directors.

Such criteria, if applied to a government, would be called a totalitarian state; by these governing standards, Hinn is no more accountable to anyone than would be the leader of such a state.

Conclusion

Churches have less restrictive financial and management reporting requirements than do ministries, but all IRC Section 501(c)(3) organizations, including churches and religious organizations, must abide by certain rules. For instance, their net earnings may not inure to any private shareholder or individual; and, they must not provide a substantial benefit to private interests.

Additionally, when one individual or family is dominant in an organization, there exists the opportunity for abuse that would preclude a full and candid disclosure of all the facts surrounding questions of impropriety.

When considering these provisions, there appears to be a clear need for the IRS to examine BHM to determine if it actually qualifies for the church exemption. Government has a duty to examine an organization's claim to the tax-exempt benefits it bestows on nonprofits. Given the millions of dollars likely donated to such an organization, the IRS should make this investigation a priority. The IRS can always re-examine and make another determination and decide it has not been a church for many years. The IRS has plenty of justification to do so, because the organization has substantially changed. IRS can re-examine based on no more than fundamental changes have taken place.

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

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