



Grassley's Requests of Televangelists are Well-Founded

Unchecked media churches could undermine the Gospel message

By Michael Barrick

When Senator Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) recently requested that numerous high-profile televangelists disclose financial information to the Senate Finance Committee by early December, his call precipitated debate among Christian church and ministry leaders concerned about overreaching government.

It shouldn't have. While Grassley's move is admittedly dramatic, what he has called for is reasonable – proof that these church leaders are not misusing funds intended for charitable purposes. Grassley, the ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, is doing what the Church should do – ensure that its leaders adhere to fundamental biblical principles such as transparency and honesty while exhibiting a sacrificial lifestyle modeled after Jesus.

The ministry leaders Grassley has contacted are:

- Randy and Paula White of Without Walls International Church and Paula White Ministries of Tampa, Fla.
- Benny Hinn of World Healing Center Church Inc. and Benny Hinn Ministries of Grapevine, Texas.
- David and Joyce Meyer of Joyce Meyer Ministries of Fenton, Mo.
- Kenneth and Gloria Copeland of Kenneth Copeland Ministries of Newark, Texas.
- Bishop Eddie Long of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church and Bishop Eddie Long Ministries of Lithonia, Ga.
- Creflo and Taffi Dollar of World Changers Church International and Creflo Dollar Ministries of College Park, Ga.

Grassley's requests of the ministries are not baseless. These televangelists are not strangers to controversy—MinistryWatch.com has been highlighting their questionable activities for years. Questions of their financial practices and arguably extravagant lifestyles have long

raised eyebrows. Grassley explained, “As a Christian myself, and a person who believes in tithing, I feel I have a right to know where my money goes. If a person gets a tax deduction for a donation, the deduction and donation should be for a legitimate purpose.”

Church leaders critical of Grassley's call are setting up a straw man. It is irrelevant that it is a secular official calling these televangelists to account. The Bible could not be clearer – church leaders are held to a high standard. “For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward...” (Titus 1:7a NASB). If the Church fails to hold its own accountable and if its most visible leaders fail to live by the very standards they purport to proclaim, then we should applaud when a leader with the standing of Grassley demands accountability. After all, these televangelists are soliciting donations in the name of Christ. If they also contradict the Gospel with how they spend those donations, Kingdom-building efforts everywhere can be negatively impacted.

How these televangelists respond will reflect directly upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One hopes that Senator Grassley has success; if he does, he will be among the first. Organizations from MinistryWatch.com to news and media outlets have generally been stonewalled by the televangelists when questions about financial practices and board oversight have been raised.

This has gone on too long. Financial shenanigans and skullduggery by Christian church and ministry leaders have done immeasurable damage to the Church – and hence the Gospel. Unbelievers see such scandals as evidence that the messages delivered from behind the pulpit are at best suspect, and at worst nothing more than another scam to pad somebody's pockets.

As a result, among a church's first order of business is to ensure that safeguards are in place to prevent finan-

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cial impropriety. Grassley has apparently seen and heard enough to suspect that these churches have not provided such safeguards. Indeed, a typical common denominator among such churches is that they generally have very small oversight boards, made up primarily of family members or friends that stand to benefit from looking the other way when questionable dealings occur.

So, this is a sentinel moment for the Church. Will it miss the point and oppose Grassley? Will it offer yet another collective yawn in the face of potential Church scandal? Or, will it finally awake and hold its leaders to Biblical standards, thereby preserving and enhancing the Gospel message?

First, we must consider the structure of the typical media ministry engaged in suspect behavior. By operating as churches, even though they do not perform many of the standard functions of a church, they are able to avoid the more stringent financial reporting required of nonprofit para-church ministries. And, since they also usually do not operate traditional churches with elder, deacon or denominational oversight, they avoid the internal church scrutiny that most pastors face. Has this been to their personal gain? Grassley has his suspicions. According to his office, Grassley wrote to the ministries, "Recent television reports and news articles regarding the possible misuse of donations made to religious organizations have caused some concern for the Finance Committee." Consequently, he has requested information of these ministries which would reveal "expenses, executive compensation and amenities given to their executives."

Grassley also refutes claims that he is motivated by doctrinal beliefs. "This is part of a long-standing priority of mine to make sure that tax-exempt organizations are accountable to their donors," he said, adding that the request has "nothing to do with church doctrine." He continued, "This has everything to do with the tax exemption of an organization. Is that tax exemption being used according to the law, and is the money that's donated under the tax exemption being used for legitimate, non-profit purposes?"

Nevertheless, one can't ignore how the theology embraced by these televangelists contributes to their re-

fusal to be transparent. The Word of Faith theology espoused by many televangelists places them above scrutiny – in their minds. Because they receive a "word from the Lord," they are not answerable to mere humans. Anyone daring to question their management or spending is really just attacking God – as they portray it. Of course, while completely unfounded, such claims are irrefutable. Who can challenge God, after all?

Equally troubling are their lifestyles, again rooted in their theology. Rather than teaching that we are here for God's purposes and that the sacrificial life modeled by Jesus is the standard for our own lives, many televangelists generally proclaim a prosperity gospel in which health and wealth are assured if one simply "plants a seed" of faith (cash donation) with them. Of course, their claims are self-fulfilling, as being flush from donations, they point to their own prosperity as proof of their theology.

Another disturbing aspect of the Word of Faith theological perspective is how it leads to ironically contradictory behavior. For while they talk about faith, they place such demands on their viewers for contributions that one can't help but suspect that the only faith they have is in human generosity (or gullibility) rather than God's provision. In his book, "The New Testament Order for Church and Missionary," Alexander Hay points to the role of the faith in the early church. "The Apostles lived by faith...The Jerusalem congregation numbered thousands and could have supported its leaders handsomely, but there was no salaried ministry. The Apostles lived 'by faith'" (p. 52).

We also learn from Hay that the Apostle Paul taught that the evangelist does not accept support from those he is serving (or preaching to at the moment, whether on a stage or in a TV studio). Hay noted that in his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul made it clear that he would not accept support directly from those to whom he was ministering "Paul said he would rather die than fail in this testimony and leave himself open to the charge that he sought wages from those to whom he preached. Evidently it is a most important part of the Evangelist's witness before the churches. While he has a right to be supported, the effect of his example makes it necessary to forego this right so far as those to whom he is actually ministering are concerned" (p. 87).

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The refusal to be transparent is also not Biblical. The Apostle Paul was clear about his responsibility to be accountable to the churches that supported him. "Taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift; for we have regard for what is honorable, not only the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men" (2 Corinthians 9:20-21 NASB). So, Paul was not hesitant to answer to men. The televangelists have no excuse for not adhering to the example offered by the most famous evangelist of the Church.

And, the Church has no excuse for letting them get by with it as long as they have. That is why we should wish Senator Grassley success in his quest for the truth. Christians can be silent no longer. To do so is sin. "Do not participate in the untruthful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them" (Ephesians 5:11). It is time for these televangelists to come clean; otherwise it could seem that they are running nothing more than money laundering schemes in the name of Christ.

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