

A Colossal Fraud

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Former NASDAQ chairman Bernie Madoff ran a ponzi-scheme swindle for nearly 20 years, and he bilked an estimated \$18 billion from Wall-Street investors. When the scam finally came to light it unleashed a shockwave of outrage around the world. It was the largest and most far-reaching investment fraud ever.

But the evil of Madoff's embezzlement pales by comparison to an even more diabolical fraud being carried out in the name of Christ under the bright lights of television cameras on religious networks worldwide every single day. Faith healers and prosperity preachers promise miracles in return for money, conning their viewers out of more than a billion dollars annually. They have operated this racket on television for more than five decades. Worst of all, they do it with the tacit acceptance of most of the Christian community.

Someone needs to say this plainly: The faith healers and health-and-wealth preachers who dominate religious television are shameless frauds. Their message is not the true gospel of Jesus Christ. There is nothing spiritual or miraculous about their on-stage chicanery. It is all a devious ruse designed to take advantage of desperate people. They are not godly ministers but greedy impostors who corrupt the Word of God for money's sake. They are not real pastors who shepherd the flock of God but hirelings whose only design is to fleece the sheep. Their love of money is glaringly obvious in what they say as well as how they live. They claim to possess great spiritual power, but in reality they are rank materialists and enemies of everything holy.

There is no reason anyone should be deceived by this age-old con, and there is certainly no justification for treating the hucksters as if they were authentic ministers of the gospel. Religious charlatans who make merchandise of false promises have been around since the apostolic era. They pretend to be messengers of Christ, but they are interlopers and impostors. The apostles condemned them with the harshest possible language. Paul called them "men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain" (1 Timothy 6:5). Peter called them false prophets with "heart[s] trained in greed" (2 Peter 2:14). He warned that "in their greed they will exploit you with false words" (v. 3). He exposed them as scoundrels and dismissed them as "stains and blemishes" on the church (v. 13).

Those biblical descriptions certainly fit the greed-driven cult of prosperity preachers and faith healers who unfortunately, thanks to television, have become the best-known face of Christianity worldwide. The scam they operate ought to be a bigger scandal than any Wall Street ponzi scheme or big-time securities fraud. After all, those who are most susceptible to the faith-healers' swindle are not well-to-do investors but some of society's most vulnerable people—including multitudes who are already destitute, disconsolate, disabled, elderly, sick, suffering, or dying. The faith-healer gets lavishly rich while the victims become poorer and more desperate.

But the *worst* part of the scandal is that it's not really a scandal at all in the eyes of most evangelical Christians. Those who should be most earnest in defense of the truth have taken a shockingly tolerant attitude toward the prosperity preachers' blatant misrepresentation of the gospel and their wanton exploitation of needy people. "*But we don't want to judge,*" they say. Thus Christians fail to exercise *righteous* judgment (John 7:24). They refuse to be discerning at all.

How many manifestos and written declarations of solidarity have evangelicals issued condemning abortion, euthanasia, same-sex marriage, and other social evils? It's fine, and fairly easy, to oppose wickedness and injustice in secular society, but where is the corresponding moral outrage against these religious mountebanks who openly, brashly pervert the gospel for profit 24 hours a day, seven days a week on international television?

Advocates of abortion and euthanasia don't usually try to pass their message off as biblical. The people who say we need to redefine marriage haven't portrayed themselves as an arm of the church. But the prosperity preachers deceive people *in Jesus' name*, claiming to speak for God—while stealing both the souls and the sustenance of hurting people. That is a far greater abomination than any of the social evils Christians typically protest. After all, what the prosperity preachers do is not only a sin against poor, sick, and vulnerable people; it also blasphemes God, corrupts the gospel, and profanes the reputation of Christ before a watching world. It not only tears at the fabric of our society; it also befouls the purity of the visible church and abates the influence of the true gospel. It is surely among the grossest of all the evils currently rampant in our culture.

In the weeks to come, we're going to be looking at the preposterous claims and false teachings of some of religious television's best-known figures. We'll analyze why a disproportionate number of celebrity faith-healers and prosperity preachers have succumbed to serious immorality. And we'll see what Scripture says about how Bible-believing Christians ought to respond. I hope this series will challenge you to take a more active stand against the phony miracles and false teachings that are being peddled in the name of Christ.

[You can read John's next article in this series, "Unholy Trinity"]

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