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## ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT TELEVANGELISTS

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The Christian apologist is accustomed to answering for the historical “sins of the church,” such as the Spanish Inquisition and the Salem witch trials. Our technological world has brought us another category of sins that are trivial by comparison, but they continue to gain public exposure: the excesses of “televangelists.” During the 1980s, almost every week the news media reported on some new immoderation, such as Oral Roberts’s promise that he would be “taken home” if his ministry did not receive sufficient funding and Jim and Tammy Bakker’s purchases of luxuries like air-conditioned doghouses. Televangelist scandals reached their pinnacle in that decade. Today, while the secular media is no longer as interested in televangelists and both Roberts and the Bakkers have retreated into relative obscurity, other personalities have emerged to take their place, and less spectacular excesses and abuses continue.

**Be Prepared.** The best approach to answering those who are bewildered or angered by the activities of televangelists is to be proactive. Become familiar with the activities of prominent televangelists. The Christian who cannot offer at least a perfunctory response to the latest “scandal” may leave the impression of being apathetic toward abuses in the church. It is, of course, impossible to predict when the media will expose a televangelist or when a televangelist will raise eyebrows with his or her ostentatious behavior. If we familiarize ourselves with some of the major televangelists’ names and their activities, however, we will at least have some ground on which to answer questions. Apologetics organizations such as the Christian Research Institute provide information on specific televangelists and their activities.

The nature of this subject brings up a relevant point: those who inquire about televangelist behavior often are only trying to provoke an emotional reaction from the defending Christian. Our reaction should always be the same, however, whether we are presented with an honest question or a harassing query about a televangelist: provide an evenhanded and sensible response that is rooted in fact. Falling prey to the bait of a harassing inquirer will serve only to justify in their minds the judgment that Christians are irrational sheep who are unwilling to criticize their leaders’ errors. Our model, rather, should be the apostle Paul, who stood up to Peter when he was in the wrong and publicly charged him with error (Gal. 2).

**Money Matters.** Televangelist scandals may be roughly divided into three types. The first, and probably most frequent, issue that arises in these contexts is *financial* scandal. Questions about televangelist finances fall into the categories of *general* objections against fundraising (“Televangelists are always begging for money”) and *specific* objections against their use of funds (“Televangelists use donations to purchase frivolous luxuries”). General objections against fundraising present little difficulty for the Christian. It is enough to reply that there is no offense in merely asking for funding; all types of organizations fundraise, including those that are antireligious in nature (e.g., the Freedom from Religion Foundation), those that pursue political or social advocacy (e.g., People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), those that provide educational and entertainment services (e.g., public television and radio), and those that provide health and emergency services (e.g., the American Red Cross). If someone objects to the mere *act* of fundraising, ask whether he or she also believes that fundraising is objectionable when other organizations do it. Point out that every legal organization has a legitimate right to seek financing and that thousands of nonprofit organizations engage in fundraising activity. If the critic is reasonably consistent, this will be sufficient to answer his or her objection. If, however, someone argues that a particular televangelist seems to ask for funds too often or in a way that is objectionable, then this is a

matter of personal judgment and must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis; there are those who even find public television's periodic and low-key requests for funds to be objectionable!

On the other hand, when a televangelist actually does misuse funds for personal gain, it is indefensible. Our response should be to point to Jesus and the apostles as examples of leaders who were blameless in their ministries. Jesus was an itinerant preacher (Matt. 9:20; Luke 9:58) and Paul often worked at his tentmaking trade to support himself (Acts 18:3).<sup>1</sup> It may also be helpful to point out that Christians have founded "watchdog" organizations, such as the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, to keep tabs on ministries and call them to account. It is important to show that many Christian organizations make a serious effort to keep their financial house in order.

**Moral Misdeeds.** When we are questioned about a televangelist involved in a *moral* scandal, our answers should be straightforward and to the point. When possible, respond by turning to Scriptures that prohibit immoral behavior (e.g., Exod. 20:14 and Matt. 5:27 denounce adultery). This is an obvious first step, but it certainly will not be the crux of the matter, since the questioner is probably already aware that the Bible forbids certain behaviors. The objection will more likely be to the evident *hypocrisy* of the televangelist who proclaims Jesus but does not do what Jesus commanded. The Bible, of course, clearly condemns hypocrisy (Matt. 23:28) and it admonishes us to be hearers *and* doers of God's Word (James 1:23). The question posed to us will often be, "How can someone who professes to follow Jesus do things like this?" Our answer will depend on the televangelist in question and the nature of his or her misdeeds. Some moral misdeeds are simply the result of human weakness. Televangelists, like prominent athletes and celebrities, are often held to a higher standard by viewers and fans, but they are no less susceptible to temptation and sin than anyone else (Rom. 3:23; James 3:2). Other immoral actions may be a sign of a more serious spiritual problem or of a "wolf in the fold" (Acts 20:29). We need to be cautious in our judgments lest we become hypocrites ourselves (Matt. 7:1); nevertheless, we should remind inquirers that the Bible promises that every person will reap what he or she sows (Gal. 6:7). An immoral televangelist will by no means escape God's judgment.

**Doctrinal Deviations.** A final area that may draw criticism is when a televangelist teaches an incorrect or even heretical theological doctrine. *Doctrinal* scandals may not attract media attention and unbelievers generally are unlikely to be concerned with unbiblical teachings; nevertheless, it is to our benefit to become familiar with any wayward doctrines taught by televangelists since these may explain (but not justify) their financial or moral excesses. Teachers of the "health and wealth gospel," for example, have misinterpreted the Bible in order to support their accumulation of wealth and justify surrounding themselves with luxuries. By pointing out their misinterpretations, we will demonstrate to nonbelievers that the roots of scandal often lie in theological error and that we do not blindly follow those who misinterpret the Bible's teachings.<sup>2</sup>

**The Real Issue.** At the heart of objections to televangelist behavior, there is a premise that the misdeeds of one who claims to be a Christian somehow are an effective argument against the truth of Christianity. That is simply illogical. Those misdeeds indicate the irrelevance of Christianity in the life of the wrongdoer, but they say nothing about the truth of the Christian faith itself. Christianity is founded on the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:3-4, 14), and a televangelist scandal, as lamentable as that may be, will not change that fact. The misdeeds of a televangelist, moreover, do not disprove Christianity any more than the misdeeds of Stalin disprove atheism or the evil activities of Osama bin Laden disprove Islam. Only a religious system that claims that its followers are perfect could be disproven by the misdeeds of its followers. Christianity, however, claims only that its founder, Jesus Christ, is perfect, not its followers.

If the objector persists in arguing that the misdeeds of Christians disprove Christianity, then you may reply: "If you think that bad deeds invalidate Christianity, then will you accept that good deeds serve to validate it?" Faced with this dilemma, the person will have to either abandon the argument or concede that good deeds validate Christianity. If the person concedes, use the open door as an opportunity to point to persons who have lived exemplary lives in the name of Christ. Well-known, respected figures

such as Billy Graham may be effective examples, but too distant. Someone with whom you are personally acquainted who can, perhaps, share his or her experiences with the objector and answer questions might be more helpful. Someone in my fellowship, for example, recently served for a week as a missionary in Central America. He gave of his own time, having used vacation hours from his job, and paid his own expenses. His experience inspired nonbelievers at his workplace to ask why someone would engage in such significant self-sacrifice. Finally, it may be helpful to point out the overall positive effect that Christians have had throughout history.<sup>3</sup> Remember, however, that even though this line of reasoning may convince the person that Christianity is true, it is built on the faulty premise that the religion of anyone who does good deeds is valid.

Televangelist scandals seem to be better suited as topics for the pages of tabloid newspapers rather than for serious discussion. American society constantly monitors the behavior of prominent figures, and unfortunately it (illogically) uses the behavior of televangelists as a guide to determine if Christianity is true. It is inevitable that this challenge will enter into our daily discussions; therefore, Christians should be no less ready to answer this challenge to the Christian faith than to answer any other challenge.

— James Patrick Holding

## NOTES

1. It is not possible to draw an exact parallel between ancient and modern fundraising activity. An itinerant teacher like Jesus or Paul would normally secure the support of a few wealthy patrons (cf. Luke 8:2–3) who would be more than willing to distribute from their wealth as a matter of personal honor.
2. For an overview of these teachings, see Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993).
3. See Vincent Carroll and David Schiflett, *Christianity on Trial* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001) and Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).